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The Cape

For as long as I can remember, my mother has worn a mask. Years and years, I've seen her come home with it still on her face. I don't think she feels it. It merged with her, becoming a part of her. Becoming a part of our lives. When she smiles at me, I don't see her mouth curl at the sides. But I see her eyes crinkle in joy, like she's squinting in sunlight.

I'm used to seeing that by now. The mask has never changed her face or emotions. Like she has a birthmark at this point. I don't question it, wonder about it, or even think about it. Not at all. It's not like I don't care. I've always cared that she worked in the ER. I'd go to school, and kids would tell me that my mom was there when they broke their arm on their bike. It made her special, like she had healing powers. And it made me special, too. I knew how important her job was. I wasn't like those other kids whose parents worked at CVS or whatever. When teachers have asked me what I wanted to be when I grew up, I've always said a doctor.

Things like that make you special. The smell of the hospital was the smell my mother came home with. That sickly clean smell that reminded me of shots at the doctor's office. There's things that you love and you hate, and then there's things with a little bit of both. That smell was part of my mother. Just like the old scrubs. And the mask.

When I turned eleven, just a little less than a year ago, she gave me a small stethoscope for my birthday. She had gotten me the same thing when I was five. Right now, it had the left ear plug missing, and I only could hear from the right. Maybe I had plucked it off when I was playing, because I had gotten a marker stain on it or something. The stuffed bears and Mickey Mouse had gotten enough check-ups for a lifetime by the time I was six and a half, when I last remember hearing a heartbeat through it.

"I thought you'd like it," she had told me, smiling. My birthday had been on an off-day for her that year. She had made sure that she could be there. My father was snapping pictures in the left corner. "They give them free in the lobby area, you know, with the stickers and trinkets." I nodded and grinned, even though I didn't know what to do with it. I put it around my neck, like a necklace.

“It’s great!” I told her. I touched the small, silver circle at the bottom of the elephant’s trunk. “Does it actually work?”

“I think it does,” she replied. “I couldn’t really tell. It’s just like the one I got you when you were little. It’s just not the red and blue one. I thought this one was more realistic and everything.”

“Really?” I smiled softly and put it in my ears. I couldn’t tell if my heartbeat was just a vibration from the instrument. But sure enough, I could hear the faint, yet bold, pumping noise in my chest.

“So, do you like it?” she asked, almost tentatively.

“Yeah, it’s great!” I said to her. Dad gave me a thumbs-up from the back of the room. I don’t want to say that what I told her was a lie. In a way, it wasn’t. I thought little mementos were nice, even if they weren’t useful. I still have a small coin that my grandparents gave me two years ago. It’s nice to have things to remember people you love. That’s what I treated the stethoscope as. Sometimes, I feel like I haven’t touched it for years. It’s in that little nook of the closet, which has become a sort of shrine. Little mementos, little memories. Physical memories. Memories I can touch when I want to remember them.

When things go in there, they become old. They become artifacts. Memories from the past is what history is. History of my family. History of my life.

But when I’ve touched these things recently, I can only think about the history I’m in.

My mother always told me that I needed to love what I have. And I do. I love my family, my close friends, my neighborhood, always untouched by anything unfamiliar or dangerous. I’m twelve now. I’m old enough to run from danger, handle myself, stay away from scary people. You spend your entire life, maybe since you were four, thinking that you’re smart and better than everyone else. You start with the little things. Learning to look both ways before crossing the street, tying your shoelaces on your own, watching your first PG movie, reading a ‘challenging’ book. You’re smart until you run into something that you can’t think your way out of. That’s when hands scoop you up and show you away around it. Everyday things are in your way. Every day you’re no longer smart. Until these things build you. Until you scrape your knees and put on the antiseptic and band-aids by

yourself. Until you do the monkey bars without falling onto the wood chips. That's when the hands disappear. That's when you start to work your way around things by yourself. That's when you start growing up and start thinking you're smart again.

