

## The Fourth Stranger

According to his colleagues, my grandfather had a nervous breakdown after repeated bouts of paranoia, forcing him to retire early from his research lab. There were many guesses as to what brought him over the edge but he denied all of them. The singular piece of evidence gathered was that he had become a germaphobe in his old age: repeatedly sanitizing his hands and his home, avoiding ill people, and not tending the garden until it became overgrown. Since he refused to touch any of the rusted tools, fearing an infection, I was sent to do it instead in exchange for some pocket money. The work was not too bad despite the fact grandpa would force me to wear all this protective layer and immediately go into a frenzy for every minor cut his bushes gave me. It would have been funny if he was not wearing this helpless look of wild panic whenever it occurred. It was worse when he even had the faintest feeling of being ill since he would make a fuss while refusing to go to the hospital. I usually did not press him further as I did not need to hear the same lecture on antibiotic resistance every time.

"I don't know how you do it," Celine had commented when I met up with her and Fielder one of those hot summer days, "I would have lost it the first day."

"That sounds like a sweet deal really," Fielder shrugged, "An old grumpy man isn't that bad of company anyways."

"Ugh, this guy," Celine huffed, "He thinks everyone is interesting. Yesterday, I caught him in a conversation with some guy. They talked for *an hour*."

"Oh?"

"This weirdo with a white suit," she prattled on, "Looked pretty official with all these maps in hand. He was on a horse though which was strange. And Fielder here did not even get a name," Celine made a dramatic gesture towards him, "This is what I have to deal with when you are gone."

"He was visiting all the water filtering facilities, farms and hospitals of the region," Fielder replied casually, ignoring our friend's exasperation.

"Now that is strange," I admitted, "Why those three things in particular?"

"I don't know. He was surveying the Oats Farm, talking to the farmer, getting a tour of the animals and asking all these questions of what they were feeding them, where the waste went and whatnot."

"Did you at least ask him where he was from?"

Fielder cocked his head to one side, pinching his lips for a moment:

"He did mention that he had been busy in Italy and Greece but I couldn't pin down his accent."

"Enough about this," Celine waved her hand in front of us, "Did you hear about Nina?"

"What about her?" I sighed, a little annoyed that the subject had changed.

"She got a cut when she went hiking with Jayce. They got into a huge fight after that because she didn't want to finish her antibiotics. The infection was bad and it gave Dr. Berne a good scare."

"Well he does have a knack of shoving random antibiotics at you," Fielder shrugged.

And like that the conversation was sidetracked to local gossip.

In all honesty, I had mostly forgotten about the stranger for the next few days as I went about my work in the garden and occasional trips to the supermarket. The grocery lists my grandfather gave were becoming more and more elaborate. He had nearly sworn off all meat despite hating vegetarians at one point, and only preferred specific locally sourced ones. This meant that I had to be in an exceedingly long line at the local butcher shop. It was there that I finally met the stranger. If Fielder had not told me about him, I would have not realized that he was there, despite the fact that he was wearing a pale suit with a hint of lime and was right in front of me. The stranger must have sensed me staring down his jacket because

suddenly we were making eye contact and his mouth, a thin sliver of red, was swisting upwards into a smile:

"You look familiar. You must be Pascal's granddaughter right?"

Dumbly, I nodded.

"Nice to meet you!"

His icy fingers dug into my hand during our handshake. There was a pungent odor about him but it was faint enough that ignoring it was easy. I opened my mouth to ask a few polite questions only for the stranger to continue babbling:

"I worked very closely with him. It is such a shame he let it all go all of a sudden. I hope he is doing well."

"He's alright now."

"Ah well it looks like he has taken my motto to heart: what doesn't kill you makes you stronger," He seemed satisfied with my lie, "Where are you headed after this ? Home?"

"Yes. And you?"

"I need to see Dr. Berne then proceed to the hospital."

"Dr. Berne?" I blurted out without really thinking, "Are you involved with some kind of pharmaceutical company?"

He gaped at me for a few seconds before erupting in a fit of wild cackling that got so loud that a few people shot confused glances at us.

"Why would you think that?" He finally stopped for air while I felt my cheeks burn.

"Berne has been getting a lot of visits from different companies," I replied sheepishly, staring down at my feet.

"I see," his eyes were glinting under the sunlight like two small bulbs at this point, which gave his face a hungry look and suddenly I felt a deep sense of revulsion that was screaming at me to run.

"I need to go," I began to back away, leaving the line.

"It was nice meeting you!" He nodded only to be answered with the meekest of waves. I hurried out the store into the warm sunlight.

