

The Mask

She truly thought she had abandoned it, years ago. It was with a deep sense of disillusion that she realized it clung to her visage; still, to her credit, once she felt the steamy, breath-choking thickness of it she had reached up with lithe fingers, snatched it off, and flung it behind her, hopefully to be carried off by the wind where it would not bother her again. She pictured it hovering, however, flightless and brooding, there just in the blind spot behind her head where a backward glance would miss it. Sighing, she turned away and picked up her pen.

She must discover where the cords lay that bound her to it; it was unhealthy and threatening to her psyche. Therefore, it must be cast out –if it was not, she was bound to make more mistakes because of the impedance to her vision. These mistakes would ultimately affect her dear children, and she could not suffer that. In the past, she had nearly always been able to find her way out of a problem by setting down the pertinent events, the descriptions and remembered conversations swimming around in the forefront of her mind, and by re-reading the words a few hours or days later, saw the pattern and the answer as clearly as an observant reads tea leaves.

So. Dutifully she recorded the conversation during which the mask had revealed itself to her. It went like this:

“Dear,” (she had said to her husband). “What is wrong? Why do you frown, what is it that is upsetting you so?”

“Nothing,” he had responded, biting off the word as if it were offensive in and of itself. Then he paused and added, “Damn toothpaste. Tom’s of Maine has three flavors: Dogshit, Unbelievable, and Blech.”

“I thought you liked Tom’s of Maine,” she shook her head, not able to assimilate this bit of news with what she knew before.

As she was writing, she could hear in the next room his continued muttering, peppered with the hissing curses that were so familiar and distasteful. She could hardly bear to be within earshot of him anymore –he constantly whined, muttered, and moaned, even in his sleep. Several times he had awakened her by sudden movements; she normally a sound sleeper and hard to wake, found herself shaking him from the clutches of a nightmare. A practical person, whenever she found herself unhappy, she methodically and scientifically set about finding the cause of it so it might be rooted out, like an offending tooth. Usually she felt herself adequate to the task and more often than not, successful. Therefore, as his wife and avowed partner in life she felt it only polite and a portion of her loving duty that she offer him her excellent problem-solving skills.

It did not occur to her that her logical mind might irritate one less inclined to be so.

Thus thinking, she felt herself beginning to respond in the usual calm manner: “Well, then. If you don’t like it is a simple thing to just get a different kind. What would you rather I buy?” And that was when the horror struck: she realized the mask was upon her face. Because from deep within her,

from a place she must have shuttered up so deeply she was completely unaware of its existence, rumbled the cry that she was almost unable to silence: “Fine! Then you buy your own toothpaste! I happen to like it, so fuck you!” Fortunately for the moment the words pattered back down into the depths of her stomach, where they lay glittering and pricking. She felt as if she had swallowed a mouthful of sequins, and they hurt horribly. She coughed, and excused herself momentarily to go to the bathroom.

Shutting the door, she stared a moment in the mirror. Dark, tired eyes looked back at her, her forehead etched with the old, familiar lines inherited from her deceased father. She had reconciled herself to the physical nature of those lines years ago, a part of her pleased that she had a harmless piece of him there to look upon whenever she chose, but the other part of her was quite aware that their deepness signaled clearly whenever her body was at low ebb. Bleakly they told the truth: she was unhappy. How long had it been so? How long had she moved through her days thinking she was doing right and her best, when all the while she was encased in the falseness of that withered skin? Worse than anything, she abhorred living lies. Her family motto had been *Esse quam videre*, to be, rather than to seem. It suited her to the ultimate degree, she felt the only way to get through life was to meet it on its own terms, to be honest, to never run from what was required. This is not to say she could not be discreet, and judge for herself what degree of honesty pertained to the situation. She was also quite able to act against her own betterment if the outcome would benefit the people she loved. That in itself was reason enough for her to “do the right thing.” However, for the most part, honest assessment of situations and her opinions as to how to face the fire was by far her most predictable quality. In this, she was a source of constant amusement to some, and alarm to others. She could be trusted when the situation called for truth, to always give it, no matter how astonishing.

The reason for this was simple: lies and deceit had covered up the first twenty-seven years of her life. It was only when she first learned to wend her way through them and accept only the truth in all its dirt-encrusted, seemingly insurmountable ugliness that she had truly begun to live her life. And so in her lonely mind, truth was equal to life itself. To deny truth had tragic consequences. It was always better to get it out, to place it before her on the table, to root out the bad seeds so as to be able to replace them with good ones. Truth was always better than fiction, and wasn't the best fiction based in truth? Truth for her contained the essence of joy, because of its connection to her own history, when she had learned to fight back and solve her own problems, one by one.

Perhaps here was the place to start, then: she was always unequivocally equal to the task of re-evaluating her own assumptions. If they were true then they would hold up; if they were not, then the sooner they were proven not to be, the sooner she would be able to replace them with better ones. Was there a place for an untruth in her life, now and years later? She recoiled instantly from the thought: oh, *here* was an emotion. But was it the thought of falsehood that had produced it? Feelings occupied a lower place on the neatly stacked mental shelves wherein she placed things according to their levels of importance. Feelings stirred things up, got in the way, and yet –oh, now! It was feelings themselves that demanded attention. But, she told herself; negative feelings are as valid as positive ones. This is what I learned back then, when I discovered truth. Perhaps unhappiness should be allowed to exist –and yet! Oh, the consequences. If unhappiness exists within this house there will be fighting. Raised voices. Sharp tongues and all the rest. What of the children? What about them?

