

THE WORLD WITHOUT A FACE

A MONO-PLAY

by Anna Halas

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Translated into English by Anna Halas (2024)

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Scene 1

October. Dina, a thirty-year-old woman in a worn leather jacket and dishevelled hair, sits sobbing on a bench in the middle of a park. Noise and whispers surround her as silhouettes of people come and go. The ground is covered with colourful leaves, which begin to “dance” whenever the wind blows.

Dina: A thirty-year-old woman sits on a park bench, sobbing like a lost three-year-old. Shame on you, Dina. Adults don't behave like this in public. *(She asks herself)* Even if they've just lost their loved ones? *(She answers herself)* Especially if they've just lost their loved ones. Grief needs silence. Cry in private, at home into a pillow, not scaring the squirrels in the park!

Dina looks around for a squirrel.

(justifies herself) I just buried my mum and ... another mum. I have the right to mourn! Grieving in a square... *(contradicts herself)* How can grief fit into a square... It either exists or it doesn't.

Dina gets up and begins to collect leaves.

Dina: When I was a child, I had one mum, just like most people. Every morning, she and I would walk the dog and buy buns. The bakery was on the ground floor of our house, and the scent of fresh baking would drift through our window as soon as the baker took out the first batch of blueberry jam buns. I didn't care much for blueberry jam, so we usually waited for the aroma of apples and cinnamon.

Dina imitates the sound of a trumpet.

Dina: That was the cue. (*quickly*) Mum would drape the jacket over me, and we would hurry down the stairs to get there before the plump lady who always bought our favourite buns for her numerous grandchildren. I would wait outside the bakery with the dog as mum dashed in, calling from the doorway.

“Two apple and cinnamon buns! And please, don’t sell all the buns to her like last time!”

“Come on, ladies, how could I forget about you?”

“But last time you did forget, and my girl had no bun. If you had agreed to put aside two apple buns for me, I wouldn’t have had to race up the stairs.”

“No, no... I know people like that. You save for them and then they never come.”

Dina: But there was something enchanting about that sprint. In our otherwise routine, sometimes even monotonous lives, a trip to buy buns turned into a significant event. The worries, doubts, fear of not making it in time, the cherished goal, the victory, the joy... (*Dina closes her eyes and leans her head back*).

Dina: During that magical ritual, my mum appeared to me as a genuine sorceress, as depicted in fairy tales. (*mysteriously*) I believed she had the gift of recognising people. Hundreds of faces greeted us at the bakery, and she would identify and call them by name.

“Good morning, Mrs. Jones. How is your son? Has he come back from his business trip to Africa? Not yet? You must be very worried about him...”

“Ms. Williams! I’m so glad to see you! Your new hat looks wonderful on you! It’s not new? That’s surprising! There’s something different about you today, I can’t quite put my finger on it!”

“Hello, Ms. Wilson! We haven’t seen you in ages! Have you been to the resort? How was it? Did you see a dolphin? Hey, Dina! Ms. Wilson saw a real dolphin.”

Dina: To me, they all looked alike, and I couldn’t fathom how mum could distinguish Mrs. Jones from Ms. Williams when both wore drab grey cloaks and sported peculiar hairstyles resembling bird nests. Sometimes, I would gaze at their hair, anticipating a little sparrow to tumble out, just like the one my mother and I discovered on our balcony last summer.

Dina picks up a small sparrow from the ground, warms it with her breath until it starts to chirp, and puts it in a nest in a tree.

Dina: I used to wait for my mum at the bakery door, and when she emerged, I'd take her hand, and we'd head to the park in silence to walk the dog. There, we'd sit on a bench, pull out our fresh buns, and savour every bite. We'd look at each other in silence, then burst into laughter.

Dina starts laughing out loud.

Dina: *(stops laughing, looks serious)* One time, it was completely different. A woman bolted out of the bakery, and I sprinted after her. After a while, I understood she wasn't going to the park, and that realisation made my stomach churn. The dog and I rushed back to the bakery, where my mum was looking around in despair for us. She didn't reprimand me for my absent-mindedness, but she didn't laugh when we ate the buns in the park.

