

## Masquerade

By Monet Tran-Davies

A clock chimed at precisely four in the afternoon, signalling the end of school. Silence loomed over the city as hundreds of students wearing identical masks filed out of the building, met by the usual grey sky and gasoline odour. Aged from five to eighteen, the students made their way home for the weekend, each taking the same routes as every other day. The regular procedure was followed.

Evelyn Blight appreciated the routine. Ever since her first school year, the pattern had been the same. Wake at six-thirty sharp, use the washroom, eat breakfast, then head to school wearing her mask. At school, the schedule was crafted of seven core subjects, each lasting an hour. Students were to eat before and after school to maximize learning. Not once had the daily order changed throughout her twelve years of education. It prevented anything out of the ordinary from happening, enforcing simplicity, organization, and peace. There was no stress, like doing a dance in which the steps never changed. Yet the lack of anything new accumulated a burden in Evelyn that she couldn't understand.

Stepping simultaneously with the students in front and behind her, Evelyn marched along the *B-section* street. In the colourless city, there were thirteen units, each with twenty-six alphabetically sequenced neighbourhoods. Families were assigned neighbourhoods based on surname, placing Evelyn in the *B-section* of *Unit Seven*.

While unlocking the door to her residence, Evelyn turned to wave to her neighbour, Liang Blier, as she always did. After all, breaking routine created uncertainty, and uncertainty created chaos. When her eyes found Liang through the mask, she felt a breath catch in her throat. She stared, body rooted to the ground and mouth hanging open. For the first time, Evelyn didn't know the dance's next movement.

Liang Blier had taken off their mask. Outdoors. Masks weren't to be taken off under any circumstances outside of one's living quarters. They were holding it in front of them as if in speculation, tracing their finger around the ridges. It was like every other mask— a snow-white, face-shaped covering with the eyes and mouth carefully cut out of the delicate plastic. In a way, it was a shield, protecting everyone from judgement and keeping all citizens equal. Masks kept everyone safe, and they had been for almost fifty years. Why, then, had Liang disobeyed?

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This wasn't right. This wasn't how the day went. Evelyn and Liang were supposed to wave to each other then go inside. After that, they would follow their schedules. They would *always* follow their schedules and *always* abide by the regulations. No taking your mask off outside of your quarters and no being out past curfew. Two simple rules for a secure and stable society. Any misbehaviour was reported and taken care of.

After a moment, Liang raised their faded brown eyes. Their caramel-coloured skin was dotted with an array of freckles as if cinnamon had been sprinkled over it. One eye was slightly lower than the other, and their thin lips were cracked. A strand of chocolate brown hair dripped down Liang's forehead, almost reaching their eyes that were accompanied by heavy bags. Evelyn had never been exposed to someone other than her parents' faces. She didn't know whether Liang was attractive or what standards to go by. What thoughts crossed the line into judgements?

"Wait—" they began in a weak voice, but Evelyn couldn't stay to listen.

She shoved the vanilla door open and forced herself inside, closing it quickly behind her. Trembling against the door, Evelyn slowly counted to twenty-eight, the number she'd been assigned at school every year. Numbers always stayed the same, and consistency was relaxing. Consistency was necessary. For some reason, though, she felt the overbearing weight of the critical chronology slightly lift.

It was four-twenty-seven in the afternoon. Supper began at six, fifteen minutes after citizens arrived home from work. Evelyn was two minutes off schedule. Hurrying upstairs to her room, she took off her mask and hung it on the wall. Removing her black uniform and evenly-striped tie, Evelyn donned a plain blue work-dress and paused in the silver-rimmed mirror. Her eyes resembled the colour of an ocean during a tempest. Maybe they could've been pretty if it weren't for the mile-long gap between them. At least, that's what her parents said to encourage her to wear her mask more often. Evelyn had always assumed that anything other than "pretty" was a bad thing. Either way, the masks hid everything. Whether that was what she wanted or not, Evelyn couldn't tell.

Heading downstairs to begin dinner preparations, Evelyn focused on ignoring what she'd seen. If she acted like it hadn't happened, it could just disappear. Yet the image of a telephone kept reappearing in

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her mind. When someone spotted rule breakage, they had to report it. That was the only thing the telephone was used for. Surely, there was no need to report Liang. They were on their doorstep, and Evelyn was the only one who could have seen them. That wasn't a big deal, was it?

Something else was also sneaking into Evelyn. It was a feeling that brought a strange lightness into her head as she pondered over Liang. A feeling that could only be described as admiration.

Quiet knocking at the door interrupted the war within Evelyn's mind. Frozen on the last step of the stairs, she felt her stomach swirl swiftly. Another knock echoed through the house, even though it was softer than a feather falling to the floor. Briskly, Evelyn retrieved her mask and returned to the door, gripping the handle for a moment.

Cautiously pulling it open, her teeth clenched together as she found herself gazing into the mask of Liang Blier. They were still in their school uniform, hands folded tightly in front of them. Images of Liang's face incessantly invaded Evelyn's mind as the two stared at each other for what seemed like hours.

"May I come in?" inquired Liang, shifting on their feet awkwardly.

