

WEIYEN TAN

Fear of the Mask

Thomas refused to wear the gas mask. The knock on the door rattled through the thin walls of the house and pierced my mind with an overwhelming frustration. Groaning with impatience, I hauled myself up from the antique rocking chair and dragged my legs towards the hall. Composing myself, I swung the door open, its rusty hinges shrieking in protest. Thomas' face was streaked with tears that glistened like streams of moonlight and his lower lip trembled uncontrollably. Somehow all my annoyance dissipated and I knelt down before him in the doorway.

“Did you forget to bring your gas mask to school again, Thomas?”

He lifted his face up to mine where I could see my own reflection in his huge, pale blue eyes.

“Mummy... my teacher sent me... back home to... get it.” Between each word was an exaggerated sob that seemed to shake his whole body violently. Sighing wearily, I stood up, ushering Thomas through the door and following after him. The house was awfully dark—a layer of thick, constant, tangible shadow enveloped every available space. Rather fitting, I thought, as it seemed to reflect the mood in every household since the war had started. All the windows and shutters had been painstakingly taped shut as an anti-gas sealant measure, casting the house into gloom. Rays of sunlight occasionally sliced through the gaps in the shutters and carved their way through the darkness. I guided Thomas to the living room and sat him down on the sofa, kneeling in front of him. He had recovered significantly and was now able to speak more fluently and

therefore was determined to put up a fight.

“Mummy, I don’t like the gas mask! I can’t breathe and it’s so smelly and I can’t see!”

“Thomas...” I tried to interrupt but now that his flow of speech was in motion he refused to stop. “I think it’s going to make me blind—it’s so misty and I can’t see! Every time I try to breathe the rubber sucks part of my face away!” With that, he broke down into howling sobs, soaking my blouse until it was drenched. Hushing him tenderly, I rocked him back and forth, patting his head gently. As his breaths gradually became more even, I prepared myself to persuade him.

“Thomas,” I said, as sternly as I could manage, “these gas masks are very important—they may save our lives one day.” He was already shaking his head firmly in stubborn refusal. “You even have a special mask.” I continued, picking up his gas mask to emphasise my point. “Look! It’s a Mickey Mouse mask for small children like you! That’s not so scary is it?”

In desperation I held it up in front of him, with its red rubber pieces and bright eyepiece rims. Honestly, I was unsure as to whether it was less or actually more scary than my own plain black gas mask. The sight of the ghastly thing only made him wail louder.

“OK then, Thomas.” I ploughed on in my futile mission to convince him. “The government says that we should practise wearing our masks every day. We’re going to put them on for 15 minutes each evening before bed. And we’ll do it together, OK?” Thomas looked up at me and an ember of hope sparked within me.

“Every day?!” he whispered.

Had I done it? Had I persuaded him?

“Yes, every day Thomas,” I replied, a smile starting to creep across my face. A sudden bout of wails erupted from him, so loud it seemed incomprehensible that such sounds could come from so small a being.

“Daddy wouldn’t make me do this! I want Daddy!”

A wave of painful longing washed over me, drowning out all of the remaining fragments of my hopes and warm memories.

“Daddy is fighting in the war, Thomas.” I forced the dreaded words through gritted teeth and squeezed my eyes shut against the

image of Edward that flashed before my eyes. “He might be away for some time but he would be really proud of you if you put the gas mask on.”

“Daddy... would be... proud... of me?” Thomas asked, with a childish innocence that melted through the aching bleakness.

“Yes, Thomas. Do it for Daddy, okay?” With slow reluctance, he began to bob his head up and down. “Shall we head back to school with this then?” I asked with a smile, holding up the gas mask. There was something intimidatingly chilling about its appearance—an odd eeriness to it. I could see the fear in his eyes at the sight of the mask, but then he quickly nodded and looked away. I stood up to place the gas mask in its cardboard box and draped the long string strap over Thomas’ shoulder. Standing rigidly, he looked oddly soldier-like, with his arms stiffly held at his side. I suddenly saw Edward there, standing in his new uniform, boots polished until they were shining. It was my turn to look away and I picked up my own cardboard box containing my gas mask.

“Shall we go?” I said brightly, with a false cheerfulness that ate away at my conscience and made me cringe inside. Thomas nodded absentmindedly.

