

THE BOY WHO LEARNED TO SMILE

A Cognitive Break

My first mask did not arrive as a lie.

It arrived as a smile.

Nobody sat me down and said, “Hide who you are.”

Children rarely receive instructions that directly. The lessons come disguised as approval. A look. A nod. A silence that disappears when you behave the right way.

I learned early that people relaxed when I smiled.

Adults seemed less worried.

Rooms became calmer.

Tension loosened.

I discovered a strange kind of power. Not the power of strength. Not the power of authority. The power of making life easier for other people.

At first it felt innocent.

A child wants harmony the way a plant wants sunlight.

But every gift has a hidden cost.

The more I learned to read the emotional weather around me, the less attention I paid to my own climate.

I knew when other people were disappointed.

I knew when they were angry.

I knew when they needed reassurance.

But I rarely stopped to ask what I needed.

I became skilled at adaptation.

The skill would serve me well.

Years later it would help me work across cultures, countries, languages and continents.

But before it became a professional asset, it was simply a survival strategy.

A boy trying to keep the peace.

The problem with masks is not that they fool others.

The problem is that they work.

They work so well that eventually people begin rewarding the performance.

And once a performance begins generating affection, approval and belonging, removing it becomes dangerous.

You risk losing the audience.

So I kept smiling.

Not because I was happy.

Because it was expected.

And somewhere inside that smiling child lived a question that would follow me for decades:

If everybody loves the mask, what happens to the face underneath?

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