"This isn't right," Evelyn answered automatically, brain ordering her to close the door. However, her body was a statue. Against her better judgement, she wanted to know what was happening. She longed for a new event.

Chin lowering slightly, the wrongdoer said nothing for a second, before repeating, "May I come in?"

Evelyn hesitated this time. Eyes veering behind Liang, she noticed a security camera on the telephone pole across the street. It bored into her, the light flashing menacingly. Inhaling sharply, she stepped aside and opened the door wider. Without a word, Liang slunk in and Evelyn silently shut the door.

Whipping around, she hushedly shouted, "What were you thinking? Taking off your mask?"

Liang remained soundless.

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Arms numbing in panic, Evelyn glanced at the windows by the door and ushered Liang into the hallway. A tornado was raging in her stomach as she glared at them expectantly. How could they do such a thing and then show up at her quarters? Breaking routine was almost as bad as taking off one's mask. It destroyed the dance's idyllic synchronization.

"Explain," she demanded.

Exhaling, Liang raised their eyes to meet Evelyn's. Through the dark holes of the mask, Evelyn could see their eyes shimmering with tears. "They took my family," Liang murmured. "They took them all."

"They?" Evelyn questioned, frustrated by the vagueness.

"Whoever runs this whole charade," said Liang, tapping their mask. Letting out a shaky breath, they continued, "They took them because they were out past curfew. My brother had tripped on the way in from work, and his mask shattered. My parents were just getting home too, so they tried helping him gather the pieces. I was watching from the window. Not two minutes passed curfew, and the people came. The guards, or whatever they may be. They pressed cloths to their faces and dragged them away. That was four days ago."

Evelyn gnawed the inside of her cheeks, chest feeling heavy. "Oh, I'm s—"

"Don't," Liang interrupted. "I don't need an apology. Not when I'm dragging you into this."

Evelyn blinked twice.

"This isn't a healthy world," they remarked. "Making everyone the same isn't a solution. It's a problem. If no one is different, life becomes meaningless."

"It prevents judgement," contradicted Evelyn, though deep down she agreed.

"It prevents fear," Liang retorted indignantly. "The fear of differences. The fear of the unknown. We should stop being afraid. Please, just . . . listen."

Minutes went by as more words poured from Liang's mouth, the clock in the hallway threatening the two with every tick. Almost an hour passed in the swish of a skirt, leaving the end of work merely moments away. Soon, thousands of masked adults would be entering their residencies.

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“Please consider,” Liang said in conclusion, taking Evelyn’s hands in their own.

At a loss for words, she nodded curtly and escorted Liang out. What was she to do? Doing what Liang suggested risked everything, yet the idea filled the emptiness she could never place. To her astonishment, Evelyn trusted everything they had told her. There was no reason to, but deep down she knew that life wasn’t meant to be this simple. During Liang’s explanation, more and more of the routine’s weight was lifted from her. All her life, she’d accepted the masks and daily pattern as a universal truth—nothing more, nothing less. There was always something missing, though. Belief didn’t equal reality.

Liang’s words replayed like a tape in her mind the entire weekend. As she watched television, everything that she hadn’t been aware of blared out at her. While she spoke to her parents, each detail screamed in confirmation of what she’d been told.

During Sunday evening, a muffled crash came from behind the house. Evelyn brushed aside the satin curtains of her room’s windows and peeked out. In the remnants of light, she could see a young child with a cloth pressed against their face being slung over someone’s shoulder. The door to another house was swinging open. Watching the figure carry away the maskless child, Evelyn’s head pounded anxiously. Two figures appeared in the house. One gripped the doorway, heaving, and the other sunk to the floor, hands over their face.

An invisible fist clutching her heart, Evelyn’s eyes narrowed. She expected the people to go after the child, but within seconds they just closed the door and turned off the lights. That was the last piece of the puzzle she needed. The final clue, revealing what was truly behind the mask.

Silence reigned over the city in the morning, as it always did. Listening to her parents leave for work, Evelyn laid in bed, the blanket feeling like a thousand pounds. Slowly, she lifted herself and began the day as she always did. However, instead of heading to school, Evelyn took her mask and stepped onto the doorstep. Cool, morning air met her face like an ocean wave crashing down. It was her first time outside without the mask on. A cold finger stroked her spine as she realized there were no redos from this point on. This was what she wanted. This was what she needed. Turning, she made eye contact with

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Liang. They gave a solemn nod, mask in hand. With a deep breath, Evelyn set down the mask and stared directly into the security camera across the street.

Life wasn't supposed to be this simple, yet someone had made it so, taking away a key feature: independence. They had made everyone rely on their schedule and mask. They had made everything so simple that no one realized what they were giving up. They had made life so sequential that any disturbance could make the dominos fall. In the end, they had made a world powerful beyond the human's ability to comprehend, yet a world so vulnerable it could collapse with the dropping of a pebble.

Evelyn lifted her foot and brought it down forcefully, hearing the crack of the plastic she'd hid behind her entire life. As she peered down on the remains of the past, the last bit of heaviness drained from her body. The ball was ending. It was time to take off the masks.