And even now, she knows: unhappiness is already here. There have long been raised voices, sharp tongues, blasts of argument, withering glances, besides the muttering hisses and freakish clawing at the dark. It's just that now I am aware of my own unhappiness that is threatening to equal his. What is the difference between his pained mutterings and the mask I wear to hide my reaction to them? They are both elements of that disappointment, that muddy clemency. So many times when he was angry she had calmed him physically: she had even told a friend on the brink of divorce how to do it, and thus the marriage had been saved. Imagine he is the fount of all your dreams, she had told her. Essentially, that is

what he is. After you realize this, the rest is very easy. Your gratefulness at his merely being in the room is a powerful aphrodisiac to the male psyche. If you find you have nothing to say at his atrocity, say nothing. But reach out, touch his neck, run your hands along his back and knead those aching muscles. Drive your own inner anger out through your fingertips. Work that anger at whatever he has said or done --or failed to --into a soulful release that will leave you aching with need of his own healing touch. You will tumble on the floor with relief, the both of you. When words fail you, the physical touch remains. Use it, and you will never need anything else.

The frontier housewife kneaded her daily bread, stoked the fire, and beat a thousand strokes of a heavy wooden rolling pin against the popping, bubbling and elastic surface of combined water and wheat, and in so doing satisfied her aching need to crack her brutish husband's skull with that very pin, so that when he returned from work in the fields that day she greeted him honestly with open arms and a pan of mouth-watering biscuits. Ah, anger! How tight the link between that and fecundity, how quickly passion dissolves ire into the cries of a newborn. Perhaps that is why we humans number so fiercely upon this earth.

Well. She had used just this method for years, and did not know where she learned it. Thinking back she found no other relationship from which she could have drawn this knowledge; it just was there. Physical love had always made her feel better, if she could relax enough to accept it, and especially to accept her own need of it, what harm was done? The end result is preservation of the peace --that, and the elemental reckoning that satisfies so much of human need, both male and female. So thinking, she mused silently, and then remembered what had happened after she came out of the bathroom.

She had reflected and washed, and entered the bedroom to add powder and cream, to brush her hair, and strode to the dresser with that in mind. Seated at his desk apparently at work, he had gasped when he saw her (what had he thought she was doing, after all?) and remarked that she was naked and desirable. She had winced, and rebuffed him. She could not remember what she had said, but it seemed to her at the time that it would not solve anything to fall into the bed and make love at just that very instant. Part of that about which he muttered was the fact that it had taken him two weeks to do one week's worth of reports, and that he could never seem to concentrate long enough because of being distracted by something else. She had no patience for the continuation of mistakes, any more than with the lack of truth. In fact, she was certain that there was a link between the two. What was it?

After awhile, because they kept cropping up to nibble at the edges of their happiness, she began to think that perhaps the causes of anger needed to be examined, both his and her own.

Indeed, there was the night before. When fresh from the shower, pink and glowing, she had been ardent with her own need, and he had smirked and made it plain that his physical prowess had already been covered with alcohol. She had been left alone to absolve her own need. And unbeknownst to him, she had learned to do so, admirably. So. Whatever did she need him for, after all? It was an angry thought. But he had given her that instrument, ostensibly to keep her occupied when he could not be with her, for his occupation often took him miles from home, for days at a time. At the time he had shown some concern for her almost non-existent physical needs, how odd a gift it had seemed. Didn't he know that she often only needed to satisfy him, that satisfaction being an end in itself? Didn't he know her own need apart from him was miniscule, and nearly always satisfied by their sporadic but intense afternoon explorations and occasional midnight romping? Why ever would she need it when he was not around? The questions, swirling in her mind, had dissolved into the drawer where the instrument was kept. There they lay, forgotten until now. At the moment, it became clear enough to her that she needed something outside his ability to produce.

Then, there was that aspect of the scholarly gentleman. The man who on the surface appeared so proper, and yet his talented words revealed a hidden flame of passion surging within him. It was for her, and as yet she had no idea what to do with it. But she was beginning to understand, partly because of that immeasurable force of honesty within her. She had recognized and acknowledged that she needed to hear from him, that his beautiful words comforted her, and that she fed upon them shamelessly. These words led her to recognize a passion within herself that possibly matched his, and it would not be denied. Ah, sin! What would she do with this? That burgeoning whiteness glimmered just upon the horizon, she felt it moving toward her and she had accepted it, and her want of it. Before her marriage she had nearly coupled with him, because of the truth of the passionate feelings between the two of them. Remember her need of truth. Indeed, that need grew to desperation before she shuttered it, and tried to blow it out. Turning her back upon it, she went in the opposite direction. She allowed winds to blow all over it, rains to fall; indeed she called upon Aeolius and resorted to outright villainy to help her forget him. And still he wrote, he sent gifts, he called occasionally; he patiently told her of his life and her importance to him, not always calmly, but certainly steadfastly. He had no idea whether or not she received his messages, much less read them, but still quite regularly they came. She wondered at his persistence, surely the work of an unhinged mind. However, she did not throw away the letters or delete the messages; instead, she saved them. At first it was because she was too busy to attend to it, then she found that whenever she felt herself in solitude, in some way, either at the edge of her consciousness or through his writing, he was there. His words drew her. She began to read them, and re-read them, and feel the miracle of their frankness. Indeed, the person who sent these passages knew the meaning of integrity, candor, and sincerity. She began to recognize that many of her own feelings of passion and beauty were mirrored in his writing. After a very long while, she admitted herself to accept this truth: she did need him.