Dina lies down on a bench and looks dreamily up at the sky.

Scene 2

Dina: Our idyllic days lasted until I started first grade. I didn't like school, and on the first day, I begged my mum not to send me back.

"Mummy, I don't like school. Can I please not go anymore?"

"Everyone goes to school, and you won't be an exception, my dear."

At first, studying wasn't too hard, but I couldn't make any friends.

"Mummy, I can't tell who's who. The children don't want to be friends with me because I can't remember their names."

"Give it some time. You'll soon start to tell them apart."

Dina: Time passed, but I still couldn't tell students from teachers. Once, I felt sick in art class and an ambulance rushed me to the hospital. I don't remember much. Doctors and nurses swirled around me, while my mum and dad, whom I recognised by their voices, seemed to emerge from the ground.

"What's wrong with our child? Is she dying?"

"Calm down. We are doing everything we can. Could you please let us work?"

"What's going on?"

“We’re doing our job. Don’t get in our way. To the operating theatre, now!”

Dina: In an instant, several fireballs flared above me, and a pleasant warmth spread through my body. For a moment, I felt blissfully calm and enveloped in a velvety indifference. A sly thought crept into my mind that I must be feeling just like our dog, who had died peacefully in his sleep a week ago. I felt so at peace for him. If death is this warm and pleasant, then he’s much better off in heaven than in our cold world.

“The pulse is weakening!”

“Oxygen!”

“Can someone fix my mask?”

“A lot of blood loss!”

Dina: To my great surprise, the next morning I opened my eyes not to my dog in the sky, but to a room with a chipped ceiling and dirty windows. Timidly, I looked around and saw a strange creature with a bandaged face in the bed next to mine. Its curious eyes seemed to smile at me. My mind urged caution towards this unknown being, but my heart was glad it didn’t have a face I couldn’t remember. I smiled sincerely, and the creature’s eyes glowed even brighter.

“Hi there.”

“Hi there.”

“I’m Dina.”

“I’m Max.”

“Are you in pain?”

“It hurts, but I’m a real man, I’ll endure it.”

Dina: The creature turned out to be a comical fellow who had undergone significant facial surgery the day before. He entertained me with jokes throughout the day.

“Under which tree does a hare sit in the rain?”

“I don’t know... maybe under an oak tree?”

“Under the wet one!”

“When is it easiest for a black cat to get into a house?”

“At night!”

“Nope! When the door is open!”

“What’s the difference between a horse and a needle?”

“I have no idea... just tell me.”

“On a horse, you jump up first and then sit down, but on a needle, you sit down first and then jump up.”

Dina: I pleaded with him to stop because laughing made my stomach ache. It was covered with multiple layers of iodine-soaked bandages for some reason. Nurses entered quietly, set up drips, checked our temperatures, and departed without a word. In the evening, a grey-haired Doctor appeared with a group of interns, explaining our conditions to them with animated gestures. The interns, who looked wise, took notes in their notebooks and made muffled noises in response. The Doctor called us Patient One and Patient Two.

“Patient One has had multiple surgeries for a cleft lip, commonly known as a hare lip. The latest procedure went smoothly, and the patient is making a rapid recovery. Dear interns, jot this down quickly. I can’t spend my time dictating everything to you. What kind of people are you? If you haven’t learned to write, use recorders!”

Dina: I was trying to imagine what a hare lip looked like, and for some reason, it struck me that my new friend must have been bitten by a hare. The thought frightened me, and I didn’t dare ask him how it could have happened.

When they approached, I prepared to listen carefully, eager to understand the bandages on my stomach and why laughing hurt so much. Doctor mumbled something quickly, then spoke in a sinister voice, stretching his words: “Patient Two is adopted.” Instead of mumbling back, several students shouted loudly.

“Ouch!”

“Poor thing!”

“How so?”

“What a pity...”

