

Beneath the Mask

I trace my fingers over my face, feeling for the presence of the mask. Its familiar glassy contour provides comfort for my trembling hands. Every day I wake up, anxious for the mask to still be there. For without the mask, I would not even be able to leave my house. Stumbling to the bathroom, I grab the sink for support. When my eyes finally lock onto itself in the reflection, the mask settles on its appearance. Identical to most of the other days, today's manifestation is no surprise. Staring back at me is a face with a pale white complexion, wooden lips creased forcefully into a smile and eyes emitting a radiant glow, almost as if I was celestial. Only if my true self saw me through the same lens. These obtrusive thoughts always sneak into my mind, but the mask is apparently meant to help me. Help me? Nothing in this world could ever help me get back what I lost.

I glance up at the clock, and realise I only have twenty minutes to get ready for school. Time tortures me every ticking second, always questioning my motives for existing. Its constant movement into the future mocking my inability to move on from the past. But how can I when my entire world came crumbling down with a game of hide-and-seek? With a huge sigh, I force myself into the shower. The water flows down my body like a gentle cascade that hugs me delicately, reminiscent of the past.

Cold water seeped into my shoe, as I ran as fast as my little legs could carry me. He waited for me outside the school gates, likewise to every other day, no matter the weather. He stood beside the palm trees; arms wide open as he embraced for impact. Water trickled down my naked face; the mask was nowhere to be seen. Our hugs always meant more than signalling the end of the school day and the start of our adventures. Those calloused hands gripped me so fiercely with passion, our bond symbolised an eternal flame that could not even be extinguished by the wildest storms. Within his arms was a sanctuary where I finally felt freedom from fear. All around us people scrambled for cover from the torrential downpour. Maybe we were simply crazy, but the rain did not stop us from enjoying our time together.

He held my bag in one hand and my arm in the other, as he led the way to the park. I wonder if he ever got bored of these childish games, but I remembered his face always etched into a grin. As soon as we arrived at the seeker's tree, he started counting and I rushed forward, looking for a hiding spot. All my previous hiding spots had been riddled with small pools of muddy water. The only idea that remained was to climb a tree, although I vaguely remembered that this section was out-of-bounds. However, in the moment all I wanted to do was play the game with him. As I scaled up the tree, I grabbed onto any possible branches and pulled myself further up. Placing my foot in any small indents within the bark, I stabilised myself for the time being.

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“10, 9, 8 ...” I heard my grandpa count down.

With only a few seconds left, the foolish desire to ascend higher evaporated any sense of logic. As my arm extended to grab a hold of the branch that was no longer there, my fingers slipped through the howling wind. Momentum continued to push me forward, and my arms flailed begging the air to hold me up with hopelessness contorting my face.

I braced for impact from the ground, but it never came. Instead, I was in the arms of my grandfather, whose energy was exhausted by the fictional strength of his imagination and the capability of his arms in reality. The phenomenal effort of catching me by a mighty, and potentially fatal act of will, drained his liveliness.

“Why *kanna*? He questioned me with his eyes clouded with gloom.

I wanted to say something. I wanted him to stay. But how could I, knowing it was all my fault? There had been an aura to my grandpa, as if he were a lighthouse providing guidance to those around him. However, in that instant his generator stuttered, his light faded, and I was abruptly trapped in darkness. That was the day, the mask first made its appearance.

I turn off the shower, grab the towel, and change into my school clothes. My monotonous daily routine takes control, as my thoughts continue to linger in the past. A deep pit of emptiness gnaws at my heart, for how deeply I yearn for the maskless days again. Millions of different scenarios have played through my mind, like a scratched record attempting to play the right tunes once again. Still the past remains out of arms reach. Just there, yet an eternity away. I know that I must move on, my grandfather would have wanted the same. Maybe it is okay just to feel empty. Acceptable. Maybe it is fine to stop running away from the past and cherish the beloved memories that I have held onto so dearly. Believe it or not, for the first time, I hear the slightest crack in my mask...