BACKMASKED

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Backmasking /bak-mask-ing/ (n.): the instinctive tendency to see someone as you knew them in their youth, a burned-in image of grass-stained knees, graffitied backpacks or handfuls of birthday cake superimposed on an adult with a degree, an illusion formed when someone opens the door to your emotional darkroom while the memory is still developing.

John Koenig

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“Mommy, could you leave the light on?” The wool blanket, scratchy and hot with my own breath, is pulled up to my nose, nothing but my eyes and forehead peeking out. My hair lies splayed out across the pillow, wavy and golden just like the princess from my book of bedtime stories. A line from a book I once read comes to me. The sun, streaming through the east window, had turned her hair into a shower of gold. It’s night, of course, but for a moment I imagine that the lightbulb hanging on a bare wire from the ceiling, glaring just bright enough to hurt my eyes, could turn me precious, too.

“Are you sure, honey? It isn’t hard to sleep?” Her voice is tinted warm with concern, but I shake my head.

“Mm-mm.” It is, but I’m not about to admit it. She sighs and acquiesces, leaving on light feet through the bathroom (because the door won’t stay shut unless you close it from the inside, and I’m not dumb enough to sleep with the door open and practically invite monsters inside.) She leaves me alone with my thoughts, the stuffed animals clutched in my small damp hands under the blankets, and whatever might be hiding in the closet. I’ve already taken my glasses off for the night, so everything’s been reduced to a blurry mess, but I can see well enough to tell that there’s nothing with jaws-dripping fang-toothed evil hunger coming for me.

At least, nothing yet.

I keep a vigilant watch at first, but eventually jaw-cracking yawns and heavy eyes win the fight. I bury my head in my teddy bear’s soft fur, blocking out most of the light except a soft orange glow through my eyelids and falling asleep in one quick stroke.

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Teddy Bear
A. A. Milne

A bear, however hard he tries,
Grows tubby without exercise.
Our Teddy Bear is short and fat,
Which is not to be wondered at;
He gets what exercise he can
By falling off the ottoman,
But generally seems to lack
The energy to clamber back.

* * *

I’m sitting in the pleasantly squishy chair facing the desk, legs swinging impatiently. Once again, I’m in this cluttered, claustrophobia-inducing office, glancing at the papers and coffee cup rings covering every available surface. I barely listen as the woman across from me (she smells pleasantly of grass and a hot summer day, refreshing in comparison to the endless winter outside the window) starts talking again in that too-nice voice that grown-ups always use when they’re trying to get me to do something. I don’t think they know I notice, but I can see through their tactics. I’ve got them all figured out.

“Arielle, you can’t keep doing cartwheels in the hallways. It’s dangerous. Do you understand? You could hurt somebody.”

“’m not gonna hit anybody,” I mumble, looking at the ground. The squiggles of color on the carpet remind me at once of the sticky too-yellow spaghetti they serve at lunch and rainbow of bus seats I’ve seen on various field trips. “I’ve never hit anybody and I’m not gonna.” My arms are crossed, shoulders hunched, and I look her straight in the eyes. That makes people uncomfortable, I’ve figured out, and true to form she glances away and I tuck my chin back down to my chest.

“Regardless, it’s inappropriate behavior for school. You can do gymnastics on your own time.” I say nothing, my eyes boring a hole in the soft upholstery of the chair’s arm, challenging her to continue. She sighs, finally admitting defeat.

“You can go,” she says tiredly, and I skip out the door, drunk on my victory. On my way down the hall, I turn one last defiant cartwheel and then run towards my locker giggling, ignoring the music teacher yelling at me to stop. I know I’m not going to hurt anybody. Why would I? I’ve never lost control of myself before, and I’m not about to.

* * *

The power goes out to a fizzle of electricity and the collective groans of my family. We flock to the kitchen, my sister whining that she can’t charge her DS, my mother that she was trying to write an email, my father that he needs his computer for work. Of the four of us, I’m the only one whose voice has gone high and panicked as I beg my parents for a solution.
“I was s’posed to do this on the weekend but I didn’t an’ it’s due tomorrow and I dunno what to do, there isn’t any light an’ I’m only halfway done…” The words spill from my mouth uncontrolled; I’m too desperate to sort them into sentences. I only started the fifth grade last week, and already managed to procrastinate my way into trouble. I’ve just barely moved from the ancient, musty-yet-charming primary school to the bright-white-marble triple-tiered middle school where we’re expected to ‘manage our own time’ and ‘prioritize assignments,’ all of which means that I was given a week to do thirty math problems and I’ve barely started at 8:00 PM the night before they’re due. This isn’t the first time this has happened – I can still remember the late nights of cutting paper and tacky-glue sticky fingers for my fourth grade scrapbook project and at least one science fair tri-fold assembled the night before – but I’d reassured my parents so very many times that this year was going to be different.

