

about 5 800 words

A VOID WITHIN THE EYEHOLE

by Janos Honkonen

Waking up from a coma wasn't like in the movies or soaps. I didn't simply open my eyes with a nice hairdo and light makeup, my family and friends waiting at the foot of my bed.

The biggest surprise was the dreams. I was in a car, slouching comfortably in the driver's seat, my fingers resting on the steering wheel. Just as I liked to sit when taking a long drive. I drove everywhere - into stores and the hospital, even into the toilet. Next to me sat my passenger, who kept berating me, cursing, crying, trying to yank the steering wheel and crash the car. It was pathetic, embarrassing, and somewhat annoying. I was used to tolerating their anger. The alternatives were too much effort.

Sometimes I woke up in the hospital or in a shop, and I wasn't in a car. Usually, I woke up in a bed when the nurses rolled me from one side to the other. They wadded up the sheets under me,

poked their fingers into my anus, changed my bedclothes and diapers. Sometimes they flexed and pumped my arms and legs. When I was in a car, I didn't see a single human face. Other times I did. Except no one had an actual head.

Waking up the first time outside of a car was distressing. I sank into the bed like it was a hammock, and my arms were trapped under the covers. My head was at an awkward angle, and the pain in my neck made me cry. The *Marimekko* drapes in the windows had a red poppy pattern. Between them I saw a slice of a sunny urban forest--in other words, a semi-cultivated thicket. The pattern turned disconcerting. It changed into an army of frogs staring at me with their stamen eyes, ready to burst all over me. A wall of penetrating stares, pupils elongated and slanted.

The red door of the room hissed open, and a doctor stepped in. They walked briskly to my bed, set down a pile of papers on the table next to it, and turned to leave. I tried to tell them someone should throw the frogs out, but all I could manage was a flute-like squawk. The doctor stopped and looked at me. Their head was a sparkling oval of geometric static. The kind of neon fireworks you see when you press your palms hard against your eyes. The static obscuring the doctor's head sizzled a thousand times faster.

I didn't understand what I was seeing. I sat back in the driver's seat, drove past the doctor towards the windows, through the crack between the drapes into the scent of dirt and the shrill

buzz of mosquitoes of the forest. I drove through a suburb, past the vegetable shelves of a grocery store, through the door next to the dairy section and into the warehouse, past the plastic strips hanging in the doorway, back out onto the sunny Kuninkaantie_road. We stopped at the Salmi bridge close to the city of Hamina and drove down to the shore. Yes, we, since my passenger was with me. They were unusually quiet. We sat on the shore of the Salmenvirta river, by the grey stone museum bridge. I lowered my feet down into the water and tried to pick up reeds with my toes, but they were hard to see with the pedals in the way. My passenger leaned close to me.

"Why the hell didn't you die?" they hissed into my ear loudly and full of spite. I turned to look at them because they had never really spoken to me, just screamed and cursed. The head of the passenger was a sphere of geometric fireworks, just like the doctor's.

I jerked. I was in the hospital room, in my bed, not in a car or on a sunny shore. My passenger was in a wheelchair next to my bed, their sizzling head next to mine and their warm body against my arm. The doctor and a nurse stood at a considerate distance by the doorway. It was snowing outside.

"And why the hell didn't I die!" The passenger hissed much too close to my ear. They leaned back and spoke in a normal voice. "I don't think they understand me. I'm tired, I want to go back to my room."

I frowned and let out a birdlike squeak. It almost resembled a word. I should have recognized the passenger, but my thoughts refused to line up.

"Their level of consciousness may keep fluctuating at this stage. They might very well hear and understand you, but they can't react to it yet." The doctor said.

"Good."

It was obvious the doctor hadn't heard what my passenger had hissed to me.

#

The people with sizzling heads visited me day and night. Sometimes they spoke to me, and I started recognizing some of them as my family members. I didn't remember their names, though. Sometimes I saw them from behind the steering wheel, but less and less often. My passenger was brought to me in a wheelchair a couple of times, then they started limping in with a rollator and an assistant. They always whispered and hissed close to my ear, then got up and stroked my hair, as if they were professing their love.

"I hate you," they often said.

"Why couldn't you just die? Why?"

"When they let me come here alone, I'm going to take that pillow and smother you with it."

After a while, the amount of pain and the limitations of my mobility started to define the difference between the dreams and

the waking world. I had been on my back for months, and my muscles had atrophied. I began to test the level of my consciousness by bending my knee. If it was easy and painless, I concluded I was dreaming.

