

The Slipping Mask

by Gregory Lawrence

Melanie was settling in for bed, adjusting cushions and cat for the latest episode of “Ex on the Beach” when an authoritative shriek pierced the night. Shock at the noisy intruder turned to consternation as she recognised the culprit. It was like an echo from days long past, still eliciting the same visceral response. *What the hell, who even uses landline phones anymore these days*, she thought. Melanie had only got one when she moved into this flat in a side street just off Leith Walk a few years back as it was included in the broadband deal at no additional cost. And, of course, because her parents insisted, in particular with her being all on her own for the first time ever, bar a short-lived fiasco in a flat-share in the city centre. *‘So how do you think we would get a hold of you if you got your mobile off for whatever stupid reason, and we need you, or vice-versa. The latter being more likely, of course, as you got a brain like a sieve, don’t we all know it, Mel’*. She decided to let the phone ring out, distracting herself by lifting up Louie, her ginger tomcat, and sitting him on the pink cushion next to her.

Forcing herself not to count the rings was no use, the more she tried not to, the more her body kept score. Second ring. She pushed her face into the shiny fur. How

could it be so soft and smell so fresh, when all he had to clean himself with was spit?

Third ring. At least she was able to withstand the Pavlovian reflex of getting up and answering, a remnant of indoctrination from a different age. *'Bloody answer the phone, will you, Mel, it's only gonnae be trouble from school anyway, or one of those bums you call your mates.'* Fourth ring. Back then, too, she had feared the horrible sound, making her skin crawl, almost as much as answering it. Even her friends, referred to as bums by her dad, often were just that, and she hadn't really relished getting wasted with them all that much; but on the other hand, she also hadn't wanted to waste away in her room, just wasting time, and need to get out of the house. Fifth ring. Nothing good could come from that shrill siren call. She felt an itch in her eyes, making her rub them furiously. On the telly, a commercial was singing the praises of panettone, whatever that was; now her eyes were tearing, and she could not see. Sixth ring. Melanie simply loathed speaking on the phone, now more than ever, perhaps ironically, given her profession, working in a large call centre at South Gyle. However, it was different then. Seventh ring. Once she passed the gates of the call centre, she slipped into noise-cancelling headset and the armour of professional politeness, armed with a script of infuriatingly inane questions and responses she had to follow no matter what. Eighth ring. The commercials were over, and Melanie was getting seriously annoyed now, drumming her fingers on her knee. Ninth ring. With a drawn-out meow, Louie jumped off his cushion and scratched at her bedroom door. The ringing had stopped.

She did not know whether Louie wanted to be let out, only to then beg to return a moment later, or whether he was hungry, again, but he would have to wait. Where was the remote? She found it on the stack of magazines next to the bed, just in time to turn the

volume up a bit. The moment she had been waiting for, the test of faith for Danica and Charlie. For lack of Louie, she gripped the pink cushion tightly, hugged her blanket to herself. When she felt the noise, she first grabbed the remote, but realised that it wasn't the TV being too loud. It was the bed vibrating, gently; it felt a bit like when she was stroking Louie, not altogether unpleasant. It was her mobile phone that was buzzing; this was, however, unpleasant. With a sigh, she found the phone under her blanket and took a look at the display. Private number. *Might be important, but then they would certainly leave a message, wouldn't they.* Swiping down to reject the call, she heard Louie purring. He kept it up while sauntering back towards the bed. Playing cute, so it was likely food the old gourmand wanted. The purring grew louder and louder, more mechanical and rhythmic. The mobile, again, a text this time.

'I know you're here,' it read.

