

Hysteria

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PROLOGUE

Darkness surrounds me. Rain falls around me and glistens on the path, thunder rumbles and lightning flashes across the sky. I am running. Running from him. Running for my life. Madly, I remember the children's nursery song. *It's raining, it's storming. The madman is coming. It's cloudy and storming and now I am running.* But that's not quite it is it... the one we learned in school was different. But I was just a kid then. I sung it like this once in school. Nobody liked that. But I thought that was how the song went. I still do. I don't think the other is really any different. I don't know why now, of all times I'm thinking about nursery rhymes. The silhouette is chasing me and he is gaining, I can hear his heavy breathing behind me.

"Laertonmi," he whispers in a husky voice.

I'm running, but he is just as fast. I can't outrun him.

"Laertonmi," he repeats, louder.

My legs start to tire. I can't run much longer. He's gaining on me. He is cold. The air around him is like ice.

"Laertonmi!" he yells, "Laertonmi!"

There is nowhere to run, nowhere to hide. Is there no end to this madness? Is there no end?

It's raining, it's storming. The madman is coming. It's cloudy and storming and now I am running.

"LAERTONMI! LAERTONMI! LAERTONMI!"

His inky black face morphs into skin. A blank, cold face stares back. The expression like death. His being like a horror film. His eyes are fixed on me. Black as the night sky. Sinister but fascinating. They are full black, like soot. I can't move. I feel hypnotised while I stand there, transfixed by this monster. This thing that perhaps used to be a human. Or maybe never was. How should I know? Why do I want to know? I shouldn't care. But I do. So, so much. I want to know. I want to know what happened to this demonic, twisted being. Because once, just maybe, he was like me. Maybe, once upon a time, he was human. He had nightmares too. Maybe people who are alone for long enough, turn into their nightmares. I look into his eyes. They say that eyes are the window to the soul. He doesn't have a soul now. But he might have once. My thoughts evaporate as his skin splits to form a mouth.

"LAERTONMI!"

My absolute fear consumes me. I forget everything that mattered ten seconds ago. Now all I can think about is the demon right here. The fact my life is about to be over doesn't matter. Not really. Nothing does anymore. It's okay once I'm dead. But what I can see right in front of

me, the transformation between a human and this monster. All I can feel is sadness. It's so heavy, like being crushed by a shadow. No way to stop it. There's nothing I can do. I wish that I could. But I just have to sit, being squashed by the weight of all the sadness in the universe. It's painful. The fear ringing in my ears now turning to screams. I have no control over my body. Running is like a natural instinct. Fear has taken its toll.

"LAERTONMI!"

Pains fill my body. I must have been running for hours. My head is full of the repetitive rhyme. *It's raining, it's storming. The madman is coming. It's cloudy and storming and now I am running.*

CHAPTER 1: New Beginnings

I bolt upright in my bed, drenched with the cold sweat that only comes from a nightmare. My breath is fast and shallow, I can see it misting in the air in front of me. Through my window I see snow falling, crisp and pure it reminds me of my family. I feel a cold nose move up my fore arm, I reach down and feel the furry coat of my only friend. The companionship of a dog is all I have in this hectic world. Rusty gazes up at me. The early morning sunlight of North Dakota glistens off his deep brown eyes. I twist my body and plant my feet on the numbing wood planks of the two story cottage. I begin my slow decent down the staircase.

A few hours pass before there is a knock at the door. Rusty bounds towards the noise barking eagerly. I open the door to reveal a man in a grey suit. He had a brown fuzzy moustache covering his plump face and was fondling a gold dollar in his left hand.

“You must be the young writer I’ve heard about,” he says in a Midwestern accent, “Timothy Banks is my name. May I enter?”

“Guess so,” I reply nervously.

Mr Banks walks in, his black polished loafers silent on the wood surface. We sit in the lounge, him on the couch and me on the armchair opposing him.

“You must know why I’m here, right?” he asks.

“No,” I state.

“Well,” he says, “you’re in quite a hefty debt to the bank,”

“How much?” I ask.

“About three thousand dollars,”

“There must be a mistake,” I declare.

“There is no mistake,”

“There must be!” I repeat, more urgently. I leap forward and slam my hands on the mahogany table between us. Rusty yelped in alarm.

“You’re a cantankerous young lady now, aren’t you?” he responds. His moustache twitches to the left. “I’m sure we can come up with some sort of arrangement.”

“What sort of arrangement?” I ask. His face twisted into a greasy smile.

“I will give you two days to come up with the money,”

“What if I can’t get the money by then?” I inquire.

Mr Banks places his oversized hand on my shoulder. Although it seemed it would weigh quite a lot, it felt weightless. "We'll figure something out,"

"What are you implying..?" I said questioning his intentions.

