

Filters

October 2020

“So, when do you think we’re going back to having classes in person?”

After eight seconds of silence, a bright green outline envelopes another video in the grid.

“I... I really don’t know. It’s hard to say, honestly. Most of the state universities have already announced they’ll be online until next fall. I heard from some of my friends that there’s a chance we might have hybrid classes by the time spring quarter comes, at the earliest. We’ll just have to see what the county’s public health department says, though. Even if they give the university’s admin the green light to open up our campus, things could change at any moment,” they sigh.

“Yeah, especially if people aren’t responsible and keep going out to parties with their friends,” someone else adds.

“Right. No matter how much I’d look forward to returning to campus in the spring — that is, if it reopens — I’m worried about the possibility of everything shutting down again, like what happened this quarter.”

Another video lights up in green. “Wait, so... the situation where you are isn’t so bad, right? And you aren’t enrolled in online classes now, are you?”

“Nope, I’m taking a break for this quarter. Things here have, more or less, returned back to normal over the past few months. People attempt to practice social distancing, even in the most crowded places, and I see people washing their hands more often than usual. We’re also mandated to wear masks and scan our ID cards for contact tracing. For the most part, it’s working; the daily case count is in the single digits nowadays, so I’m not too worried.”

Click. “How are online classes going, by the way?”

“They are... just like they were in spring quarter,” comes a reply, followed by sighs of agreement from others in the call. A mosaic of green boxes flash across the screen, then a crimson microphone icon precedes each name in the grid.

Someone’s virtual background flickers. The video next to it freezes for a moment.

Later, one of the hosts sends a message to the chat box, calling everyone back for a discussion with the whole group. “Alright, it’s been five minutes. If no one else has anything to say, let’s leave our breakout rooms and return to the meeting.”

Open closet door. Select mask. Hold cloth fabric upright, slightly bending the middle. Pull hair back, looping strings around each ear. Double-check bag for phone, earbuds, hand sanitizer, an extra mask. With keys in hand, lock door, leave home.

Walk ten minutes to the train station. Tap wallet on turnstile scanner, check balance on transportation card, rush up escalator, board train. Quickly glance around at the other people in the train car, every pair of tired brown eyes glued to black mirrors. Eleven disposable filters in classic light blue, five with cute patterns on reusable cloth, three white ones with the country’s name and the head of a merlion printed on the left side in red. Silently stand for the next twenty-five minutes with earbuds plugged in. Exit train, walk for six minutes.

Scan QR code for contact tracing. Move forehead toward the temperature scanner. Enter cafe. Browse social media while waiting in line. Order drink, pay in cash. Find a table for one. Place bag on chair and look around carefully before collecting drink. Sit down. Take off mask. Savor first sip of drink. Put on mask. Memorise ten new words, learn one or two grammar rules, copy five example sentences into notebook. Take a vow of motivation, then start working on novel. Look at others in the cafe, then out the window, for sparks of inspiration. Watch

pedestrians traverse the streets, wondering what each of them could be thinking. Refill drink with ice. Get distracted and scroll through social media. Wonder how friends and family in California are doing. Attempt to work on novel again, and again. Take off mask. Finish drink.

Put on mask. Leave cafe. Go home.

Repeat.

I don't mind staying home. It's always too hot outside, anyway. Rain or shine, the weather in this part of the world is consistently humid all year round; that's one thing everyone here can agree on. The air quality hasn't been great, either. These days, people have been celebrating the Hungry Ghost Festival by burning joss paper and incense, creating pillars of smoke every few hundred meters. To make matters worse, there's perpetual construction work going on around the neighborhood, especially with the new subway line on the street in front of my grandmother's apartment block. There's also a small ball of anxiety sitting in the back of my thoughts: a quiet fear of contracting the virus from someone outside, falling sick, and spreading it to the people I live with. Every time I think about going out, a popular slogan repeats itself in my head: *stay home, save lives*.