A sick joke. Would the guys from work do that? On more than one occasion, she'd agreed to join them for a work night out, without ever actually showing up. Too flustered to come up with an excuse about why she would rather wind down after work instead of spending her time in some hellhole of a club or pub, full of sound and fury. But she could not remember tonight being one such night. Recharging, being herself, was necessary after each work day as well as each work week. She felt that itch again, this time all over her face. No wonder her face was breaking out, with all that stress. Spending all her energy on doing something she disliked, in an environment that distressed her, with colleagues she could not help but displease. It was all the harder for the fact that they were generally decent people, even kind, just not her kind of people. The workplace gang was led by Jamie. He had the luxurious figure of a lumberjack

who'd been letting himself go a fair bit. Despite his large frame and body height – he stood 6 foot 6– he was never a looming presence, and did not seem tall or towering as much as round and robust. Loudmouthed and often uncouth, but generally laid back. The only thing he could not abide was not being right – and because he often was wrong, though not quite so often in matters of consequence, humouring him had become a habit; well, not only him, but also the rest of the work guys, even Liam, the fuckwit. *'If you just smiled once in a while, honey, you'd feel better, but I guess you don't want to.'* He also seemed to believe he was out of her earshot as soon as she had her back to him. *'That bint thinks she's above us, I guess. A right bunny-boiler, I can tell you.'*

Here at home, her evening disturbed, coffee, cigarettes and constancy no longer keeping her emotions down, adrenaline started coursing through her now. She tapped the 'Call' button underneath the text. 'Number unavailable,' she was informed by a bored but polite woman's voice that could just as well have been computer-generated. If it was Liam, he must have turned the phone off right after sending the prank text... A loud bang jerked her upright. The noise laid her bare, made her feel raw as though thrown naked into a pot of boiling water. Anger had subsided, primal fear enveloped her.

"The new Fiat X-Treme, the ultimate in..."

Just the thunderous start of another commercial break, with the inevitable surge in volume. Melanie first silenced the TV and then got up to silence the meowing Louie, shaking the bag with his cat food, whereupon he followed her eagerly across the hallway into the kitchen. Before she could fill his bowl, her now-raw nerves were assaulted again by the landline ringing once more. This time, it sounded higher in pitch, no longer muffled by the thick old walls and doors, but at the same time the frequency hit deeper,

she could feel it in her teeth, drilling into them. Who even had this number? Nobody from work, she was pretty sure. In fact, she could only think of her mother. Remembering their last conversation – in the flesh, not on the phone – made her clench her teeth even more, tensing all the muscles in her face. It had been in the doorway of the flat, another workday evening when she was tired out, worn out, and unable to make herself put on her well-worn mask of a forced smile and make-believe rush: *‘So good to see you, but I got to bolt in a moment, I’m meeting somebody.’* Her mother usually bought it, her father less so, but on that evening, she’d been too fatigued to even keep up the pretence of needing an excuse to retire back to bed after her mother had collected the monies for a present for nan.

‘Are you okay, Mel?’

‘I’m okay, thanks.’

‘You don’t look okay, come on, talk to me, what’s up?’

‘No really, I’m okay.’

‘Well if you don’t want to talk... look I only want to help.’

Yes, her mother would have been the one to send the text, maybe from someone else’s phone. Now the damn ringing was overwhelming her more than the fear of an uncomfortable conversation. Frustration and fury in equal measures flushed her face. For the first time since moving in, she answered the landline phone.

It was not her mother, but the voice was feminine and familiar. It most reminded her of the announcer’s voice she had heard when trying the mobile number.

“Hello there, am I speaking to Melanie Jackson?”

“Yes, who is this?” Her own voice came out hoarse, the words half-stuck in her dry throat, while her interlocutor continued with enthusiasm.

“That’s great, Melanie, thanks so much for confirming! Now I’d just like to go through your options with you. You can either choose the premium package, or the premium platinum package. In either case, we will get on with your request immediately and you can...”

“Premium package? Of what? Who are you?”

“Oh, I couldn’t really comment on that, but I think that doesn’t really matter at this stage. One difference between the two packages is, of course, the price.”

“Which company? What am I paying for? And how much?”

“We could forward you to the Pricing Department to look at that for you, but not until you’ve locked in your choice, I’m afraid.” *A scam, of course.*

“I’m sorry but I’m going to have to hang up.”

“I’m afraid that’s not one of the options currently available. Your choices ...”

With a grunt, Melanie smashed the phone back into the receiver; it was cordless, so not quite the effect as seen in old films, but still satisfying. At least until she realised that had not actually hung up the phone, but put it on loudspeaker. Resonating in the kitchen, the voice sounded a lot fuller, more menacing.