The war had made the world seem like a different planet. I no longer thought of the clouds as bringing rain and life, but rather they were an army of darkness, soldiers storming towards an ominous abyss of shadow. The tension in the air was stifling, as if it was bursting with thousands of secrets eager to spill onto the streets. It was nearing the end of winter, but there was still a crisp chill to the air that stung at my skin and burned my throat as I breathed in. Thomas’ school was just around the corner and we neared the entrance within minutes. “Ready?” I asked.

“Ready,” he replied, gnawing at his bottom lip apprehensively. Swinging open the door to reception, I signed Thomas in and was about to turn to leave when the receptionist called out to me.

“Oh, Mrs Walbridge!”

“Please, call me Penny.” I interrupted hastily. The sound of my last name only made me miss Edward even more than I already did.

“Penny,” she continued, flushing with embarrassment, “I think you ought to stay today.” She gestured to the side in order to speak

to me privately and out of Thomas' hearing range. He was rather preoccupied with the abacus in the play area anyway. "I understand that Thomas has had some difficulty with the gas mask, am I right?" she continued in a hushed voice that tickled my ear. Oh no, not the gas masks again I thought to myself.

"Yes, but we've brought it in now and I'll make sure he brings it to school every day." I replied quickly, eager for the conversation to end. I wasn't sure how much more of this gas mask business I could take without screaming.

"Oh yes, that's good," the receptionist remarked. "But the children are going to have a gas mask drill today."

Dread filled me like molten lead and I felt unable to move my legs. There was no way that this was going to end well. "I really don't think that's the best idea..."

"I know that Thomas is very nervous around the gas masks but I think this is certainly necessary for his safety and Miss Hendy, that is Thomas' teacher, insists that he learns to become comfortable with this."

"Surely it would be better to let us sort this out ourselves. I mean, you can't force this on him, he's only six years old for goodness' sake!" In my hot frustration I found myself, rather confusingly, defending Thomas. Footsteps echoed down the hallway and a teacher marched down the corridor, her high heels clicking constantly against the polished floor.

"Miss Hendy," I said, with a respectful nod in her direction.

"Ah, Mrs Walbridge," she said with a strained smile that stretched her red lipstick across her weathered face. "How lovely to see you. And is Thomas here now?" Upon hearing his name, Thomas popped his head around the corner from the play area and ran towards me, wrapping his arms tightly around my legs. "Are you ready to come to class now, Thomas?" she asked. Thomas made no response, chewing on the end of his sleeve ravenously. "Mrs Walbridge, I think it would be best for you to come this way."

I nodded grudgingly and followed Miss Hendy, Thomas trotting cautiously in front of me. Upon entering the rowdy classroom, I sat at the back with Thomas and waited for Miss Hendy to calm the children.

“OK, Thomas.” I began hesitantly, not sure how he would take this. “Remember how we agreed to try the gas masks on? Remember how we’re going to make Daddy proud?” Thomas bobbed his head up and down. I hated having to do this to him. I could already sense his steadily growing panic. “Well, today, we’re going to make Daddy even more proud. We’re going to try wearing the mask in the lesson with all the other kids too!” I forced the enthusiasm into my voice, trying not to sound as patronising as I felt.

“You mean, we have to put them on?”

“Yes, Thomas,” I answered firmly, determined for this to work.

“And this would make Daddy proud of me?”

I nodded fervently, not trusting myself to speak.

“OK, then,” he said with such wavering uncertainty that it almost persuaded me to scrap the whole thing and leave. Miss Hendy had settled the class and was now giving instruction.

“So, class, today we’re going to have our first gas mask drill in order to help us to get used to them. Isn’t that exciting?” The reaction of the children was surprisingly varied. The majority of the class were practically bouncing in childish excitement, thrilled by the prospect of games and fun—any way to escape from the ordinary dullness of the usual school day. But some of the children were absolutely terrified. Thomas, however, contained his tears and bit his bottom lip hard, desperately attempting to control his instant panic.

“Everyone quiet! Quiet! I said QUIET!” Miss Hendy commanded severely, trying to settle the class back down. For a teacher of such young children, she really didn’t seem to be very understanding or compassionate. “Right, now can everyone take out their gas masks and place them on the desk,” she continued once a hushed silence had settled in the classroom.

A loud clattering and chatter erupted suddenly as children pulled their masks out from their cardboard boxes. The commotion dissipated just as abruptly as Miss Hendy held up her hand for quiet. “Now, I want everyone to listen carefully.” She eyed the class, surveying each child to check that they were listening. Oddly, I felt that I was part of the class, back in school and being scolded by my own first grade teacher. The memory made me smile, despite the fact that my mischief had long been abandoned.

