

M-12

Behind the Masquerade By ISAAC KANG

The ballroom sparkles with crystal chandeliers, each prism catching light like frozen tears. I adjust my mask—an ornate piece of marble white porcelain that covers half my face—and watch the dancers swirl around me in their own disguises. The orchestra plays a waltz, and I move in perfect time, a smile fixed beneath my mask. In this dream of a masquerade, I am whoever I wish to be: successful, confident, unbroken.

But masks have a way of growing heavy.

Mine began as a necessity, crafted in the crucible of a seven-year-old's pain. That morning, when I found my mother surrounded by scattered pill bottles, her mouth slightly ajar, I learned that sometimes the world is too heavy to face without protection. Though she survived, something in me changed that day. I picked up my first mask—a shield against the raw reality of almost losing a parent—and learned to wear it well.

I've crafted three masks to conceal the pains from my identities—low-income, immigrant, pastor's kid. These masks, each born from a different struggle, were personas hiding my insecurities and, inadvertently, my stories. A kid who slept to escape gnawing hunger; whose parents delivered fish to keep the heater on; who crumbled under the expectations of his title.

Outwardly, I met the stares at my food pantry lunches with practiced indifference; inwardly, I shouldered the responsibilities of a breadwinner, studying at my part-time jobs. On stage, a confident speaker concealed hours of ESL classes beneath a mask of eloquence. At church, a masked smile and a 90-degree bow hid a family plagued with instability.

These masks served their purpose, each one a carefully constructed barrier between my reality and the world's expectations. They allowed me to dance through life's masquerade, moving to the rhythm of others' expectations while keeping my true self safely hidden.

Too heavy to bear—after all these years, I found myself stumbling under its weight. As I stood on stage, embodying Polonius in Shakespeare's 'Hamlet', I delivered his famous advice to Hamlet.

"To thine own self be true."

Thud. Dropping to my knees, I stared as tears streaked my face. These oft-rehearsed lines stung as I professed them on stage. Suddenly, I wasn't Polonius anymore, and I wasn't talking to Hamlet. I was talking to myself, a broken boy hiding beneath his masks.

With every tear, a crack formed on my mask, leaving but a pile of shards and my naked self. In my desperate yearning to become one with my mask—to fade away—I became oblivious to an obvious truth. The masks and I were two separate entities, and one was slowly killing the other. But without a mask, who was I?

~~This question haunted me on my nightly walk. I thought I knew who I was: the effortlessly perfect student, the filial pastor's kid. Yet, without my mask, I struggled to embody those.~~

Finding the silence unbearable, I reached for my phone and queued my favorite philosophy podcast: Philosophize This. Tonight's episode, "Kintsugi: Beauty in the Broken," described an ancient Japanese art that sees broken pottery as opportunities for beautiful rebirth. Each crack, filled with gold, becomes a testament to the object's history. Hearing this truth, I knelt weeping. The very tears that once shattered my mask now mended the fractured pieces of my past, renewing them with gold.

Kintsugi showed me beauty in brokenness. My shattered masks—facades hiding my battles with poverty, racial stereotypes, and expectations—became shards I would use to realize my authentic self. The struggles they hid transformed into golden seams, binding these fragments together. In embracing my broken parts, I was creating something more beautiful, textured, and authentic than any mask could ever be.

What if, I wondered, my masks weren't meant to hide my cracks but to highlight them? What if each fragment of my splintered self could be bound together with gold, creating something more valuable precisely because it had been broken?

This understanding found its truest application at the local food pantry where I now volunteer. Last week, a mother came in, shoulders hunched, wearing the same mask I once knew too well—the one that says "I'm fine" while hiding hungry children at home. She approached the counter hesitantly, her fingers nervously folding and refolding her registration form.

I recognized myself in her careful movements, in the way she tried to make herself smaller, less noticeable. I remembered my own mother's trembling hands as she accepted bags of groceries years ago, how she would wait until closing time to visit the pantry, hoping fewer people would see her there. The memory of our empty refrigerator, save for a bottle of water and wilted vegetables, flashed through my mind.

"The first time is the hardest," I said softly, meeting her eyes. "I remember when my family used to come here." Her shoulders relaxed slightly, and I saw a glimmer of recognition—here was someone who understood. As I helped her select foods her children would eat, sharing tips my mother had once learned about making pantry items stretch through the week, I watched her mask begin to slip, revealing not shame but relief at being truly seen.

The masquerade still plays on in the world outside, but in these moments of genuine connection, all masks fall away. The marble white mask I once wore has been transformed—its cracks filled with gold, each fissure telling a story of survival and growth. In embracing these golden seams, I've learned that true beauty lies not in perfection, but in the courage to let our broken places shine.

Today, I stand as a Kintsugi work in progress—broken, mended, and all the more valuable for it. My masks haven't disappeared entirely; instead, they've become part of my story, their cracks filled with the gold of authenticity and self-acceptance. In the end, I've learned that the most powerful mask is no mask at all—just the genuine face of someone who has learned to be true to themselves, golden scars and all.