“... are either the premium, or the premium platinum package. Ending the conversation is not amongst the choices.”

“What?” Anger made her voice clearer, firmer, and let her forget for a moment she was talking to a scammer. “That can’t be right.”

“I don’t make the rules, I’m just following the script.” Oh so that’s what this was all about. That’s why the voice sounded so familiar. Now that it was clear it was imitating an AI customer service operator and her own voice in service mode; it could only be a disgruntled customer, enacting petty revenge. One to whom she sold some kind of broadband package or whatever, and who now felt cheated, taking it out on her, not the company. She hung up, using the conveniently large and symbolic button on the handheld this time. After a moment’s pause, the voice continued. Louder this time.

“Hanging up is not an option, I’m afraid.” Melanie felt her limbs prickle with cold fear. *Fight or flight. Don’t freeze. That just makes you a victim of whatever comes your way, and you had it coming then.* Her father, drunken to the point of losing command of his mother tongue, but still capable of shouting. Her high school bullies, stuck-up bitches with too much make-up stuck on their faces and probably stick up their arses. Or that disembodied voice that called her, following some surreal script, still speaking to her from a phone she had hung up. She stared at the damn phone, frozen in place.

“Talk to me, I know you’re still there.” Okay, fight. But first think. She’d hung up, but the phone cable was still in place. Not thinking anymore, she yanked it out of the wall, then grabbed the receiver, with the cable hanging off it, and threw it across the hallway for good measure. The voice stopped, though she felt like it was still echoing in the kitchen. She had no idea how that had worked, but maybe on landline phones you actually had to pull the plug sometimes. Or she just hadn’t hung up correctly before? Either way, that stalker was a case for the polis, not that they would do much about it. She shivered, then called after Louie. He didn’t come, though he couldn’t be far; she had not heard the cat flap clatter, which it invariably did whenever he used it. She shook the

bag with the cat food again, and that did the trick. His bowl filled, Louie began to fill his stomach as though he hadn't been fed just hours earlier. Melanie was about to sit down next to him on the floor, to just wind down, when the doorbell rang out. Loud and clear, the first beat short and high, the second long and low, with an echo of bass frequencies she could feel all over her body. Why she'd never switched to a different doorbell she did not know. Then again, and once more. She felt the skin around her eyes tense, sign of a migraine to come, great.

It was probably a coincidence that someone was at the door just after that phone conversation, but she would most certainly not answer the intercom. The door to the tenement was unlikely to be open, and no neighbour would let someone unknown in. Not after the escalation of the issue with late-night revellers or ASBO enthusiasts using public stairwells in the street as a toilet. Louie jumped into her arms. His orange fluff and gentle purring were like white noise that hugged her tight, shutting out fear for a bit. Rubbing him against her face even relaxed her face somewhat. He was better at calming than her own thoughts. All those ever did was seek to rationalise why she needn't feel as anxious as she in fact did. In that, they echoed the world – parents, teachers, doctors. *'Oh no, sweetie, that's not actually what you're feeling. You just want attention. That won't hurt, stop fretting. That doesn't hurt, stop fucking fidgeting and making that face.'* While that inner voice never soothed her, it told at least her what to say to others, how to behave towards others, which feelings to hide and which ones to play up. And what she herself couldn't do, soothe herself, Louie achieved effortlessly. But now he stopped purring, then tensed his muscles. An instant later, he had jumped down to hide under the kitchen table.

The bang against the door was like a louder, deeper, more visceral ring of a bell, with her body as the clapper. Everything vibrated and oozed primordial fear. Then the knocking became constant, a pain, and she knew she could only alleviate it by answering. She approached the door, slowly, and heard herself say:

“I’m coming. Who are you? What do you want?” Pushing against the door crossed her mind, but she immediately grasped the futility of it. Then the voice spoke. It was the same person as from the phone.

“So you want to cancel?” Courteous, not too weighty.

“What? Who are you, and why are you are you harassing me?”