"Not what you're thinking, but if you can't manage to get the money within the two days, they'll be hell to pay..." he reached into his suit and pulled out a small revolver and held it over my chest. My heart stopped, if he moved his finger an inch it would be the end of my life. Just like that he put it back into his pocket and turned around. He walked out of my house, but not out of my life. I knew this wouldn't be the last I saw of him, I had to leave.

I ran up the stairs toward my bedroom and reached into my drawer I pulled out my favourite coat. My bag was sitting next to my bed, I slammed the clothes I needed into it and began to walk back down the stairs. I saw the drawer I left my gun in and contemplated bringing it. I'm going to need protection if he comes after me. I threw my bag into the snow, it landed with a soft crunching sound. I grabbed Rusty and ran away from my past.

Chapter 2: Yellow Brick road

He is coming for me, I can tell. The way he does that curious smile when I see him in the street. Like he is itching to find the money that I owe him. I need to get out of here to somewhere so I'll be safe. Somewhere I can start again.

I find myself running from the house. My black shoes clapping against the stone hard footpath. Then I feel warm fur rub against my leg and I smile, my head becomes a little less hectic. Rusty will help me. Rusty will calm me. I keep running, calmer now because of Rusty. I run around the corner and I see it. It's like a huge tower, a huge balloon. I smile as I ease into a fast walk. It is like a huge magnet pulling me towards it. Telling me to go faster. My hot air balloon is Rusty and I's ticket to freedom. Where we can have a fresh start.

Soon Rusty and I are in the basket. Ready to go. I cut the ropes and up we go. Floating, flying like a bird. My hometown eventually gets smaller as I go up higher. A tiny black car creeping through the town like an ant making its way to its nest. The occasional person staring up at me. A tiny child jumping up and down pointing at my hot air balloon. I look down at Rusty. He has his paws up on the basket and he is barking. An excited bark. I smile again.

I look out of the hot air balloon again. We are traveling fast. My hometown is far away by now. I turn my head and look in the direction of my destination, Louisiana. All around me are fields and hills. There is a road and I see a car. It looks exactly like the one I saw before. Same colour, same size. All at once panic starts to fill my brain. It could be Mr Banks. The banker could be following me. Wanting the money. I am not free. I can't escape. I need to make this lighter so it will go faster.

There are two sandbags in the basket. I have an idea to drop them directly on the car and then he might go away. I pick up a heavy sandbag. I grit my teeth under the weight. My arms start to hurt and it gets worse. Sharp pains scream for me to put it down. I can't hold it any more so I drop it over the edge. Horrible shot. It lands nowhere near the car. So I try again. This time with the other one. I try not to hold it for as long as I did before. And I drop it over the edge. This time it lands on the road but behind the car. Missed. With less weight the balloon goes higher. It passes the clouds. Of course why didn't I think of that? Now he will lose me. Hopefully.

Now I wait. I wait for ages. There is nothing to do. Rusty has fallen asleep. So I am only left with my thoughts. I sit down. I feel my legs relax. The warm sun against my skin makes me feel sleepy. I feel my eyes relax and close. I am sure a quick rest won't hurt.

Suddenly I jerk awake and I scramble up. I am sure something just hit the balloon. Fear spreads through my body. Once I am up I have a look around outside the balloon. It is like a sea of clouds. Big, white, fluffy, clouds. My heart beats faster. If I am above the clouds I won't be able to see where I am going. I am have to go down a bit. So I do.

I travel for days like this. At night I have to land. If I'm lucky I can sleep indoors somewhere. Other times I'm not so lucky and Rusty and I have to sleep outdoors. At night I am comforted by Rusty. His warm furry coat makes me feel safe and warm. I only see the banker's car once. But we go up in the sea of clouds again.

But on the last day disaster strikes. Rusty is getting hungry. He's sniffing around my food bag. His wet black nose searching for food. So I give him my last apple. The apple's cold and smooth in my hand. It looks like it has been dipped in red paint. I hope that makes him feel better. I feel a little hungry myself so I put my hand in my food bag and it comes out with nothing. Fear and dread suddenly come around me like a blanket. We have completely run out of food. We are forced to land.

We land right outside a city. By now my tummy is rumbling so much its making me feel sick. I need food. But we can't leave the balloon. There's a road about 100 meters from where we landed. With Rusty by my side I stumble over there. I'm starting to feel really sick. I can't think. I can hardly walk. Then there is a car. I recognize that car. But I didn't care. I needed to eat something. The car is coming closer and closer. I also recognize the driver. The driver sees me and starts to slow down. He is smiling. Why is he smiling?

The car pulls over and stops. The familiar man gets out and I stumble over to him. I am starved. Rusty is licking me. He knows something is wrong.