Satisfied with her observation, Miss Hendy continued “I know many of you already know how to do this but I just want to clarify.” She picked up her own gas mask to demonstrate. “First, hold your breath.” She spoke slowly, as if in slow motion, with an emphasis on each syllable of every word. “Then hold the mask in front of your face with your thumbs inside the straps. Thrust your chin well forward into the mask and pull the straps over your head as far as they will go.” At this point, her voice was considerably muffled due to the barrier of the mask. She proceeded nonetheless. “Finally, run your finger around the face piece taking care that the straps are not twisted. Does everyone understand? Any questions?”

Standing there in her high heels and wearing a terrifying gas mask appeared strangely comic and I had to compress a bubble of laughter that rose up in my throat. No one said a word but a couple more children started to cry, sniffing audibly. Miss Hendy pulled off the gas mask and smoothed out her straggly, dishevelled hair.

“Right then,” she said as there were no questions. “Your turn.”

I turned to Thomas and offered a comforting smile. I wasn’t sure what much else I could do. “Ready then?” I asked. He shook his head in protest, any previous bravery having vanished. But I shook my own head and held up the mask. “We’ve got to try putting it on Thomas. At least once. Hold your breath now, OK?” I don’t think I even needed to instruct him—he was already holding his breath in terror. Carefully, I pulled the straps over his head, his fragile body jerking backwards as I tried to keep the straps from twisting. As soon as the mask was on, real panic set in.

“Mummy? Mummy I can’t see you! Everything’s going cloudy—I’m going blind!” Thomas was shrieking, his genuine fear crackling in the air. “I can’t breathe, I can’t breathe, I can’t breathe!”

“Thomas honey, calm down, I’m right here.” I tried to hold him but he squirmed out of my grasp, desperately trying to rip the mask off. Every time he breathed out the rubber washer under his chin flipped up and hit his face, further fuelling his panic. His shrieks had escalated to a steady stream of screams that pierced my ears painfully. Kneeling down, I ripped the mask off his face and held him close, hushing him gently. His face was wet with a mixture of tears and cold sweat. Gradually, his screams were reduced to shuddering

whimpers, until eventually he fell quiet, exhausted by his draining outburst. The utter silence in the air was like an alarm sounding in my ears as I suddenly became conscious of the stares that penetrated through my skin. I raised my head slowly to look around the class. The children were petrified. Miss Hendy looked furious.

“Come this way with me please, Mrs Walbridge.” I had never heard such coldness in the undertone of her condescending command. Obediently, I took Thomas gently in my arms and carried him out the door. “I don’t know what you’ve said to that child but you must teach him some discipline!” Miss Hendy was marching in front of me, her back to my face, even as she was speaking, as if she couldn’t even bear to look at me in her disgust. “If not for his own good,” she continued, “then at least for the safety of others. Do you have any idea the damage that your scene has just caused?! I’ll never get those children comfortable with the masks now.”

“Miss Hendy..” Suddenly she turned swiftly on her heel and I almost crashed straight into her.

“Just go,” she interrupted, leaning forwards into my face. I could feel her breath down my neck and spittle that sprayed onto my cheeks. “You’ve done enough. Make sure Thomas brings his mask tomorrow—today was the third time that he forgot!” With that she stormed past me and headed back to her class. I swallowed down the many furious comments that threatened to spill from my lips. I knew it would do no good to express my anger.

After the short walk home, it dawned upon me the seriousness of Thomas’ refusal to wear the gas mask. One day it could cost him his life. And if that happened, I knew I would never be able to forgive myself. There was always going to be something that I could have done more, some way I could have tried harder. I had to share the burden. Picking up a pen and a piece of paper with an envelope and, having settled comfortably into the rocking chair, I began my letter to Edward.

An hour later and my page was still blank, with nothing but the words ‘*Dearest Edward*’ inscribed at the top. Somehow, spilling my worries onto the paper wasn’t as easy as I thought it would have been. Sharing this burden was selfish and unfair of me—Edward didn’t need even more to worry about. Nevertheless, I knew I had to

tell him and forced my pen into action, writing about the danger of Thomas' refusal to wear the gas mask and my endless exasperation in trying to convince him. But most of the letter was about how much I missed and loved him, how I yearned for him to come home. I forced myself to end the letter, before my tears soaked the paper and smudged the ink—some words were already unreadable.

