

MASKS

by

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Characters

WOMAN

Forties.

Props

Actual masks can be used, if desired.

Masks
A Dramatic Monologue/Performance Piece

Once on a warm and cicada-filled night
An old man, with a face as pink and round and hairless as a baby's,
Blew down the dark and leafy street
All shadow and mystery
Into the cool pool of light before my door.
He knocked like Fate, and when I opened,
Looked at me for a long, long time,
As if surprised.
He thrust a piece of paper at me.
"Right address," I said. "Wrong person."
"Who ARE you, then?" he asked.
"Who AM I?"
Well. Different things to different people.
I keep my masks close at hand.
I have them for all occasions.
Which one shall I put on for you?

(She assumes her WORK face.)

This is my work face.
We all need one of these, right?
Mine makes me look calm.
Competent.
Professional.
The customers like it.
"Yes, sir, I'll take care of that for you."
"No, ma'am, she's not in at the moment. Would you like to leave a message?"
My colleagues tell me it looks great on me
AND
Complements what they're wearing.
Fits in nicely at the office,
Matches the decor
Of pastel efficiency,
Of long mindless days
Logged by computer
And filed in cabinets by the window.
Of course I take it off as soon as I get home.
It's hot underneath
And after being so pleasant
To everybody
For so long

The smile's beginning to crack at the corners.
See?

(She becomes a YOUNG WOMAN.)

When I was younger,
I wore this a lot.
How many games I played in it!
He loves me...he loves me not.
Bashful glances.
Whispered intimacies.
Giggles in the dark.
You can still see
Traces of ecstasy
Traces of tears.
I'd feel like a fool wearing it now.
Too garish.
Too much make-up.
Bright and flashy as a lure should be.
Useless
Now that I've given up fishing.

(She puts on her SOCIAL FACE.)

These days when I go out
I wear this instead—
My social face.
Looks cheerful.
Agreeable.
Interested.
Likes to be taken out dancing.
Enjoys the theatre.
Loves to entertain.
Goes WITH everything,
Casual or formal.
Goes TO everything.
A game. A dinner. A show.
Accidental meetings at street corners.
“Don, how nice to see you!”
Light conversations over lunch.
“I saw her husband the other day.
With another woman.”
Quite delicate.

Ruined by drink, when the mask slips
 And something else shows
 Behind the slitted eyes.
 Hides yawns.
 (You'll never know how much you bore me.)
 Anger.
 (You jerk.)
 Insecurity.
 (Do I look OK? Do you like me, even a little?)

(She changes into THE MOTHER.)

I get a lot of use out of this one.
 In fact, sometimes people call me "Kay's mother,"
 As if I had no other identity,
 No other mask,
 But this.
 As if this were all I was:
 Someone's mother.
 Even the vet tells the dog
 "Mummy will take care of you."
 And usually, mummy will,
 'Cause family comes first.
 But sometimes
 She wishes she could take the mask off and burn it.
 Sometimes she dreams of running away
 To the Big City
 And spending the orthodontist's money
 On a week of riotous living
 At the Holiday Inn.

(She turns into THE MARTYR.)

Mother's mask—Martyr's mask.
 Every mother has close at hand
 (Can you guess?)
 THIS.
 Notice the sorrowful expression
 The pale cheeks polished smooth
 By ingratitude.
 The sad eyes looking up to heaven
 To see if someone's watching
 And taking notes for future reference.

Must be used with a certain voice:
 “After all I’ve done for them!”
 “After all I’ve sacrificed!”
 Comes with certain beliefs:
 What would my family do without me?
 How would they cope?
 (They wouldn’t. They couldn’t.)
 I’m needed.
 I’m indispensable.
 Hard-working,
 Hard-done-by.
 Hard.

(She metamorphoses into THE BITCH.)

