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The Masked Stranger

by Richard Lewis

The masked stranger rode into my living room every Friday night. Kimosabe and his ever-loyal sidekick Tonto could always rescue me from the monotony of my early years. Those drab days when nothing much ever happened, just spinning my wheels and hiding in the woods beyond range of my mother's voice. Only returning to base for tea, to hear her shrill tones, "c o o e e, c o o e e." As I arrived at the back porch she'd launch into favourite tracks from her greatest hits album.

- 1) "Have you done your homework yet?"
- 2) "You need to tidy your bedroom."
- 3) "Don't forget to write that thankyou letter."

Sometimes I felt there was nothing out there for me, just counting the days, months and years till I was grown and waiting for Friday to call. I'd fire up the old black and white TV in the corner of the room and wait for the strains of the William Tell Overture, followed by the sound of hoofbeats and watch as my heroes returned for another gripping episode.

*A fiery horse with the speed of light, a cloud of dust and a hearty Hi-Yo, Silver!
The Lone Ranger!*

For thirty minutes I'd be glued to the silver screen, riding alongside the daring duo, out on the range under the wide prairie skies; chasing down outlaws, chasing down the truth. Together we pursued that band of desperadoes, Butch Cavendish and his gang through the Badlands of Monument Valley.

As I outgrew my western hero I became aware that I'd long since fashioned a mask of my own. Not a domino mask cut from the black cloth of a dead brother's shirt but one that perfectly fitted every contour of my face. I'd learned to tack a smile onto those sorry features and appear happy when feeling sad. I pretended that I understood what was going on in class when I really didn't have a clue and feared being told I was

stupid. I'd allowed myself to be moulded into the image of what others demanded, adopting a false self that people found hard to read.

Now, all these years later, as if having created my own mask were not enough, we all carry a mask in our back pocket or handbag to protect each other from an invisible threat. When first wearing the blue and white face covering I felt like an extra walking onto the set of Holby City. My nose itched, my glasses steamed up and I couldn't make myself understood to others, neither could I understand what they were saying and it seemed the government had done a mighty job of putting the fear of god into us.

As I look back on those vanished years when just a kid, I marvel at the simplicity of life and the naivety of those TV western shows. If only the virus could be rounded up like a gang of outlaws but they say it'll always be out there, lurking on trails and in the canyons of our days, waiting to ambush us.

I can't help making the parallel between our present heroes, the intrepid band of nurses riding to the rescue with a shot of vaccine, and that masked stranger of old firing a silver bullet to ward off danger.