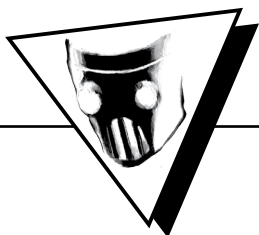


UNMASKED

DAY ONE



BY DENNIS DETWILLER



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DAY ONE

Dennis Detwiler

First day of high school, 1986, goes something like this . . .

When you first enter, there are lockers on either side of a long hall. It's the longest hall you've ever seen. It's still sunny and warm outside. You walked from the car with your face upturned, feeling the sun's heat, until the crowd swept you up and entering the hallway felt like throwing yourself into a darkened pool on a summer night.

Then, the din of a thousand kids talking.

It's still warm enough that everyone is wearing those obnoxious fluorescent shorts your mom wouldn't buy you last year. People you knew in eighth grade—people who weren't your friends really, but with whom you shared a nodding relationship—don't look at you. You are out of place. You're wearing the wrong things. You move and speak the wrong way. You interrupt various conversations as you pass, speaking too loudly so as to not be swept down the hallway untethered. You are desperate for a group, a selection of people who have settled for you and whom you hate only marginally less than the rest of the people at the school. This trick of friendship has always eluded you. Instead, you float in a social void. Adrift.

Eventually, you surrender to the feeling.

The locker is a locker, just like the one you had last year. You have no problem remembering the combination that came on the printed postcard; you've always been good with numbers. The inside of the locker smells like rotten food, even though it's clean. You place your backpack inside, along with the brown paper bags you'll cover your school books in later and some books you brought to read at lunch (all Heinlein). You have only a second to look around before the first bell goes off. You have no idea where you're supposed to be, or where that supposed to be, is. Usually, this would fill you with panic.

But not this time. This time, you're holding the mask. It's a blue balaclava, the one your father wore when he used to shovel the walk. Before. But you've done something to it. You've sewn red X's over the eyes and cut holes in it, and pinned a band of blue-and-white safety pins to it. You stand, arms half in your locker, looking at the mask. If you put it on—and you never have—but *if* you put it on, would . . . the world . . . seem different?

That's stupid. Stupid.

The urge to make the mask struck you the last week before school started. Sitting in your bubble of books and games and a ruined room, the TV throwing static and the radio playing the same six songs over and over, you heard it. Sunday morning, 10:03 a.m. The voice rose up perfectly formed and seamless—like a soap bubble, perfect and round and light. Rising in your mind . . . from somewhere else.

The voice said, "Hello, my friend." It said, "I'm here. I'm real. Find the mask."

"Make it," it said. You turned off the TV. You killed the music. You waited in silence. Then, just as you were ready

to dismiss it, it rose again—perfect and *other*. Born of nothing in your mind but somehow still in it.

You stomped out into the hall, trying to make the voice go away with your anger, and found the house silent around you. Your mom was at the medical center until noon. No one was there. Outside, only a lone lawnmower droned far off. No voices. Nothing. Then . . .

“Hello, my friend . . .” it began again. And you ran the sink and sang and danced around like a maniac until it quieted again. Music. You put on your Walkman and blasted Talk Talk at full volume.

You shook it off and went downstairs in your underwear, scratched your hair and poured milk into a Tupperware bowl filled with some sugary thing and watched TV. It sang to you, “Life’s what you make it . . .” But the other voice wouldn’t go away. “Schoolhouse Rock” was on, but the world seemed to swim in and out, every other word from the TV lost to that implacable, still, voice in your mind.

Hello, my friend.

I’m here.

I’m real.

By one o’clock that first day, you knew there was something wrong with you. By four, you had all the components for the mask. You couldn’t help yourself.

Hello, my friend—

“I know, I know, shut up.”

The only way to quiet it was to obey. To make the mask. So you did. When you found them, one-by-one, the pieces of the mask were lit from inside, in a way that felt so real you had to see what others thought.

Your mom looked at the pin-box, lit by some internal sun, and saw nothing. Instead, she said, “Yeah? My pins. What?” You were manic. You collapsed at three in the morning with a finished mask, the voice finally silent. It was relief, putting an end to a horrific struggle.

Release. The mask silenced it all.

Silence.

You kept the mask. You carried it in your pocket like a talisman. Something to keep the voice away. As the days without the voice carried on, you soothed yourself into something like acceptance. But your internal explanations kept changing. It wasn’t real. It was real, but at least it was over. It was a ghost. It’s a brain tumor. And from there, it was a short jump to:

It was your dad.

Days later, the mask still seems fraught with power, like it’s connected to some secret energy. When you hold it, you feel that power in you. When it’s near you, you feel better.

You stand in front of your locker and hold the mask in your hand on the first day of high school, 1986, and wonder if there’s any measurable difference between going insane or the world going insane around you. When the second bell rings, you put the mask in your front pocket with your book and turn and stumble forward, then back and shut your locker, and then run off in a direction you pray is the correct one. But already you know it won’t be.