My tenth birthday was important to me because it marked the day that I became a tween. A girl named Jessie said that between ages ten and twelve, you were a tween. I wasn't a child anymore. And now that was *mathematically* speaking. Not just telling my parents about how mature I am. I had the playground law on my side. There were kids whose birthdays were in the summer, and they never got recognized as being a tween by others. Bragging to your own parents or siblings got boring after a while. Anyway, being nine and three-quarters wasn't the worst thing in the world.

That's probably the most grown-up I've ever felt in my life. I could have been an adult at that point, even though I never have been one. That's when I really believed I had moved past childish things. I never loved being a child. Maybe just a year ago, I had carelessly stuffed that stethoscope in my closet. My mother had given me that. And I had let myself slip it away like it was worth nothing.

As you grow up, you *do* want to be a child again. Adults always wistfully say that, like we have some sort of golden nectar that they once had. I hadn't ever realized what they meant. No one does, until something happens that forces them to. Suddenly, you wish you were younger again, and everyone could shield you and tell you that it was all right.

A pandemic made me wish that. Not acne or anything like that. Not anything that my parents wished would go away when they were my age. My mother was in the kitchen, home from work when I spoke to her.

"Mom?"

"Yes?"

She was cutting apples into slivers. I still lose my teeth even though I'm twelve. One has grown in a weird way in my gums, and it's screaming to get out. Cutting apples helps with the pain. It's the little things that make my mother the person she is. The way she finds time to buy birthday presents for friends or watch me play soccer. The little things that are big. For me and for her.

"Are you still going to have to go in? The hospital would be closed, wouldn't it?" I know I sound inept, but she knows what

I'm thinking. People say dumb things when they have nothing else to say. What else should I have asked her? If she would be safe? No, that sounded pessimistic, like I assumed the worst.

She put the apples on a plate and set them down on the table. "I'm still waiting for instructions. You know how the school board had to set things up for the rest of the year? My work has to do the same." She told me to eat and then paused, her teeth pressed down on her bottom lip. "There'll be precautions and things like that to keep us safe. They won't just throw us back in."

"But what if they do?"

"It doesn't work that way, my love," she said softly. "That won't happen, okay? They're not allowed to."

"Will you have to quit?"

I'm spitting out questions without thinking about them. I feel like we're talking hundreds of feet above ground. Distant and jittery. There's no logic to what I'm saying. Only fear.

She laughed quietly and put her hand on my back. "No, no, not at all. You'll never have to worry about that."

Her voice was reassuring for me, but it didn't make my questions go away.

"What about dad? Will he be fine?" I asked her, almost naggingly.

"Dad will be all right," she reassured me. "Just like me."

I shook my head. It felt like she was telling me not to worry, instead of telling me why I shouldn't be. There were plenty of reasons why I thought I should be. A global pandemic is a once-in-a-lifetime thing. Like a war or famine or natural disaster. Being told not to be worried was always the first step in these things. Disaster was the next.

"Mom?" I asked her. My voice sounded weak, like I was sick.

"Listen," she said. "I know you're worried about this. We all are, and I'll admit it. But you don't have to do the worrying. That's what me and Dad will do. And we'll do it when it's time."

"But the time is now, Mom." I sounded ridiculous and childish, like I was warning her about an alien invasion.

"You'll be in school virtually until summer vacation," she reminded me. "That's more than enough time for your father and I to assess the situation. We're not going anywhere until it's safe."

"But what about you?" I asked her. "You can't quit work all of a sudden if they make it go back. And it isn't safe."

She sighed and didn't answer my question immediately. For a moment, I thought she wasn't going to answer me at all, until she replied, "This all happened suddenly. And when things happen

suddenly, people don't know what to do with it. You think this has been here for months, my love, and many other people do, too. We've been hearing it on the news since January at the longest. Your father and I didn't expect this to happen, and I know you didn't. Don't feel like you're the only one who thinks this, all right? You aren't alone. This snuck up on people. And they're in shock now. Things are moving slowly, but they are moving. It'll be safe by the time the plan rolls out."

"You sure?"

"Yes, I'm sure," she tells me. "Look at the bright side. No real school! Classes start later, and you won't have to get up super early."

"And you?" I ask her.

