

THE STRANGER

EXT. PLAYGROUND - DAY

A park in spring. TIM, mid-30s, unkempt, tired, walks hand in hand with CLAIRE, a blonde-haired three-year-old in a red puffer jacket. They're approaching a playground from the street side, houses visible over the tops of trees. On the other side of the playground, open fields give way to distant woods. About ten children fill the playground, running and laughing, while a few mothers watch from the surrounding fence. TIM is talking as we draw closer.

TIM

...then it's one more night with me before you go back to mummy's, OK? OK?

CLAIRE

Yes. And we have pasghetti.

TIM

Spaghetti. We'll see.

CLAIRE nods to herself. They reach the gate, and TIM opens it.

TIM

Now you're sure you're-

But CLAIRE is already off, running towards the climbing frame. TIM sighs and finds his own spot at the fence, putting down the small backpack he's been carrying. The weather's crisp - he rubs his hands before shoving them into the pockets of his coat. He looks around, catches the eye of one of the mothers and gives her a taut smile before looking away.

On TIM's blind side, the STRANGER comes to stand next to him. She's a woman in her late 40s, lean and well-dressed, wavy blonde hair cut stylishly short. She has the air of a severe professional, a different bearing to the mothers in puffer jackets with their prams. She watches the playground for a few moments before speaking.

STRANGER

They grow up so fast, don't they? It may be something of a cliché, but it bears repeating.

TIM

[awkward laugh] Yeah, yeah it's crazy.

STRANGER

And only because you are in the process of watching them grow, second to second-

TIM

Well her mum has her half the time and all.

STRANGER

Yes of course. Even so, it is a gradual change. It is only when you look back-

TIM

Right, you're like, 'I can't believe this was them!' [since the STRANGER doesn't immediately respond, he elaborates, miming swiping on a phone] You know, looking through old photos...

STRANGER

[Nodding, with a slight smile] Quite so. You might hardly recognise them, if you did not have that thread of continuity to hold onto.

TIM

One moment, crawling around trying to stick everything in their mouth, the next, 'Oh my god, you're a person now! Opinions and everything!'

STRANGER

Preferences, certainly. Although in my experience, these are somewhat changeable. Favourite foods come to mind..

TIM

Yeah, that's the new thing.

STRANGER

Ah yes. A battleground that will soon seem all too familiar.

TIM

Yeah, I bet!

Beat. They stand side by side, watching the playground.

STRANGER

You have not been here before, have you?

TIM

Nah, we've just, you know, graduated from the little playground from over on the other side. [gestures back the way he came] Claire was all excited about going to the 'Big Girl Playground'.

STRANGER

Ah, of course. And which one is Claire?

TIM leans in slightly, points.

TIM

Red jacket, blonde hair, over by the spinny thing.

STRANGER

The roundabout.

TIM

Yeah, that's the one, roundabout! Sorry, still all a bit blaaaghhh...

STRANGER

Oh, no need to apologise.

TIM

She was up all night yesterday, nightmares and sh... and stuff. Guess that's going to be the new thing now.

The STRANGER nods understandingly.

TIM [cont'd]

But she'll tucker herself out today.

STRANGER

While you conserve your strength for the trials ahead.

TIM

Just getting to that point where you can let them run off on their own without hovering over them, like Ahhhh!

He shakes his hands like claws above an imaginary head for a brief moment before dropping them.

TIM [cont'd]

You know?

STRANGER

Oh, indeed. The fear that in the one moment when your attention is diverted, something terrible will happen. That is quite common.

TIM

Sure, sure.

STRANGER

Yet there is always only so much attention one has to give.

Beat. It's almost as if the STRANGER has something specific in mind as she stares at the playground. TIM regards her for a moment before turning his gaze back to the playground as well.

TIM

Yeah, it's uh... Well, it's tricky, isn't it?

STRANGER

Indeed. Then of course, there is the social pressure of interactions like-

TIM

[Calling out] Claire! No, let him have a turn if he wants, you've had plenty of goes already! Whyn't you go back on the climbing frame! Yeah - yeah, over there! Good girl!

The STRANGER regards TIM until she's certain he's finished.

STRANGER

As I was saying, then we have interactions like these. A more... forgiving set of conversational rules may hold, yet they still place demands upon our attention that we can never entirely ignore.

TIM

[Half-listening, still focused on CLAIRE] Mhmmmm.

STRANGER

Strange, what details are filtered out when we cannot focus our attention. Faces are the most striking example. You have no memory of faces - at least of those you barely see. And unlike most conversations, here the participants spend most of their time not looking at one another.

TIM

[Still not paying attention] Really?

