

Zachary Tan

Doppelganger

I appeared the day his mom died. He asked me to go to the funeral in his place. He was very polite about it, beginning with a 'please' and ending with a 'thank you'. Of course, I complied, so while he was locked in his room, I was consoled by his friends and family. They thought I was him, and I guess, in that moment, I was.

He had many names for me: his doppelganger, his second, his replica. Eventually, he settled on, Nathan, a shortened version of Nathaniel. Biologically, I would say everything about us was identical, the minor exception being memories. While events that made him feel a strong emotion were clear, things that he gave less importance to were hazy and undefined. It was like trying to read a wet book, where the font is too small, and the words bleed into each other. A jumbled mess. Every time he makes me appear, I have a new set of these memories. I assume the same happens to him when he makes me disappear, but I do not know.

At first, I appeared rarely. I was there for his mother's funeral. I visited his younger brother when he was first hospitalized. I spoke with his father about setting aside money for meals. I made up with his friends whenever they got into a fight. Then, I started appearing for more menial tasks like studying and taking tests for him. Shortly after, it reached a point where I attended school for him when he was too tired to get up in the morning. Although, I didn't mind. That was what I was there for anyway.

It was when I started going to school more often than he did, that I noticed a rift forming between us. He became more reclusive, and because of that, I started to receive fewer memories from him. Our interests began to differ. While he didn't enjoy studying, I did. I enjoyed the

knowledge I gained, and it felt like one of the precious few things I could call my own. I enjoyed exercising, but because he was only focused on staying in shape, I never saw any improvement.

Ninth grade was the first time I attended a first day of class.

“Go.” His voice was muffled from his blanket.

I had no idea that one word could shock me so much. I stood there while I struggled to find any words to say to him.

After a pause, I said, “Are you sure? Don’t you want to meet your new classmates?”

Another pause. “I feel sick,” he said. “I mean, if you’re meeting them it’s basically the same thing as me meeting them, right?” He pulled his blanket over the last remaining part of him that was sticking out, the top of his head. “You’re better at socializing than I am anyways,” he mumbled barely audibly.

I waited for him to say more.

“You’ll be late if you just stand there,” he said. “My phone’s on my desk, and everything you should need is already in my backpack.”

“Alright, I’m off,” I said.

I didn’t have time for breakfast, since Nathaniel had just woken up, so I grabbed his phone and backpack and bolted out of his room, making sure the door was closed behind me. He never liked to leave his door open.

When I finally arrived at school, I was struck by how large the building was. It spanned the whole city block, with a seemingly endless number of students hovering around it. Nathaniel hadn’t toured this high school before applying, so it was all new to me. I waded through the sea of students and slipped through the bright red doors, eager to meet new and familiar faces. Nathaniel’s best friends Maxwell and Connor were also attending, but knowing them, they would

most likely be late. I made it to our homeroom after wandering around aimlessly, and I locked eyes with Connor sitting in the far corner of the room.

“Yo, what’s up?” Connor said as I walked closer to him.

“Didn’t know you’d be one to get up early,” I said, sitting down in the seat next to him.

“New year, new me,” he said. I gave him a skeptical look. “Nah you’re right, my parents made me get here early. They said I shouldn’t be late for my first day of classes, especially at a new school.”

“Knew it.”

He shook his head. “Anyway, what have you been up to all summer? Other than just lounging around.”

“You know... Not much. Pretty much what you said.” Nathaniel rarely made me appear over the summer, and when he did it was usually for running errands or doing chores. I wasn’t against doing all these things for him, since that’s what I’m supposed to do as his copy. This did, however, leave me with some gaps in my memory when Nathaniel didn’t find something important or impactful.

My first first day of classes proceeded uneventfully. Of course, I introduced myself to all the classmates I could. Although I dislike interacting with so many people in such a short time, I wanted Nathaniel to have at least a few new friends.

The first day Nathaniel attended class we were already over a week into classes. That day he told me to run some errands like grocery shopping, cooking, and laundry. Lately, he made me appear every day, so I am not sure what changed his mind. He left the apartment in a bad mood and returned in an even worse one. I was about to ask him what happened but hesitated. I didn’t know what to say.

The next day, I attended classes.

