

Bourne
toWrite...
creative writing
workshops

The Mask

by Ivor John

After a few days, the swelling had subsided, but had left a puffy sallow contusion below my left eye, the lower lid of which had turned a florid reddish colour. My left eye was watering continually, making it seem that I was constantly half crying. I actually did feel like crying, but this emotion came in waves and not necessary when I expected it. My eye felt as if it had grit in it, which I was unable to dislodge. Of most concern was that the sore across my cheek had become septic. Ironically meaning that the spider, about two centimetres across, was hidden by a layer of puss.

I tried to clean it, using some TCP, which had probably been at the back of the bathroom cabinet for years. For so long that the bottle's label had faded and the lid had to be forced off with pliers. I'm not sure if it was the degradation of the contents, or if it was supposed to be that way, but as soon as I dabbed it on toilet paper and applied it to my purulent cheek, there was an intense stinging. Even worse than the pain when it was done. At least then I was significantly intoxicated, I experienced this without the ameliorating effects of alcohol. I actually don't think it made the pain less in reality, it just made me not care that it hurt or what I would look like.

At first I had stayed in my room. Apart from the feelings of nausea and headache from the drinking and the hash the previous day, there were the waves of panic. An overwhelming thought that I was going to die. Not in an abstract sense, some time, undetermined and unknown in the future. But now, right now in this bedroom. My childhood bedroom, where even a few days ago, I had enjoyed thoughts of my future. Now it seemed futile and superficial. A crap job in a supermarket, and friends, friend who held me down.

Then came the gasping for breath, gasping for air more quickly than my lungs could demand it. Fetid air, which smelled of sweaty training shoes and lynx body spray. I thought I was going to pass out, maybe I did, but it would stop eventually, although I never felt at the time that it would. It surprised me, how quickly my self-image, my views of the importance of life had been ripped up.

I had come out of my room in the late afternoon. Ruth, my mother, was in the kitchen, with my little brother Peter. They were playing a game on the table.

“What have you done to your face? Did you fall off your bike again?”

Despite my evasiveness, she insisted on examining my infected cheek.

“What have you done, you’ve had a fucking tattoo, you idiot.”

I didn’t try to describe how it had happened, I am still not sure I knew anyway. I took a bowl of coco pops back to my room and slammed the door.

I phoned in sick to work, and stayed in my room, nearly the whole time. My mood didn’t improve. I smoked cigarettes, until they ran out and ate coco pops. I couldn’t even masturbate. The panic attacks did get less frequent and I realised that if I didn’t go back to work now, I would lose my job.

I covered the spider with a large adhesive dressing and allowed people to believe that it was a flare up of my acne. But eventually, I realised that I had to reveal it. I had never been a confident person anyway, but now I felt that everyone was looking at me. As if I was naked in public. Every conversation I thought was about me. But then, something happened, I am still not sure how or why it did. I had never been exceptional, in looks or intelligence, I wasn’t quick or funny. I had realised, particularly after the events at the party, that my friends viewed me as of little value to the group. I was tolerated as long as I played the game. But now, with my tattoo, I was the centre of attention. It didn’t really matter why. I was interesting now. The tattoo, was my mask, it allowed me to be a different person. And so that is how it continued.