Thankfully, Mom has a solution. She always does. Standing on my tiptoes on the stepladder I fetched from behind the trash cans, I grub around in the cupboard above the coat closet until I manage to extract several dusty, mismatched candles. I have to get help to light the match, and the wax melts into stubs as I slave away over fractions. By the time I’ve made it through fifteen problems, though, I’m taking off my wire-framed glasses to rub at my burning eyes and trying to think of an excuse to put this off until tomorrow, or something to tell my teacher when I bring it in unfinished.

* * *

“SHUT UP! I HATE YOU!”

I’m crying hard now, forceful sobs wracking my body as I slam the door to my room in my mother’s face. It just bounces back open, so I kick the cloth-covered brick we use to keep doors closed in its general direction and collapse onto my bed, grabbing my teddy bear and squeezing him with all my strength. I cry until I can feel the wet tears leaking to my eyes making a damp patch against my cheek, and then some. By the time I uncurl myself and take a steadying breath, I can feel a heading pounding in the back of my skull and all I want to do is stay in bed and fall asleep atop the flower-patterned pillows and crinkled sheets. Unfortunately, the light assaulting my eyes from the opposite window reminds me that it’s the middle of the day, and if I try to sleep I’ll just be woken up soon anyway. When I eventually open my eyes again, all of the rage burning low in my belly has been replaced by a strange sort of terrifying calm, a sense of quiet determination.

I stop in the bathroom to down a few Ibuprofen and a glass of water before retreating back to my room and shutting the door carefully behind me, brick and all. Methodically, my hands sift through the paper littered across my desk and segregating out a pile of anything that has so much as a doodle on it. From watercolor paintings of flowers to butterflies winging their way across math homework, nothing is left behind. Once everything’s sorted, I toss the drawings one by one on to the floor, letting them flutter and twirl towards the ground. Only when I’ve gotten to the
end of the pile do I stop and look around myself. I’ve made a halo surrounding my white wicker chair of blinding paper against the dark, polished wood.

Bare feet relishing in the coolness

of the floor, I lower myself down and sit cross-legged in the middle of the ring. I reach for the page nearest me- a juvenile sketch of a fanged spider-human hybrid. Looking at it now, I see nothing but problems. The limbs are too skinny, the clothing falls unnaturally, the shading wavers between too harsh and not dark enough without being able to choose one. Squeezing my eyes shut tight, I close my fist, the page in hand. It’s deafening in the silence, the crush of paper against my palm.

My eyes flutter open, and I note with surprising apathy that my arm is shaking slightly, the crumpled drawing held fast in my grasp. Weirdly, I feel nothing but an ambivalent sort of curiosity. It’s odd, but whatever.

As I put that down and reach up the next sheet of paper, a snatch of a voice floats to me, my mother’s. ...complaints from teachers about the drawing... I scrunch up my face and rip this page clean in half, then again into fourths.

...focus more on classes... bright but distracted... sixth grade supposed to be different... so much potential... seems to be self-sabotaging... wasting her potential... you’ve got so much potential... potential... potential...

The voices overlap and overwhelm me, my parents and my teachers and everyone who keeps telling me that I could be more than I am. There’s a scream blocking my throat, but I just breathe through my nose and tear pages more and more violently, until I’m sitting in a hurricane of torn paper, the scraps of my own creativity. The scream comes out in a quiet gasp of breath, and I swallow hard to keep from dissolving into tears again.

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I’m not actually late yet, but I rush into the room anyway, wrenching binders and books out of my backpack at top speed and digging into my trapper for a pencil. Geography, the forest-green binder proclaims in Sharpie messily scrawled across the top. It’s the kind with the clear plastic pockets you can put a sheet of paper in, but I never really got around to it. In the rush to label all my supplies the night before school started, it just seemed easier to put the name on like this.

Once the teacher (a stick-thin woman with stick-straight hair and an authoritative manner that strikes fear into even the chattiest girl in the class) starts talking, I find myself wandering. I want to pay attention, but this is all just so boring. It’s like I keep telling people, it’s not that I don’t want to do well in school, it’s just that everything they want me to remember is so boring! Why should I care about being able to map South America? I don’t live in South America, and
I’ll probably never go to South America, and I just don’t have it in me to care when there’s absolutely nothing interesting about it, and there are so many other fascinating things I can focus my attention on.

