

# *Collage of the Mask*

It was that time of year again: a warm day in July, or mid-August, where air was so warm that walking outside for a few minutes would be enough to make you sweat through your shirt and a person that attempted work would collapse in the blistering heat before they had a chance to get started on their desired task. Yet there I was, tromping along the overgrown path wearing jeans and a jacket, not caring about the sun beating down on me or worrying about the fact that the temperature was somewhere around 103 degrees. I wasn't very smart about that sort of thing back then, and I didn't know exactly what the word "sunstroke" meant, but I'd like to think that you couldn't tell that just by looking at me.

I was eight or so at the time: just old enough to be trusted to explore my grandfather's 42 acres of land alone, but not so old that I didn't have a bedtime. I looked, rather unsurprisingly, like a younger version of myself, complete with dirty blonde hair, jeans that had six month old grass-stains (and plenty of other stains, too), and a weather-beaten jacket that was two sizes too small and too many years old. I was unnaturally tall for my age, and I like to think I was also unnaturally good-looking. I had accidentally put on my dad's hiking boots instead of my own, and I wore a hat that was too big for my head. Because of this, I couldn't see three feet in front of my face, and every minute or so I would trip on some unseen twig. But I didn't care. It was fun enough just walking around the seemingly infinite expanse of land, and a couple of pebbles in my shoes or sticks scratching my ankles weren't going to ruin that.

I ducked under a low-hanging tree branch and made my way to one of the few bridges that allowed me to cross over the river and reach the second part of my grandfather's land. The "bridge" didn't exactly call for a description; in fact, it suspiciously resembled a large wooden plank. My grandfather had assured me that it was completely safe to walk on, but I still had my doubts. I cautiously made my way across it, worrying about it snapping in half under me all the while. I was almost to the other side when, suddenly, I heard an obnoxiously loud bird call behind me. Startled, I lost my balance....

.... And fell off the bridge into the river below. I flailed and floundered in the vast stream for about a minute until I quickly realized that I was sitting in only a few inches of water.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Perhaps it might be more accurate to call the "river" a creek...

Dazed, I stood up, dusted myself off, and climbed back up onto the bridge, going on my way with no particular destination in mind.

I warily wandered uphill, blind as a bat in a bucket due to my hat yet still happy to be exploring. Soon, however, I found myself drifting off the trail and wandering into the wilderness. I remember making a left turn and going downhill, but everything else blurs in my mind when I try to recall it. I'm not sure how long it took to get there, or where exactly it was located, but I eventually came across a small clearing.

The clearing should've been unremarkable: it was fairly average, at least as far as clearings went. It was small, bland, and mostly empty. Thin rays of sunlight filtered in through a tangled roof of blackish-brownish tree branches situated right above it, which I supposed was pretty typical of most clearings. However, this erratic light illuminated the thing that made the clearing interesting.

An object sat in the middle of the clearing, standing out against its surroundings like a diamond in a sea of pebbles. While the rest of the clearing's floor was bare, wildflowers bloomed around this object, further highlighting its importance. Even though I was wearing an overlarge hat that almost completely covered my eyes, I didn't fail to notice it.

I picked it up, turning it over in my hands. It shined in the faint light of the clearing, and I could dimly see my eight-year old face reflected back at me from the black surface of the object. There was something mildly disturbing about the way the distorted reflection grinned up at me from the shadowy surface, but I failed to notice that at the time.

I felt oddly compelled to take it back to the house with me.

So I did.

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It was a mask, in case you were wondering. But, there were a few odd things about it.

For whatever reason, it seemed oddly... significant. It was black, with intricate gold designs of roses and ivy branches woven into it. It was certainly very pretty, but something about it gave me the impression that it was hungrily *staring* at me. This was odd, considering the fact that it didn't even have eyes, but two narrow slits where eyes should have been.

I wouldn't notice this until a few years later, in 2011. I'd also notice a long, spidery crack that ran up the side of the mask, and another, larger crack that was only visible in certain light.

But, I'm getting ahead of myself. I don't want to spoil these key details for you, dear reader. Let's get back to the story before I give too much away.

## 2

Now, don't get me wrong: 2011 was a great year. It was the year that I officially started "maturing", and also the year that I was able to watch PG-13 movies. It was my official first step toward becoming a teenager, and it was the year where my bedtime was pushed back. But it was also a year where I discovered that the world had *limits*.

But not just the standard limits that you'd expect from a curious eleven-year-old like myself. Sure, I had limits with parents, limits with school, and, (still) limits with how late I could fall asleep. I was limited in terms of how much I could eat before getting a sick stomach, limited in how long I could last while playing sports (I have asthma), and limited in terms of how much free time I would have after getting all my work done. But, most notably, I realized how finite my grandfather's land was that year.