Then came the day when I felt--I knew--that I was fully awake. I reclined on my bed and started exploring the limitations of my new body. Every movement made the shriveled muscles tighten, sitting up was impossible. The morning sun peeked between the *Marimekko* curtains. Again, the poppies turned into an army of frogs, ready to leap. The bed was a quagmire, and if I let the frogs get too close, I would sink. I flailed, kicked, and managed a faint scream. I swiped a sippy cup and the call button off the bedside table. A nurse came and pulled me up from the mire into which I was just about to sink. Gasping for breath, I suddenly realized that the passenger was my spouse.

#

"What do you mean you don't care? It's our wedding venue, of course you have to care!"

"Well, what would you like?"

"It doesn't matter what I like, just tell me what you want!"

"I don't really want anything specific."

"Yeah, fine, you never do."

#

One day the doctors stepped into the room, and their head wasn't

made up of geometric static anymore. They had a massive frog's head, which almost scraped the ceiling. They leaned over me and started talking, but I was paralyzed with fear and couldn't understand a word. I stared at the doctor until I realized that the frog's mouth wasn't moving when they spoke. They were wearing a huge dead-eyed frog mask. It didn't muffle their voice, I could hear them unnaturally clearly.

"...inferior frontal gyrus. I mean, damage to the inferior frontal gyrus. It may cause various visual aberrations, but they should... or I mean... they may get better with time. Partly. But the operation went well, and your condition is otherwise good. After rehabilitation, you can return to a more or less normal life."

The doctor fell silent. The frog mask stared at me uncomfortably close, obscuring half of the room. I nodded and smiled. The doctor cleared their throat, stood up, and mumbled their goodbyes as they walked towards the door.

When I was alone, I started cautiously exploring the back of my head. The last of the bandages had just come off. My head was shaved at the back and at the sides. The scar stood out from the skin, and the staples were still in. I followed the row of staples that ran from ear to ear and took a sharp turn up on both ends. The scar was numb and felt like leather.

During the following weeks, the car trips became more and more infrequent and finally stopped altogether. I had been transferred

to the rehabilitation ward, where my days were full of physiotherapy, neuropsychologist's puzzles, and various activities with the occupational therapist.

"Push, and push, and push, and now harder, harder, harder, harder!" the physiotherapist spurred me on. My feet were strapped to a motorized exercise cycle above my bed. I gritted my teeth and kept pedaling.

"One more, one more, one more, go, go, go!" the physiotherapist chattered, almost jumping in place.

Eventually, I had to stop. The electric motor of the cycle kept spinning the pedals slowly, it was pedaling me. My body was as feeble as fetus, and my muscles had morphed into cables that were too short. I couldn't even sit up. When you are under 30 and can't even extend your arms or legs because your muscles are too weak, it's supposed to change how you think about your life. I didn't do much thinking, I took my rehab a day at a time. The only thing I kept wondering about was the masks everybody was wearing.

The squirrel mask of the physiotherapist was large and cartoonish, but some of the masks were quite intricate and refined. Human faces, animals, pop culture heroes, mythological figures from all eras and cultures. The masks had only one thing in common: they covered the head completely. There were no eyeholes to peek through, no half masks that left the mouth uncovered, I couldn't see even a single ear. There was nothing human.

When I was alone, I kept touching my face. There was no mirror in my room, but I didn't need one. I scrutinized my reflection on the chrome tubes of the hospital beds, the metal reflectors of the neon lights, the glass of the doctor's wristwatch. I was the only one without a mask. My face and head were normal, apart from the row of staples on the back of my head. I tried to avoid seeing the nurses' photos on their badges. They twisted my eyes and brain in a way that's hard to describe. It was like looking at an incredibly bright blind spot as the room kept spinning around. I avoided television and magazines for the same reason. Seeing a picture of a face, even from the corner of my eye, felt nasty. The only human features I saw in the hospital were mine.

My passenger and my family came to see me a few times during the weeks in rehab. During those visits, I realized I had taken a step back from everyday reality. I didn't feel detached, precisely the opposite. It was as if my former life had been a low production value TV show, and now I saw that all the metal and rock were just plywood and Styrofoam, and all the dramatic characters were just actors.