“If you want to cancel our relationship, there’s just a few steps we have to talk through. Could you please let me in so we can have a chat.” The intonation suggested a request, not a question. As Melanie could not bring herself to firmly say no, she went with silence. “I just want to talk to you, I need to speak to you.” The voice was becoming more strained.

“Why?”

“You’re going to need to open the door.” Like fuck do I, thought Melanie. Stalling was the best she could do. At least there was a door between her and whoever was out there.

“Who let you in? And who are you, again?”

“Upstairs neighbour. Now you let me in, please.” The Feltons upstairs? Surely not? They were a couple of OAPs in their late sixties or possibly early seventies, but sprightly and bright. They had been living here for over twenty years, twice the time Melanie had been staying here. During that time, the only change in mentality brought

about by the process of aging she had noticed in the couple was that they had grown a tad warier of people. They would not let a stranger in. There was a tickling sensation on her face. Melanie hated being tickled. Thoughts began to race, but Melanie herself remained frozen in place, silent.

“At least talk to me, please.” Needier, more desperate, but also more disturbing. “Please, please, just have some common decency and at least speak to me.” The high-pitched whining was grating, and she needed it to stop.

“How? And about what again, exactly?” The pleading stopped, and Melanie almost felt relief. Despite that creep at the door. “I take it you’re a customer I spoke to on the phone some time?” When the voice replied, it was more business-like again. And still evading all her questions.

“You can choose one of the following two options. Acquiesce to me, or make up excuses.” Never mind what acquiescing would involve; the stalker now accusing her of making up excuses, not knowing what it was like to be her, what her life, her work, cost her, boiled Melanie’s blood. Sweat started to form on her brow and under her armpits, not the clammy perspiration of fear, but hot anger pouring out. At last.

“Well, it’s not like I’m making up excuses, you fuckwit. I don’t actually have to speak to you. And I am uncomfortable speaking to you. You’re stalking me. I’ll contact the police if you don’t leave.”

“I’m sorry, that’s not a valid excuse.” *Well, fuck you too*, Melanie thought. She didn’t need an excuse, but she didn’t even need to say that; just like she shouldn’t need an excuse with people like Jamie, or Liam, or even that guy from Tinder she’d been on one date with. The name was something with N, like Neil or Nate. ‘*Work is not an excuse to*

blow me off now, is it. I'm also working hard shifts, amn't I.' Summoning all her courage, she looked through the peephole, trying to silence her every move by holding her breath, holding her muscles as still as she could. The view through the fisheye lens was distorted, but she clearly saw the figure standing there in profile, with the environs appearing to either draw in onto the stalker or flee away from them. Wearing a long dark coat and a dark hood, nothing much stood out. The figure began to turn towards the peephole, and Melanie recoiled. She overcame the instinctive response and faced the peephole again, then had to stifle a scream. She was faced with a mirror-image of her own face. In order to stay silent, she rubbed her face, violently; that usually helped. Her reflection did no such thing.

She turned away before the stalker began to bang on the door, slow but heavy. What Melanie needed to do now was not make excuses, but call the police. They had gone too far, however they had done it. There were no pockets in her pyjama bottoms, and she also came up empty rummaging through the pouch in her hoodie. The mobile must still be in the bedroom. As the banging on the door picked up its pace, so did she, giving up on trying to obscure what she was doing. The bedroom door had all but fallen shut due to the draught from the balcony door, which she'd left tilted open. She kicked open the bedroom door, and found the room different to before. Lit only dimly by the silent television, as the skies outside had darkened, something she could not have noticed in the hallway, perpetually lit by lamps for lack of any natural light. The monochromatic view of the room as a mass of shapes was enough for her, knowing exactly where everything was; except, naturally, the mobile, which she'd placed somewhere earlier. When exactly? She'd tried to call back the sender of that text. Who was, of course, none

other than that fucking stalker outside. But she'd not reached them then; no, they'd had that phone off. To avoid being tracked, or something? If that was to be successful, they'd have had to throw away the mobile. Was that a bit much? Not if they seriously wanted to harm her. Or was it her that was a bit much, '*overreacting much*'? Maybe they had held a picture to the peephole, and her overreactive mind had filled in the rest. Was the mask of sanity slipping from her, or was that very thought the result of gaslighting taking its toll? Her face indeed felt like something was being torn from it, skin burning. Melanie wiggled her fingers, trying to make herself remember where she could have put the mobile. She had to stop this, either way. Her foot stepped on something unexpected, hard: her mobile. She must have dropped or thrown it when that commercial break had spooked her.

