

Syndrome

How do you find someone who, according to others, doesn't exist?

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(The preview version)

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Prologue

The mattress squeaks as I turn. The pillow sticks to my face and smells of sweat. The covers are just as dirty and yellowed.

It doesn't matter.

Nothing matters anymore.

I know every inch of this room. Every streak and discoloration, every name and number that has been carved into the wall. The ventilation grid, the door, the chair, the bed, the table; it will all haunt me in my dreams until the day I die.

How long have they been keeping me here? Days, weeks, months? I honestly have no idea. The meaninglessness of the hours is an endless flow. And then there are the seizures... Whenever I have one, I am out cold for days.

Footsteps in the distance... but they're getting closer, just like the voices.

I sit up, wrap my arms around my knees like a child and press my back against the wall. Instantly the cold creeps through my clothes and I start to shiver.

I hold my breath.

The footsteps become louder. The men are getting closer.

Keep walking... for goodness sake, keep walking.

They stop in front of my door. Keys rattle.

The door opens with a squeak.

Three men appear one by one.

My heart stops. I press my back even closer to the wall. 'Please, no!'

The men grin at each other. They approach.

I scream.

Chapter 1

Shadows, all the parents, teachers and children are reduced to mere shadows. The rain makes sure of that. The water splatters against the windshield. Umbrellas in all shapes and colors make it surreal.

I barely notice, I have been staring at my phone for the past ten minutes, scrolling past dozens of pictures of my mother. She looks cheerful. Her smile is warm and sincere. Those two things were always a part of her character. Not a problem in the world could bring her down. 'You can always find a solution, as long as you look for it,' she would sometimes say to me. I believed that.

That belief is gone now, just like my mother's smile.

The musical notes coming from the radio valiantly try to overpower the clatter of the rain. The wistful voice of the singer gives me a lump in my throat. I'm wiping a tear from my cheek as the phone in my hand begins to vibrate. I recognize the number immediately. I take a deep breath to steady myself and pick up. Before I can say a word, the man on the other end of the line starts to babble so loudly I have to take the phone away from my ear.

'Listen, kiddo,' my employer says. 'Esmee is well again, so you don't have to fill in for her. Although the customers will miss that sweet face of yours tonight.'

The lump in my throat persists. I swallow a couple of times and cough. I wonder if Louis notices, but I doubt it. If there is anyone who lives in his own little universe, it is Louis Enrico. 'Sure,' I respond. 'Instead of putting up with my ugly visage, they get to stare at Esmee's boobs all night long. I feel sorry for them already.'

On the other side of the line Louis roars so loudly it hurts my ears. I keep the phone a bit further away from my ear. The laughing turns into coughing.

'Cigarettes are so nice, aren't they?' I respond.

'Shove it, waster.' Another cough. 'Besides, things have improved lately, haven't they?'

'Improved?'

'For God's sake, Peter. What do you think I'm talking about?'

'Honestly, I have no idea.'

'The seizures.'

'I...'

'Never mind. I'll see you tomorrow.'

'Don't worry. My bartender skills will fill you with joy.'

'Hmpphh, the only skills you have are written on your résumé.'

'If so, why don't you fire me?'

'Because there's nobody else I can talk to like this without getting punched in the face.'

'Perhaps because I know that somewhere deep down you have the heart of an innocent little girl.'

'Bite me, Deferme.'

After Louis hangs up, I shake my head and put the phone in my pocket.

The passenger door opens and my sister hops in. A gust of cold wind and a couple of raindrops accompany her. She shakes her head as she slams the door shut. She throws her schoolbag on the back seat. 'What are *you* doing here?'

'Nice to see you too,' I say.

Aisha wipes the raindrops from her jacket and crosses her arms. 'Dad would pick me up.'

He is far too loaded to even get up and you know it damn well, little sis.

Aisha puts on her seatbelt.

I start the engine and steer the car towards the road. 'He was too busy.'

I can see her disappointment from the corner of my eye. 'He promised! I finally got him to take me shopping. I really need some new T-shirts.'

We approach an intersection. The raindrops on the windshield distort the lights of the houses and lamp posts on the side of the road. It makes me feel gloomy.

'You're kidding, right?'

'What?' Aisha bristles at me. 'The fact that I need some new T-shirts or dad promising me to go shopping?'

