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Too Many Minus One

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Lil'brother and lil'sister were playing hide-and-seek one day, and she hid so well that the only way to find her was to look everywhere at once. The street wasn't too long but had places to hide. Everyone lived on one side in houses with even numbers, whilst on the other side there were no houses, only half-built half-ruins: foundations with rebar sticking out, fresh log frames—walls without roofs, without windows, without floors, without ceilings. Amidst all that there was an old tractor, brown with rust just like a bitten apple or a rotten white-speckled windfall one, alongside about a dozen more pensioned-off service vehicles: buses, combine harvesters, fire engines and even one half-lowered crane, which was jolly fun to climb, and even jollier to jump down from when winter piled up enough snow to keep you from breaking your legs or neck.

By the rules you could hide anywhere you liked, even in the neighbouring district, town, country, planet, star, if you were fast enough to run away whilst the seeker-finder counted to a hundred, aloud and at normal counting speed for everyone to hear and check whether the seeker had skipped any numbers by mischief or chance. Of course, for the game to be fair, you had to close your eyes. That's where the list of rules pretty much ended—a very simple and clear game for

any child. Some hid worse, some hid better, and she, lil'sister of that very lil'brother whose turn it was to seek, always hid best of all, so well that she was never found, and had to come out herself, never revealing her favourite secret places. The other children always sulked at her, took offence, and didn't even want to take her along to play. Playing with her was like chasing the wind, like catching a sunbeam, like counting to infinity. The maximum lil'brother managed to count to once was twenty thousand seven hundred and eleven. He was a mathematician. From those Olympic calculations his mouth went dry, his ribs ached, he fell down dormant, and when he woke up he told everyone that in his dream he'd counted to the end of the mathematical marathon, but no one, not his lil'sister, not their parents, not his friends believed him—only said he was a shameless fibber, liar liar pants on fire, and they'd all heard it themselves.

The day was ordinary except for the strange rain—so slow, so fine and so dense that it resembled fog, through which everything could be seen without any particular foggy difficulties. In other words, the sky was clouded over from horizon to horizon, and the air was wet to the touch, like in a bathhouse, only cold, didn't take your breath away or make your head spin.

Lil'brother counted to ninety-five and opened his eyes early, knowing that lil'sister had already scarpered and wouldn't catch him cheating. First thing he checked was the wardrobe that stood nailed to the tree. It was used as an undertreehouse where children, shutting themselves in, became teenagers, and teenagers became a bit grown-up, and grown-ups

syringed themselves to death. The wardrobe was empty. He counted fifteen steps to check between the tree branches—no one there either. Dropping to the damp grass, he crawled under one of the log frames but found no one and nothing except a pile of fag-ends and other strange objects left there by the teenagers. He went on, taking twelve steps to the large doghouse where he saw an old mangy mongrel sleeping quite alone, without any girls hiding beside it. He went through a series of other, more obvious places, counting hiding spots as he eliminated them, but found no traces of lil'sister either, no smell of cinnamon sweets, no bubblegum scent of her so-called perfume, not even a piece of her denim dress caught on a protruding nail. In the scrap metal heap, in one of the buses, under the seats at the very back, he found... no one either, nor in the fire engine's cabin, under the crane, between its tracks, but in the abandoned kiosk, where passers-by often chucked rubbish that had got stuck in their pockets, to his surprise... he found her.

She was looking at him, and he was looking through her, because looking at her wasn't possible—she was translucent from head to toe. She was silent, smiling, and he wasn't in the mood for smiles, though at first he was pleased, quickly un-pleased again when, not waiting for her reaction, he touched her shoulder, and his hand went through it as it would have gone through potato mash. She shook her head.

— Didn't find me, — she said, — keep looking.

Irritated, he tried to push her, as he often did, but again pushed through air.

— You always say things like a cow has four stomachs, — she began, — an earthworm has five hearts, a spider has eight legs, a centipede has one hundred legs, and a millipede has one thousand, a dragonfly has twenty-eight thousand tiny eye parts in each eye, and I now have lots and lots of me's. Until you find them all, you won't find me.

— How many then?

— You don't know that number, you can't count that much.

— I know all numbers.

— Multiquadrillizillion, or maybe more.

— There's no such number, you dum-dum.

— I hid all my different me's in all my favourite places, even I don't remember how many there are.

— You're a dum-dum.

— Dum-dums can't hide like I do.

— But you can, even though you're a dum-dum.

— If you're so clever and not a dum-dum, go find me, — lil'sister said, smiling her girly I-know-something-you-don't smile.

— I don't want to play with you anymore.

— You have to. Mom and dad say you should play with me.

— You should play with dolls.

— But we're playing already.

— You're not playing fair.

— And you don't know numbers.

— I do. I know all numbers. You know that.

— Do you? Then prove it and find me, all my me's. If parents come back from work and I'm not there, what will you tell them?

