

Masks

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(Translated from Tibetan by Christopher Peacock)

She came towards me, two twinkling eyes smiling above a baby-blue mask. There was no one else around, so it had to be me she was smiling at. Who was she? I wondered, moving towards her. Still smiling, she extended her right hand. She had long, slender, and incredibly soft fingers—I had the strange sensation of never wanting to let them go. These were hands befitting a pianist or a surgeon, I thought. Who knows, maybe she was one.

“Hi.” She was the first to speak.

“Hi.”

“Forgot your mask?” she said, still smiling. As she spoke, she slid the green leather handbag under her arm round to the front, extracted a plastic-wrapped baby-blue mask identical to her own, and handed it to me. It seemed like the two of us had known each other for a long time. But who was she?

I belonged to a small minority of people, surrounded by a happily willing majority, who simply couldn’t bear to wear a mask. Better to just catch the virus than have to cover up your face, I thought. It was precisely because of this attitude that I found myself walking ten kilometers on a frosty late autumn morning instead of taking a taxi or a bus.

I stood there, holding the mask in my hand. “Written anything new recently?” she said, eyes still twinkling. As I was thinking of how to answer her, she spoke again. “Ah, the bus is here. See you later.” With great intimacy, she laid those long, slender, incredibly soft fingers on my left arm, then boarded the bus. So this meeting place of ours—it was a bus stop.

After we parted ways at the bus stop, I finally started thinking about who she was. Actually no; I had been thinking about it from the moment I saw those two twinkling eyes coming towards me. Who was she? Why didn’t I ask her? I should have added her on WeChat. Maybe we were already friends on WeChat? Maybe if she’d been maskless like me, I would have recognized her right away. Sadly, it’s all over when you have to say “if.”

I lingered there, feeling at a loss, replaying our fleeting encounter in my mind. She was about my height, 1.7 meters at least. Her dyed-blond hair was tied up in a bun and her fine eyebrows were neatly groomed. Those twinkling eyes lay beneath naturally long lashes. She wore a short white woolen top and a black skirt—of what material I’m unsure—that hung off sturdy hips and draped down to the ground, preventing me from getting a look at her shoes. But the little gold studs inlaid with turquoise stones were all it took to confirm that she was Tibetan, proof as solid as her ID card.

“Who is she? Ah—never mind who she is,” I thought to myself, about to set off to where I ought to set off. But I remained there, held back as if by some intangible force.

Bus numbers two and five stop here. The name of the stop is Springwater. I didn't see whether she got on the number two or the number five. I looked at the route map to see where these two buses went, and to see if there were any Tibetan residential areas or places where Tibetan speakers worked along the routes.

More people were gathering at the bus stop. All were looking at me with surprise and hostility. Clearly, it was because I wasn't wearing a mask. I was left with little choice but to leave the bus stop. Staring at the mask she had given me, I began to wonder again who she was. I caught myself at once—"never mind who she is, stop thinking about it." Yet her image refused to disappear from my mind, and furthermore, I found myself thinking about Márquez's *Love in the Time of Cholera*. A love story spanning some half a century, the novel tells of a couple unable to marry because of their youth, who undergo all the trials and tribulations of life and are reunited in their eighties, only to find themselves unable to marry because of their old age, all the while showing us the history of Colombia and the horrors that war and epidemics inflict on people's lives.

And with the horrors of COVID and the war in Ukraine, what are we in now if not a time of war and epidemics? Not to mention the headaches of propaganda, which makes it increasingly impossible to sort truth from lies, and that the pandemic has further isolated those with already limited social interactions, leaving them completely alienated, and has made it so we can no longer even see the faces of those who already hid their true feelings. How many tear-jerking love stories there must be in the world with war and pandemics as the backdrop! Yet, in

some times and some places, those stories can be turned into tools of the rulers' propaganda, creating more harm than good. Literary creation is one of the noblest pursuits imaginable, but when it becomes a tool of the ruler's propaganda, there is nothing filthier. What would a pure and simple love story even look like in *this* time of pandemic? What about a story with me and the woman from just now as protagonists? Haha! Could we call that love? Ridiculous. That woman might even be a relative of mine.