Yes, it was indeed her trusty eyePhone Y, smooth, streamlined and slim in her hands. Comforting, though in a way different to Louie. And something was different about the phone too. The display lit up when she pressed the button on the side of the phone, but it wasn't her usual lock screen, an unflattering portrait of Louie, that showed. It was replaced by all-caps text, using a font like old calculators did. Did these even exist anymore, or had they all been replaced by phone apps? Despite the size of the text it was hard to decipher; parts of the screen looked damaged, creating several huge gaps.

'COMPROMISED EYE-PHONE. YOUR ... TO EITHER ACQUIESCE OR ...
PLEASE LOCK ...'

Pain began to bore into her forehead. For fuck's sake, had she broken her phone now? Nah, just dropping it on the carpet shouldn't break an eyePhone screen. More likely that it was a virus. Frantic tapping didn't get her any results, not even the emergency-call-only screen. This must be that stalker's work, somehow. Maybe that text had done it, or

maybe she'd otherwise not been prudent enough when browsing the web on her phone. Either way, she needed to find a way out of this mess now. The balcony door was half-open. If the Feltons upstairs were in their living room, she could... Melanie squeezed herself through the half-open balcony door, listening out for signs of her neighbours up there. Their TV was on, blaring a familiar jingle at its usual OAP-grade volume. Wow, she wouldn't have counted the Mr and Mrs Reginald Felton amongst the demographic for "Ex on the Beach". And they were there in front of the telly themselves as well; she caught a waft of pipe smoke, sweet in her nose first, then tickly in her throat. She had to stand in the cool evening air for a moment, suppress a cough, gather herself. The yard which the balcony overlooked was all quiet and peaceful. Then Reginald began to bark, half-excreting his lungs, or what was left of them, half-chastising them for still not being used to pipe smoke after the nigh fifty years he'd been enjoying tobacco, as he'd boated to Melanie on more than one occasion.

"I'm not even gonnae tell ye that I telt you so," exclaimed Mrs Felton, who had never touched tobacco, and was proud of it. "But I telt you, so I did. That pipe is gonnae be the death of you." Melanie took her chance. She tried to whisper – wanting to be as little an inconvenience as possible – as loud as she could.

"Mrs Felton! It's an emergency, I might need your help. It's Melanie Jackson, from downstairs." No reaction. Melanie did not want to shout, but she did have to repeat herself louder. This time, there was some reaction.

"Did you hear that as well, Janet?" His voice was raspy, but kind. Despite Janet's assurance that she had not heard anything, and that there was no way he had better hearing than her, especially with all that smoking, Reginald Felton got up. Noisily, for

Melanie's benefit. Soon he would be at his balcony door, and then only a few yards from her vertically. Abandoning timidity, she began shouting.

"Mr Felton, can you please help me? Please, there's somebody in front of my door..." Then she heard a faint ring, and the rustling upstairs stopped.

"That's the doorbell just rung, it will be the lassie from downstairs again. Can you get that, Reg, seeing as you're already up on account of a ghost?" Apparently, the old man was confused, or did not hear, as Mrs Felton's chuckle turned into a sigh. "Never you mind, I'll go for it, quicker anyways!"

"Please Mr Felton, it's Ms Jackson, from downstairs, with the hair?" Melanie continued pleading. She knew he must remember that; her dreadlocks stood out amongst the other tenants, in particular to the elderly couple. "It's Melanie, the lass from downstairs, your neighbour with the piercing?"

She pleaded, as hopelessness made her feel cold all over. Mr Felton did not seem to have heard her at all. The night no longer seemed cool and majestic, but cold and hostile. Then everything went quiet for a second, and the night was simply a void. It took Melanie another second to realise that the Feltons' TV had been either turned off or on silent. Then Mrs Felton was speaking, in the distance, but audible through the stillness of the night. Melanie had not been quick enough. Pressure began to build in her temples.

