THE SYNDROME

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Joby is the middle child in a family of three boys. He is 15 years old, a Grade 10 student at a private boys’ school. He was a consistent honor student from Prep to Grade 6. In high school however, his grades rise and dip with each passing semester because he prefers to spend most of his free time playing basketball with the neighborhood boys, most of them older than him, at the court in his subdivision.

Joby’s oldest brother Joaquin is 17, a Grade 11 student at a progressive multiple intelligence school. At the age of two, Joaquin was diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder. He had been in occupational and speech therapies from aged 2 up to 16. He is on the mild end of the spectrum. He is quite intelligent, does well in school and is a budding musician and writer. However, he tends to obsess over his school requirements and when feeling stressed, often throws tantrums, shouting and slapping himself and even pushing his parents and brothers whenever they try to placate/restrain him during these episodes.

Jiho is the youngest child, the baby of the family, a Grade 5 student enrolled at the same school as the middle child Joby. He has been a consistent honor student since Kinder.

Joby resents the attention lavished by his parents on Joaquin and Jiho. He openly accuses his father of favoring Joaquin and indeed, his father tends to baby the eldest, talking to him in soothing tones whenever the latter feels anxious, indulging his love of music by buying him electric and acoustic guitars and other musical accessories. Joby also accuses his mother of favoring Jiho, babying him, allowing him to sleep by her side instead of in his own room, asking for hugs and kisses to which requests Jiho easily acquiesces.

Joby starts getting into trouble at school. In Grade 9, his parents were called to a meeting with the principal after Joby and some classmates found a wallet left by one of the students inside the school’s computer lab. They were caught on the CCTV camera dividing among themselves the money inside the wallet.

Now in Grade 10, Joby gets into more trouble, both inside and outside school. Early in the school year, he develops a crush on his 22-year old female Science teacher. He creates a meme on Facebook showing himself giving flowers to his teacher with the words “I love you” flashing. The teacher distances herself from Joby. She no longer calls on him to recite in class and reports him to the Guidance Counselor for counselling sessions.

Joby falls into a depression. Secretly, he starts smoking. At first, he borrows his classmate’s vape gadget and uses it in his room at home. Later, he graduates to buying cigarettes and smokes them at the sari-sari store near his school every dismissal time. To ease his stress further, Joby makes tiny cuts on his right arm with a box cutter, doing so late at night in his bedroom while everyone is asleep. Later at a party, he discovers alcohol as another way to numb the pain from his teacher’s snub.

It is Joaquin who discovers Joby’s secret vices. Before Christmas break, Joby tells his parents he will be attending the debut of a neighbor who will be having her party at an events place in Katipunan. He says his basketball friends will pick him up in a car driven by one of the friends’ father. Joby’s parents are preoccupied with work and household chores. Absent mindedly they agree that he can go to the party. Joby returns from the party when his parents are asleep. He is drunk on beer served by waiters unmindful of serving alcohol to a minor. Joby sleeps off his drunkenness sitting on a chair in the terrace as the door to their house is already locked.

At 5 in the morning, Joaquin sees him and shakes him awake. Joaquin serves him coffee so he can sober up. Joby is finally awake and sober, grateful that it is Joaquin who discovered him. It is a Sunday and their parents are still asleep. Joby takes a quick shower then rejoins Joaquin and Jiho at the breakfast table where they eat cereal.

Before Joby has a chance to tell Joaquin not to tell his parents what had transpired the night before, his parents walk in. Joaquin has a silly smile on his face and proceeds to laugh. When their parents ask what’s so funny, Joaquin tells them he discovered Joby sleeping on a chair in the terrace in drunken stupor. Their father confiscates Joby’s cell phone and forbids him from going out of the house and especially, from playing basketball at the subdivision court until further notice. Joby angrily rises from his chair and proceeds to his room but not before giving Joaquin a punch on the cheek as he passes him. Joaquin shouts, “Aray!” but continues to laugh.

On Monday, Joby and Jiho attend their respective Christmas parties at school. Joaquin is left at home with his father, his Christmas break having started earlier than his brothers’. Joaquin sees Joby’s cellphone in their parents’ bedroom and fiddles with it. He sees two videos. The first video shows Joby at the debut, smoking a cigarette and drinking beer with his friends. The second video shows Joby in his room making tiny cuts on his right arm with a cutter. Alarmed, Joaquin quickly shows the videos to his father. Later, Joby’s mother receives a call at her office from Joby’s guidance counselor who informs him of the trouble he has gotten into with his Science teacher. The counselor also says he has begun counselling sessions with Joby in school and notices the multiple light cuts on his arm.