Then again, I'm quite certain that I have no family at all in town other than my sister. So why such tenderness towards me? It's also possible that she came up here from my hometown—but no, it was obvious from the assured, familiar way she boarded the bus that she was a long-time resident of the city. Perhaps she had mistaken me for someone else? No—she knew I was a writer, didn't she? Well, maybe she'd seen my picture somewhere? That can't be it either—there wasn't so much as a bio on the jacket of my solitary published book, let alone a photo. Except—except there was someone who had put the whole book online, a picture of me included. Even if she'd seen that, though, it wouldn't explain how affectionate she'd acted. Could she be the wife or girlfriend of a friend of mine? But then those twinkling eyes alone would have made her easily recognizable, even if I couldn't see her whole face. In any case, she must have read my work. Who knows, maybe she was a big fan...

She came towards me, two twinkling eyes smiling above a baby-blue mask. She extended her right hand. They were long, slender, and incredibly soft fingers—I had the strange sensation of never wanting to let them go. She held out a plastic-wrapped baby-blue mask. With my

left hand, I took the mask, and with my right, I took her hand in mine and led her to the woodland park on the riverbank. Countless poplars grew there, tips piercing the sky and trunks thick as buckets, but there was nowhere you could set foot without stepping in trash and excrement. It brought to mind that saying: “The poplar is mighty but sprouts from the dung, the azalea is tiny but springs on the mountain.” The few spots that were trash-free—or relatively trash-free—were already filled with masked people. All were looking at me with surprise and hostility. Clearly, it was because I wasn’t wearing a mask. She kept reminding me to put my mask on, but I wouldn’t. Hand in hand, we took a long stroll in the woods, stopping occasionally when we found a clean spot to sit and chat under the cool shade of a tree. This went on for three or four hours, but not once did she take off her mask, so I’d still had no chance to identify her.

Out of ideas, I pointed out that the kind of mask she wore was only effective for four hours, in the hope that she might take it off just once, but she said she’d just swapped it for a new one when she went to the bathroom a moment ago. There was a teahouse in the park, and I figured she’d have to remove her mask if she was drinking, so I suggested we stop by. But even at the teahouse, the mask didn’t come off. It seemed her refusal to remove the mask was as stubborn as my refusal to wear one. Perhaps she had a cleft palate? Or a huge mouth that gaped down to her neck? Or absurdly thick lips? Or maybe it was really bad breath? I recalled with some sadness the woman I briefly dated the year before, who I’d been forced to break up with for that very reason.

“If you’re not having tea, shall we go walk by the river?”

“Sure.”

We went down to the riverbank. Even here they were constructing those big stone embankments they were calling “river course management guards.” These days every river in the grasslands big and small was fenced off by these things, much to the indignation of the nomads, who complained relentlessly that they had no way to water their flocks.

做核酸啦，做核酸啦.....¹

That hateful shriek snapped me out of my dream. Another one of those COVID testing companies that turns negatives to positives for the sake of profit, I imagine. A surge of anger rose inside me.

Ah tsi. A damn dream. Of course. Maybe it was all a dream. No. I met her yesterday. That wasn’t a dream. It was real. And the plastic-wrapped baby-blue mask by my pillow was proof. I rolled over in bed and picked up the mask. I found myself reading aloud the Chinese characters printed on it: 做医用外科口罩.² Who was she? What did she do? Was she a pianist, a surgeon? Or maybe she was someone like my sister, someone who couldn’t land a good civil service or teaching gig after college and wound up an admin assistant at some local government office making a paltry two thousand RMB a month. How sad that would be. Sometimes people like that really drive you mad. Take my sister, usually a sensible person, someone who listens to my and our parents’ advice. But not so after graduating college. After several unsuccessful

¹ In the original Tibetan text, this phrase is written in Chinese characters. Pronounced *zuo hesuan la* (“PCR tests, PCR tests!”), this phrase was heard throughout China during the pandemic at testing sites, or when white-suited medical workers came door-to-door to administer PCR tests for COVID-19.