"Don't think like that, please?" She's pleading with me to be happy. To not worry. I don't know how I couldn't. I'm only worried about her. Dad works from home. Doesn't she realize what this all means? Maybe she does and is hiding it from me.

"Mom, be honest with me," I tell her, looking into her eyes. "Will you be all right?"

If she doesn't want me to worry, she has to be honest. Even if she is scared, I'll know that she is prepared at least.

"We'll see."

"Do you promise?"

She looks me in the eye and hugs me. I smell the hospital on her as a sort of perfume. "I do."

It was late at night when I woke up from my sleep. I checked the alarm clock beside my bed. It was only ten thirty. I settled back against the covers, listening for noises downstairs. If my parents were still awake this late, I'd hear them.

My throat felt parched and almost sticky, so I got out of bed for water. Being as silent as I could, I crept downstairs. My parents were talking over the table, so I stopped to listen before coming all the way down. It's clear that they're trying to whisper, like little girls on a playground when they're excited about something. But they don't sound excited about anything. Are they scared? But being scared is just excitement turned into a monster.

"I can't wait until Tuesday," I heard my father mumble as I gripped the railing. My body was still waking up from sleep. "The dealership says they'll take me in then. It's about time anyway. Finally, we'll have both cars working again."

I heard my mother nod, and they talked for around half a minute. Mainly boring stuff about the taxes and the car and everything in between. My ears woke, however, when they began talking about work. I usually put this under the ‘grown-up talk’ category, but things are different now. I’m not playing with friends or going to school even. There’s me, TV, my books, and a mostly empty house. And these days, my parents’ jobs interest me. Mainly because I’m more mature than I was a while ago. But I’m worried about my mother for the most part, and that’s why I start to listen.

“You can take the van starting Monday,” my father offered. “I’ll pick up the Prius; you just drop me off.”

“Sounds good,” she answered. At this point, I had forgotten why I was even down there in the first place. I heard a pause.

“Did you tell him?”

He asked her softly, like he was exchanging secret information like spies in movies. I strained my ears trying to pick up what my mother was saying.

“Not yet.” She stopped before going on. “He’ll be fine when we tell him; he’s old enough, and smart enough to know the kinds of things that are going on. . .”

I thought hard, bearing down on myself to think of an answer. Were they having another baby? No, that wasn’t it. They always told me that we didn’t have enough time to have another child. I knew I should be upstairs, but I stayed down. I wanted to hear this whole conversation. I wanted to know what they were talking about.

“So you lied to him?” he asked. My mother answered quicker than I thought she would. Or at least quicker than I would have. I was in disbelief. What could she have lied to me about?

“Not really,” she replied. She lowered her voice, like she wanted no one to hear her. “I could tell he was worried about me, and I didn’t want to encourage it.”

“So you did,” my father said. *Case closed*, his tone murmured. *No need to worry anymore, nothing to see here.*

My mother sighed. “I-I just didn’t want him to worry about me.”

“We all worry about you, Meghan,” my father said softly. “Why should he be any different?”

“He’s just a little kid,” she murmured, barely audible from where I was standing.

“He’s a mature kid,” he corrected her. “And he’d be the first one to tell you that. Kids are resilient people, Meghan. Remember those NICU kids that you met? They’re braver than I could ever dream to be! Don’t underestimate your own son!”

“That’s not it,” she breathed, her voice like a breeze blowing in the sky. It was frail but sure and strong. “I don’t want him to worry about me. I wish he wouldn’t at all, it’d be better for him if he . . .”

How could I? I wished I could speak and say that to her, but I didn’t dare go downstairs and blow my cover. I knew why she wanted me to not worry about her. I knew about the stress and pain that it would give me. But I cared, because I was her son, and I wished she acknowledged that. Acknowledging that I care, that I’m with her.

I didn’t need to hear any more. I crept silently back upstairs and into bed. My throat was still dry, but this time it hurt.