Nothing to say, lil'brother frowned and pouted but went to search further. He habitually counted his steps—one, two, three—as the ghostly lil'sister followed him.

An hour later, after walking two hundred and thirty-seven steps through the neighbour's garden, he found another lil'sister in a small plum grove. The fence had rotted and fallen into the grass several years ago, covering the ditch like a bridge, and thus opening access to the garden, but no one cared to steal the plums because they were too sour to even look at. Under one of the trees, as if she had forgotten to hide, stood another version of his sister, as serene and translucent as the previous one. She smiled, took the other herself by the hand and they all went on together.

In the space under their own house's porch, behind a wall of hops climbing up strings, lil'brother found yet another lil'sister after

counting forty-three steps from the garden. She sat cross-legged, waiting. In the darkness her eyes shone like a cat's. All three see-through sisters suddenly merged into one and became slightly less see-through, slightly thicker in consistency, as lil'brother noticed when he tried to take her hand.

— However, alas. Still not all of me, — she giggled.

— I can see that. You're being annoying and I'm hungry.

— Go and eat then. Then you'll never find me, and I'll win.

— You always win.

— And you still play with me.

— Because you're my sister, — he protested. — I wouldn't play with you if you weren't my sister. I hate when you do your mysterious girl thing.

— I'm not just your sister and I'm not just a girl. Some of me is also your friend.

— I'm not sure about that anymore.

— Oh, you aren't?

— Friends do friendly things, sisters help their brothers—you're unfriendly, unhelpful, unsisterly, very girly, annoying, and also a dum-dum.

— Yes, different me's are many different things.

He sulked but continued looking and counting, for he, frankly, had little choice. He walked and walked, counting steps and hiding places, wandered and wandered, counting levels of his frustration, climbed the old mill, knocked on neighbours' doors, but no one was home—everyone was working or had gone to see the travelling circus or just for a walk, as if they foresaw he'd need their help and did everything to avoid it. Most of the time there was no one to find, nothing more to count, and none of the multiplicity of sisters helped.

— But I always help you plait your braids!

— I can plait braids myself.

— No you can't. If you can, why ask me then?

— You can see me whole, but if I want to see myself, I need to stand in front of the mirror, and even then I still only see a part of me.

— You should ask mom and dad to buy you another mirror. Or three more. Or a hundred. I'm not sure how many mirrors you'd need now.

He mumbled numbers under his breath, counted his fingers, theorised what if there were also invisible sisters, or negative sisters, or too-many-to-count sisters, like there were too-many-to-count other things: raindrops, hair, stars, air. Whenever he asked if he was close to finding the rest, asked for tips, to be a good sister, at least partially, and tell him at least something, hint at something, she only pointed out that

he was the one who was a mathematician, he was the one who boasted that he could count to any number imaginable. For the first time in what he deemed an already long life he wished he'd chosen to be good at football or mayhap drawing but definitely not mathematics.

Lil'brother found nine more strangely smiling versions of his sister after walking three thousand fifty-seven steps: one on a house roof, behind the chimney, one behind the transformer box with the dangerous electricity sign on it, one in a field in tall grass, and six more in other places, anywhere at all, as if she'd either completely forgotten how to play like before or was mocking him, simply standing in the middle of the road. He even started searching in their own house, which was generally against the rules, but acceptable when there were only two of them who played. He checked the wardrobes with clothes—found one, the dark and musty cellar—found another, the damp veranda—she was hiding there in the old oak chest, the dusty place under the stairs—one more again, counting each location as he eliminated it, successfully or not. The ghostly girls followed each other, sometimes merged, sometimes fragmented back, looking like a fan or a peacock's tail—eyed, beautiful, ominous.

In the end the search was “almost successful”. Lil'brother checked everywhere he could, counting every location twice to be sure. At some point, he had to call his friends. He didn't have many and many of those he had didn't fancy going out in the rain and preferred playing video games, which he would have preferred as well, to be honest. Some did come, though. They searched every square meter of the surrounding

space and found his sisters in various hiding places, many of which she asked to keep secret. It became possible to touch her—his hand didn't fall through her hand, which greatly pleased lil'brother. "Almost successful" because they didn't find the last lil'sister, but both decided it would do. The last lil'sister, hidden somewhere very far away, no one ever found anywhere—neither her lil'brother, nor she herself years later. Luckily, their parents didn't ever notice the difference.

— So, how many have you counted? — she asked, examining her assembled self with her hands on her hips.

— Too many minus one. You don't know that number.

— Tell me. I want to know.

— Multiquadrillizillion.

Her lil'brother was too boyish for her to take seriously; she never did, hence she only shook her head.

— I won, and you lost, — he announced proudly. — In your game.

Her lil'brother was too boyish in his boasting for her to agree with him; she sometimes did yet still preferred to tease him.

— You're a cheater.

— I didn't cheat.

— You know you did. You cheated. I heard it. I was hiding near. You

counted only to ninety-five.

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