Dina: One of them even dropped a pen on the floor and spent several minutes crawling under my bed looking for it. When Doctor and interns left, I froze in an unnatural position on the bed. My thoughts were racing uncontrollably. They cut my stomach because I was “adopted”. I didn’t understand what kind of disease this was or how it was treated. The tone in which Doctor

announced my diagnosis and the interns' reactions left little doubt: this disease is fatal, and I will die soon. My immediate thought was how much my mum and dad would miss me. Last week, when our dog died, my mum sat crying in the kitchen at night, and my dad tried to comfort her. It was frightening to imagine how much she would miss me.

When I came to senses, I turned to the wall, ignoring my neighbour's attempts to make me laugh.

“What's the difference between falling from the 1st and 10th floors? You don't know? Falling from the 1st floor feels like - boom! – “aaah!” Falling from the 10th – “aaah!” - boom!”

“How do you know when summer ends and autumn begins? Think about it! No guesses? With the letters S and A!”

“Head on, head off, head on, head off. What is it? Well... Well... The limp man behind the fence!”

Dina: My stomach pain had subsided, but my chest continued to ache relentlessly. I was certain it was a sign of my “adopted” disease. When a nurse came in, I mustered the courage to ask her,

“When will I die?”

“Ha-ha-ha. You'll outlive Moses. They removed an unnecessary part of your stomach that was causing trouble. Now it won't bother you anymore.”

Dina: I was relieved that the thing making me “adopted” had been cut out, but my doubts lingered. A few days later, I was discharged and sent home, while my friend Max, who had been bitten by an unknown hare, remained in the hospital to entertain the nurses with his riddles.

Scene 3

Dina: High school was where my nightmare began. I realised that not only my mom but everyone else had the magical ability to recognise faces. We had various teachers, mostly women, and I could only identify them by their shapes. The Maths teacher was as long and thin as a pole, with skirts reaching her heels, making her appear almost transparent. The Biology teacher resembled a neighbourhood marmot with her blonde curls and short legs. The Chemistry teacher was the easiest to recognise; she bounced down the corridor like a ball, with everyone stepping aside to let her pass. Her laugh was peculiar, sounding as if she had swallowed a hundred and twenty ugly frogs, each croaking in her stomach in turn.

Dina tries to imitate the frog's laughter and croaking at the same time.

Dina: The magical ability to recognise faces that I longed for never came to me. My teachers started looking at me sideways and advised my mum to transfer me to a school for special children, as they found my behaviour inadequate. I didn't greet teachers in the corridors, couldn't participate in team games requiring face recognition, and was labelled a "dumb person", a label I carried until the end of secondary school.

"Your girl will be better off with people like her. Believe me, I'm saying this from the bottom of my heart. I'm trying to help you make the right decision."

"You will only do her a favour by finding a suitable institution for her. The children don't want to accept her, and the teachers struggle with her. You can't imagine our workload! We can't give her the attention she needs!"

"Your child is stupid! Yes, I'm not afraid to call a spade a spade! She doesn't belong among normal children!"

"I understand your feelings. I would be worried too. But you see how it is. You're such a nice, smart woman... and your child is so... strange. You have to accept it."

Dina: My mum saw me in a different light, always assuring me that I was smarter than those who labelled me otherwise. I wanted to believe her, but I couldn't. I tried several times to talk to mum about my mysterious "adopted" illness, but my fear of upsetting her outweighed my need to know the truth. I miss you so much, mum!

Dina sits down on a bench and looks up at the sky.

Dina: The truth revealed itself out of the blue, when least expected. I left school, and after several unsuccessful job attempts, I found my ideal place at a local cinema. As a cameraman's assistant, I barely had to interact with people. Following the trial period, the cinema's director, a young yet grey-haired man, summoned me to his office.

"Dina, we'd like to hire you as a permanent employee. You're responsible, modest, and you don't meddle in others' affairs. Bring your documents, and we'll get everything set up. But don't think this means you can start spending hours chatting with the girls at the checkout!"