Believe me when I say that forty-two acres is an impressive amount of land to own. In comparison to my own parent's  $\frac{1}{2}$  an acre of yard space, my grandfather's land seemed like some gigantic jungle that spanned continents. But even something that big is still finite. I had been exploring it for a few years now, going off the mowed paths and hacking through the wilderness for a few hours a day every time I visited my grandfather. Eventually, I had to realize that his land had a concrete, solid, finite end to it. And I realized that in 2011.

Perhaps I should discuss the meaning of the word *finite*, or what it means to me. If it's finite, it has an *end*. The universe is *infinite*, endless. Never mind all those theories about some fabled multiverse, the universe is infinite, and is constantly expanding, ever since the big bang happened and everything came into existence. Earth is infinite, too, as well as any other planet of similar shape. Why do I say this? Because it's circular.

A circle, as well as any other shape (like a square, triangle, or hexagon), when drawn perfectly, has no concrete end and no concrete beginning. Therefore, it is infinite, in a different way than the universe is. The ancient Greeks used the term "Pi"<sup>2</sup> to represent this infinite thing, and, as far as we know, Pi has no end. You could walk around earth, or some cube-shaped

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<sup>2</sup> 3.14159265358979323846...

planet, or even a pyramid-shaped planet for a thousand years, and you'd never be able to determine where the planet's *end* was. People used to believe that the world was flat, and it actually *did* have a concrete end. You'd just fall off of it if you sailed too far.

When Columbus sailed to America, he was taking a huge risk. As far as his crew knew, they would end up hitting some colossal waterfall when they hit their map's limits, and they would plunge to their death. When Columbus sailed past the boundaries of that map, he discovered that the world was actually infinite. Unfortunately, no Christopher Columbus of the 21<sup>st</sup> century has declared that my grandfather's land is infinite.

Because it just *isn't*.

In 2011, sometime around December, my grandfather reluctantly agreed to go exploring the northernmost portion of his land with me. He even agreed to go exploring the *wilderness*, not just the mowed paths. You could imagine my ecstasy when he took his first step off the trail and into the forest since God knows how long.

It started off pretty easily: we were walking through a sparse copse that steadily grew thicker and thicker. When it got to the point where what we were walking on what was more of a deer trail through a colossal forest than anything else, he still continued going forward. Even when it got to the point where it wasn't even a *deer trail*, he *still* pushed on forward. But after 20 minute's time, he abruptly stopped.

"End of the line," he said, and turned around, starting to walk backward.

"What? What do you mean?" I questioned. "Are you done exploring with me already?"

"No. We just can't explore this way anymore. If we go any further, we'll be in someone else's land," He responded.

"Oh. Okay..." I was a bit dazed at this. But, if his land ended one way, that didn't mean it *all* had a concrete end, right?

We backtracked, fighting our way through the dense undergrowth and eventually getting back to the mowed path. We crossed the bridge over the creek and rounded a corner. I could see what looked like a bamboo forest to my left, and an open field to my right.

"Can we explore the bamboo forest?" I asked curiously.

"I'm afraid there's not much to explore," he replied. "That forest marks the boundary between my land and another person's land. If we walked through it, we'd be trespassing. And," He added with a sigh, "That's not entirely legal."

“Well, alright.” I was disappointed, and a little bit angry, too. I’d been through the bamboo forest plenty of times before, and there wasn’t anything too interesting on the other side of it. “I’ve always wondered what’s in that forest on the other side of your house.”

“Fair enough. Let’s go,” he said.

We walked down the mowed path for a few more minutes until we came to the aforementioned forest. It looked impossible to get through the thick wall of trees and undergrowth that made up its outer edge, but my grandfather managed it easily. After what seemed like an endless amount of walking, we made it to a spacious glade. Pine needles littered its floor, and a gigantic tree blocked out the sun every ten feet or so. Curiously enough, there was an old bench in the middle of the clearing, indicating that someone had been here before.

“This is as far as we can go,” he said airily.

“Why?” I questioned, maybe a little too quickly.

“I’m not as young as I used to be, we’ve been out here for an hour, it’s starting to get late...” he supplied.

“Hmph.”

“Of course, you could explore this way tomorrow,” he offered.

“Well, alright,” I said, reluctantly turning around.

We headed back to the house. When we were inside it, I shut the door to my room, took the mask out from its hiding place under my bed, and examined it.

It seemed noticeably more cracked than before, almost as if someone had taken a sledgehammer and wacked it a few times. I could make out deep red marks on it in a couple places on it, almost as if it was bleeding. Again it seemed to stare at me hungrily, even though it had no eyes.

It made no sense. How could it be damaged? I had left it under that bed for three years, checked it every time I visited my grandfather’s house, and had never seen it damaged before. I even looked at it last night, and it was fine. And how on earth did those red marks get on it? I wanted to ask my grandfather, but the mask was a secret to me alone. No one else knew about it. It was almost *precious* to me, like a handwritten love poem or a gift from a friend. I warily put it back under the bed.

I heard the door let off a telltale creak right before my grandfather came into my room.

“Is everything all right?” He asked.

“Yes, yes—everything’s fine,” I quickly responded.