“Were you okay yesterday? You seemed to be in a bad mood. Did anything happen?”

Amelia said. Amelia and I were in nearly every class together, and she always sat in front of me. We didn’t have assigned seats, but it seemed like everyone stuck with the seats they chose on the first day of classes.

“I was feeling a bit sick yesterday, but I’m alright now,” I said. “Did I do anything strange? My memory’s a bit hazy.”

“No nothing strange,” she said. “You just didn’t really talk to anyone like you usually do. You also spoke a lot quieter. Did you have a sore throat or something? I heard there is something going around lately.”

“Yeah,” I said.

“Let me know if you need anything like cold medicine or something. Is that what you take for a sore throat? I’m not sure, but I have a lot of medicine lying around the house since my sister gets sick a lot. If you don’t live too far away, I could bring them over for you, or I could just bring them into class. Just text me.”

“Thanks, but I also have some medicine around, so I don’t really need more.”

I also had a lot of medicine around for whenever our brother got released from the hospital. Although his condition had not been getting worse, it wasn’t getting better either. Sometimes, they would let him go home for a couple of days, but they always made sure we had the proper medicine and knew what to do in the case of an emergency. Our dad said it saved on hospital bills. The days dragged on.

“What’s going on with Amelia,” Nathaniel asked me after he returned home from school one day.

“What do you mean what’s going on?” I said.

“Don’t ‘what do you mean’ with me. Amelia has been overly chatty with me, and talking about stuff I don’t understand. Like medicine and such.”

“I didn’t mean to keep it a secret, but lately Amelia’s been concerned about your health. We talked a bit because her sister has a weak immune system, so she gets sick easily. I mentioned how your brother also has a weak immune system because he is going through chemotherapy right now. She asked how you were holding up, and–”

“Alright, I get it.” His voice was loud. “Just don’t get carried away.”

I froze, then nodded slowly. I didn’t even know what I was nodding about, I just felt like nodding was the best choice of action in that moment.

Ninth grade came and went faster than I could have imagined. Although I shared many classes with Connor, Maxwell and I basically had completely different schedules. Although we weren’t able to talk a lot during school, we always hung out after. At some point during the year, Amelia and her friend Sophie joined us. We would usually spend time at one of their places to watch movies or play games. Nathaniel didn’t want me to stay out too late, so I was usually the first one to leave.

One night we visited a beach. It wasn’t a great beach, but it had carnival rides and food stands lining the boardwalk. There might have been some sort of carnival going on, and we were allowed to go by ourselves since it was close to home. Maxwell and Sophie immediately bolted off to the Ferris wheel, like they said they would, while Connor made a run for the food stands. Amelia and I were overwhelmed, so we stood still for a few minutes to gather our bearings.

“Is there anything you want to do in particular?” she asked.

“Not really,” I said. “What about you?”

“I really like the sea, do you think we could just walk along there?”

“Sure.”

We walked towards the beach and stopped when the waves were gently lapping our feet.

We picked a direction and started walking.

“Thanks, sorry I’m boring.”

“That’s not boring, I like the sea as well. I’ve always wanted to drift around like a piece of seaweed.”

She laughed. “You’d better not fall asleep, or you might never make it back to shore.

Actually, that’s one of my biggest fears, getting lost at sea.”

“Really, I don’t think it sounds too bad.”

“I would hate to die that way. Wouldn’t it be so cold, and you’d be alone.”

“I guess, but isn’t there something peaceful about that?”

“I guess.”

There was a pause.

“This is kind of morbid, can we change the topic?”

“Yeah, I was thinking the same thing.”

I spotted Connor looking like a lost child with a half-eaten hotdog in one hand, and a bag of popcorn in the other.

“Look, there’s Connor,” I said pointing at him. “Let’s see if he knows anything fun to do around here.”

We met up with Connor and eventually ran into Sophie and Maxwell again. They had large smiles on their faces and wore matching plastic sunglasses. Connor, Amelia, and I laughed

at them, and they, seemingly embarrassed, took off their sunglasses and stuffed them in their pockets stammering out something about some guy giving them out to them for free.