Dina: I returned home, overjoyed, and immediately began searching for my birth certificate. Since passports were only issued at sixteen, my only identification was this mysterious certificate, which I had never seen before and had no idea what it looked like.

With my mum out, I desperately rummaged through all the drawers where my certificate might be. It wasn't with the rest of our family's documents, and I began to suspect it was lost, explaining why I had never seen it. My desire to get a job was stronger than my frustration, so I reached the furthest shelves filled with old junk, where documents were unlikely to be. To my surprise, I found a yellowed folder with a piece of paper inside. The certificate's edge was torn, as if our dog had occasionally chewed on it. The poor condition of the document didn't spoil my excitement. I hurriedly started to pack it into my backpack but then decided to examine it more closely. I read the worn letters repeatedly, but the meaning remained the same. It revealed that my real mother was my aunt, my mum's sister, and the father's name was blank.

I heard a soft rustling beside me, looked up, and saw my mum - my first mum. She was as pale as a lotus flower, her eyes filled with despair. I approached her, hugged her as tightly as I could, and whispered "Thank you" in her ear. I remembered my childhood diagnosis as an "adopted" child and realised that I had often wondered how I had come to be with these beautiful people, but I had always set those thoughts aside to bask in their love for me.

Our relationship with my mum and dad remained unchanged. It seemed they were even relieved not to have to fear the truth anymore. Working at the cinema brought me great satisfaction. I disliked films about people, particularly melodramas, as distinguishing between nearly identical faces and hairstyles was a challenge. Following the storyline was difficult, and initial viewings often ended in confusion. My job provided a unique advantage - I could watch the same film multiple times without feeling lost. I took pride in securing premiere tickets for my mum and dad, arranging front-row seats so they could watch from my studio.

Scene 4

Dina: A few years later, my dad passed away from a stroke. It happened unexpectedly, leaving us stunned. That morning, he left for work with his usual smile.

"Have a wonderful day, my dear girls, and take care of yourselves!"

Dina: Later that afternoon, his office called to say he had been admitted to the hospital in serious condition. By evening, he was gone. Mum aged before my eyes. I watched as her hands became etched with thousands of fine lines, her voice took on the brittleness of a frosty winter morning, and her back curved, like a tree bending in the wind.

On the day of the funeral, an unknown woman in an unusual outfit arrived at our doorstep. She wore an extravagant black hat that lacked a veil, giving her an unconventional appearance. She hesitated, glancing nervously at the gathering until my mum, her eyes filled with tears, looked up and emitted a heart-wrenching cry. The woman rushed to my mum, embracing her frail figure as both wept openly. As they mourned beside my dad's casket, I sat quietly sobbing, curled up in a chair by the stove. Deep within, my subconscious projected a haunting future where my mum, unable to bear my dad's loss, would leave me alone within these familiar walls.

In the evening, we were making our way home when, for some reason, a woman in a hat started walking alongside us. We moved in silence, our progress slow, resembling snails struggling through tall, impenetrable grass. The three of us entered the apartment together. Without delay, my mum suggested we gather in the kitchen for mint tea. Seated at the table, my mum then took the chance to formally introduce me to our mysterious guest.

"I'd like you to meet someone, Dina. This is my sister Elvira. Your mum."

We drank our tea in silence for a few minutes, until my first mother requested to lie down. She excused herself, leaving us alone in the kitchen. After an awkward pause, we began chatting as if we had known each other forever.

"Do you enjoy working at the cinema?"

"Yes, I really do."

"Is your boss strict?"

"He's pretty laid-back. He appreciates that I keep my focus on the job."

"Do they pay you on time? It's tough these days."

"Always on time. No issues there."

Dina: Our conversation was easy-going and even took on a playful tone at times. It felt like I was conversing with a reflection in the mirror that had always been slightly out of focus.

Dina takes a mirror out of her bag and starts looking at herself.