Instead of filling out the worksheet lying lonely and untouched on the corner of the fake-wood-patterned table I share with the other girl in the class whose last name starts with a D, I take the mechanical pencil that I’m tapping pointlessly on the edge of my binder and put it to actual use.

I end up producing a weird sort of doodle, sure, a Coraline-like girl’s face with button eyes and a creepy grin. It looks pretty good to me, though, and I mentally grouse about the fact that all of my best drawings are on the yellow binder dividers reminding me that this section is for Chapter 1 or Tests & Quizzes.

When the bell finally rings, (two short, sharp bursts of sound that always manage to startle me even after three years of middle school) for once I don’t participate in the rush to stuff supplies into backpacks and the crush of people at the door, all trying to get to recess as fast as possible. Instead, I stay back to put the last few sketchy lines on my drawing while eyeing the teacher to make sure she isn’t suspicious of me. Thankfully, she’s busy with something-or-other at her desk and doesn’t seem to notice. In my concentration, I don’t notice that my deskmate hasn’t left either until I lean back in my chair, satisfied, and go to close the binder. She’s leaning over my half of the desk, her face scrunched up in confusion and her straight, white-blond hair falling like a barrier between us.

She pushes it behind her ear as she comments matter-of-factly, “That’s creepy.”

“Well, yeah,” I say. “It’s supposed to be.” Duh.

“That’s weird. You always draw such weird stuff, you’re just so… weird.”

“Thanks,” I say, with as much sarcasm as I can muster, and I shove my binder into my backpack and swing it over my shoulder as I head out the door.

Whatever.

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Definitely keeping the hippo.

I put the worn, grey-that-was-once-purple stuffed animal into the ‘keep’ pile, which is, I have to admit, a lot bigger than the ‘donate’ pile. At first, I tried to keep them about even, but I quickly realized that it was a fruitless endeavor. Almost every one that I picked up pulled me into a whirlwind of some fond memory or another, and at that point it would have been too heart-
wrenching for them to join the frog with extendable legs and the pristine white polar bear in the black plastic trash back with the word DONATE in my mom’s half-cursive writing on its side. I manage to give up three of the cats, and one of the unicorns, although I have to keep one of each. For representation’s sake.

As the mass of stuffed animals on my bed diminishes, I try telling myself it’s stupid for me to care so much. One or two for sentiment, that would be okay. But I’m in seventh grade now, I shouldn’t care so much about some dumb teddy bears and plushies.

At least I’m not as bad as my sister, who had a crazy screaming fit when Mom told her she couldn’t keep all of hers, even though you can’t even open her closet without a barrage of stuffed animals spilling out practically onto your head. If anyone’s too old for something, I think, raising my eyebrows to myself, she’s too old to still be having temper tantrums. She’s eleven, for god’s sake, she has to grow out of these things soon.

Near the bottom of the pile, my hand brushes against coarse fabric. I pull out a light brown stuffed mouse, grey string of a tail frayed, tiny embroidered nose, just small enough to fit in my palm, a wave of nostalgia rushes over me. Pebbles. Pebbles Adventures, that’s what I called the stories I’d tell my grandmother. I remember carefully writing one of them out, in my shaky first-grade handwriting, and the way my mom kept it on her desk for a week, she was so proud. I never told anybody at school that I kept him in my backpack, a delicious secret kept more out of a desire to have something of my own than trying to avoid potential teasing. I dragged him with me everywhere, and everything we did, from going to the grocery store to battling space aliens from Neptune in my mom’s laundry basket, was always fun. And always together.

I put Pebbles in the keep pile and move on to a dark brown bear with a missing leg.

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“Okay, I’m ready,” I say, taking one last look at the mirror. My hair is long enough to brush up against the seat of the chair I’m sitting on, the only length it’s ever been. The stylist opens her mouth to speak, but my mom stops her.

“No wait, I have to take one more picture first.” I sigh and cross my arms.

“Another?”

“Just one second,” she says, holding up her phone, “Turn around again, just like that, this’ll only take a moment, I just want to get the lighting right…” About ten photographs later, she finally stops and I turn back to the stylist.
Arielle DeVito

“I’m ready, let’s go.” She tells me to follow her to the back where I sit down in a reclining chair and let her gently massage shampoo into my scalp. It’s weirdly comforting, even though I normally never let anybody touch my hair, since all too often they brush up against my neck, which tickles and makes me shudder. Eventually, we have to get up, but it’s with reluctance that I sit back down in the chair at the mirror. My mom alternates between watching eagerly from the nearby couch and typing on her phone, and I sigh and look back at the mirror. Armed with a blowdryer and comb, the stylist wrestles my wet, tangled hair into a shining straight mass that I’ve not once achieved on my own. She pulls it back into a low ponytail and braids it loosely.