My parents wore traditional theatre masks; my father's mask was that of tragedy, and my mother's one of comedy. During the visits, my father and my little sister, with her mouse mask, sat in silence and nodded along to my mother's manic babble as she poured out her sadness, relief, and love. I listened and smiled, trying not

to glance at the clock. Earlier I would have automatically said the words you are supposed to, but I couldn't be bothered anymore. They felt painfully contrived. When my mother finally stopped talking and sat down, my father and little sister dared to open their mouths. My father asked how I had been and talked about the weather, which I could see through my window. My sister had drawn me a picture, which she handed to me solemnly.

My spouse had a red and black kabuki mask with a fierce scowl. During the first few visits, they kept on hissing their malicious comments, filled with hatred. However, as time went on, they turned indifferent and cold. During their visit, the bulging eyes of their mask stared at me, and they kept stroking an angry, red scar on the inside of their left forearm. It snaked from their wrist up towards the crook of their elbow. If somebody else was present, they kissed my forehead goodbye, but as if they were touching a piece of meat with their mouth. I couldn't decide if it was their lips I felt or the lacquered scowl of the mask.

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"What did they say?"

"Well, she died last night."

"Oh no, honey! Oh no! Come here! If I can do anything, just tell me."

"Naah, it's okay. These things happen."

"...your big sister died. 'These things happen.' It's a pretty

big thing!"

"Well, she had been suffering for a long time, it's better this way."

"You can't think like that! Aren't you sad at all? You are not even crying."

"Can I please mourn in my own way? Or should I pretend?"

"Your fucking sister died! Are you mourning? Do you even feel anything?"

"Right now you annoy me, is that a good enough feeling for you?"

#

The cops introduced themselves, but I forgot their names right away. They sat next to my bed on chairs brought from the day room, ankles crossed under the seat in a weirdly submissive way. The older one had a loose rubbery mastiff mask with eyes painted sloppily off-kilter. The younger cop had a Batman mask good enough for a film. I managed to mask my snort with a cough.

The cops suspected something but didn't say it out loud. They wanted to know what I remembered about the accident. It made me really think about it for the first time. I told them I've spent the last few months driving on the cool aisles of warehouses, on the cresting waves of lakes, from Helsinki to Utsjoki and back again. I have been driving for months, but I can't remember having an accident. The cops glanced at each other. The older one took out some printed photos from a folder. The inkjet had left white stripes on

them. There was a long straight stretch of highway flanked by dry heath and scraggly pines on both sides. A pallid morning light, a long dark trench plowed into the pine needles on the ground. A red car wrapped around a pine.

Why had I swerved off the road right there? I didn't know.

Was there a moose on the road? I couldn't remember.

There are no skid marks on the road, why is that? Well look at that, indeed there aren't, interesting.

Why did you leave the cabin at night, what had happened there? I didn't have an answer.

What about my spouse's injury? The younger cop set another printed photo on my lap, and I looked down instinctively. There was something red there, but that's all I had the time to notice. Next to it was my spouse's face, filling half the sheet, and I looked right at it. Brightness, motion, swirling shapes that wrenched my brain and stomach. I closed my eyes, but it was too late. The vertigo spun-spun-spun the room around faster and faster! I screamed, grabbed my head, and vomited all over myself, the printout, and the blanket.

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"Fired, holy shit! Did you tell about it at home already? You must be pissed off."

"I'm okay, jobs come and go."

"But didn't you like working there?"

"Yeeeah, doesn't really matter in the long run where you work."

"You really are one of a kind. Come out for a drink, at least!"

#

My room was bustling with people. My friends were standing about, digging my clothes out of the closets, asking what I wanted to take with me and what should I leave on the ward. One of the nurses helped me dress myself, the doctor came in to drop off a stack of papers, the occupational therapist popped in to say goodbye.

I couldn't keep my family from visiting, but I had asked my friends not to come, hinting about unspecified neurological problems. Nevertheless, my best friend had decided to surprise me by bringing a ridiculous number of friends to help me pack. This was a typical whim of theirs: surprise visits to a friend's house to bring a cake, with no regard to whether it was convenient or not, volunteering to be the driver on trips to which they hadn't been invited to, renting a cabin for a weekend with borrowed money for everybody who wanted to come... Their intentions were nice, but the implementation was impulsive and socially blind, which they were too hyperactive to realize.

I had spent weeks alone in my hospital room, and the throng was bewildering. I didn't want to be surrounded by people, but I couldn't kick my friends out either. Luckily, everyone was too preoccupied with the move to sit next to me, wringing their hands and agonizing over how to break the awkward silence. I didn't try to make small talk like I usually did, I just sat in silence.