'Both.'

I can't imagine my dad managed to speak coherently, let alone make a promise. Ever since the accident he only sits aimlessly behind his computer with a six-pack within reach. His editors expect him to hand in his new novel within two months, but he hasn't written a single chapter.

'Well, it's true.' Shaking her head Aisha turns to look out the window. My little sister is ten years my junior, but she is quite mature for an eleven year old. She has tons of friends and she can babble for hours. Her being quiet at the moment, is telling. It makes me realize what this excursion with dear old dad truly meant to her. It's not about the clothes; it's about the man himself. It is a brave attempt to get her father – not the man he is nowadays, but the person he was a year ago – back to reality.

The lump in my throat returns. I change gears, place a hand on her arm and squeeze slightly. 'I could come along with you?'

Her words confirm my suspicion. 'No, never mind.'

I don't let her rebuff me that easily. 'Of course, I could. It will be fun, won't it?'

She shrugs her shoulders and stares through the window avoiding my gaze.

Playfully I nudge her with my elbow. 'Come on. Have you seen how I look these days? You may need some new shirts, but I need a whole new wardrobe.'

A smile. Mission accomplished. 'That's one thing for sure.'

'You can help me. Girls have a far better fashion sense than guys.'

'It's time for you to get a girlfriend.'

I grin. 'As if I have the time.'

Aisha glances at the clock. 'But don't you have to go to work any moment?'

For a moment I consider telling her the truth, but I decide that lying will make me sound cooler. 'I'll just call in sick.'

'To go shopping?'

I steer the Fiat to the other side of town. 'To go shopping with you.'

We've still got a few blocks to go and reach the mall when Aisha sees the red pick-up truck. 'Peter, we're being followed.'

I glance in the rearview mirror, take a look at the car and roll my eyes. 'Seriously?'

'You think I'm joking?'

'More like you're playing some game again.'

Thousands of raindrops clatter unharmoniously on the windshield. The wipers work overtime and do their best to try and hypnotize me. Rainclouds have stripped all colors from the surrounding landscape and turn it all grey.

Aisha continues, 'He was parked at the end of the street at the school.' She unbuckles her seatbelt, turns around in her seat to sit on her knees and presses her stomach against the backrest. Then she places her cheek against the head restraint and stares through the back window. 'He's been behind us ever since.' She speaks calmly, almost amused.

'Put your seatbelt back on.' Irritated, I grab her shoulder and push her back down.

Without removing her gaze from the window, she smacks away my hand. 'Perhaps he's a cop.'

'Have you been up to something, then?'

'No, but you might.'

'Not that I'm aware of.'

'Or maybe something you don't want to admit.'

'Just sit down or I'll tell dad you've been a pain in the ass.'

She looks at me defiantly. 'No, you won't.'

'Watch me.'

But we both know that I won't do it in the end. Not that he'd care in the least.

Aisha points. 'Look, there he is again. He's coming around the curve. Why would he be following us?'

'Perhaps he thinks you have a lot of cash on you.'

'Don't be stupid.'

'Whoa, don't be stupid.'

She ignores me and says, 'You don't think it's...'

'What?'

'A bad man?'

'If so then I think he'd try to push us off the road, don't you agree?'

'Perhaps he's about to. He's getting closer.'

'Stop it, Aisha. We're not being followed. That car is just going in the same direction as we are, that's it.'

She doesn't listen to me. She's still looking through the back window obsessively. She stays quiet for a minute or two, which has to be a new record. Then her voice changes remarkably. 'Peet...'

'What?'

'That man...'

Once again I look through the rearview-mirror, but instead of the driver I only see a blurry shadow. The rain clattering against the back window makes it impossible to see any contours, let alone a face.

'I know him.'

I sigh. 'You can't even see him.'

'Yes, I can. Look, he just winked at me!' Her voice is trembling. 'Get us out of here.'

'Christ, what has gotten into you?'

'Just hit the gas!'

'Calm down, will you.'

'You don't get it.'

'Quit playing games, Aisha.'

'It's him, Peet.'

'Who?'

'The man from my nightmares!'

'That's enough. Or I'll take you straight home. I'm not in the mood for this nonsense.'

'It's not nonsense. It's him. Just look!'

