**MR. O’BRIEN**

**AND HIS GREAT**

**MANY**

**STUDENTS**

**A MINIATURE NOVEL**

**by Simmons S. S. Wang**

**To all my teachers who are the greatest gardeners.**

**Please note that all other names, including locations, characters, are fictious and coincidences on naming may occur. Please know that this not intended.**

Table of Contents

[Chapter 1 After It All Happened 1-3](#_Toc36554902)

[Chapter 2 He Finds It Difficult 2-4](#_Toc36554903)

[Chapter 3 Running 3-8](#_Toc36554904)

# **After It All Happened**

Today, on the tenth day of September, Mr. Richard Michael O’Brien passed away. He died in his own house, on a sunny Saturday morning. His eyes were closed, his hands piled peacefully on his belly.

We will not forget him. We never will. For his being our greatest memory.

The funeral’s next day. Every single student and co-worker, alive, that he ever taught and worked with, attended the ceremony all the way through, from the church where we spoke about him, his doing to us and his good deeds, to the graveyard, where everyone said their final goodbyes and left in tears.

I did not leave. I teared not.

That’s when I started to remember everything.

The journey that changed us. The journey that changed us all.

It was a rainy Saturday morning, twenty-five years ago.

I was then a middle-aged man. He was then half an old man.

Twenty-five years later, I am fifty-six years old, and he passed away at the age of seventy-nine.

I did not go home that night and stayed at the somewhat harmonious and calm graveyard. I believe it’s his soul that settled me. I closed my eyes and memories flood me. I shut my eyes tighter, trying to recall everything…

# **He Finds It Difficult**

Mr Richard Michael O’Brien retires today. Ten years ago. On September tenth. He retired in Springswood Robinson’s High after working as an English teacher for twenty-nine years.

He was an interesting man: he was at that time despised yet favoured. Favoured by the faculty and despised by students.

He is the kind of teacher with all the accessories: suit and tie, ironed every day, a pair of fancy leather shoes, a handkerchief in his bosom pocket.

Ten whole calendar years later, Mr O’Brien wakes up precisely at five a.m., the time he used to go to work.

He wakes up, finds himself in his bedroom (also his study, kitchen, living room and loo), in the near suburbs of Springswood City.

He got out of his bed difficultly because of the recent backbone surgery. He started to limp (he doesn’t have good legs either, he’s a seventy-six-year-old) past his stove towards his desk. Then remembered that he hasn’t opened his curtains yet. He hobbled back towards his window facing the northwest. The light is feeble. It’s starting to rain outside. He exhaled greatly, and starts to limp back towards the

Then he takes out his gold-lined notebook he uses as a journal. A large one, to be honest, really large. It’s a refillable, and he has added more than the width of a piano. He has been using it ever since the getting of his job. And he scribes the following:

' I really miss the kids. I haven't seen them ever since...'

He is expecting people to knock on his door and congratulate him. Celebrate with him. Toast him. At least visit him. Send him a card the very least.

He did not get any of these.

And I know every single thing. Because I am the only person who has knocked on Room 3-B of 231 Gregory Avenue.

And he was the only teacher who opens the door for me.

My name is Simmons Ann Winston. I am one of his last year of graduates. I was considered weird, by nearly all faculty and schoolmates.

Because I know what it all really is. And, not bragging, they do that to all nerds in junior and senior high.

Back to the tiny apartment on Greg Ave. Mr O’Brien treated me like a rare guest and made me tea. He asked me if I want breakfast together. I agreed. I’m not lacking currency, it’s just impossible to refuse a hot plate of smoked bacon, mashed potatoes, milk and porridge.

We forgot all about dining etiquette and talked a lot during the meal. Starting from status of well-being, we get refamiliarized more and more.

I here present one period I still remember, also the period which concerns me the most. It happens when we were finishing the last bits.

Scrunch.

‘How’re you doing these days, sir?’

Slurp.

Slurp.

‘Well.’

Crunch.

‘I’ve just done a minor surgery,’

Slurp.

‘It ended okay, really. Got my bones inserted a piece of nail of sorts.’

‘And…Do you need any assistance or any of the sort? I live across the park.’

I burped. It was just too delicious.

‘Sorry.’

‘Never mind that, dear Sim.’

He coughed a bit. I brought him water, and he poured from my thermos then drank even though I sterilised the rim with alcohol wipes. He always does this. At school, after class, even at home, he wouldn’t drink from any other container—not even his own tap.

‘Ay! Stop calling me sir this sir that, lad. We’re friends.’

Scrunch.

‘Well assistance…not quite yet. May I ask you a small favour?’

Slurrrrrp.

‘Yes, in all kinds.’

He paused a bit.

‘Nope. Call me sir.’

‘Okay…Sir.’

Swallow.

‘Please visit me when you ain’t busy. Okay?... I’m too lonely sometimes.’

Swallow.