On second thought, I'm happy to stay at home. When I'm home, I can breathe freely. I don't have to worry about whether or not someone next to me is sick, if they will cough or sneeze within the next minute, or worse, if they have the virus. It's a burden lifted off my mind. I can breathe freely without the filter of a mask. Whatever I inhale, I exhale without a second thought. In, out. In, out.

Don't get me wrong, though. It's not that I don't like wearing a mask when I go outside. It's a nice accessory to have. According to a post I found on Instagram, a mask combined with a

hat and a pair of sunglasses makes for the perfect disguise for a trip to the grocery store. From personal experience, I don't disagree.

No matter how much I'm accustomed to not wearing a mask at home, I always hesitate right as I'm about to set off on a run, dig into my first spoonful of a meal at the food court downstairs, or take my first sip of a drink at my favorite cafe. In my moment of hesitation, I feel as if I'm walking outside during the first few sunny days of spring, when I wear shorts for the first time after at least five months of jeans in cold weather. I'm exposed. Something's missing. I'm making a part of myself vulnerable, a part of myself that is supposed to be shielded from the rest of the world, for the safety and sake of others. Now, if I don't wear a mask, something feels missing.

Here, I've noticed that people aren't afraid to hide their disapproval towards those who don't wear masks in public. The other day on the train, an old man coughed loudly into his left palm, his light purple mask pulled down to his chin. Everyone was staring at him, myself included. He didn't seem to care, and used the same hand he coughed in to grip a metal pole for support as he got up to leave, his mask still pulled down. Everyone continued to stare as he walked out.

A mask is not too different from an identity, isn't it? Each of us wear one at every moment, replacing it with another depending on who the situation calls for us to be. When I sat in my university's classrooms, I donned an N95 respirator, two rubber straps tied tightly around my head; when classes moved online, I kept it on. I sift through my closet for my black one, made of two layers of washable cloth, and put that on when I'm with my parents. I'm someone's granddaughter, too, and I pulled down my light pink disposable one, ever so slightly, during the two times I cried in front of my mother's mother at the dinner table. Whenever I read an article

on the news about a hate crime against people who look like me, blaming an entire ethnicity for causing a pandemic, we all wear the same mask at that moment. None of us is free until all of us are.

My mother once told me that wearing a mask, now, is an act of love and kindness. When we loop two strings around our ears and breathe through layers of filters, we protect ourselves and the people around us by minimizing the spread of germs and viruses. Without a mask, we expose ourselves and put others at risk. Like the air we exhale, there's so much that goes through our heads every second of every minute of every day, but a filter prevents all of it from passing through our mouths and reaching the world outside of us.

When we don an identity like a mask, we become someone to someone else. Likewise, they become someone to us; just as they know who they are to us, we know our significance to them. A child, a sibling, a parent, a crush, a former lover, a student, a teacher, a confidant to another. For better or for worse, we may become someone we are not, or assume a role we have no choice but to fulfill. In this pandemic, our world is a stage; we are all actors slipping on our masks when it's our time to shine, or go out of the house for essential purposes.

When I am by myself, breathing freely, who am I? Looking into the mirror without a mask, what do I see? A girl from Singapore, almost twenty years old, five-foot-one on a good day, an only child, with three syllables for a name... Figuratively speaking, however, each of these labels is a mask in itself, defining me in a way I cannot change.

Who am I, really? I may never know. With every situation, around each person I interact with, every brand-new version of myself I become, I exchange my mask for another, so often to the point where there's almost never a moment I'm not wearing one. Throughout the time I've spent alone in quarantine, I've realized that I'm definitely not as honest with myself as much as

I'd like to think I am. In the fleeting moments between sent text messages and conversations spoken aloud, when my mask is pulled down for a break from acting, what do I say to myself when no one else is listening? My inner dialogue likes to hide bits and pieces from my consciousness, and seems to control me more often than I can tell myself what to say. Maybe the voice in my head wears a mask of her own. Maybe she just wants to be someone to me.