I shoot a quick glance at the pick-up truck. 'I can't see shit in this weather, Aisha. Which means you can't see anything either.'

'But...'

'No.' I make her turn harshly so she's back in her seat looking straight forward. But I only notice at the last second that I turned the wheel at the same time. The suspension jolts when the tires hit the curb. 'Damn it.' I can barely prevent us from tearing through the fence of one of the front yards. I yank the wheel and steer the vehicle back towards the road. 'Look what you've made me do.'

I expect her to react sharply but my little sister has turned pale while looking in the side mirror.

I start to doubt. She's not that good an actress, my little sister.

Christ. She's trembling. Does she truly believe any of this?

I whisper. 'Hey, you're letting your fantasy get the best of you. You do know that nightmares can't come to life?'

She looks at me furiously. Tears gleam in the corner of her eyes. 'This isn't just a nightmare. I've been dreaming about him for about two years now.'

'Aisha, nobody is chasing us.'

She just looks at me with fear in her eyes.

I sigh. 'Fine, I'll prove it.'

Instead of turning right which will take us to the mall in under five minutes, I turn left. We pass by several stores, houses and office buildings. There aren't many people walking around due to the bad weather. The few exceptions are battling against the rain. Their chosen weapon, the umbrella, is blown in every direction by the strong wind.

We approach an intersection. The traffic light has been green for a while and chances are that it'll turn orange any time now. I grasp the steering wheel and hit the gas. The engine roars and it overpowers the noise of the rain. If we manage to reach the traffic light before it turns to red, I calculate, then the pick-up truck will have to stop. In that case we get him off our tail quickly and we can resume our original route.

I focus on the traffic light. The pick-up truck is about 100 yards behind us. With just 10 yards to the intersection the light is still green.

The pick-up truck doesn't slow down. Not two seconds later the light turns orange.

It doesn't matter. Without slamming down on the brakes you can't stop safely anymore. Hit it, Peet.

The traffic light turns red.

We fly across the intersection. I quickly glance left and right and check the other traffic. A small bump in the road makes the tires bounce on the asphalt. When we touch the ground again the suspension squeaks loudly.

The intersection is the end of the city center. The local road ahead of us leads to the woods. Dozens of trees and bushes sway wildly in the wind.

'Peter, he's not stopping!'

I glance backwards through the rearview-mirror. Astonished I see Aisha is right. Despite the fact the pick-up truck is about to fail to stop at the red traffic light and the traffic on the other lanes is already starting to move, the vehicle isn't slowing down.

'Christ, they're going to collide!' I yell.

'Can't they see him?' Aisha clasps a hand around her mouth.

Scared I might drive us to death, I hastily pull over to the side of the road. Since I don't take my gaze off the rearview mirror it's a miracle we don't hit anything. Almost automatically, I turn around quickly. The wiper constantly renews the view, like a slide, so I only see fragments of how the pick-up truck hurtles across the intersection. The driver doesn't seem aware he's about to get hit. If the large truck that's approaching from the left won't crash into him, then the car from the right certainly will. It's inevitable.

I hold my breath and brace myself for the crash...

...that doesn't occur.

'What?' Aisha's voice fades away.

My jaw drops.

No, I'm not seeing it right The view is distorted because of the rain.

The truck and the car pass each other by across the intersection, cutting the pick-up truck in half. They don't even notice. It's as if the pick-up truck is made of air.

Can't they see him? They don't even honk their horns.

'Peter, hit the gas!'

It takes a while before I notice Aisha pulling my shirt. My limbs refuse to move. I'm *too* astonished.

The pick-up truck is closing in.

That license plate.

Three smileys grin at me.

Your imagination is getting the better of you, son. Don't let your sister's fantasy get a hold on you.

That pick-up truck is just going to pass you by and that's it.

But instead the car slows down until he comes to a stop right next to us in the middle of the road, his tires squealing. The engine sputters and it sounds way too heavy for the vehicle it powers, more like a large truck. A cutting sound rivals with it, like the timing belt is in desperate need of replacement. There are other sounds as well, like an off-tune children's melody which reminds me of an ice-cream truck and...

Voices?

My ears prick up. As if the driver holds the god of weather by his balls, the rain stops. The wind picks up and with it come gloomy whispers. A shiver goes down my spine. The wind rocks the Fiat hard back and forth.