In fifth grade, you learned about theme with Mrs. Debbins. What is the theme of *A Swiftly Tilting Planet*? What is the theme of *The Book of Three*? What is the feeling that binds the work together? The thing that

makes an endless chain of words mean something when you step back, fuzz your vision, and look at it all?

Already, you know what the theme of your high school years will be. It has set like quick-drying cement: this feeling of not knowing where or when to move, of being alone.

Lost.

.

You're being watched. Biology. Nine minutes late. Carded. Mr. Something-something keeps throwing looks at you, but that's not the gaze you're feeling. It's the girl. The one behind and to the left of you. She was a blur when you entered, heart thudding in your ears. Everyone looked up and your vision swam. The clock ticking nine past eight sounded like a hammer. The teacher said something. You said something. You showed him your card. He gave you a late card. Someone laughed. You plopped into a seat and waited for the attention to slowly evaporate. Eventually, the teacher (Mr. Something-ery?) began talking. He drew a picture of a circle on the board. No, not a circle, a seed. Then a tree. Then a name in script:

Mr. . . . Sorthery.

That can't be right.

Then the eyes on your neck.

You're sweating now. A perfect bead that feels several gallons large trickles directly down the back of your neck. You try to slow your heart, but it's beating away on its own. You fidget and shift, but the feeling doesn't leave. Finally, and with no other choice, you yawn. It is so incredibly fake. As you extend your arms, you tilt your head and look back. Three feet away, staring right at you—the girl.



Short hair with a slight spike in the front, overalls that end in shorts. Blue Converse sneakers. Bright eyes which open somehow even wider when you turn. She smiles and flutters a hand in excitement at you; a gesture which somehow indicates, *I need to tell you something*. She mouths a word. You turn back so fast the chair's feet squeak on the rubber tiles.

"Something wrong, Mr. Boone?" the teacher says. Thirty pairs of eyes turn on you. How the heck did he remember your name?

"No, Mr.—" you begin, and then realize you aren't at all certain about the name. But you're stuck. You've run to the end of the diving board, and everyone is looking at you, and the momentum takes you over the edge. The name starts to come out of your mouth before you can stop it.

"Sro . . . thror . . ."

A silence so deep that the only sound is the clock ticking seconds on the wall. Ten seconds.

"Ree." You finish. It feels like the name took more than a minute to enunciate.

The teacher's brows (Mr. Srotery? No?) wrinkle a bit, and he looks at the name he wrote on the board for a second, as if to make certain it's what he wrote. He turns back, grimacing like he swallowed a lemon.

You stand, suddenly, as if something pulled you up by invisible strings. The chair squeaks again. Someone laughs.

"Uh. Can I go . . . I have to go to the bathroom. . . ."

Tick. Tick. Tick. More sweat.

"Bathroom," you say one more time.

Another laugh.

The teacher turns away, his giving of permission. You walk out so fast it feels like you're suspended on tracks in the ceiling. You're fairly certain your feet touched the floor at least twice.

The hallway is a million degrees cooler. It is silent. Someone had spent time unrolling a strip of packing paper, painting it in blue and white letters and hanging it over the hallway. How long had it taken them? Minutes? Hours?

"WELCOME BACK, SAILORS," the sign reads.

I've never been here before, you think, before running to the bathroom.

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The bathroom is green and huge. It smells like chemical lemons and bleach and pee. In the mirror, you look like someone who's just escaped some sort of assault. Your shirt is askew, your pants pulled up strangely, your face looks puffed and red, your hair is messed up. You're looking pretty good.

Sound carries. You blow your nose, and it's like a jet taking off.

Water, cold and clean. In the mirror (polished metal scratched with names, initials, and "AC/DC") you stare back, looking the same as before, only wet.

That's when you see it.

A blur in the mirrors. Purple and fast. It moves left to right and each time you think your eyes will settle on it, it's already on the next mirror. Then your brain clicks and you turn around.

The bathroom is empty. The doors to the toilet stalls hang wide (one at a slight angle). Nothing. No movement. No purple blur.

Then, with your butt on the edge of the sink (still running) someone taps you on the shoulder.

You spin and stumble backwards.

A woman—the most beautiful woman you have ever seen—emerges from the mirror like someone stepping out of a pool of silver paint, only sideways. She has purple skin. Her eyes are green. Like, all green. She leans out of the mirror like a figure on the prow of a ship, face towards you, smirking.

She brings a green finger to her lips. *Shhhhhh*. The finger says.

What do you do? Think carefully.

That's right. You scream.

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Jump cut to the nurse's office. Her name is Heather, and that's easy enough, but she wants to know which class you're from and you almost do it again. "Mr. . . ." you begin and then say, "Biology. Uh . . . freshman biology."

Mr. Freshman Biology. You're just doing great.

You ended up here because a burly kid you guess is a monitor or something found you shouting in the bathroom, rolling around on the floor. He was enormous, topped with what looked like a perm—a perfect mat of brown hair curled into brillo-like compactness. He lifted you up, smiled, and brushed you off.

"Go to Mrs. Winters' office. It's the blue door across the hall." The content was kind, but his voice was like someone unlocking a door with one of those old-timey buzzers.