² Surgical mask for medical use

job applications, I said to her, “Forget about it. Why don’t you go back and stay with Mum and Dad, look after the livestock, and just read in your spare time?” Replying in between sobs, she said she refused to return to the grasslands. I thought of that proverb: “A herder’s hardship is hardship indeed, and harder still when snows impede.” She must be afraid of the cold and the physical labor, I thought. Since she’d been off at school from a young age, not wanting to do a herder’s work was understandable. I said, “How about we hire someone to help Mum and Dad back home, and you can stay in the city and sell yoghurt and milk?” But still she refused. She said she had to work in an office no matter what, even if they didn’t pay her.

And that was how she ended up in a low-paid government admin job. That two thousand a month wasn’t even enough to cover her phone bill and the food she always had delivered. Besides the low salary, she had to live with the constant threat of being made redundant, the constant snide remarks and put-downs from senior coworkers, and the constant need to fawn on the bosses. Seen from the outside, she wore fancy clothes and carried a cute knock-off designer bag, but inside she was fragile to a pitiful degree. Any attempt to persuade her to ditch that wretched job was simply met with more resistance—like I said, it can drive you mad. Most people can’t even get one of these humble positions after graduation. They spend their days wandering aimlessly like lost souls in the bardo or killing time staring at their phones. It’s enough to bring tears to your eyes.

I put the mask back by the pillow and picked up my phone. Of the 1242 contacts I have on WeChat, the majority are people I’ve never laid eyes on; people who got in touch because of my writing, mainly. Many

of those had sent effusive friend requests, having got my contact from a friend of a friend; then after I accepted, they never messaged me again. Of course, there were also people I'd seen before, people I know, even relatives, friends, and old classmates, but there were also many whose identities remained a mystery since they hadn't put their real names. Anyway, could she be among them? What if I posted a message on my Moments in both Tibetan and Chinese: "Can the person who gave me a mask yesterday morning at the Springwater bus stop please DM me"? It was worth a try at least. So I posted the message, complete with a picture of the mask, but no one got in touch. My post did, however, garner plenty of piss-taking comments. "Got started a bit early on the booze yesterday, did you?" said one. There were a few along those lines.

If she was commuting to work, then she'd almost certainly be back at the Springwater stop at the same time tomorrow. So the next morning I got there nice and early to wait for her. The masked people were all looking at me with surprise and hostility. Clearly, it was because I wasn't wearing a mask. Although we were yet to have a single reported case in our little town on the grasslands, we'd been subjected to repeated and unpredictable lockdowns. The lockdowns, and the accompanying barrages of propaganda, had really put people on edge, making them wary as wounded animals. "What is it you're really afraid of? The pandemic, or something else?" These words were muttered to myself, and no one around me heard them. It was now an hour later than the time we met yesterday, but there was still no sign of her. She wasn't coming. Maybe she had got on the bus here by chance. If that was the case, it was possible she'd never come here again, and in that case, I'd never see her again, and if I never saw her again, I'd never find out who she was. Maybe she would come again tomorrow, and then the two of

us would form some special bond. Maybe we would meet again in fifty years. These notions brought *Love in the Time of Cholera* back into my thoughts, and vivid details of its fantastical love story filled my mind...

As I walked back home, I felt a pang of regret that I hadn't simply asked her where she was going, and I pondered whether or not I should come again tomorrow. I decided in the end that I would.

I went back to the Springwater stop at the exact same time for the next seven days in a row, waiting and hoping to catch sight of her. Though I became resigned to the fact that we wouldn't meet again, I kept going back, like clockwork. The only thing that changed was the steadily decreasing number of people looking at me with surprise and hostility.

After a month or so, my boss finally asked why I was never in the office in the mornings, and I finally had to admit to myself how foolish I was being. I was about to toss the plastic-wrapped baby-blue mask, but at the last minute, I changed my mind. Before I throw it away, I'll go to the Springwater stop one last time.

The next morning, when I was almost at Springwater, she came towards me, two twinkling eyes smiling above a baby-blue mask.