There were six of my friends in the room, and I tried to recognize which was which. Apart from my best friend, whose mask was a golden retriever with its tongue hanging out, I honestly couldn't tell them apart. Their voices were hard to distinguish in the din, and the masks didn't help, but there was an even bigger reason. Only then, when I couldn't see their faces, I realized how little attention I generally paid to them. I sat there, silent, and let them chatter and bustle around me, like I always did. They kept gravitating to me, even though I didn't do anything to encourage it. I guess they got something out of it because they kept coming back. Someone had compared me to the capybaras in online videos. I just sit there, calm and sympathetic, and other animals gather around me. I guess so.

#

The winter day was achingly blue. My best friend took me to their car, the others headed for their vehicles. One of them blurted out something about a homecoming party, making others shush them. I pretended I didn't hear it and tried not to sigh. We drove through the city. Powdery snow swirled on the windscreen, the hot air from the vents smelled of mildew and scorched dust. My friend was quiet, and after months of hospital rooms and corridors, I was dazed by the bright wintry city. For a moment, I expected to see the road rushing under my feet, but the floor stayed solid. I quickly realized the biggest challenge of the outside world. In the hospital, it had been easy to avoid pictures of faces, but things were different in the

city. The people on the streets had their masks, but billboards, shop windows, the sides of buses, they all turned the city into a minefield of portraits. I had never thought about the sheer amount of advertising inflicted on us every day. I leaned my head against the side window and saw my face in the rearview mirror. Even through the smudgy glass, I looked normal.

My friend's silence was squirming with questions. I tried to remember when they had appointed themselves as my best friend, but couldn't. I turned away from the window, and they saw it as permission to satisfy their curiosity. They said in a roundabout way that there had been rumors about my spouse's wound. Their dramatic temperament and codependency were well known, and some people were under the impression that things in our relationship had taken a turn for the worse during the last year. Then there had been the thing on the cruise...?

I left the insinuations hanging and kept my eyes on the icy street. The silence stretched out until my friend broke it, like always--they couldn't stand a moment of quiet. Their spouse once said it's amusing how you can get my friend to admit to anything just by keeping mum. Now they changed the subject to a skiing trip to the Swiss alps. They both had gone mountaineering, downhill skiing, hiking. An absolutely idyllic hotel with lovely rooms! When we stopped outside our rowhouse flat, they were gushing about how my spouse and I should join them the next time. When they realized what

they were saying, the end of the sentence trailed away.

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"Yeah, I fucked them!"

"Okay. And what made you do that?"

"Well, think about it! THINK ABOUT IT! And I took some photos, look at this!"

"Put down that damn phone. Why did you do that?"

"I don't know what I was expecting. You are not even a tiny bit jealous? What the fuck?"

"If I'm so horrible, why don't you just leave me?"

They stare at me for a few seconds and snort. Disbelief, laughter, scorn. They turn around, raise their hands and walk out of the room.

"You don't get it, you just don't get it!"

#

The house was full of people. Friends, acquaintances, family members. My spouse hugged me like I was a sack of potatoes. Out of obligation, because everyone was watching. On the kitchen table there was a cake, sparkling wine, the obligatory bowls of potato chips and dip, dessert bowls full of candy. Box wine, beer, someone hollered that the sauna was on. The masked throng was chanting for a speech and didn't let me leave the kitchen until I muttered a few awkward words.

Dozens of pairs of eyes followed me every moment. Eyes made

of glass and plastic, eyes painted on or carved in wood. Everyone wanted to know, but nobody wanted to ask. I made small talk with a man in a Finnhorse mask for a good while before realizing he was my big brother, whom I hadn't seen in a long time. He had come to see me a couple of times while I was still in a coma and apologized for not visiting after I had woken up. You see, his new job had taken all his time. A management-level position in the chemical industry, dozens of employees, international trade, a salary to match. They had moved from their downtown flat into a house of their own, with a yard for the kids to romp in. The summer cabin had been renovated, they had taken our father to an ice hockey match, celebrated his 60th birthday. Mother had kept visiting a doctor after a doctor, but now the new antidepressants seemed to be working. For a while, it had looked like the shock of my accident would get my mother committed again, but when I got better, so did she. It was horrible to lose one child, let alone two. He was quiet for a moment, clasped his hands, fidgeted. I let him off the hook by saying that I understood. Anyway, he was here now, and it's much nicer to meet at home than in a hospital, isn't it? The way he slumped in relief was almost comical. But then it was time to go, he had to pick up the kids from the playgroup. But if I needed anything, like money or... He kept looking for the right words. If I wanted to visit, day or night, the door was always open, and the sauna was hot! I smiled, nodded, and hugged him. My brother walked out in his hiking jacket and boots, back to being a

name in text messages and a signature in Christmas cards.