When Joby and Jiho return home from school, Joby’s parents confront him about his problems. Joby shouts at his parents to mind their own business or at least, to mind only his brothers who are his parents’ favorites. Joby picks up his basketball and heads for the door. His father grabs his arm and sees the multiple small cuts that look as if Joby had been scratched by a cat. Joby sees the look of concern on his father’s face but breaks out of his grasp and runs away. He shoots hoops alone at the basketball court and returns home only when it becomes too dark out.

While the three brothers are on Christmas break, Joby’s father goes to Singapore on a business trip but not before warning Joby to “straighten up.” At his father’s order, all three sons sleep on a mattress on the floor of the Master Bedroom so Joby’s mom could keep watch over them especially on Joby while their father is away.

On the first day that Joby’s father is out of the country, the family has lunch in the dining room. Joaquin is in a foul mood and announces that he wants to commit suicide because he feels overburdened with too much Christmas homework. Their mother scolds Joaquin. Joaquin abruptly rises from his seat and bolts out the door. Jiho tries to run after him but his mother stops him and tells her two younger sons that Joaquin just needs to cool off. They resume eating. Within the hour, Joaquin returns munching on chips that he bought from the nearby 7-11. He has a satisfied look on his face.

The next day, the three brothers are eating lunch. Their mother is upstairs doing some paperwork. Joby is angry at Joaquin for telling his parents about his vices. Joaquin recounts how he finds Joby sleeping on the terrace and proceeds to laugh at the recollection. Joby gets angrier and is about to punch Joaquin on the face but Jiho stops him. Joby then walks out of the house. Joaquin runs after him and asks where he is going. He angrily replies that he will go live with their grandmother in Meycauayan, Bulacan and heads out.

Joby actually goes to the basketball court and shoots hoops with his friend. His friend sees Joaquin from afar and alerts Joby. Joby tells his friend that he will hide and to pretend not to have seen him if Joaquin asks. His friend tells Joaquin that he has not seen Joby. Joby sees Joaquin walk out of their subdivision. He is concerned but resumes playing basketball with his friend.

At six in the evening, Joby returns home. His mother asks where Joaquin is. Joby is surprised that Joaquin is not at home. He tells his mother that he saw Joaquin walk out of the subdivision and had assumed that he was just going to 7-11. Joby tells his mother to call Joaquin on his cellphone but Joaquin has left his cellphone at home. His mother calls Joaquin’s classmates but no one knows where Joaquin is.

Joby’s mother asks Joby and Jiho to ride with her in the family car so they can look for Joaquin. They head to 7-11 just outside their subdivision. Joby is tasked to look for Joaquin inside the store but he is not there. They proceed to the nearest police station but the policeman on duty tells Joby’s mother that he can only be reported missing after 24 hours have passed. In the car, Joby tearfully confesses to his mother that he hid from Joaquin at the basketball court and that earlier, he had nearly punched Joaquin for ratting on him. Mother explains that Joaquin is only concerned as they all are about Joby’s troubles. Joby is repentant and worried for Joaquin. They head to a nearby hospital and Mother asks the clerk at the admissions section whether a patient by the name of Joaquin Andres had been admitted. The clerk answers in the negative. The family hurriedly eats dinner at a fast food chain before driving around some more, searching the streets for Joaquin.

At 10 in the evening, they return home. Joby’s mother calls some friends from the media requesting that an announcement be made about her missing son. She sends pictures of Joaquin to her media friends online.

Nearing 12 midnight, Joby’s mother debates on whether she should tell her husband that Joaquin is missing. But then suddenly, Joaquin walks in. He passes his mother’s outstretched arms and proceeds to hug Joby. Joby hugs him back. Both brothers are crying. Mother and Jiho are crying. They then notice that Joaquin’s legs and feet are very dirty and black. He has been walking for hours and had reached San Jose Del Monte, Bulacan before deciding to return home. Joaquin is extremely hungry and tired. His mother feeds him and between bites he explains that when Joby walked out of the house earlier, he had mentioned that he was going to live with their grandmother in Meycauayan. That’s why he decided to head to their grandmother’s house, to look after his brother. Upon reaching San Jose del Monte however, he decided to head back because he had encountered a pack of dogs. Besides, he had no money and was extremely hungry and tired.

Upon hearing Joaquin’s remarkable story, Joby tears up, hugs Joaquin and apologizes to his brother. He also apologizes to his mother for being such a pain. The family has a group hug. Joby’s mother explains that she and their father equally love all of their children. They are worried about Joby and want to help him ease his troubles. Joby says he is no longer depressed. He expresses his love for his family.

Later that year, Joby graduates with high honors from Grade 10. His entire family is there and they take a family photo with smiles plastered on their faces.

THE END