"Oh, it's you again, Ms Jackson, hiya," Mrs Felton said through her own front door. Melanie knew it could not be, yet she felt it had to be. Either the stalker was impersonating her, or she herself was slipping. '*Princess Nutty throwing a tantrum again*', she heard her parents say; their response whenever she was upset. '*The bunny boiler doth not abide, time to go into witness protection, haha.*' Who on earth had said

that? Liam, she thought, it had to be. That time when she'd, in a rare display of standing her ground, been annoyed that he'd left all dirty dishes for her when it was his day on the rota. Or no, it had been the Tinder guy. Nathan, that had been his name! Then the stalker spoke. The pressure on her head felt crushing now.

“Good evening, Mrs Felton, so sorry to bother you again, but it's an emergency, I've been locked out of my flat; do you have the spare key?” It was her own voice. Though it sounded different to what she heard in her head, she recognised it at once. After all, she was used to listen to her voice on recordings made for “training and quality purposes” with a supervisor. There was a creak upstairs, as Mrs Felton opened her door. What disconcerted Melanie the most was not how the stalker imitated her voice, or how they knew the Feltons had her key. It was the uncertainty. Was she slipping? Was this real? She knew it was, or at least felt it was, but she could not trust her feelings, could she? *‘Oh Mel, typical, making out like you're going crazy, just to get out of something. Keep wailing and I will give you something to wail about.’* Hearing the jangle of the spare set of keys, identical to her own set in her pocket, brought her into action, however.

The metal in her pocket was icy, heavy. Then came awareness, like a cold shower. She'd locked her door, but pulled out the key and put it in her pocket. This meant the stalker, whoever it was, could get in by simply unlocking the door. She could prevent that. But only if she was faster down the hallway, sticking her own key into the lock before the stalker could unlock the front door. Coldness gave way to a hot rush of blood, tingling her face. Slipping back into her balcony, she negotiated her bedroom and its obstacles without issue. Once in the hallway, she could hear heavy steps coming down the stairs. Louie hissed. The thumping got louder, closer. Louie stopped his hissing,

growing too afraid. Now that she could not hear him anymore, she had to tread more carefully to avoid stepping on him. She tried to sense Louie's presence. The darkness now was closing in on her, like a black mist. Her steps were shorter now, her rhythm disturbed. Louie let out a pathetic meow, scared as she'd never heard him, from somewhere behind her, which allowed her to fall back into larger strides again. Until pain shot into her foot, like an electric shock, but duller. It radiated up her lower leg. She'd stepped into something. It was the plug of the landline phone, she now realised. The banging on the stairwell had stopped, but the stalker appeared to make a point of traversing the landing as heavily as possible. Slowly. Yet Melanie could not outpace them, her foot still sending a shock upwards each time she put down her foot. A grunt of pain escaped her. Then the stalker was at the door, fumbling for the keys. Melanie was in the last chance saloon. Where the hell did that figure of speech come from? Both generally, and specifically from where in her head? Melanie made the jump. Lifting her right foot, taking off on the strength of her pain-free left foot. She was in the air, then something tugged at her. And now it pulled, on her right foot, and she screamed in surprise. The phone cable had wound around her foot, stopping her mid-air. There was pain to come, she still thought, before she landed face down on the floor. Her body was aching, true, but her face was only numb now. And she was glad for it; finally, the tingling, the pressure had stopped. Did she still have any chance though at all though? *'You're in the last chance saloon, princess. One more of these outbursts, acting out, acting crazy, and I mightn't know what I'm gonnae do anymore. And will you stop it with the fucking fidgeting!'* Her father's voice, mixed with her mother's tut-tuts in the background. *'We know you're making it all up. And you got an invisible pal now? Get tae*

fuck.' Was that what this was? She stretched with all her might to touch the door. No. Pushing her hands into the floor, she propelled herself forward, landing on the ground again. Now. She stretched again, feeling the pull in her shoulders, but now she could touch the door, though only with her fingertips.