“Alright, then. Let’s eat dinner. Your grandmother made clam chowder again. I know how much you love that.”

“Okay.” I stood up, leaving the room.

“You’re sure you’re all right,” he said again, phrasing it more like a statement than a question.

“Yes.”

“Then let’s eat.”

“Okay.”

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The next day, I explored the forest further. I eased my way through the gap that my grandfather had made in the glade’s outer ring of trees and continued walking, pushing through more trees and reaching what I thought was unexplored wilderness. However, I soon came to the road outside of his house.

I wanted to scream. Was nothing infinite?

### 3

It’s been 20 years since 2011. My grandfather died on his ninetieth birthday, grandma dying five years before him. I had come into possession of their land, their house, and everything they owned after an intense debate with my cousin over the contents of the will. I had just moved in a week ago, and I was still redecorating the house. They were nice grandparents, but their idea of a “comfortable living space” was drastically different than mine. The house was poorly insulated, they got all the house’s water from a badly rusted pump outside, and the bedrooms were just... ugly.

I passed a painting of some long-forgotten person painted in some long-forgotten age, my expensive shoes making a staccato sound as they clacked against the wooden floor. I’d taken up a career as a musician years ago, and all the ancient, dust-ridden instruments in the house would be fun to play around with. I was especially looking forward to messing around with my grandmother’s upright bass, the instrument I had composed some of my best music on. I walked down a small flight of stairs and found myself in their living room, the location of several of the aforementioned musical instruments. I immediately went to the bass and started playing one of

my old songs on it, but stopped as I noticed the gigantic picture window cut into the wall. Sunlight filtered through it, illuminating millions of miniature dust motes dancing in the air. I walked up to it, looking out at the sixty-three acres of land that I now owned.

I couldn't say whether it was through charity or some divine intervention, but the people who owned the land adjacent to my grandfather's had decided to pass it on to him when they died, giving me an extra 21 acres of land to explore. *And now*, I thought to myself. Grandpa had worked long hours keeping his land in order when he was alive, and I was expected to do the same until I moved into a better house. Keeping the rapidly growing, sinister grass from spreading would be a chore. I imagined myself spending a long time on a lawnmower, battling back weeds and grass and who knows what else. It would all be worth it in the end, though.

But I could worry about work tomorrow. 63 acres was a lot of land to explore. It was still finite, but that didn't make it any less beautiful. I hurried back up the steps, taking my hat off of a shelf as I walked. I ran up to the closet and put on a coat. Then, I walked out the door, enjoying the cold spring afternoon. I walked back in a minute later after I realized that I'd forgotten my walking stick. As I went into the bedroom, I noticed something poking out from under the bed.

It was a beautiful mask. Wonderful red-and-gold designs of ivy and roses curled up its edges in an almost hypnotic pattern. The mask itself was an infinitely deep, mesmerizing shade of black. Countless, intricately detailed designs decorated its center and borders, further highlighting the mask's beauty. For whatever reason, I had the impression that the mask was staring at me, inviting me to put it on .

As I picked it up, however, it screamed at me.

All at once the mask changed shape. Formerly beautiful designs of roses and ivy became crazily twisted and demented. The surface transformed into an almost skeletal shape. The edges became as sharp as broken glass, and scarlet marks that suspiciously resembled blood were scattered across its skull-like visage. It seemed to stare at me with a hungry longing, even though it lacked eyes.

I abruptly threw it in the wastebasket, hearing an almost mournful noise as it cracked in half.

I stood there for quite a while until I, too, felt broken. There was a splitting pain in my skull, and all of a sudden it was hard to see. I instantly regretted throwing the mask away.

I don't remember how, but, a few minutes later, it ended up back in my hands, perfectly intact.

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It was getting dark. I fumbled around in my pocket for the house key and opened the door. I'd spent at least four hours exploring the land, and I was weary and exhausted. I considered ordering a pizza so I didn't have to cook myself anything, then decided against it, remembering the half-eaten cheeseburger that I sat in the fridge earlier that day. I found the key and turned it in the lock, forcing open the heavy door. It was a relief to step into the warm house after wandering in that cold wilderness for such a long time. I passed the bedroom, hanging up my coat as I did so.

Then, almost as an afterthought, I slowly turned around, walking into the bedroom. I searched the wastebasket for that horrifying mask, finding nothing. Shrugging, I stepped out of the room, thinking about dinner, bemusedly wondering what had happened to it. Failing to think of a logical explanation, I eventually convinced myself that there wasn't any sort of mask in the first place, and that I'd been imagining the whole thing.

I tried to sink my teeth into the cheeseburger, but it stopped before it hit my face. Confused, I again tried to push it into my mouth, but something was blocking it. I put my hand up to my face and tried to feel it, but, again, something was getting in the way.

It was then that I noticed that my eyesight was narrower, almost as if I was peering through two eyeholes cut into a mask...

...But that was obviously impossible. There was no mask.