“Are you ready to go, Thomas?” I called. “It’s time for school now.” Thomas rushed around the corner and caught me completely off guard: he was wearing the gas mask. I could hear his fast, shallow, panicked breaths through the barrier of the mask. “Thomas? Thomas are you all right?”

“Mummy, I think I feel sick,” he groaned. “I need to take it off!”

Alarmed, I quickly pulled the mask off his face and wrapped my arms around him.

“I tried, Mummy. I tried to be brave but I just can’t!” he whimpered miserably. “I’ve let Daddy down!” The sorrowful misery in his voice made my heart ache and I hushed him softly.

“No, Thomas, Daddy would be so proud of you for trying. You managed to put it on all by yourself. We’ll keep putting the mask on every day but only for a little while, OK? Only a few seconds to start with. Does that sound good?”

Nodding promptly, he wiped his nose on the sleeve of my shirt and I rolled my eyes in amusement, genuinely impressed by his courage. “We better be off to school now,” I said, keeping an eye on the clock. “Let’s not forget your gas mask this time!”

As I was heading back home from the school, after dropping Thomas off, I noticed the posters stuck up on the walls, scattered everywhere around the buildings. They depicted a gas mask and the caption read *‘Hitler will send no warning—so always carry your gas mask!’* My hand automatically went to the cardboard box that was slung around my shoulder and I lifted my head to look around the street. The neighbourhood was oddly empty, as it had been for the past few months since the war started. Those who were about had turned up their jacket collars and wore long gloves with their hands in their pockets to stop open skin being hit by gas if there was an attack. There was something awkwardly cold about this that made me feel like an outsider in an unfriendly territory. There was an air

raid warden patrolling the end of the street in his gas mask, wearing a steel helmet and heavy overalls. He was holding a gas rattle, which was actually, rather comically, usually found in the hands of supporters at football matches. Despite this amusing coincidence, the gas mask looked terrifyingly alien and made the warden appear dehumanised. I quickly walked past him and turned the corner into the house.

Weeks passed in a blur of monochromatic tones and Thomas made no progress. I still had not heard back from Edward and my worry was eating away at my sanity. Every night I heard the inevitable ‘Put that light out!’ or ‘Cover that window!’ from an air warden to some poor householder who had forgotten to turn off the lamps or draw their curtains. I was constantly straining my ears for the potential sound of the gas rattle, warning of a gas attack or a drill. I still had no idea what to do with Thomas if that situation ever occurred as it was bound to. The days seemed to disappear into a black hole of darkness, slowly spreading into every aspect of our lives.

It was a Wednesday when I heard a knock on the door. I thought Thomas had returned from school. It was the telegraph boy. They were nicknamed *‘Angels of Death’* because they only ever delivered news if a soldier was missing or killed in action. The look on his face told me the news instantly. I could barely feel the envelope between my fingers as I took out the telegram. I already knew what it would read:

THE SECRETARY OF WAR DESIRES TO EXPRESS HIS DEEPEST REGRET THAT YOUR HUSBAND PRIVATE EDWARD WALBRIDGE WAS KILLED IN ACTION SEVENTEENTH FEBRUARY. CONFIRMING LETTER TO FOLLOW.

THE ADJUTANT GENERAL

“I’m sorry,” the boy mumbled, after having seen my face fall in dread. I nodded distantly and closed the door as he turned away sombrely. There had to be a mistake, I thought as I sank to the floor with my back against the front door. I had dreamed about this happening. I had expected a hot, fiery pain to scald and burn me with a scorching agony. What I felt was so much worse. A cold,

icy numbness crept through my body as if ice was solidifying in my veins. I felt hollow and empty; I was frozen in place, unable to move. Tears streamed down my cheeks silently—no sobs racked my body as I thought they would. A deep ache consumed me with a torturous anguish that refused to subside. The world around me shattered, as if I had been living in a crystal dome that had only just collapsed around me. Edward was gone. I don't know how long I sat there before a knock on the door scattered my distant thoughts.

"Mummy? Are you home?" In silence, he waited for a reply but even as I mouthed the words, no sound came out. "Mummy, you forgot to pick me up today so Bobby's mum walked me home. Can you open the door now?"

Bobby? Oh yes, Thomas' best friend.

"Mummy, are you there?"

Finally regaining control of my limbs, I heaved myself up from the floor, staggering against the wall. Wiping my eyes and trying to compose myself, I braced myself to tell Thomas the news. How could I do this without breaking his heart? Without breaking my own all over again?