‘Of course. I could move next door if you don’t mind. The property looks nice.’

‘You can share a room with me if you’d like.’

Gurgle.

‘What’ve you done after retirement, sir?’

Swallow.

Gurgle.

‘Well. I rode some bicycle, did some races, broke my rear end, oh, and I’ve went to America once, to see my daughter, five years ago, um, and that’s all it is really.’

Crunch.

‘So, are you bored or anything of that sort, sir?’

‘And, doesn’t your daughter ever visit you?’

He nodded then shook his head. Big, benign, year-ridden head.

‘Well, I’m sure she’s pretty busy…yeah…’

His daughter and me are classmates. Quite a remarkable student she was really, but then she went to America in pursue of his boyfriend, then I heard, from my many other classmates (nice they contacted me, really), that she’s arrested for burgling just after Mr. O’Brien visited...

He talked in a light voice. In a medium comfortable London accent (he moved to Springswood because of some social reasons), and asked nothing about me. Which made me comfortable, as I don’t like to pick up the topic about me. I am a pilot for BA and I’m two months before retirement: I’ve been through a minor air accident and then, well, had some traumas, and BA decided to decrease my work years.

Anyway, he finished, got up and wiped his mouth with the same handkerchief in his bosom pocket: a square cotton fabric, lined with heavy gold twistings, just a bit worn out. I turned to look and couldn’t help but notice, for the first time there’s a woman’s name inscribed upon it: it was in Cursive, and I’m never a genius at Cursive, but I managed to make out ‘Julianne B’ something, then he noticed me looking, when I, very ashamed, quickly turned back, quickly stuffed it back.

I deprioritized that issue because Mr O’Brien’s health is just way too concerning.

‘Now keep eating, son. Never overestimate your body: it always consumes for more.’

We both laughed. For me it was for him. As for him, it was the humour of life.

We sat on his bed and saw some TV. Surprisingly he watches the soaps. I helped him with some groceries around the corner. I asked whether he had visitors before me. He shook his head.

‘I don’t understand, sir. Not even your co-workers? Mr. Baker? Mr. Charleston? I mean…’

He interrupted me, swallowed then, with great difficulty, said, with a little, almost inaudible voice: ‘They’ve passed.’ Oven Baker died last year when his heart stopped…He was with his grandson on a summer tour to Devon…Old Charleston died like years ago…One of his students were driving him somewhere and…well…they had an accident…

I escorted him outside into the rain, into the taxicab he hailed, said my goodbyes, and he was off to a teacher’s retirement conference or sorts.

I realised something, and I started running.

# **Running**

I started to run. I ran for Mr O’Brien’s cab, waving, screaming, flashing down Greg’s like a maniac.

Because of this question I’ve been meaning to ask him.

Why a student to drive Mr. Charleston? Which student to drive him? Did the student live? Oh lord am I puzzled… and lord do I want the answers…

Oh, and, he forgot his handkerchief, it fell in the rain… It was not until then when I saw the water-stained inscription: Julianne B. O’Brien, My Love of Life. It was muffled, ruffled and wrinkled with about hundreds of thousands of touches of Mr. O’Brien. It’s probably her wife’s name.

That was my best guess and other possibilities based on the O’Brien name and ‘love of my life’ just misleads people.

So, anyway, I ran after the cab. It wasn’t very difficult, as when I finished university education I’ve won every year’s domestic county marathon winner.

It was, as I said, raining. Very typical day, very typical people, but little did I know that this is the game-changer of my life. Mr. O’Brien’s life. And as I believe, many other people’s lives.

I made a turn at Madison’s, dashed down the Great Sam…Once I was so close to getting to it, but then a truck almost ran over me at a traffic light-less T-crossing, but luckily I always kept up with the cab at street lights.

Luck stopped favouring me when I slipped and fell, at the crossing of Black and Canter’s, and the irony is ironic: the fastest runner in the county cannot fix a skin scrape on his knee. It seemed quite psychopathic really: covering my left injured leg with my left hand while holding the precious partly-soaked handkerchief away from my oily sweaty skin (it was a hot day and I’m in my tee shirts). While dashing down Canter’s one-mile downward ramp where it interconnects with the city motorway.

I am so desperate to catch up with the cab I forgot that he had a phone and I had his number. I rushed past people on Lexington Place’s crossing and ran directly onto the motorway. This is the entrance (or is it exit?) in the suburbs furthest from Gregson’s so I must have run for something eight, ten miles.

It’s okay for a marathon runner but it’s not okay for the motorway patrols. They stopped me on the entrance (god bless it’s the entrance, or I’d be going to the big house) and asked me why. I said the gentleman in the cab in front lost something very important to him, and the helpful cop sat me in his sidecar and whizzed off. In a Honda motorbike!

I was surprised and joyed at first but then I had a problem. How far will the cop take me? What if he drops me off at some service station and… and lose Mr. O’Brien’s cab?