We continued wandering around the boardwalk in search of things to do, but we ended up spending most of the time just talking to each other. Somehow, we all managed to squeeze into one Ferris wheel bin and rode it around a couple of times. We also found someone with a Polaroid camera who took photos of us in front of a large sign. Maxwell bought five of them and distributed one to each of us. I tucked it into my pocket.

We stayed until the sun began to set, and walked out onto a pier to watch the sky fade from orange to pink to purple to black. Eventually, the street lights flickered to life and illuminated our paths back home. First, Maxwell and Sophie broke off. Then, Connor split. Finally, I walked Amelia to her home, and I walked alone.

At the start of the next year, I got my first part-time job as a cashier for a grocery store. I wanted extra money for doing things with my friends, and our dad only left enough money for food and daily necessities. Nathaniel agreed, as long as I was the one working, and not him. My friends also found it fun to visit me while I was working. Usually, either Amelia or Connor would stop by since Maxwell's parents hired a tutor for him. Both of Maxwell's parents wanted him to go to a top university, so they wanted to raise his grades and prepare him for the SAT.

University was something that intrigued me, but I wasn't sure if Nathaniel wanted to go. I hadn't talked to him about it, but whatever he decided to do, I was ready to go along with it. After all, it was his life to live, and I was just his copy.

"You want to go to college don't you," Nathaniel said. I hated it when Nathaniel gave me choices.

“What do you want to do?” I asked. “I’ll be happy with whatever you choose.” I tried to smile at him but thought better of it, and kept a plain face.

He thought for a moment, then said, “Never mind.”

His question caught me off guard, but it wasn’t something I hadn’t thought about before. What did Nathaniel want to do in the future? How can I best set him up for that? I already tried my best to give him a great high school experience. I was a part of the tennis team, I had a good relationship with most of my classmates, and I had a few close friends that I could rely on. If I were to disappear, I think Nathaniel would be fine without me.

Although the college talks decreased, their looming presence didn’t. Connor, Maxwell, Amelia, and Sophia were all very busy, and it was rare that we were all able to spend time together as a group. Usually, it would just be one or two of us, as the others would have something else to do.

“Hey, do you want to do something fun tonight?” Amelia asked.

I gave her a questioning look. It was just us in her apartment. Her parents were both out, and her sister was already asleep.

“What did you want to do?” I asked hesitantly.

“What did *you* want to do.” She gave me a look and laughed. “There’s a coffee place that has a whole wall of board games we can play. They’re open until quite late, and I think we could both use some time to relax.”

“Sure,” I said. “Is there anything in particular you wanted to play?”

“I guess we’ll see when we get there right?”

The coffee shop was a short walk away, and the moment we walked through the doors, I knew we were in the right place. The smell of wood, paper, and coffee mixed together to create a

nostalgic scent that lingered in the air. On my left was a wall completely covered in board game boxes and an empty doorframe that led into another room. Directly in front of us was a slightly bored-looking employee who greeted us with a ‘welcome’. The place had more people than I was expecting, with nearly half of the tables having one or two people sitting at them.

We walked over to the counter and spoke to the employee.

“How much for one table for two?” Amelia asked.

“Depends how long, it’s \$17 per person per hour,” the employee said.

Amelia looked at me.

“How long do you want to stay?” she asked.

“Up to you,” I said.

She stared at me deep in thought.

“Let’s do two hours to start,” she said. “That should give us enough time to finish at least one game, and we can decide if we want to stay longer afterward.”

“That works for me,” I said.

We paid and made our way over to the wall of board games. Most of the games, I didn’t recognize, but I pointed out the ones I did.

“I’ve played that one before,” I said pointing at The Settlers of Catan. “Those two as well.” I pointed at Risk and Monopoly.

Amelia nodded and continued scanning the wall. Eventually, she stopped and pulled out a slightly broken box.

“Have you ever played Wingspan before?” she asked me.

“No, what’s that?” I looked at the box, and there was a picture of a white bird with orange highlights on a sky-blue background.

“It’s really fun. Let’s play,” she said. “I can explain the rules while we set up.”

“Sure,” I said.

She told me, that the goal of the game was to attract birds to your board. The premise isn’t too hard to grasp, but it took some time of vigorous explaining from Amelia until I finally felt I had a grasp on how the game worked. I loved how each card was a unique bird with its own ability. Even birds that appeared nearly identical had different names, abilities, and slight visual changes.