"Thomas, how was school?" I exclaimed as I opened the door, my voice sounding unnaturally cheerful and disgustingly forced.

"It was... OK, I guess." He could already detect that something was wrong.

"Come on in," I said hurrying him through the door, eager to hide us from view.

"What's wrong, Mummy? Something is wrong..."

"Nothing dear, noth—" I stopped myself mid-sentence. It would do no good to lie to him. I knew it would only make this more difficult. My throat suddenly felt desert-dry and I licked my parched lips. "Come sit down Thomas." He sat down on the sofa and I knelt in front of him. "I just got a letter." I began hesitantly, unsure as to how to phrase it. Thomas nodded but confusion was written all across his face.

"It said..." My throat closed up and I had to stop speaking to keep from choking. "It said..." I had to finish the sentence now or I knew that I never would. "It said... that Daddy won't be coming back." The words rushed out all in one breath, like a gentle breeze

that somehow seemed to carry all the sorrows in the world.

“You mean, I won’t see Daddy again?” Thomas’ puzzlement gradually turned to understanding as I nodded slowly. “Why? Where did he go?” His expression spiralled into a frenzy of bewilderment.

“He’s dead,” I whispered. I could find no other way to say the words. “Daddy’s in heaven now.” The shock of saying the words out loud was like a slap on the face and I felt as if all the air had been knocked out of me. All of a sudden, a flood of emotion poured through me, flooding my cold numbness and replacing it with waves and surges of an aching pain. I became distantly aware of Thomas’ howling sobs as he clung to my arms, gripping me so hard—the physical pain was trivial, nothing compared to the torment of grief.

Exactly one week later, there was a knock on the door.

“Morning Ma’am.” said the postman, standing on the front step as I opened the door. I smiled tiredly in response, my eyes swollen and puffy from days of weeping. If the postman noted how awful I looked, he politely made no attempt to remark on it. “A parcel for you Ma’am,” he said cheerfully, handing me a box wrapped in rough brown paper and turning away as I nodded my thanks. Looking down at the parcel, I froze, my whole body stiffening in shock. There was a letter. It was in Edward’s handwriting. Regaining mobility in seconds, I slammed the door shut and raced to the living room.

“Thomas! Come here! Now!” I called in fractured commands as I tore open the letter frantically in nervous apprehension. I had to force myself not to skim read the letter in my fervour, savouring every handwritten word. It read:

My dearest Penny,

My dear, if you are reading this letter you most likely would have received the telegram informing you of my death. I wanted to send you one last message before it is too late. I have been drafted to the front and know that I will not make it home to you and to Thomas. Words cannot express my love for you and the emptiness I feel without you here. Concerning Thomas’ stubbornness, I have sent this letter along with something that I believe will help. Anyway, I won’t be needing it anymore. I will always love you. Remember that.

With all my love,

Edward

Biting my fist to keep from sobbing, I skimmed down the page to the next paragraph, this time addressed to Thomas:

Thomas, my dear boy,

Know that I will always be proud of you in everything you do—no father could ever be more blessed with such a brave and wonderful son. While I am away, take care of your mother for me and be strong. I have a gift for you and hope that it will help you overcome your fear of the mask. It was mine. Wear it to remember me. I love you to the moon and back, son.

Daddy

“Yes Mummy?” Thomas interrupted my thoughts and I looked up at him. For some reason I was beaming, my glowing smile stretching from ear to ear. I patted my lap, gesturing for him to come and sit down as I read out the letter to him. “Did you hear that Thomas? Daddy left you a present!”

“But it’s not my birthday, Mummy,” Thomas protested in such innocent confusion.

“Why don’t you go on and open it anyway?” I said, reaching for the box and placing it in his lap. Slowly, he tore the brown paper away from the box and lifted the flaps to see what it contained. Horrified, I beheld the sight of a gas mask—as alien and dehumanising as all the others that I had seen. Anxiously I turned to see Thomas’ expression. He looked strangely mature, with a look of understanding and recognition on his face.

“So this was Daddy’s gas mask?” he asked.

“Yes Thomas.”

“And he said that I can wear this? For him?” I nodded, nervous to see his response. Suddenly, a broad grin illuminated his face and it was as if the sun had emerged from after a storm.

“I’ll wear it!” he declared proudly. “I’ll wear it for Daddy!”

“Yes,” I said, “for Daddy.”

Watching Thomas confidently standing there in Edward’s gas mask, I wondered whether it masked his fear or showed he had overcome his fear of the mask.