I was preposterous. The cop was nice and he stopped the cab after five minutes of racing in the late afternoon jam.

He talked to the driver and stuffed me, all sweaty, mucky and somehow bloody all over, inside the cab, next to Mr. O’Brien.

I waved the cop goodbye, and then awkwardness fell.

Mr. O’Brien looked at me as if saying ‘Seriously kid, what the fxxk!’ (believe me he says that word very often) And the cabman is very silent (well he might be astounded by my appearance) and says no word and keeps driving.

I tried to explain, but Mr. O’Brien stopped me right away with the raise of his index. ‘Gimme the handkerchief, please. I know you’d picked it up for me.’ I gave him the handkerchief, which was hardly stained except for the part I pinched it, and he thanked me with a faint ‘Oh… Thank yee…’ Or it might just be myself thinking because sounds just blow up around you after running two full-length marathons.

I had never thought of it would hit him so hard. He acted normal when asking me to hand it over, but upon contact with which he started sobbing and jerking as if it’s electric.

He started crying real hard since then. And really amiably he stuffed the handkerchief inside his little bosom pocket back before crying. As if it’s not an object but a piece of old glazed china of high currency quotation.

I did nothing and kept embarrassing myself under the now blazing, curious eyes of the taximan reflecting from the rear-view mirror and other travellers in other cars in the jam. They’re currently looking at bloody and sweaty and panting man, in his tees and a pair knocked down glasses (yes, thanks for asking, I’m eight hundred degrees short-sighted). Still holding the unseen handkerchief that is now in Mr. O’Brien’s pocket dumbfounded. Much of a sight to be honest.

The cab wormed through the jam inch by inch. And my shame grew every time a new vehicle aligns our cab.

For heaven’s sake we exited the motorway just before I blush myself to death. It’s the other side of the middle-sized city where lies all the fancy stuff: the municipal’s regional airport, the convention centre, the high-tech zone and all the new buildings built this or last year. It’s already starting to go downhill with the speed identifiable by the naked eye: more buildings ended up not finishing, the smell of unprocessed industrial waste, and the unfriendly, oily, metallic aura that surrounds everything. Like the city itself, it’s not a place for new things, new beings and technically anything new.

As I peered through the passing lining reinforcing steels and scaffolds with nobody on them, the driver stopped in front of a convention centre, as mentioned by Mr. O’Brien. I was pulled back from my emotions, and I helped the now conscious and calm Mr. O’Brien outside.

It’s cold. And raining hard. I opened a small umbrella in my waist pocket and held Mr. O’Brien by his arms and tilted the umbrella towards him.

It was a silly thing to have done when looking back now: I was not needed and I caused him awkwardness. I haven’t asked my questions yet!

I was still short of oxygen then and my brain was defunct. I saw him into the gate and said goodbye. He turned wobbly and waved. And then…

He waved me to him. I ran to him and he said to me: ‘I’ve got another ticket. Come with me. I’ll tell you what you want.’

I was scared out of my wits: how on earth does he know what I want!

I did not care much about it at that time and I thanked him then walked into the unsculptured convention centre with a big ragged rag saying: ‘WELCOME TO EDU-CON!’

Seemingly Mr. O’Brien was familiar with the grounds, as he dragged me by my sleeve to a distant information desk, where sits a crooked woman in her forties (or fifties?) and, her pyjamas.

She yawned and said, ‘How can I ‘elp you?’

Mr O’Brien answered that he wanted to redeem a coupon for his tickets, and then he pulled out four worn strips of paper all saying ‘Edu-con ticket for adult’. I remembered it immediately: it’s issued by our school somewhat twenty years ago. It’s for the faculty only because that time it’s an honour to have a ticket to the world-famous educational convention costless——even though you only get to stay for half an hour, photography and filming prohibited.

It was obvious: the coupon was outdated. I paid with my debit card, got two strips (with the same pattern), took him by his hand and walked into the ‘Entrance’ which is actually just a half-inflated balloon gate. I was frightened that it might collapse and suffocate us inside.

It did not. Mr. O’Brien starts speaking.

‘Did you know how did Mr. Charleston…well you know…died?’

I replied with a shake of my head. And signalled him to continue.

‘It was three years ago. When he returned home from a monopolised birthday party. I was not there because I was in hospital preparing for the surgery next-day. A student of his offered to drive him,’

I interrupted saying ‘But sir who’s the student? Is he alive now? I mean…’

He signalled me to shut it and lets himself keep talking: ‘Be patient.’

‘They crashed into a drunk cargo driver driving on the wrong side. And that student…is that fucking son of a bitch who stole my fountain pen.

My heart sank. That was my best friend, Harris Blanc Jr.

‘Is he alive sir?’

‘Well… he is.’

My heart leaped. ‘And if so…Sir where is he now?’

‘He is… if he is punctua