"Let me in," her voice said from outside the door. "You need me cause I'm a part of you." Well, this was it then. An invisible friend or foe, a part of her. She pulled herself forward again, her right arm, doing most of the work, now a swarm of insects, wobbly, stinging. She pushed against the door with both of her hands, still on the ground.

"You're just fucking figment of my imagination," Melanie shouted. "You're not real, you can't be real." The key turned with a click, and she pushed more. There was another click from her right shoulder joint, and her arm went to the floor, limp. She could still feel it, but tried not to, concentrated her strength in the left arm now pushing against the door as well as the stalker trying to force their way in.

"You made me up," said the voice. It was a figment of her imagination, she should have known. It was not enough to make her let go consciously, but it weakened her subconsciously. Her left arm stopped pushing, and with both of her hands she started fidgeting, drumming on the floor. One finger after the other. The motion was like smelling the scent of their old family flat, the acidic must of its own, even before her mother's perfume, her father's deodorant, and of course beer and stale smoke.

"You're not real, I'm crazy," she sighed.

The door opened. Blinded by the light coming in from the lamp in the landing, Melanie could only see the outline of the figure in her doorway. It looked real to her, and

her hands began to cramp. She started sobbing, towards the dark stranger. But the voice was still hers, though sharper, stricter, when it replied, calmly.

“Just because I’m not real, doesn’t mean I can’t hurt you.” She felt the figure’s foot hard in her stomach. It felt like a void had opened inside her, pulling her entrails into it. And she could feel everything. When the pain receded, a bit only, she was still curling in agony. However, she realised that she could take this; it was physical pain, yes, but nothing more. She opened her eyes. The light from the hallway and her position, curled to the right of the hallway, allowed her to see her reflection in the mirror on the wall. Wounds were showing on her face, as though something had stuck to it and been pulled from it.

“But I am, in fact, every bit as real as you, I can assure you. And everything else, for that matter, in case you’re feeling too out of it to know if you’re real, you drama queen.” This time the foot hit her head, though not full on; instinct had saved her, but even the boot just grazing her head had caused hot glowing pain. She wasn’t even aware of having moved her head.

“Who are you? What are you? Am I insane?” The heat on her scalp grappled with the coldness of despair.

“Insane? Fuck no, you’re not. I should know, I’m part of you.” It bent over her, and she could see its face now. There was no face, not really. It was like a piece of parchment where the face should be, with holes for eyes, and the shape of her own nose.

“I’m real, but made up. Made up by you.” The horror and stench came over her at the same time, as the thing approached her face. Loose skin, covered in scabs and sores, streaked by blood. It was a mask of dead skin, her facial features still discernible. The

little crook in the nose was perfect, the mole under her left eye was there. In the lower lip, she could make out where her piercing used to be; a wound oozing pus.

“I’m your mask. You needed me. But now I need you too, and I need you more.”

That was it. It was real. She knew the truth of it without thinking, recognised the mask. A side of herself facing the world, to protect herself. A face of her, but dead. Or undead.

“Give me you, or I will take you. That’s your two choices. I will have you.” The voice now was a grunt, a hiss. Needy and powerful at the same time. She’d never heard herself like that, but she knew it was her, and it was of her own making, though not her fault. Nor was she insane. The mask did not give her a real choice, so she had to make her own choice. It might not work, but it was a choice. She grabbed the skin mask and pulled. Slime seeped onto her hands, slippery, and she could not get a grip. She smelled sulphur and tasted blood, metallic and harsh. Retching, she pulled with all her might. The figure wearing the skin mask made a gurgling, and sour stench escaped through the mouth-hole. With a sound like breaking wood, the mask came off. Without it, the body that had worn it began to sink unto itself. It was disintegrating. She watched as it became a bubbling mass of gore, formless, soon lifeless. The mask was still twitching in her hands, and she waited for it to die, in uncomfortable stillness. At last, it quietened, and she tapped her fingers in relief and joy. The numbness in her face was slowly leaving. Having folded the mask, she put it into the pouch of her hoodie; who was to say if it could not serve her well in future, as long as she would not let it eat into her face again.

THE END