"At last" says the man. Then I realize who the man is. He is Timothy Banks. "Hello again"

"Please all I need is food" I say desperately.

"Yes but I believe you owe me some money" He pulls a gun out of his pocket.

"No please I will do anything" My heart is beating faster and faster.

"Anything, you say?" Mr Banks smiles that curious smile again.

"Yes"

"What about you give me that money you owe me?" His smile gets bigger

"Fine, just as long as you give me something to eat"

"It's a deal".

By the next day Rusty and I are back in our hot air balloon. We are getting really close to Louisiana when more disaster strikes. A bad storm appears without warning. It's like the world doesn't want us to get to Louisiana. The wind is pushing the balloon back. But we are so close that we can't land. We want to keep going. The rain gets heavier and lightning and thunder decide to join in. *It's raining, it's storming. The madman is coming. It's cloudy and storming and now I am running.* We come to a city without realizing it, and then, in a spur of a moment, a

building comes out of nowhere. I can't steer the wind is too strong. It's coming closer. I can't go anywhere. I'm dead.

Chapter 3: Clarity

Dark clouds spin around me. Dark and heavy with the promise of rain. I can see the moon through the clouds. A Cheshire cat grin. There's a loud noise that cracks through the night. I look down. Everything happens in slow motion. The hot air balloon smacks into the building, knocking me out of it. I go skidding across the flat roof of the building, ripping my dress. I stand up, stumbling slightly. Everything's spinning, my head's throbbing. I put my hand out to steady myself, but there's nothing there and I fall again. I take my shoes off and throw them across the building. The rain is falling and the wind is howling, or maybe that's Rusty. I call for him, he barks back. I stand up and try to look for him, though my vision is blurred by the rain. I can just make out the hot air balloon, still half on the building. I hear a yelp. I run over to the sound. I can see Rusty trying to climb out of the basket. I can't reach him. The balloon starts to slip. Tears stream down my face, or maybe it's rain. "Rusty, Jump." I yell. He looks up. "Jump." He backs away. "No Rusty, come back!" he jumps. There's a moment of silence as he flies across the sky. All at once the air balloon falls and I catch him. Rolling away from the edge, I let him stand. "Good dog." I tell him.

I look over at Rusty. "Listen to me, we have to get off this roof before..." Mr Banks appears on the other side of the roof. "Laertonmi" He yells.

"Leave me alone." I scream at him. I look for a place to run. There's nowhere. The only way out is being blocked by Timothy.

"Laertonmi." He repeats, moving closer.

"Stop." I back away.

He's not stopping. "Laertonmi!"

"I don't know what that means!" I'm nearing the edge now.

"You do." He persists, stepping closer. "You just need to think."

"What do you want from me?" There's nowhere to go.

"Laertonmi!" He's beginning to sound desperate. Closer, closer.

"Go away! You have what you wanted!" I'm on the edge.

"Laertonmi!" He's right in front of me now.

“What does it mean?”

“LAERTONMI!”

I scream and push past him. Rusty follows obediently. We run across the rooftop to the edge. There’s a staircase there. Without thinking I spin around the bannister and rush down as fast as I can. It doesn’t matter that I’m nearly slipping, I just have to get away. I know he’ll follow. Maybe we can hide... We’re nearing the end of the staircase when we hear him.

“Listen to what I’m saying, LAERTONMI!”

I ignore him and run faster. I reach the end and hurriedly look for somewhere to hide. Rusty runs forward. I follow him. He runs into an alleyway, so I follow. There’s a door at the end. I make my way towards it.

“LAERTONMI!”

I open the door and suddenly I’m falling. Everything is spinning around me. I’m going mad.

It’s raining, it’s storming. The madman is coming. It’s cloudy and storming and now I am running.

Faces swirl around me, only some of them are recognizable. I can no longer see Rusty. I’m in a room full of mirrors, how can people know who they are? That’s all I can see now. Reflections and silhouettes. Faces coming in and out of my vision. Closer and closer. Sinister shapes and shadows following, there is no end. I’m still falling into the dark. I’m perpetually falling into the abyss that is my psyche. Fascinated by the things my mind can conjure I look towards my demise. I can see the ground coming up to meet me, it looks like polished black marble. I land on my hands and knees, but the fall doesn’t hurt. I looked around me and saw hundreds of mirrors all facing toward a central point, me. My vision falls on one of the mirrors, all I can see is the blackness that surrounds me. I pull myself up onto my knees, that’s when I can see what’s in the mirror. Hundreds of copies of the banker and Rusty. I finally stand, gun drawn, my only protection now.

“Laertonmi.”

That’s all I can hear now. The same phrase over and over. Like a reoccurring nightmare. The faces are screaming at me now.