When I logged into school on Monday, it was clear I hadn’t slept. I didn’t know if anyone could notice, and I didn’t care if they did. When you get older, little things don’t bother you anymore. The bigger things do. Bigger things as you get bigger. I can’t think of anything but the present, about mom, our family. Not when those hospital people are sending her in, like a lamb for slaughter, those officious fools at the hospital in their starched suits and ties, watching her go to war for them while they just sit there. If I went there, their blonde, Barbie doll-like secretary would offer me lollipops, like little tokens of kindness that would make up for everything. Like they know what this is like.

They don’t, I thought, and I bit the inside of my cheek hard in anger. *They don’t, and that’s why they’re doing this to her, like she’s nothing but a wooden doll. A cheap wooden doll. Something they can replace without digging their hands too deep into their pockets.*

If my mother were here and could read my thoughts, she’d tell me to calm down gently, like I was fussing about nothing — only so that she could take the anger on herself, so that she could give herself the burden, let my mind rest. She’s just as upset as me, I saw yesterday. My parents don’t need anything more on their chests right now. If I could take just a little bit of it! It’d be like Sam Gamgee taking the ring from Frodo. I have nothing else hard in my life. I’m a kid, and I can take it.

But you have taken it, a small voice inside me whispers. Look at yourself! Think about the things you've been feeling. You have been taking it, and it's too much for you. You're angry, scared, worried.

It trailed off, leaving me feeling hollow and alone. I knew it was right. Maybe my mother was right, too. I shouldn't worry about her. It's worse for me.

"Hello?"

My mother was standing at the door. She had her scrubs on, with a mask and a face-shield. Her eyes smiled at me.

"Hi."

She peeked in at my blank computer screen. "Are you in class? If so, I don't want to disturb you."

"No, no, it starts in ten minutes or so," I tell her. She nods and comes over to me.

"I just wanted to tell you something, okay?"

I know what she's going to tell me. It's almost eight o' clock. She's going to work. I know it from yesterday. That should have never been a surprise to me; of course she'd have to go in.

"Don't worry, Mom, I already know," I said without thinking. Her eyebrows are raised for a moment, then they come back down.

"I'm sorry I lied," she whispered. Her voice fluttered like the wings of a broken bird. "I just didn't want to worry you. You know, with everything that's going on nowadays I didn't think that —"

"Mom, it's all right." I interrupted her just as quietly as she spoke. I don't want to hear her apologize. It'd be for nothing. It's my fault I ever believed her. Believed anything other than what I knew. . . .

She nodded, and I saw that her eyes were wet, shining like stars. "It's going to be all right, son," she whispered to me, like she was hushing me to sleep.

My throat hurt like it had last night, and it hurt to breathe. "I know."

She reached out and hugged me, and I hugged her back. Her scrubs smelled like the hospital, and the smell brought a new, aching pain to my throat.

"Don't be scared," she told me softly, like I was young and hiding in her skirt from something. "It's all right. Don't be scared."

“I’m not scared,” I said in whatever I could muster from my broken voice. “It’s just, just *this*.”

“This?” She pointed at her face shield and mask. “This is a cape, Jimmy, not a mask. Don’t be scared for me, okay? You can’t find fear out of me; I’m more than that. And you’re more than that, too. Remember that, all right? For me.”

I looked at her eyes, the only thing the mask didn’t cover up. Were they pleading? No, my mother would never plead. They were strong and bold, and the tears in them didn’t mask that. She was confident in me to be as strong as her. The pain in my throat loosened. I could never be like her, but I thought of her. Almost every second of my life.

“I will,” I told her, and I gave her a small, faintish smile. She returned it and kissed me on the forehead.

“I love you.”

“I love you, too.”

She nodded and her eyes crinkled. “You grew up so fast.”

I didn’t know what to say to this, so I gave her a sort of half-nod.

“Bye, Mom.”

“Bye,” she said, and she walked out the door.

Almost as soon as she left, I darted up the stairs to my room. Class wouldn’t start until two minutes from now, and I had just enough time. I opened my closet door and pulled out the stethoscope, cold and dusty.

What could happen in the future meant nothing to me then. I held it in my hands, and the metal became hot with my grip. Every second felt precious to me. My mother could have been in the same room with me now. Even if she wasn’t, I still had the mask and cape of my hero.