"Oh, hey," he added, as you stumbled up and opened the door.

He handed you your mask. It had fallen to the floor during your . . . during the . . . thing.

"Be careful with that. It's important," he buzzed. Then he winked at you—an expression almost as improbable on his face as the purple lady was in the bathroom.

And now, you're here with Heather. Mrs. Winters. Heather Winters.

"Do you suffer from low blood sugar, Steven?"

"What? No. No. I'm fine. Just light-headed." You stand. Half-sit again, and then stand and walk. Everything you've done today feels crazy—not just the sighting of purple women either (but doesn't that already feel like a dream, like the voice?).

"I'm going now," you say as the door shuts on the empty hall. She says something, a question. The tone is not angry. The door clacks shut.

A second later the bell goes off.

The hallway fills with kids all over again.

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After two classes—which are so long they feel somewhere between waiting for water to boil and paint to dry, occupied by blurs rather than students, whose names are sucked out of your head in seconds—you arrive in the cafeteria.

You get in line. People point at you, and one kid, a big one, mimes screaming while waving his arms about. So everyone already knows you freaked out in the bathroom. Good. That's great. Awesome.

You keep your eyes down and get food. You pay.

You sit.

You don't sit at a table. You sit with your back to a tile wall and unfold the book from your pocket, placing the tray on the ground next to you. *The Moon is a Harsh Mistress*. Escape.

Then, the girl in the overalls.

She smiles. "Why did you scream, dude?"

"Uh," you say.

"She told you not to say anything . . ."

The girl holds your hand. It's the first time you've touched a girl's hand in any situation which could vaguely be considered social. She pulls you up. You chuck the book behind you next to the tray.

She drags you (both hands now) out of the cafeteria. You lean against the pull, your feet flopping reluctantly behind her. Your tray and lunch and book recede behind you.

"GET A ROOM!" someone shouts.

"GET FUCKED!" the girl shouts back.

Double doors and then a summer day. A football field. A track. The lake. She lets go and you miss it, immediately, the touch.

She runs off across a low hill that curves out towards the lake. You run after her. She's all you've got. If you go back in now, you'll be lost. More lost.

Run. Running. Into the trees near the lake. The gate near the lake. You were here once before. On the other side at Silver Lake.

Before this randomness.

You see her again. She's standing with other people. You stop, wheezing, forty feet away. There are four people there. You don't know any of them.

That's wrong.

You know the kid with the brillo hair.

"It's okay," the kid says.

"Come on," the girl laughs. "We're not going to beat you."

There's the girl and brillo-head; a tall, thin boy you think plays soccer, and another kid, Franco something, the one with multiple sclerosis.

"So, what can you do?" the MS kid says, and it's clear, he's the leader. "Kid, what can you do?"

Blank faces. It might help if you knew what the fuck anyone was talking about.

"Your mask, kid. What does your mask do?"

"My mask?"

The girl looks at you like, *tell him*, and then looks at the MS kid in a way which makes it clear he's important to her. Something comes loose in your chest, an emptiness that flutters around.

The brillo guy says, "The mask that fell out of your pocket. When you put it on, what do you become?"

Eyes on you.

"What. Do. You. Become?"

"Nothing. I don't become nothing," you finally say.

Confused looks.

"He's one of us," the girl says. "You're one of us. Show 'em."

You stare, blankly.

The girl lunges forward playfully and grabs twice at your pants. She pulls away holding your mask. "See?"

"Listen, we're the good guys," the MS kid—Franco something—says, not unkindly.

You lunge and grab the mask back, suddenly, without really knowing why. The girl looks at you, pissed off. "Hey!"

"No love," the soccer kid laughs.

"We're like you," the brillo kid says.

"Yeah," the soccer kid says. He reaches in his pack

and pulls out a welder's mask. But it's weird. It's painted up like a skull, and big, goofy slinkies are glued to its visor plate.

When you look over at the others, each of them is holding a mask. Each one made unique with the addition of decorations, painting, trinkets.

Handmade.

Hello, my friend. I'm here. I'm real.

"Kid. What do you become when you put on your mask?" the girl says, laughing in disbelief? Anger? Confusion?

"I never . . . haven't put it on, yet," you say, finally.

Laughter.

"Dude, what did you even make it for?"

"The, uh . . . voice told me . . . It told me to."

Smiles all around.

"Yeah, I get that. Believe me, I do, kid," Franco says. "Your name is Stephen. I'm Franco. That's Dora and Michael and Taft."

"You need to try that mask on," Franco says. "Uh . . . later. Not here."

"Can you imagine your first time being in *school*," Dora says, scandalized over something he doesn't yet know.

"Try it later, when you're alone. Somewhere safe."

For some reason, you know this is your cue. You begin your exit.

"And, kid, uh . . . Stephen," Franco says, and you like your name being spoken by him. "Come back tomorrow and tell us what you are. We'll be here, waiting.

"Welcome to the weird, kid. You're not alone."

On the walk back to the cafeteria, in the sun, alone, you turn your face up to the sky. And just like that, it's day one again.