

# Faceless Stranger

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How I got here is anybody's guess, especially mine. I'm not even sure where here is. It's not like amnesia because I can remember my entire life, name, address, family, what I had for dinner, everything. I just can't remember getting here.

It was nighttime, very, very dark and I was lost. It was like being in the middle of nowhere on a moonless, starless night. I could hardly see a thing. The problem was I was in the city, where at least the city lights would normally illuminate the surroundings. Something did not feel right about this whole thing. I began to feel a sense of dread come over me when I realized I was being followed. I picked up my pace but the faster I walked the faster the footsteps behind me would hit the pavement. As I turned corners the steps behind me turned corners. I felt certain I was being followed.

I heard a low laugh and could tell that it was a man coming up behind me. Then I began to run from the man, the man without a face. At least I never saw his face. I frantically tried every door that I passed to see if it would open. I knew that he was coming after me but did not know why. Maybe he was a rapist, or maybe he just wanted money. Regardless of what he wanted I just wanted the safety of being around other people. Perhaps then he would go away and I could go to the police.

Finally, I came to a door that opened. I discovered that I had stumbled into a huge department store that appeared to be abandoned. The light was very dim and I could barely see my way around. I was sure I wouldn't find anyone inside so I looked for a place to hide.

I entered men's clothing and found a huge, long oval rack of pants to hide under. Breathing heavily, but trying hard to squelch the sound, I sat there quietly, as close to the center of the rack as possible, hoping that my pounding heartbeat would not give me away.

All of a sudden I heard someone moving in my direction. Nooooo... I cried within my mind, I didn't want the stranger to find me. My heart began beating even wilder than before and my hands were shaking. Then to my relief it was not the stranger but someone else who had entered into the clothing rack with me. Fearing to speak to each other we just sat there staring at one another. Maybe the stranger changed direction when he could no longer see me and started to chase the women I now shared my sanctuary with. Maybe the lady saw me run under the rack and also wanted the company of another person. My emotions were confused. I was afraid, afraid the stranger saw the woman join me. I was also relieved, relieved that I was no longer alone.

It seemed liked we sat there for an eternity, but in reality it was only a matter of minutes. Then we heard the scuffling of feet headed in our direction. Gripped with fear we sat as stiff and as still as we could, barely daring to breath. After a few seconds I realized the scuffling was lighter, not heavy like a mans. Peering out between the clothing on the rack I was horrified to see that it was a child of between six and eight years of age, running as fast as her little legs would go. The stranger must have spotted her when he lost track of the second woman. My mind was frantic with questions. What did this man want? I parted the pants as slightly as possible and when I did not see the stranger I motioned for the child to join us. Placing a finger to my lips in an effort to keep the child quiet, I embraced her. We sat there in utter silence. The only movement was the pounding of our hearts.

After a while, and just when I thought it was safe enough to climb out and find help, there was more movement. Funny I did not see anyone in the department store when I entered, and now I find myself listening to a fourth person moving around, only this time I heard a whimper. Was that someone crying I wondered? For fear that someone else was in danger I slightly parted the pants once more. I was stunned to see another woman, much older, in a crouched position. It appeared that she was also trying to avoid detection. "Psst, psst, psssst," finally catching her attention I waved my hand to invite this third lady into our hiding place.

How much longer would this go on? Would there be enough of us to stand up to this menacing stranger? Should we just wait for morning and the safety of a crowded store? Did he have a gun? Should one of us try to go for help? So many questions were running wildly through my mind, so many scenarios. Still none of us spoke, afraid of being found out. Sound after sound broke through my thoughts and penetrated our quiet. One by one during the next hour there was scuffling feet and rescues as we drew more people in with us under our clothes rack. I was getting more and more nervous and wondered if eventually someone would lead the stranger to our little space. What if he already knew and was just toying with us?

Now with thirteen of us I knew we could not hold anymore. Two more girls and one boy high school aged, another young girl about ten years of age, four more ladies of all ages, and a very thin, frail looking man. By now I was fairly certain that the stranger did not know exactly where we were, but I began to suspect that surely he had somehow and purposely chased us all into the same department store. We all sat there quietly waiting, not daring to speak a word, I was dreading the worst.