“Laertonmi. LAERTONMI!”

Louder and louder. I can’t bear it.

“I DON’T KNOW WHAT IT MEANS!” I scream. “LEAVE ME ALONE!”

They come closer and closer, louder and louder.

“LAERTONMI!”

“LEAVE ME ALONE!”

“LAERTONMI! LAERTONMI! LAERTONMI!”

I put my hands over my ears and curl into a ball on the ground. Shadows and reflections of silhouettes closing in around me. I scream and then everything goes black.

I wake up in the same position, crying.

“Rusty?” my voice echoes, making it sound small and lonely. Like me in this room. I stand up shakily. My clothes are torn and dirty. I look around at the room. I can still hear whispers. But not so threatening now. I wipe my cheeks with the back of my hand and stand up. I look into the nearest mirror. There’s a girl there. Laughing, twirling slowly in her new clothes. She looks so happy. And now I realize. That girl used to be me, a long time ago. What happened to her? She was being chased? No... no that’s not it... it never was... I shake my head, look at the mirror opposite to this. In this one, there is another girl, or is she the same? No not quite. Instead of healthy, this girl looks skeletal and pale. She’s laughing, but it’s not like it should be. It’s manic laughter.

“Laertonmi.” She whispers to herself. “Laertonmi.”

The happy girl, in the other mirror, is still smiling, she’s pretty. She has rosy cheeks and long hair. I look again at the half dead me. She’s not pretty like her twin, all the colour has been drained from her face. Her hair is limp and lifeless, and her eyes... Her eyes are not the way they used to be. They’re distant now, far away and... crazy. Who’s she speaking to? There’s no one there?

“Laertonmi. I know, I know. Laertonmi.” It’s just her, all alone in the room.

“She won’t listen. Laertonmi. The characters are still not on the paper. Laertonmi...”

What does that mean? The characters are not on the paper? I look from mirror to mirror. They both look like me. But they can’t be, they’re so different. Does that mean I’m only one of them?

I must be the happy one, the one twirling and laughing, that’s who I am. Happy, sweet. It is me. It has to be. Doesn’t it? I turn around. Looking at the other mirror. The girl looks up. Straight at me. She laughs. Whispers.

“Laertonmi.” She giggles and then... disappears.

It’s just me now. All alone in the dark. I pick up the gun. I look around at the shadows. I can see Mr Banks heading down the hallway.

“Laertonmi.”

“STOP!” I scream. “What do you want from me? I don’t know what it means!”

“Laertonmi.”

What does it mean?

“Laertonmi!”

I close my eyes.

“LAERTONMI!”

He’s so loud.

“LAERTONMI!”

But he’s not real.

“LAERTONMI!!!”

I pull the trigger.

Everything is silent now. I look down. I killed him. And then I realize. He was never chasing me. I was running away. Why did I shoot? I panic and run. I run until I can’t run anymore. I’m surrounded by mirrors. They’re fascinating, all holding different stories inside them. I look down. There’s a collar. I hold it up. It belongs to Rusty. I look at the ID on it. It reads: Laertonmi

I start to laugh. Manically. Everything is revolving around this one word and I have no idea what it means. I look into the mirror. The pretty girl stares back at me, looking scared. She turns away. I’m not her anymore. I can’t be. She’s not here. I go over to the next mirror. The mad girl stares back at me. Laughing.

“Look at us.” She whispers. She holds out her hand. I take a step back.

“It’s alright.” She says. I catch sight of the collar in the mirror. That’s strange. I look closer. I read the name tag again. I Laugh. In the mirror, the nametag reads: IMNOTREAL. Or course. It was backwards. I’m not real. Because they’re not. They never were. The mad girl takes my hand, pulls me through the mirror and suddenly I’m back in my room. All over the walls there are words. ‘I’m not real’ again and again and again. I pick up the gun. I look at it. I laugh. I am the mad girl now. That makes sense. I can remember now. ‘Schizophrenia’ they told me. I’m crazy. I laugh. I point the gun. And I shoot. Laertonmi, the word used to infuriate me and now I know why. The word meant something to me, the true was in the mirror... imnotreal, I’m not real, HE’S NOT REAL, I’M NOT REAL!, I’M NOT REAL!, I’M NOT REAL!, I’M NOT REAL!, I’M NOT REAL!... He never was real and now I can live with that.

BLURB

LAERTONMI!

That word has been haunting Bonnie, a young writer for weeks now. She's in debt and when Timothy Banks comes for the money she runs away. Now with Timothy on her tail, she travels to escape him and the nightmares that have been plaguing her, and lately the dreams have been getting worse. Will she find the money in time, or does Mr Banks have a deeper reason to why he wants Bonnie so much?