THE SYNDROME (1st Revision of Storyline)

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It is midnight. Joby, 15, is sitting by his study desk in his bedroom. With a box cutter, he makes several cuts on his inner left arm, above his wrist. Some blood oozes from the cuts but not a lot as he is careful not to cut too deep. He has propped up his cellphone on his desk and takes a video of the entire procedure. He smiles at the camera.

The following morning, Joby’s mother nags him about his barely passing grades in Science and English. Joby and his two brothers have given their mother their respective report cards. Joby glances at 17-year old Joaquin’s report card and sees straight ***A***s. Ten-year old Jiho has similar high grades. Joby argues with his mother that Joaquin’s grades don’t count since he is an autistic retard who goes to a special school unlike him and Jiho who go to a regular private school for boys.

Joaquin is not offended. Instead, he corrects Joby, as if giving a professorial psychology lecture: first, he is in Grade 11 at a progressive multiple intelligence school and not a “special school”; second, he is not an autistic retard but rather, a person previously diagnosed with Asperger Syndrome. Joaquin goes on to quote the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders 5th edition which states that Asperger Syndrome, along with all other categories of autism, have been consolidated into one umbrella diagnosis so that he is now technically, a person with Autism Spectrum Disorder or ASD for short.

“Why do I have to be stuck with a weirdo for an older brother?”, Joby wonders aloud. Joby’s father reprimands him and tells him to have some respect for his Kuya. Joby accuses his father of babying Joaquin despite him being the eldest, talking to him in soothing tones whenever the latter feels anxious and indulging his love of music by buying him electric and acoustic guitars while he can’t even buy Joby a new basketball to replace his worn one.

When Joby’s mother tells him to stop, he turns on her and accuses her of favoring the youngest Jiho: allowing him to sleep by her side instead of in his own room and asking for hugs and kisses to which requests Jiho easily acquiesces.

Joaquin is upset at the family confrontation and starts hitting his head with his hands. His father holds down Joaquin’s left arm while Jiho holds down his right.

Joby storms off to his own room. He browses his Facebook page on his cellphone and sees the meme he created showing himself giving flowers to his 22-year old female Science teacher, with the words “I love you” flashing.

Flashback: (Joby develops a huge crush on his Science teacher. He does all he can to impress her, doing well on quizzes, frequently reciting in class, making her and his classmates laugh at his jokes and carrying the teacher’s things for her. After the meme catches her attention, she distances herself from Joby. She no longer calls on him to recite and reports him to the guidance counselor for counselling sessions).

Joby deletes the meme.

Joby secretly 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. He finds that smoking and making light cuts on his arm are mind numbing distractions from the emotional pain he feels from his Science teacher’s snub.

Later at a party, he discovers alcohol as another way to numb his pain.

It is Joaquin who discovers Joby’s secret vices. Joby tells his parents he will be attending a friend’s birthday party at their neighboring subdivision in Quezon City. Joby’s parents are preoccupied with work and household chores. Absent mindedly they agree that he can go to the party. Joby returns 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.

Before Joby has a chance to tell Joaquin not to tell their parents what had transpired the night before, the two walk in on the brothers at the breakfast table. 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 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.

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 party, 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 after he 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 to visit his brother who is a resident there. 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 who abruptly rises from his seat and bolts out the door. Jiho tries to run after him but his mother stops him and tells her younger sons that Joaquin 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 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 holds him back. Joby shouts, “Why can’t you be a normal Kuya for a change!” He breaks from Jiho’s bear hug and walks out the door. Joaquin runs after him and asks where he is going. He angrily replies that he will go live with their grandmother in Meycauayan, Bulacan.

Joby 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. Joaquin approaches and Joby’s friend does as he is told. From his hiding place, Joby sees Joaquin walk out of their subdivision. He is concerned but resumes playing basketball.

At six in the evening, Joby returns home. His mother asks where Joaquin is. Joby is surprised that Joaquin is not there. 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.

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. Jiho 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 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 has 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. 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, Mother debates on whether she should call her husband to tell him 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 had been walking for hours along the wide stretch of Commonwealth Avenue, had reached Fairview, then, Novaliches before proceeding to San Jose Del Monte, Bulacan. He would have continued walking to Meycauayan had he not encountered a pack of barking dogs at SJDM. Joaquin is deathly afraid of dogs of all kinds. He decided to head home.

Joaquin is extremely tired and hungry. 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. He would have done it too were it not for those frigging dogs. Besides, he had no money to buy food.

Upon hearing Joaquin’s remarkable story, Joby tears up, hugs Joaquin and apologizes to his brother. He also apologizes to Mother for being such a pain. The family has a group hug.

Days later, Joaquin and Joby are shooting hoops at the basketball court. Mother is busy in her room preparing a pleading for her client. The boys’ father is holed up in his study room watching a sex bondage video. Jiho is in Joby’s room cutting the inside of his left arm with a box cutter. Some blood oozes and Jiho smiles absentmindedly. -THE END-