We played two games of Wingspan, then moved on to a different game from the wall. Before we knew it, we had long overstayed our original two hours and were kicked out by the employee.

“That was fun! We should do this more often,” Amelia said on our way back to her house.

“It was. Next time we should bring Maxwell, Connor, and Sophie. Im sure they’ll love it as well. Maxwell loves board games,” I said.

“Yeah…”

I dropped Amelia off and headed home. I didn’t reach our apartment until 1 AM. When I opened the door Nathaniel was standing in the doorway.

“Where were you?” he said in a quiet tone.

“Oh, uh, I was playing board games with Amelia and lost track of time,” I stammered out. “Sorry.”

“Just stop,” he said.

“Please, just stop,” he said.

I was confused. What did I need to stop?

“Please, give *me* back. Please... Just give *me* back.”

His voice was quiet.

“What do you mean?! What did I do?!”

“I can’t stand you being here.”

I didn’t understand. Weren’t you the one that summoned me? Weren’t you the one that used me?

“You’re just a copy. Please just disappear.”

I knew I was just a replica. I could never truly be you. I knew that. You knew that. I’m sure you knew that too. My vision faded to black.

Nathaniel summoned me again over a month later. He had a guilty look on his face, but for me, it felt like only a few seconds had passed. I think I understood why he was anxious, and why he was upset, but he shouldn’t have been worried, since I was only a copy.

He didn’t speak to me, but I already knew why he had summoned me. I hastily shoved the unfinished homework lying on his desk in his bag and prepared to go to school. I wondered how much had changed since I had last been there. He just stood still and watched me, that same guilty look plastered on his face.

“Wait,” he called out as I was leaving the room.

I turned around and stared at him with a soft expression.

“Sorry.” His voice was barely audible.

I closed my eyes. “Sorry,” I mumbled back.

I arrived at school slightly late and rushed into the classroom. I made eye contact with Amelia and Connor and briefly waved at them. Amelia lifted her hand, and Connor nodded slightly at me, then looked away.

After class was over, neither of them came over to talk to me like they usually did. I felt a pang in my chest because there were no significant memories while I was gone. That was the problem. My memories of the month when I was gone were a blur. It was like time had skipped forward, while I had stayed stagnant. My classmates didn't all greet me like they used to, and I did not know why. I didn't even know if Nathaniel knew why.

In the month I was away, Nathaniel continued working my jobs. He had decided that he wanted to go to college, although he wasn't sure what he wanted to do yet. Classes continued like it always did. The months passed, and Nathaniel and I still stayed nearly non-verbal with each other.

I continued thinking about our fight. What exactly did I take from him? My whole existence was purely made for him. I had never stolen anything, and I had always done my best to do what he asked of me. That was my purpose. I tried to make friends and do well academically for him, and I was happy to do so.

I had a realization.

Months after our fight, I gathered enough courage.

"Are you happy?" I asked Nathaniel.

He didn't reply. He looked at me.

"Did I help you at all?" I asked.

He paused then nodded slowly.

"That's good," I whispered. "I'm going to step out for a bit, okay?"

His eyes darted around, before finally meeting mine. He seemed confused.

"Okay," he said. "Stay safe," he added softly.

"You too."

I smiled, put on a hoodie, and slipped out of the apartment.

I wandered around in the darkness led by moonlight, but mainly flickering street lights. I shoved my hands into the pockets of the hoodie to stave off the cold. I felt something that felt almost like a small sheet of cardstock in my pocket, and I knew instantly what it was. I thought for a moment, and then aimless steps were filled with purpose.

I lost track of how much time it took me to reach the boardwalk, and when I did get there, it was deserted. I smiled and finally pulled one hand out of my pocket. In it was a small polaroid. It was already fairly smudged, and I could barely make out who was who. Partially because of the low light. Partially because of the smudging.

I walked down onto the beach, and when I could feel the waves gently lapping my feet, I started walking a familiar path.

At some point, I stopped. I took off the sweater because it was not mine, but held the Polaroid firmly in my hand. I took a deep breath, closed my eyes, relaxed my body, rubbed the Polaroid one last time, and stepped into the water.