I hold my breath. My heart pounds in my throat.

Aisha screams.

The sides of the pick-up truck are covered with rust stains. The side windows are blinded. I shouldn't be able to see the driver. But I can!

Impossible!

The man is extremely pale and his white hair is turned into dreadlocks. He shows a toothless grin like an octogenarian. His eyes are nothing more than black holes, like a bottomless pit holding me prisoner. He lifts his hand and waves. His mouth goes up and down, but more like a goldfish's than like he's trying to make words. Yet we can understand him perfectly. Better yet, it sounds as if he's sitting next to us in the car. 'Can I wish you a bloody good afternoon, you weirdos?'

The landscape changes. The trees and bushes flanking us at both sides of the road fade away and disappear, like someone is erasing them with a divine eraser. They're replaced by a

snowy landscape filled with craters, corpses and bones. The smell of rotting and decay is nauseating. The sky is pitch black, a huge contrast with the rest of it.

Sweat is dripping across my cheeks.

'Will you come with me later, little girl?' The man bellows. This time his mouth stays closed and the voice sounds from the Fiat's radio. 'We're going to have so much fun, you and I. You can count on it.'

Aisha shrieks but I only notice when she grabs me roughly by the shoulder and starts to shake me. 'Peter, get us out of here!'

It takes a moment to gain control over my limbs again. I put the pedal to the metal as hard as I can. The engine roars, the tires slip. With a jolt the Fiat jumps forward into the white world. Beneath us bones shatter. The car shakes. It doesn't matter. The pick-up truck is more important and it remains perfectly still. I glance in the side mirror and see the man smile and wave.

'Peter!'

The voice is all that remains. Like a mantra it echoes through the void.

A poke to my side.

Surprised I open my eyes.

Aisha looks at me questioningly. 'Are you coming?'

I frown and look around. I'm still sitting behind the wheel of the Fiat but it's standing still in a parking lot. Neon lighting of different shops welcome me, just like the shopping crowd. The engine's off and the raindrops are once again splattering loudly against the windshield.

I feel dizzy but also extremely tired, as if I've slept for hours.

The mall?

'What just happened?' I whisper.

'What do you mean?'

'The pick-up truck...'

'What are you talking about?' Surprise is taken over by worry. 'Are you feeling alright? You look like you've seen a ghost.'

I swallow. My throat feels painfully dry. 'We were being chased...'

'Chased?' Aisha turns around and looks through the back window. 'By whom?'

I want to say *by the man from your nightmares*, but I shut my mouth. Suddenly it all makes sense to me.

It wasn't real, son.

But it felt so real.

Excuse me? Cars driving through one another; a landscape filled with corpses and bones; a man whose voice sounds through the radio... What's real about that?

I sigh, pinch my nose and try my best to keep the upcoming headache at bay.

Come on, get out and go with your sister to the clothing shop. But I'm not sure I dare to leave the car. I get the feeling someone is watching me. I look around me skittishly.

'Jeez,' Aisha's voice comes from far away, as if from another world. 'You're all shaky. Are you getting sick?'

I shake my head, lift my nose in the air and take a few deep breaths and look at her as determined as I can. 'Let's go inside.'

Chapter 2

The image of the extremely pale man and the landscape covered with bones still haunts me.

It was just my imagination, nothing else.

Of course, that makes sense. But why do I have the feeling somebody is watching me?

On edge, I watch my surroundings. It's not busy in the shop. Three girls are standing by a pile of T-shirts laughing. They pick up the garments, look at them bored rather than interested and then put them back in a careless heap. A couple of employees walk around but that's it. Yet I cannot shake off this feeling of uneasiness.

The wheezing sound of a curtain being shoved aside makes me turn around. Aisha steps out of the fitting room wearing a red dress. 'What do you think?' She twirls with a grin on her face.

'I thought you said you needed T-shirts?'

She shrugs her shoulders carelessly. 'I couldn't find anything I like. Besides, you just can't leave a dress like this hanging on the rack.'

I decide not to react.

The smile on Aisha's face disappears. 'Are you sure you're alright? You still look like shit.'

'I've felt better.' I admit.

One of the employees, a stout woman with a slightly bloated face and a pair of small glasses, comes our way wearing what can only be a fake smile. On her chest hangs a name tag saying *manager*. 'Is everything alright?'