Dina: As I looked at her face, I could discern her eyes, nose, and lips, yet the complete picture eluded me. I shared my struggle, and to my surprise, she confided that she, too, had difficulty

recognising people. Knowing I wasn't alone brought a fleeting comfort, overshadowed by the sorrow of her past departure from my life.

“Why?” lingered on my tongue, but I held it back, unwilling to disrupt our fragile conversation. My birth mother was the first to speak about our relationship. “It pains me... deeply... I couldn't provide what your adoptive parents did.”

Dina: Although I had no words, the urge to understand pushed me forward, and I delicately posed the question.

“Why did you make the decision to give me away?”

Dina: This is how I came to know the story of my arrival into this world. At just fifteen, my birth mum became pregnant by an unknown man, a scandal that brought shame upon her respected family in our small town. Unable to hide her pregnancy any longer, they sent her to her older sister's house in the city, where she was to disappear into anonymity, give birth, and relinquish the child to an orphanage. My first mum, her sister, adamantly opposed this plan and insisted that she and her husband would adopt the child upon its birth. My new grandparents refused to accept this, severing ties with my parents forever. After my birth, my birth mother returned briefly to her parents' home but couldn't remain there. Two years later, in the dead of night, she packed her bags and fled to the other side of the world in search of adventure. She found adventure indeed, but happiness eluded her grasp like a lizard's tail slipping away at the first hint of danger.

Scene 5

Dina: My second mum remained with us. She turned out to be a gentle soul, though just as scatterbrained as I was. Managing us was a challenge for my first mother, but her daily concerns kept her from longing to reunite with my dad too soon. Despite her stooped posture and worn appearance, she faithfully rose each morning to whip up a scrumptious breakfast. Our ultimate delight was her homemade apple and cinnamon rolls, a recipe she secured from the baker before he moved across town.

One evening after work, I stopped by the pharmacy to pick up medication for my first mum and accidentally brushed against a medical magazine lying on a table near the entrance. As I bent down to retrieve it, a peculiar headline caught my eye: “People Without Faces”. Intrigued, I began

reading the article, which detailed the struggles of a woman who couldn't recognise others and suffered deeply because of it. With each word, my heart pounded harder. My hands turned icy, yet my body felt like it was on fire. I almost blurted out to the pharmacist:

“Can I borrow this magazine, please?”

She shrugged indifferently. I snatched the magazine and dashed home at full speed. Both mums were seated on the sofa engrossed in a documentary about aliens. Bursting into the room like a hurricane, I hurried towards them. Startled, they asked what was wrong, but I couldn't utter a word, gasping heavily as though I had just finished a marathon with pockets full of rocks.

After regaining control of myself, I quickly read them a brief article on prosopagnosia, a neurological condition that impairs facial recognition. My second mum quickly grasped why I was so excited, having some experience with it herself, though not as severely as me. My first mum looked at me anxiously, puzzled by my sudden outburst. “We're not stupid, mum!” I shouted joyfully.

It marked my moment of triumph, a spontaneous realisation of self-awareness and self-acceptance. Throughout my life, those around me often perceived me as either eccentric or simply nearsighted. For years, my first mum had been my sole supporter, even without fully grasping the daily challenges I encountered. Even now, as I detailed my issue to her, she raised one eyebrow in genuine surprise - a gesture reserved for moments of true astonishment - and declared: “I don't see that as a problem. I never did.”

To outsiders, her comment might have seemed indifferent, but to my second mum and me, it resonated as the purest form of love and complete acceptance.

Epilogue.

Dina sits on a bench.

Dina: I had just buried two mums, both claimed by an unknown virus within 12 hours of each other. Now, I am sitting alone on a park bench.

Dina glanced at the imaginary man beside her.

Suddenly, a man joins me, producing an apple and cinnamon bun from a paper bag and studying my face intensely. Meeting his gaze, I recognise the same eyes that had smiled at me years ago in the hospital. He divides the bun and hands me half, his eyes smiling again.

“Hello, Max.”

“Hello, Dina.”

In a world devoid of faces, there are eyes that still connect us.