Some masks, like slippers, I only wear at home.
 For example, the Bitch.
 Just call me Ilsa.
 Ilsa of the SS.
 And click your heels, please.
 Ask my husband what I’m like when I’m wearing this.
 Ask my children.
 When the doors and windows are closed,
 When there’s nobody I have to impress,
 When I’m tired
 And they haven’t done their share of the work—
 I SAID, “Clean up your room!”
 “I asked you a month ago to fix this!”
 If you heard me, you wouldn’t recognize me.
 Is that screaming woman the one I know?
 The one who always smiles at me?
 Who never seems to lose her temper?
 Who gets on so well with everyone?
 Who’d’ve guessed!
 Secretly even she’s surprised
 At the red-hot flare of anger
 Shooting up from depths
 She never knew existed.

(She smooths her face.)

My husband and I don’t wear masks when we’re together.
 We’re transparent to each other.

Open and truthful
 About everything,
 Even sex.
 Especially sex
 On long hot summer nights
 When the kids are away at camp
 And we make love with all the freedom of the old days
 If not the agile bodies.
 I know what he's thinking—
 When he needs to be left alone.
 When he needs company.
 He knows what I'm feeling—
 When I'm down
 And a kiss will make it better.
 We can read each other's minds.
 Finish each other's sentences.
 It's so relaxing.
 Makes for a great relationship.
 Not that we're perfect, mind you.
 I do have
 (Tucked away in my pocket)
 A bewitching mask
 Which I hardly EVER use
 But sometimes have to
 Because really,
 How long would a marriage last,
 Without a few little white lies?

(She shifts into CASUAL mode.)

Only a few people have seen me in this.
 It's too plain to wear out.
 Too shabby.
 It's the one I use
 At the end of the day.
 When I sit in my chair
 (The fat, squishy one)
 Drinking tea in my dressing gown,
 Watching the news,
 Clucking my tongue at the folly of the world.
 ("Another shooting? Another bombing?
 What's the matter with people?
 Are they out of their minds?!")

Also perfect for weekends,
 When I binge on my favourite shows
 Relax. Garden.
 Let it all hang out—
 But not too far.
 We have neighbours, after all.

(A look of BLISS comes over her face.)

This one I hardly ever get to wear—
 Much as I'd like to.
 It's me
 When I'm all alone in the house.
 When the kids are at grandma's
 And my husband isn't home yet.
 When I don't have to hurry
 Or go anywhere.
 When I can relax without feeling guilty.
 When everything's OK just as it is
 And a deep happiness comes over me
 And I think how lucky I am
 Just to be alive
 Here. Now.

(She becomes a CHILD.)

I'm very fond of this,
 Though I hardly wear it any more.
 Only when I feel small and helpless.
 Only when I want to be taken care of for a change.
 This is my first mask.
 I made it myself
 From bits and pieces I picked up.
 I can't remember when I started it,
 When I didn't wear masks.
 Once I said what I thought:
 "Did you bring me a present?"
 "What're those spots on your face?"
 "I hate you!"
 But I found out that was wrong.
 Impolite.
 Unacceptable.
 So I made this to hide

What I was really thinking
Really feeling.
Isn't that part of growing up?
Fitting in?
Pity the child who never learns how.

(She assumes her NIGHT face.)

Now I'm so used to wearing a mask
(Except in front of my husband, of course)
I don't know what it would be like
Not to.
I think I'd feel naked.
Vulnerable. Ashamed.
Who goes around without a mask?
I've taken to wearing one even at night.
Like it?
It's lacy.
Lightweight.
Porous.
Lets my dreams slip in and out.
Though I'll tell you a secret...
Once
Wanting to adjust the fit
I slid my finger
Underneath, here,
AND
(just for a moment, you understand)
I thought
(but I might've been mistaken)
What I felt was not skin
But another mask.
I quickly jerked my hand away
And smoothed over the edges
And now you can't tell
That I ever looked.

You ask me who I am.
Not the woman you think, sir.
As I said
Right address—wrong person.
Sorry.
I shut the door.

Masks reveal,
Masks conceal.
Let me see—
Which one shall I put on for you?

THE END