

The Mask We Wear

□ Written by Arsalan

> “I am a cage, in search of a bird.” — Franz Kafka

Nobody really knows what you carry.

They see you — not as you are, but as they need you to be.

You perform like a script handed to you at birth.

Smile on cue. Numb when expected. Cry in silence. That’s the deal.

And the worst part? You agreed to it.

THE ROOM

There’s a room in your memory you never go back to.

Not because it’s locked — but because it’s too quiet.

It’s where you learned silence could be louder than screams.

Where you sat, waiting for a message that never came,

a call that never rang,

a knock that never happened.

The light was broken, but you never replaced it.

The dust settled, but you never cleaned it.

You just... left it.

And every so often, you remember that room still exists.
Untouched. Unspoken. Alive.

THE BENCH

There was a bench you always passed on your way back home.

One day, you sat there. It was raining a little. Just enough to hide your face.

Two strangers sat beside you and didn't say a word.

And it was the first time in weeks you didn't feel alone.

Not because they knew you — but because they didn't try to.

And that silence was the kindest thing anyone had ever given you.

THE EMPTY CHAIR

At dinner tables, you always notice the empty chair.

Even when everyone else is laughing.

Because you know what it's like to feel invisible even when surrounded.

You smile when expected. Nod when required.

But your mind is somewhere else —

sitting in that empty chair,

wondering if anyone ever sees you leave early.

And the truth is — they don't.

THE OLD PHONE

You still have the phone you used during the worst time of your life.

It's not about the messages or photos. It's the weight.

It reminds you of the nights you stared at the screen, hoping for something. Anything. Just to feel like you mattered.

But the notifications never came.

Just silence.

Heavy, honest silence.

THE LAST LAUGH

You remember the last time you truly laughed —
not the forced kind, not the polite one —
the real one that came out of your gut.

It was so long ago, you're not even sure it was you.

Now you laugh to fill space, to end conversations, to make others feel less guilty.

But that real laugh? You buried it.

Along with the version of yourself who believed people would stay.

THE OLD PHOTO

You found a photo the other day.

One where you looked... happy.

But you don't remember that version of you.

Not the way they smiled without fear,

not the way their eyes weren't always scanning for danger,

not the way their shoulders weren't heavy with guilt.

You stared at that photo longer than you expected.

Trying to mourn someone who's still breathing.

THE MESSAGE UNSENT

There's a message in your drafts that you never sent.

Maybe it started with "I'm sorry" or "I miss you" or maybe just... "Hi."

You read it sometimes.

Edit it.

Add a line. Delete it. Start over.

But you never send it.

Because deep down, you know —

they moved on from the version of you that still waits.

THE MIRROR

Sometimes the mirror is the cruelest object in the room.

Not because of how you look —

but because it sees right through you.

It knows how you fake the morning routine.

How your smile has cracks in it.

How you practice your expression before leaving the house
so nobody asks if you're okay.

THE TRUTH

Some people were born to be background noise in their own lives.

To be the laugh track in someone else's story.

The one people call when they have no one else —

but forget the moment they're fine again.

But not you.

You started as a whisper.

You became a scream.

Then, silence again —

but this time, not out of defeat, but understanding.

You know now: survival is not always heroic.

Sometimes, it's just existing quietly enough to not be noticed —
until you're strong enough to walk away.

> “In the fight between you and the world, back the world.” — Franz Kafka

But you didn't.

You backed yourself.

And somehow, that made all the difference