The scissors glint and shine even in the soft yellow light of the studio, and I wait with bated breath as she makes the first cut. The noise is clean and sharp, a single short "cscsck" and then I’m looking at her holding up a braid of my own hair.

It’s surreal, somehow, to see the stuff that used to be attached to my head just… sitting there. The whole time the stylist works on turning the jagged line into a smooth curve, I stare blankly at the braid lying limply amidst the brushes and curlers. Before we leave, my mom takes another dozen or so pictures, and I spend the rest of the day shaking my head just to feel the way my hair swishes against my neck.

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“Look, she’s Coraline!” I hear one second grader whisper as they file past in a ragged line. I am not, in fact, Coraline, but I’ve grown tired of telling people that I’m, “Just a creepy doll, not any specific one, just supposed to be scary.”

And I am scary—enough that every time I look in the mirror, I shiver. There’s a pair of buttons glued just over my eye sockets, and I can mostly see through the holes in the middle, although the rest of the world is partially obscured by the black. It doesn’t hurt, exactly, but it is a bit uncomfortable, and every time I blink the buttons move and pinch my skin. I can’t smile, either, beyond slightly turning up the corners of my mouth, for fear that they’ll fall off.

It’s worth it, though, for the looks on peoples’ faces when they see me. So far, I’ve catalogued three ‘shit-my-pants scared’, two ‘delighted’, and about thirty ‘horrified.’ Everybody I’ve crossed has either complimented me or run away, and to be honest I take their fear as even greater praise. There’s something oddly thrilling about being able to clear a room just by entering it. Not to mention, at least two people have given me free candy out of fear. This is a power I’ve never really had before, and I am a gleeful wielder of it.

As the line of second graders dwindles to the last few stragglers, one little girl with short, spiky blond hair in a plaid jumper turns around when her friend stops talking to stare at me. I quirk up my lips in the semblance of a smile, forgetting for a moment that I’ve drawn on stitches
and an ear-to-ear grin. The blonde girl lets out a short, sharp shriek as her eyes open wide, freezing in position. The other girl gives me a fearful look before ushering her friend away, and I roll my eyes under the buttons and cross my arms, turning away from the office and sitting down on the wood benches with a huff. Second graders are stupid, anyway. Why should I care if they’re scared of me? Why should I care, when the whole damn point of this costume was to scare people?

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I rub my eyes and sigh, taking another bleary look at the computer screen. The Word document in front of me, still mostly blank. The wordcount at the bottom left, firmly at 544. The clock in the bottom right hand corner, reading 5:16. All of it spells out a night of epic procrastination, culminating in this final rush to get my English paper done about three hours before it’s meant to be turned in. My teddy bear, stuffing worn flat from years of sleeping with my head on his stomach, stares at me from the corner of the room with hollow plastic eyes, and I stare at his reflection in the screen, my own eyes glassy and unfocused.

In my planner, it’s written in purple ink that I should be analyzing characters from Great Expectations, but all the ideas I could come up with weren’t even worth writing in the brainstorm document (which now resides in the recycle bin, never graced with a single word.) Instead, I googled ‘Great Expectations characters,’ and cherry-picked the thoughts I liked from other people. I wouldn’t call it plagiarism, necessarily- all I’m taking are ideas, not actual words or phrasings from the authors. And at this point, I’m at a level of tired where it doesn’t really matter to me if I write about Pip or Bob the Builder, as long as I can reach 700 words, hit control-P, and then hit my ever-so-inviting bed for about a half-hour of sleep.

I peck out letters one by one, yawning what feels like every few seconds. Once I finish a sentence, I have to glance over it to make sure it’s actually coherent. One of my paragraphs is just one long sentence, coming in at about 60 words. Another repeats the same idea four different ways. I can’t bring myself to care.

The sound of the printer chugging away, cacophonous though it may be, is music to my ears. I practically throw the two sheets of paper into a folder and collapse face first into bed, sinking into its endless warmth and then further, into blissful unconsciousness.

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Before Sleep
Ezra Pound

I was in love with anatomy
the symmetry of my body
poised for flight,
the heights it would take
over parents, lovers, a keen
riding over truth and detail.

I thought growing up would be
this rising from everything
old and earthly,
not these faltering steps out the door
every day, then back again.

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