People came and went, the voices got louder, laughter turned raucous. I drank only a couple of beers, but as people got more drunk, the questions became more and more personal. People wanted to touch my scar, which you could still see and feel under my hair. A jagged line from ear to ear and up towards the temples. I kept answering questions about my hospital stay, I recounted my coma dreams, described how strenuous the rehab was, told them I didn't remember anything about the actual accident. I didn't say anything about the masks and pretended I didn't hear the hints about our relationship problems.

After the solitude of the hospital, the crush of people was bemusing. I faced one grotesque mask after another, my personal space kept shrinking as people got drunker and drunker. The chatter turned into mind shredding static. Someone shoved a phone in my face, trying to show a photo of their child. Just a glimpse made me retch as the room spun around. I almost slapped the phone from their hand, trying to avoid vomiting like I did in the hospital. I combed the throng more and more frantically, trying to find at least one person without a mask, not caring what seeing an uncovered face might do to me. I was still the only one. "Only me! Only me! Only me!" The words kept repeating in my head, compulsive and searing, and I started muttering them out loud.

At midnight I had had enough. I started hinting that I was

still quite tired and wanted to turn in. Some of the guests made an awkwardly stagy performance out of emptying the apartment. Hey, let's go, everybody! The host needs some rest now!

After a dozen drunken hugs and congratulations, I was left standing alone on the ground floor of our house. The sauna door was open, radiating heat and the smell of wet wood. The yellow glow of the toilet and kitchen lights threw long shadows around the apartment. I pulled on my winter shoes, opened the porch door, and stepped out into the brisk winter night. The city lights made the clouds glow brown, the railing was freezing under my palms. The view consisted of our narrow strip of a yard, with the lone pine tree and the red brick wall of the house next door. My spouse had grouched about the lousy yard, but it had been the only reason we'd been able to afford the place.

I leaned on the railing and watched the yard lights sparkle in the snow until my fingers were numb, and I was shivering. I only wanted to turn in, but there was still something irritating left to do. I sighed, turned around, and stepped back in.

My spouse sat in an armchair facing away from me. Behind them were our living room panoramic window and the shimmering lights of the city and the houses down the hill. I saw the reflection of their mask in the glass. Although it hadn't changed, its leer was somehow less fierce. I took off my shoes, knocked the snow off them onto the porch, set them down on the floor, and closed the door. Then

I stood in silence and waited.

"I give up," my spouse said. "I don't even hate you anymore, I have wasted too much of my soul on hating you. Perhaps I pity you, but it's like pitying something like ... I dunno, a boulder. I must start thinking about myself, I won't keep wrecking my life because of you a moment more. I have already wasted... Jesus, eleven years. How stupid and blind can you be for this long? What did I fall in love with? What did I see in you?"

An incredulous little giggle, a gargle of snot as they inhaled.

"Fuck me, I actually tried to kill myself just to get some kind of a reaction out of you. Twice. Actually, maybe I tried to kill you the second time. I don't know what I was expecting. It doesn't matter what I give you, how much stuff I pour into you, good or bad... It's like pouring it into a well. Other people have noticed it too."

Their voice faded away. I didn't say anything, they sat in the armchair, quiet. I could taste the words on my tongue, the things I would have said earlier to defuse the situation. I knew how the conversation would go, as usual. What my spouse would say, what I should answer and what tone to use to meet their needs. When to raise my voice as if I was angry, when to hug. I had thought that's what caring is, maneuvering a difficult situation semi-consciously to a happy end. I was done fooling myself. It had always been just pure and boring automation.

Minutes went by. I put my weight on my other leg, my spouse sniffed. The silence kept winding tighter and tighter, worse than ever. I didn't feel the need to break it.

"Would you have cared if I had succeeded? If I had died? What would you have felt?"

I turned and walked upstairs into the cozy smell of our bedroom. I crawled into my own bed for the first time in months and fell into a deep sleep.