It was not so terrible a declaration as she had thought –indeed, for weeks and weeks all she felt was relief, and simple joy at their renewed conversations. Happily she devoured his writing, she savored it all, and it was all truth and beauty to her. How very strange it was to turn out so, she mused. And yet when the mask was recognized, she realized it wasn't actually strange at all –how many have run into the arms of another when their partners fail them? It was probably as simple as that. How depressing! Her lover sensed her disillusion, yet when she talked it over with the object of her renewed passions, she soon saw that it was anything but simple. Here was another human life, not an object! He reminded her of this, and she was ashamed of her inability to explain. And still the mask lay there, glittering and punishing her. She refused to put it on, even to salve the wounded feelings of her lover. They had to discover the answers, no matter the outcome. Better to endure the shards of anger than to assuage with senseless humility, and be guilty of cutting into her own self-respect. If he were real, he would eventually understand and hopefully respect her honesty. The mere fact that she did not have any, much less all, of the answers to this, was frightening her nearly out of her wits, but still she refused to diminish their importance.

He asked her the deep questions they both needed to ask, and it seemed that his probing and prodding her to discover answers related only to himself, apart from her husband. But later as she remembered them, staring at her reflection in the glass, she wondered. She was a complex being, and simple answers outweighed her ability to understand and apply them. Why, for instance, she asked herself: why exchange one man's needs for another's? Wouldn't this be a wholly futile and temporary attempt at rectifying a deficiency that obviously lay within herself? Like the operator of a piece of excavating equipment, her writer friend had continued to delve deeply into her reasoning for loving him and accepting him back into her world. He told her if she ran away again he had admitted to himself that he probably could not bear it, he did not think he was up to the task of getting through the pain of her rejection again. She reminded him he had done so admirably the last time, even growing and changing for the better because of his acceptance into new and personally satisfying social circles. Besides, what had he wanted, what had he intended by continuing to send her his work, and keep her informed as to his successes? Do not be afraid *now*, she lectured. I do not plan to go anywhere without you, as incredible

and ridiculous as the situation seems, I have admitted to myself something I could not admit before –and that is, that I have a deep and abiding need of you. We will figure this out. If we are –listen to me! (She had nearly shouted when he had begun interrupt) –if we are to grow old in a nursing home together, or on our own front porch in two side-by-side rocking chairs, the road there will not be easy. She was not sure from whence those words had come, but they were out, they were true, if allowed to become real...

“You are bringing tears to my eyes,” he had breathed. “I had no idea you felt this way.”

“Well, I didn’t either. But I do. I need you; I need what is in your mind. I need who you are, and I need to be with you as much as is possible in this life.” They sighed, and talked of little else for a time. She asked him: “I do not know why you love me. I feel that if you truly knew the person I have been and can still be from time to time, the stupid, the selfish and angry and downright illogical me, you would grow tired of me quickly and leave. Can you love me, knowing I am not perfect?”

He answered slowly. “I do love you. That means I accept you as a complex woman, who has been weak as well as strong... in a word, a real woman. Don’t you know that it is the depth of your emotions, the power of them, that figures prominently in what attracted me to you in the first place? I know that those "feelings" can get us into trouble occasionally... do I ever!” Laughing, he continued, “I thought that business about being stupid, selfish, and exercising poor judgment once in a while was my line! Join the human race, my dearest. Can I still love you? Do I still need to breathe?”

It was truth that joined them, then. And, as she remembered this, somewhere along the way the identity and purpose of the Mask became quite obvious to her. Blinking fast against that recognition, she knew now that the next time she spoke to her lover it would be to ask this one question:

“Do you have need of me because of who I am inside, or because of what I could do for you?” She hardly knew how he would answer, and she honestly did not know if she could do what would be required, if he did not know the right answer. Even more, she had no idea what would happen should he answer correctly. Moving through this life, there were paths that required one to choose, or to make a choice. If he did not understand the question, that would be an answer in and of itself.

She was quite certain that her husband would not understand the question. But she was equally certain that she would never again allow her need of who she’d thought he was inside, or his need of what she did for him, to weave themselves into that sharp and glittering fabric, nor to cause the tendrils of the Mask to curl up and fasten themselves about her strong and patient neck.

As to the future, that is yet to be revealed.