STRANGER

For instance, when you try to recall this interaction, you may find it difficult to remember mine.

TIM finally registers something, and uncertain if he's being told off, he glances at the STRANGER. When he sees the STRANGER still staring at the playground, he quickly turns back.

TIM

[With a slight laugh] Yeah, it's funny, that.

STRANGER

An inevitable consequence of attentional bifurcation.

TIM

Eh?

STRANGER

Splitting your attention in two. It is a phenomenon which I find perpetually fascinating.

TIM

Oh, so you're like, a psychologist?

STRANGER

After a fashion.

Beat.

STRANGER

I have found, for instance, that while individuals may not remember specifics, certain fragments will remain lodged in their minds long after the fact, prompting thoughts that would otherwise pass unnoticed. An insertion, if you will.

TIM

Oh, really?

STRANGER

Indeed. Coupled with the lack of sleep typical of early child-rearing, and the heightened sense of anxiety appropriate to unfamiliar responsibilities, new parents are almost preternaturally... suggestible.

As she's talking, TIM turns to look at her with mounting suspicion.

TIM

That sounds kinda... I dunno, sounds a bit-

STRANGER

Disturbing?

TIM

Hah, yeah, I was gonna say 'creepy'.

STRANGER

[Still staring at the playground] I do not deny it. But this would be the rational way of explaining what occurs, of making the strange at least somewhat familiar. There are others, but... I doubt you would much like them.

TIM

Sorry, what did you say your name was?

STRANGER

I didn't.

TIM

But your kids are here, right?

The STRANGER turns to meet TIM's gaze.

STRANGER

Would it matter if they were?

Beat.

TIM

Okayyy... Well, it was nice to meet you, really... really interesting stuff, what you were saying, but we'd better be going, you know how it is... [Glances to the playground] Claire! Time to go, sweetheart!

STRANGER

[Quietly] Now you will have two choices.

TIM

[Snaps back to focus on her] What?

STRANGER

Tell me again... Which one is Claire?

Growing unease on TIM's face as running footsteps approach. The STRANGER gives him a polite nod and begins to walk away, and for a second TIM seems torn, panicked.

CLAIRE (O.S.)

Daddy, daddy!

A small figure in a red puffer jacket barrels into TIM's legs.

TIM

Ooof!

But he's relieved as he picks her up. This whole thing was just an odd woman spouting theories at him.

TIM [cont'd]

You have fun, kiddo?

CLAIRE 2

Yes! I play on the swings.

TIM

[Grunting as he puts Claire down] Alright then, well let's just see-

He freezes. CLAIRE 2 looks up at him, waiting for him to finish. She's different. Still the same clothes, the same blonde hair - but while the face is very similar, it's definitely not the same.

TIM looks around desperately, still holding CLAIRE 2's shoulders. Children in the playground, other parents by the fence, the STRANGER walking away. He looks back at CLAIRE 2, horrified.

TIM [cont'd]

I... what...

CLAIRE 2

Is it time to go home now, daddy?

He steps back, desperate.

TIM

[Calling out] Claire! Claire!

CLAIRE 2

[Laughs] Daddy's being silly!

TIM squats down in front of her, grabs her by the shoulders again.

TIM

Where is Claire?

CLAIRE 2, frightened by his urgency, not understanding.

TIM [cont'd]

Where is she?

CLAIRE 2's face creases up, ready to cry. Looking up, TIM sees the STRANGER, some distance away now, still walking.

TIM [cont'd]

Oh, you fucker!

He abandons CLAIRE 2 and chases after the STRANGER.

TIM [cont'd]

Oi!

The STRANGER stops walking. She waits for a moment, turning as TIM catches up to her. Behind them we can hear CLAIRE 2 starting to cry.

TIM [cont'd]

[As he reaches her, breathing heavily] What the fuck have you-

STRANGER

I advise you to remain calm.

TIM moves towards her aggressively.

TIM

You better-

STRANGER

The other parents are watching you now, aware of an altercation. Tell me, if you saw a man lay hands on a woman at a playground, what conclusion would you leap to first?

TIM

I don't give a fuck what they do! Where's my daughter?

STRANGER

[Looking around him] Currently standing by the playground gate. Preparing for a quite fulsome howl, if I'm any judge.

TIM

That's not my daughter.

STRANGER

Are you sure? She certainly seems to think she is.

TIM

Some kid you've... I don't know what you've done, but-

STRANGER

You believe I've convinced a three-year-old child to play the part of your daughter? Does that sound credible to your ears?

TIM

I'm gonna call the police. [Points at the STRANGER] Don't even fucking think about moving.

STRANGER

By all means, call them. I am certainly intrigued as to what exactly you intend to tell them.