Aisha nods but then turns back to me. 'Do you mind if I quickly try on a pair of trousers? Then we can go home. I'll come and get the T-shirts some other time.' Before I can answer she has already disappeared into the fitting room.

'Independent girl,' laughs the manager. 'It seems she knows exactly what she wants.'

'Don't get me started,' I reply.

Ten minutes later Aisha still hasn't come back out and I start pacing in front of the fitting room.

'Hey little sis, are you about done in there?'

No reaction.

'Aisha?'

Silence.

Frowning I step towards the curtain. I push it aside and stare into the face of a boy. It takes me a while to realize I'm looking at myself.

On the floor lies a crumpled red dress. The fitting room is utterly empty.

I yank the curtain completely open. 'Aisha?' I step into the fitting room, somewhere in my mind expecting to find a spot where someone could hide, a secret door or something. I don't find it and I rush out of there.

'Nice little joke, sis!' I call. Frantically I look around me. 'Okay, you can come out now.'

My sister doesn't show up.

'I'm not in the mood for this nonsense, Aisha. Hurry up!' Two emotions fight to gain the upper hand. Fear against anger. The latter wins. 'This isn't funny.' I speak loud enough to get the attention of everyone in the store. I can see the glares that are being cast my way from the corner of my eye, but I just ignore them. I clench my fists and look around the shop.

The manager walks towards me. 'Is everything alright, sir?'

I shake my head. 'I can't find my sister.'

'Excuse me?'

'She's gone.' Irritated I continue to look around. *I sincerely hope you're not playing a game with me, Aisha, if so you'll be in so much trouble.*

'Did you come here with your sister, then?'

I twist to look at the woman. 'Who else did you think the girl you saw just now was?'

'What girl?' The woman looks at me questioningly.

'The girl you thought was so independent just a minute ago.'

She looks at me with distrust in her eyes. 'I think you're mistaken.'

'Mistaken?'

She nods. 'You were alone when you walked into the shop.'

'Don't be ridiculous.' Furiously I step around the woman and search between the racks, half-expecting Aisha to be hiding in there from me. 'Dammit, quit playing games!'

A hand is placed on my arm. 'I'm serious, sir. You've been alone all this time. You came in and took a seat in front of the fitting room. You sat there for at least ten minutes.'

I turn around and look the woman straight into her eyes. 'Is this some kind of joke?'

'Excuse me?'

Suddenly I'm absolutely certain and I point a threatening finger at her. First the white man with the dreadlocks, the bones and corpses and now this. 'Where are the cameras?'

'Cameras?' Unsure, the woman casts a glance at her coworkers and the rest of the small shopping crowd at the other side of the floor who are watching me cautiously.

'The ones for the TV show of course. You can't fool me.'

'I really have no idea what you're talking about.'

'Sure.' I shake my head. 'Well, I refuse to be a part of this.' Then I raise my voice and yell so loudly my vocal cords hurt. 'AISHA!'

From the corner of my eye I can see the manager straighten her back. She puts her hands on her side. 'I think it would be best for you to leave now.'

I turn around furiously. 'I'm not going anywhere.'

'I could call security.'

'Try me.' I stomp back towards the fitting rooms, half expecting to find Aisha in there, after all. One by one I check them all.

They're all empty.

'AISHA!'

I start to panic. My heart is racing so fast I start to feel lightheaded. Everything starts to spin. I don't submit to it and continue to search every corner of the shop. I tear everything down the racks and push aside whatever is in my way. Then someone grabs me harshly and forces me down to my knees.

'What do you think you are doing, sir?' The owner of the voice pushes me even further to the ground. My head hits the floor hard. Black spots cloud my vision, turning into stars and rendering me defenseless. I can feel my hands being tied together behind my back. Roughly I'm being pulled to my feet.

I only come to my senses when I'm being led out of the shop. The employees and the shopping crowd stare at me with cation and surprise. 'My little sister.'

'I suggest you keep your mouth shut for the time being,' the man holding me says in this nasal, commanding voice. 'You'll get plenty of time to say what you want later.'

I want to resist, turn around and hit him in the head but I change my mind. I don't stand a chance in my current condition. Besides, the security guards will want answers. So do I, isn't that coincidental?

