



Four Masks

Words **Jake Lemkowitz**

1969

Dave DeBusschere joined the Knicks in '68 and became a fast favorite in New York. Amidst the heavy accents and cigar smoke of Madison Square Garden, the fans pronounced his name Da Butcher. A gnarly inside-post power forward, he lived for easy put-ins and tough rebounds beneath the basket.

His sophomore season as a Knick, however, DeBusschere started in a slump. Those once-easy shots weren't coming so easy. Dave had barely put up five points against the arch-rival Lakers in Los Angeles when he took an elbow hard to the face. There was a leafy crunching sound as DeBusschere's nose shattered. Bleeding and pelted by boos, he was escorted back to the visitors' locker room.

Miraculously, DeBusschere was listed in the starting line-up for a game against the Warriors two days later. But when he stepped onto the basketball court in San Francisco, he wasn't immediately recognizable. To keep his nose splint in place, the Knicks' team doctor had fully wrapped DeBusschere's face with a mask of white surgical tape. The other players stared. Warming up pre-game he looked like some sort of high priest, or an escaped hospital patient.

That night against the Warriors, DeBusschere broke out of his slump with a barrage of pull-up jump shots far beyond his usual range. He scored 24 points and went eight-for-eight from the foul line. It was as if the crudely constructed white mask had transformed DeBusschere into an alternate version of himself, a far more accurate and sinister player. It was as if he had become Da Butcher.

431 BC

In the beginning, the mask feels a bit like a joke. Even in ancient Greece there is something inherently amusing about a man in drag, and the wooden mask is modeled after the maker's wife, with bright red lips that are shaped to project the actor's voice into the crowd.

As the play proceeds, the mask's static expression becomes increasingly familiar until it fades into the background, a blank spot where the actor's face should be. The action becomes more intense and the audience is drawn further into Euripides' tragedy, ignoring the mask completely.

And then the mask begins to change. This is no special-effects magic, but a trick of the mind. The mask has become a conduit for something inside of the audience, for fears and desires that they could never otherwise allow themselves. What thirst for revenge would drive a mother to stab her children to death? Is it inside everyone? Is it inside you? For each man in the auditorium, that blank mask has been replaced with his own face. Each man sees himself kill.

When the play is over, the mask returns to a piece of wood. The audience leaves the theater and returns to a world of mathematics and reason, and to the business of giving form and order to everything unknown.





1830

Hunger egged him on. So the outlaw followed the sound of drumming, not stopping until he reached the harbor shore and the outskirts of the Kwakitul village. The outlaw could clearly hear chanting now, and the sound of whistles like a gang of traffic policemen. But the village appeared to be deserted. Only long wood cabins stared back at him with grinning painted faces. He spit and tramped through hard mud streets until he could see the music riding up into the sky. A mirage of hunger and darkness, he realized; it was a plume of smoke. He crept to the door of the longhouse and looked in.

Hundreds of people, maybe more, shimmered in the firelight. All eyes were focused on a single dancer in a brightly-colored mask, which was carved into the shape of an octopus. The dancer swayed to the sound of the music, and his mask's tentacles twitched and moved in time. It occurred to the outlaw that the tentacles themselves were in control of the dancer, that this man somehow belonged to his mask. At least that was how it appeared. The octopus dancer lunged at the crowd, but was herded back towards the fire by four Indians with rattles, who joined him now in the clearing.

A second dancer jumped out wearing a long-haired mask depicting a four-headed bird. He was joined by four Indians as well, also with rattles. Each of the mask's four birds chimed in to the music by opening and closing its jaws. And every time a different bird snapped its beak, the mask's dancer spun around as if he had been taken by surprise. The drumming picked up.

Then the third dancer joined them in the clearing. His mask was the simplest of the three, a raven with a long beak painted black and red and blue-green. Like the colors of a day-old bruise, the outlaw thought. The sound of the whistles and rattles and chanting reached a fever pitch. As if on cue, the beak of this new mask split open in four directions, revealing a mask inside the mask. It was carved like the face of a human. The octopus lost complete control over his body. The bird with four faces twisted into the air with all its beaks snapping. And the eight Indians with rattles were not able to stop the third dancer as he pulled a small girl from the crowd and tossed her into the flames.

It was just a doll, the outlaw thought. But he didn't stick around to find out. He was already halfway down the road.

2011

There is power in anonymity. That's why it's a crime to wear a mask in New York State. This anti-mask law originally passed in 1845, but it's still enforced today. Just ask the protestors who were arrested during this past year's Occupy Wall Street demonstrations. Scores were cuffed and carted off to central booking. The charge? Covering their faces with an image of Guy Fawkes. This smirking, mustachioed, mass-produced piece of plastic has become an icon of modern-day activism.

The Guy Fawkes mask made its first appearance as a tool of dissent in Alan Moore's *V for Vendetta*, a graphic novel that was adapted into a movie starring Natalie Portman in 2006. In Moore's tale, the mask becomes a key weapon in overthrowing a fictitious totalitarian government. In 2008, a group of Internet vigilantes known as Anonymous launched a campaign of protests against Scientology, and made the Guy Fawkes mask their disguise of choice. Partly because of *V for Vendetta*, and partly because of the mask's resemblance to a nerdy Internet meme known as Epic Fail Guy, the mask was an instant hit with the group of hacker activists.

Since then, the mask has taken on a meaning far beyond movies and message boards and Anonymous. Its significance has little to do with Guy Fawkes himself, the would-be terrorist who attempted to blow up British Parliament in 1605. In fact, it does not represent any particular ideology whatsoever.

The mask is powerful today because it is a way for Occupy Wall Street protestors to become as faceless and insidious as the forces that they are up against. Deep-rooted social injustice is invisible. When activists trade in personal agendas for the anonymity of the mask, they stop being victims and they start being a little bit more like their enemy. And Guy Fawkes' approves, with a grin.