TIM

Look, lady, I don't know what you think is gonna happen here, but it's not gonna fly. Her mum will back me up, my... my whole fucking family will back me up. That's not Claire!

STRANGER

Ah, children! They do grow up so fast, don't they?

TIM grabs her by the lapel, all impotent rage. The STRANGER regards him calmly.

STRANGER [cont'd]

You are not the first, and you will not be the last. But fear not... I can assure you that all of this is quite normal. [She taps TIM's hand on her lapel with a finger] If anything, the women tend to be more violent.

TIM

I don't know where you get off, lady. I've got pictures and shit! No way anyone's going to believe-

STRANGER

You yourself can hardly believe, looking through old photos. Besides, it is truly astonishing how widely a photograph can deviate from a real person. Far more, I believe, than your daughter currently deviates from your memory of your daughter. And memory is a notoriously unreliable source. Tell me, could you actually describe how your daughter differs from the little girl you believe to be an imposter? Can you even recall her face?

TIM

Of course I can-

STRANGER

No. No, what you actually remember is a series of disjointed imaginings that coalesce into a vague impression of your daughter - an impression that, for some reason, is not currently in accord with the daughter who is... Ah, it appears one of the mothers is comforting her. I suggest you remove your hand from my jacket before she calls the police and you are forced to explain yourself. In a way that allows you to retain custody of your child.

TIM

That's not...

He seems defeated, bewildered.



STRANGER

We have been over this. [Gently, she pushes TIM's hand from her jacket] As I said before, you have two choices. You can return home with your child.. or with no child at all.

TIM

Mary's never going to believe-

STRANGER

We shall see. Perhaps you will learn that this is something only you perceive. Perhaps, by the time you have reached your home, even you will be unable to tell the difference. Remember, memory is notoriously unreliable. Now... [She adjusts her jacket, straightens up] I would estimate that you have perhaps... twenty more seconds before that woman decides to take action. She is debating whether or not to corral her own children first. The bifurcation of attention once again! Only so much we can observe, and of that, only so much we can see.

The STRANGER turns and walks away, across the field towards the woods. TIM makes no move to stop her, overwhelmed and helpless. Then, making a decision, he hurries back to the playground. He's almost there when he remembers something, takes his phone out of his pocket, stops and turns. The STRANGER is now several hundred feet from him.

TIM

[Calling to her] Hey!

She stops, looks back, lifts her hand in farewell. TIM raises his phone and decisively takes a picture (at this distance her features are blurred, but TIM doesn't spend any time looking at the image). The STRANGER gives him a nod, then turns and resumes her pace.

TIM returns to CLAIRE 2 and CONCERNED MOTHER. He crouches down and picks up CLAIRE 2, who starts bawling into his shoulder. CONCERNED MOTHER steps back, expecting an explanation.

TIM

[To CONCERNED MOTHER] Yeah I had to... Thanks.

[To CLAIRE 2, uncertain] Let's... get you back to home.

He carries CLAIRE 2 a short distance away. In the distance, out of focus, CONCERNED MOTHER surreptitiously takes a picture of him. TIM sets CLAIRE 2 down and unshoulders his backpack. She's sniffing now, the immediate chaos over.

TIM

Hey. Hey, look at me.

CLAIRE 2 looks up. Her face is slightly different again - more similar to CLAIRE, this time. TIM looks at her in confusion for a second before taking a tissue from the backpack and wiping her nose clean.

TIM [cont'd]

Blow.

CLAIRE 2 blows her nose. When TIM removes the tissue, she's still not the original CLAIRE, but again, it's still a slightly closer match than the first time.

TIM [cont'd]  
[half to himself] Who are you?

She stares at him, clearly not understanding the question. TIM sighs and stands up, running a hand through his hair.

TIM [cont'd]  
[weakly, his voice breaking] Fuck...

CLAIRE 2  
Can we go home now, daddy?

A tear falls from TIM's eye. He stares out across the field, but the STRANGER is gone.

CLAIRE 2 tugs on his sleeve.

CLAIRE 2 [cont'd]  
Daddy?

TIM  
[roughly wiping his eye with a sleeve] Yeah. Yeah, we can... Come on.

CLAIRE 2  
[holding up her arms] Can you carry me?

TIM  
Uh... sure. Up you come.

He lifts her up and begins walking.

CLAIRE 2  
Can we have pasghetti?

TIM freezes. Beat.

TIM  
[deadpan] Spaghetti.

CLAIRE 2  
Spaghetti.

TIM  
OK.

He walks on. CLAIRE 2's face shows over his shoulder, almost, but not quite, the original CLAIRE.