Longing for morning and the arrival of the department store employees, I glanced at my watch; it was 3:30 am. Daylight was still about two and a half to three hours away. I wondered if there was a security guard on duty and if so where had he been? Did something happen to the security guard? Maybe the stranger was security. I am sure my mind was not thinking rationally at the time because fear had taken over. Fear mingled with anger. I was angry that someone would have us all so paralyzed.

The time seemed to crawl past like a sloth moving from one tree limb to another. Another glance at my watch reported the time to be 3:50 am. Sensing the mounting anxiety under the clothes rack, one of the ladies finally spoke up. In the quietest whisper she could muster she said, "I can't take this anymore. I'll take my chances." I reached out to grab her arm fearing for her life. She just looked at me with resolve and pulled away. Ever so carefully she peeked out from under our safe place, then after a few minutes of observation, she slipped away. Gone, just like that. I began to hold out some hope that maybe she would elude our pursuer and come back with help.

A glance at my watch informed me that another 18 minutes had past and still no help seemed to be on the horizon. Was the lady ok? Did the stranger have her in his grip? In my mind any decent person would have sent help therefore I feared the worst had happened.

Then without any notice at all, after a few seconds of whispering between them one of the teenage girls and the teenage boy climbed out from under the rack. I am sure they were hoping that together the stranger would leave them alone. Again I became hopeful that someone would be sent to redeem us from this danger.

Another 20 minutes had passed and there was still no help. That is when the older woman whom I had seen crouching also decided to make her exit, she looked at the children and asked do you want to go home, the youngest, with tears in her eyes nodded and took the woman by the hand and off they went.

It was about 4:55 am when I began to panic once more. Why hadn't anyone sent help? The stranger must be picking us off a few at a time. There could be no other explanation. That is when our male companion began to get restless. With a hoarse but quiet voice he rasped "I gotta go, is anyone with me." With a determined look on her face another lady nodded and they were gone.

I was getting more and more anxious as the minutes ticked past, hoping to escape this prison that we were trapped in. There was nothing I wanted more than to be with my family but feared that I would never see them again.

It was 5:19 when another one of us decided to run for freedom, "Please," the lady pleaded, "Come with me, surely all of us can get out of here if we stick together." For a few minutes we just sat there frozen, thinking about the proposal when the last two ladies nodded their agreement. Then the teen spoke up "take me I want to go." The final child just shook her head no. I could see that she had probably been the most frightened of us all. With pleading eyes they turned their attention to me. I also shook my head no. I wasn't about to leave the child behind to face this danger alone. Again I was hopeful for a rescue, praying under my breath that everyone who had left were alright, getting help.

The two of us who remained waited quietly. We sat there, peering between the clothing stands. In the dim light the stands looked like prison bars. I felt like a prisoner too.

The minutes ticked by so slowly, the fear mounting, how long before the stranger either gave up or came to finish what he had started? Glancing at my watch I realized it was nearly dawn, 6:03 am to be exact. It wouldn't be much longer and the sun would be up. I thought that in the daylight, with people starting to move about for the day, the two of us would be safe enough. That is when I heard a loud beeping sound.

Beep, beep, beep, beep, beep..... I gasped as I sat up with a start. I pushed the snooze button on the alarm and sighed with relief. I got out of bed and went into the kitchen to make a pot of coffee then headed for the bathroom to get ready for my day.

An hour later I was on my way to work when I heard a child's voice, "Thank you for staying with me."

"What?" I returned, turning to see who had spoken with me.

"I said thank you for staying with me. I was so afraid everyone was going to leave me all by myself."

I was startled to see the last child that had been with me under the clothes rack. My mind raced at the possibilities. Was it really a dream? Of course. My reasonable mind said it was, but apparently we both had the same dream. It doesn't seem possible to a sane person. What about the others in our dream? I was quite unsettled by the thought, especially the faceless stranger.

Coming back to reality I stammered, "Your welcome. I'm glad you're ok."

"I have that dream a lot and you're the first person to stay with me until the end." she responded. "Everybody always decides to wake up, then I am left alone, afraid that one of these days the man is going to find me."

"Have you seen his face?" I asked. "Do you know what he looks like? I never got to turn around and look."

At this point I noticed something was changing in the child's demeanor. I couldn't quite decide if it was an innocent confusion about my question or something more sinister. The child looked at me quizzically with a slight smile responding, "I thought you knew. He doesn't have a face. I call him the faceless stranger."



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