When I returned home, the procedure was as usual: I would sanitize my hands, put the groceries away, and meet with my grandfather who was usually in his study, littered with books, old anatomy posters and medical research magazines. His leathery face was even more sunken than usual, a sign he had been up all night looking through news articles.

"The world is going down the drain," was his greeting.

"You said that yesterday, " I handed him the mail.

"This is no laughing matter Lucille," two very watery eyes rose to stare me down, "Did you hear what happened to Mrs. Merle?"

"Her prosthetic knee was giving her problems, right?"

"Worse. The long-term suppressive therapy is not working. They are giving her the fourth line of antibiotics and hoping for a miracle."

With that, he continued to sort the mail with his bony fingers until reaching the last of the pile. His eyebrows visibly furrowed and with a swift motion he dug into the envelope. He squinted at the contents of the letter only to turn visibly pale before asking in a soft, trembling voice:

"Say, did you hear of any new visitors?"

"Oh yeah I did," I was torn between the mounting worry for Mrs. Merle, as well as the dread that was clawing at my stomach, "I met one of your old lab partners. Didn't get his name though."

"What did he look like?"

For some reason, his sudden quiet voice was more terrifying than his usual brusque one. It felt like a prelude to the many awful screaming matches he had with my parents back in the day.

“White guy in a pale suit. Thin lips. Smelled weird.”

“When did you meet him? Did you talk to him?” The last letter fluttered to the ground while grandpa struggled to get up, trembling at the effort.

“At the butcher’s shop a few minutes ago,” I felt increasingly guilty despite not knowing exactly what I had done wrong, “He recognized me and started talking.”

With that, grandpa was out of his room, slamming all the shutters close and scurrying about in a frenzy. I followed him out, confused:

“Who is this man? Do you know him?”

“I knew him from my research,” my grandfather yanked at the locked door, “ We thought at first that he was a fellow researcher until it was too late.”

“What do you mean by it was too late? What is his deal?”

Grandpa finally paused and stared at me fixedly:

“Wherever he went, people would get sick and the medication they took would fail. We were a few steps ahead of him for a while, churning out new antibiotics every time, but soon he began to catch up.”

A sudden banging at the front door cut him off. We both froze, too afraid to turn. I was still reeling from the confusion while the old man looked like he was about to faint. The banging continued for a while then the knob began to jiggle which prompted him to grab my shoulders and push me to the back of the house.

“I know you are in there!” The sickly sweet voice was that of the stranger.

“How did he get here so fast?” I heard my grandfather mutter to himself.

“I still have the horse,” the stranger called from behind the door, making both of us nearly jump out of our skins, “Pascal, why don’t you come out and talk? Is this any way to greet an old friend?”

“Go away!” My grandfather yelled, finally turning to the door only to turn even more pale. I followed his gaze only to realize in horror that it was covered in a layer of yellow slime. It was my turn to drag him towards the staircase only to catch a whiff of rotten eggs which nearly made me gag. I turned again to see that the substance was crawling through the cracks and onto the wall. We were both scrambling up second storey when the stranger called out again:

“Come on! I can’t keep the other three waiting! We have big plans for the future!”

“His plans?” I spun to face my grandfather once we were safely secured in a small storage room only to be shushed. I only got a glimpse of his wide eyes before he closed the door and enveloped us in darkness. It was then that I realized that the smell had gone as suddenly as it had arrived. We waited with baited breaths for more jeering only for a cold silence to answer us. Suddenly, all the questions I wanted to ask dissolved and we simply crouched for a good hour until the distinct sound of hooves leaving the premises alerted us of the man’s departure. When we came back down, the slime was gone as well but I sanitized the door for good measure. Grandpa burned the mysterious letter he had received while I tried to call Nina repeatedly only to be met with a receiver every time. I eventually found out that she and Mrs. Merle did not make it.

It took days for both of us to gather our courage and catch the nearest train to my parent’s summer house where my grandfather holed himself up for the remainder of the year. I tried to continue my nursing studies despite him pleading with me not to. Whenever I visit him, I do not mention that I’ve begun to see the stranger again. I should feel guilty but he would have gone mad if he found out that I see them on the regular now. Besides, the sightings are always from afar and when we make eye-contact, all the stranger does is wave. He is not always alone however. Three other men, all with the exact same suit but different colors, accompany him from time to time. They wander around the wards, visiting patients, talking to doctors, and smiling like everything is a big joke. I’ve tried making security escort them out but they keep coming back.