I would have been relieved.

#

They sit naked on the cabin floor, knees together, thighs and chest covered with blood. They squeeze their wrist, blood pulses down their arm, and hangs in congealing filaments from their elbow. The knife is on the floor, the lantern on the cabin table burns with a tall, fluttering flame, the glass black with soot. The wood in the fireplace crackles as it burns. The air smells of smoke, paraffin, and blood.

"Say something, say the fuck something, shout at me!"

I frown and look around for the first aid kit. It's on a shelf next to the door, between a small woodchip basket and a pile of old magazines.

"Not even this! You are unbelievable, UNBELIEVABLE!" They wail, their mouth contorted and ugly.

I have to pry their fingers away from their bleeding wrist.

They give up, collapse into a wailing pile and let me tie a tourniquet. The cut is long, but not that deep. They didn't slash across the wrist, but along it up towards the crook of their elbow. I place a roll after roll of gauze on the wound and tighten a bandage around the rolls to put pressure on it and staunch the bleeding.

"You can't get help, I threw the phones and the car keys into the lake!" they say, swallowing and gagging from all the crying.

"I have spare keys in my backpack. Put some pants on and let's go to the town ER," I say.

"You're nothing, you are fucking nothing! You are not human, YOU ARE NOT HUMAN!"

#

I woke up in an empty bed, the other side hadn't been slept in. The winter wind rattled the window and blew snow on it, the sky was pastel blue with icy haze. I rubbed my face, which felt weirdly numb. The scar on the back of my head was itching.

The bedroom closets were ajar, and there were piles of clothes on the floor. I got out of bed and stopped to listen in the bedroom doorway. The house was quiet.

Last night's party had left its marks downstairs. A beer can on a speaker, a potato chip smushed into a carpet, someone's shirt, a towel that was still damp. Things were missing here and there. CDs, books, dishes. All of them important to my spouse.

I went to the toilet, put the coffee on, and started

wandering around the apartment. My face still felt weird. Not exactly numb, more like if it had been covered with dry glue. I kept rubbing and picking at my cheeks and the scar on the back of my head, which was stinging and burning.

My spouse's wardrobe was empty apart from the sportswear. There were gaps in the dish board. The pots and the frying pan were gone. The closet under the stairs was open, and the suitcases were missing. The two big ones, where you can pack enough stuff to start a new life.

The winter sun made the yellow kitchen decor glow. I poured myself a mug of coffee and sat down. Where the steam from the coffee met a sunbeam, I could see the single droplets dancing in the light. I picked at a doily and considered my next step. First of all, I should start with the paperwork regarding the divorce.

Outside, the neighbor's kindergartners were playing in the snow. They tried to build something out of it, but the snow was too cold and dry and flowed like fine sand. One of the kids wore an astronaut helmet with a golden visor, but I couldn't make out the other masks. I focused my gaze on the windowpane. Where a tree cast a shadow, I could see a dim reflection of my face.

Everyone was wearing a mask, but me. What did it mean? Some of the masks reflected what the people were inside, others were caricatures, some concealed things. Was I the only genuine human who is precisely what they look like? That didn't feel right. I couldn't

be a caricature of myself, could I? I was thinking in circles. I had always observed other people and unraveled them like a tangled fishing line, but never myself. A marriage, why? Friends, why? The family and the job and the hobbies, why and why and why?

I couldn't get a handle on anything.

The coffee had gone cold, the sun had moved, the kids had gone and left piles of snow for the wind to sweep away. The skin around my eyes felt tight. I pressed the heels of my hands on my eyes and rubbed hard--and something on my face moved. I touched the scar on the back of my head.

Yes. Of course.

I stood up and walked in front of the large hallway mirror. There was a postcard stuck between the glass and the frame. I plucked it out and dropped it on the floor.

When I knew what to look at, it was surprisingly obvious. A strikingly detailed human mask covered my face, everything but the eyes. There was a void within the eyeholes. Not darkness, but a deep, gnawing, all-consuming void. I bowed my head and dug my fingernails under the scar--which was not a scar, but a rubber band that had sunk into my skin. At last, I managed to work both of my thumbs under it. The rubber band started coming off with faint ripping sounds until I could finally pull it over my head.

The mask fell into my hands. The inside of it was white, smooth, and apart from the eyeholes, featureless. No indentations

of a mouth, cheekbones, or anything.

I let the mask fall and looked up.

END