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Gaby Wohead

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## The Masks We Wear

GABY WOHEAD

**GATHERED IN A TIGHT, TENSION-FILLED HUDDLE,** I inhaled deeply, checking that I still knew how to breathe. The air smelled like a hairspray explosion, the feeling was absolute distress and the sky outside had become strikingly black. I zoned my focus in on the perfect stack of letters my coach held, as he rambled on about how the results didn't matter as much as how hard we tried. Lie.

The results enclosed in that white envelope mattered to everything about me and who I was. Four years of cheerleading memories were flashing through my brain like a slideshow: the countless laughs with my best friends, the exhilarating feeling of being thrown ten feet into the air in front of an entire pep rally, hugging each other when we won playoff games, and sticking together through the tears and smeared mascara when we lost.

I thought back to all those elementary years on the sidelines, in the broken-down bleachers of the old Allen Eagle Stadium, when I wished

that one day I would have the privilege of cheering on the famous Allen Eagle football boys, the big varsity ones. And now, somehow, I had the opportunity. I had paid my dues, worked my way up through middle school, freshman year, and junior varsity, the whole time looking up and admiring the beautiful varsity girls.

I had spent the past months crashing and falling on my butt, leaving bruises, but getting stronger, making every moment count in the challenge to conquer my back tuck, all to ensure my spot on the varsity squad. All this preparation was about to pay off. I had nailed my tumbling pass during tryouts, perfectly executed my stunt without wobbling, and danced with the biggest "pick me" smile on my face. It was such an adrenaline-filled moment, and certainly I had one of the highest scores.

"Gaby Wohead, 42." I snapped back to reality as I heard my name called. Many of my teammates were already outside, with opened letters and exuberant expressions. I clenched my letter and walked toward the glass exit doors. I stepped over two tragedy-struck girls crying just outside the doors on the ground, and avoided eye contact with all the eager, competitive, crazy cheer moms. They looked at me funny as I went to my traditional "letter opening bush," sat down and ripped the paper open.

**I CHOKED ON THE AIR. I STOOD UP AND FORCED MY SHAKY LEGS TO MOVE THEMSELVES, AWAY FROM THE CELEBRATING MASS OF CHEERLEADERS, AWAY FROM THE CONFUSED, EAGER BYSTANDERS, AWAY FROM THE SCREAMS AND THE CRIES AND THE CHAOS.**

I read the first sentence. I read it again. It didn't say congratulations.

"Dear Candidate, we thank you for your interests in the Allen Cheerleading Association. Unfortunately, you were not selected as a member of the 2012-2013 squad."

I choked on the air. I stood up and forced my shaky legs to move themselves, away from the celebrating mass of cheerleaders, away from the confused, eager bystanders, away from the screams and the cries and the chaos. I made it all the way to the smelly dumpster behind the school before my legs gave out. I collapsed, and I allowed the salty tears to stream down my blush-covered cheeks. I didn't even realize it was raining. I didn't acknowledge the nonstop vibrations of my phone. I refused to let my mind

**CHEERLEADING BROUGHT ME AN ESCAPE, AND NO MATTER WHAT WAS GOING ON OUTSIDE OF THE FIELD, WITH MY POM-POMS IN HAND, I ALWAYS FELT RELEVANT.**

reflect on all the aspects of my life that were just ripped out of my hands. I sat there, alone, leaned up against the cold, wet dumpster. I sat there and I cried.

After what seemed like eternity in this timeless bubble of shock, I saw my dad. Almost like a tall, goofy-looking angel, walking from his car in the pouring rain, with a face of pure concern. I saw worry in his eyes that can only be displayed by a loving parent who is hurting for their child. My dad looked comforting, and I ran to him, jumped into his arms - a place that had once protected me from anything that could make me sad.

"I did perfect, Daddy, it's not fair," I said.

He said "I'm proud of you Gaby, because you fought for this with everything you had."

It didn't seem real. We got in the car and drove back to the front of the school, where girls were still gathered, along with other people. I knew I had to stay strong, just temporarily, as I went to hear my best friends discuss what had just happened. I was even more hurt when I found out that barely any of my girls has made the team. I glared at the group taking pictures holding their letters, and did a double take when I processed that the new, never-been cheerleaders had made it. It was almost like someone slapped me right in the face, and the tears started running faster than ever.

**A**fter all the years of preparing for this one moment, I couldn't even fathom my anger and pure hatred for these girls who has never found cheerleading of any interest, until coincidentally, the "big time year", the year of posters and football programs and being on the new stadium field on television on Friday nights. I knew as a cold hard fact that I was much better than them, and my heart literally began to ache as I watched them celebrate. My childhood best friend, Justin, a tall, blond, blue-eyed teddy bear, was dating a girl who had just made the team, and as I stood alone, taking in the nightmare around me, I felt his arms wrap around me.

"I'm so sorry, Gaby," he said with honest sadness in his voice. It felt a little better to know that someone cared, but when I say a little, I mean microscopic. I felt a slight sense of numbness. I felt in that moment that nothing made sense or would ever be how it was supposed to be again.

My identity was in cheer, and I deserved to be able to support the "boys in blue" because there was truly nothing I loved more in the world. I cannot put into words how I felt about it, like it was what I was destined to do. For some reason, when I tumbled onto that field, and peered out into

the blue-and-white-colored crowd, I felt the same happiness and excitement that little kids feel on Christmas morning.

Cheerleading brought me an escape, and no matter what was going on outside of the field, with my pom-poms in hand, I always felt relevant. I felt a sense of belonging with my teammates, because of the bond that we shared that other people couldn't quite understand. We knew each others' strengths and weaknesses, and we knew that no matter what ridiculous number of sprints our coaches forced us to do, we were going to pee our pants laughing the whole time they yelled at us. We knew that we were always together, and if people were to judge us, they could judge us all, because it was just jealousy. Being very secretive about my problems and insecurities, I suppose cheerleading served as some sort of perfect, happy, pretty girl mask for me. It was a superficial façade for the girl I really was underneath, and it gave me two temporary hours of happiness once a week under the stadium lights. It made me feel recognized and necessary, something that I have always struggled with and still have a hard time with today.

So, I suppose the obvious lesson I could have learned from having my childhood dream ripped from my fingertips was that life isn't fair. Oh, but obviously this broken, insecure, fake-happy cheerleader must have already known such a thing. No, I didn't learn that life isn't fair. I learned that we all wear masks in this life, to hide who we truly are. Although cheerleading was what I did, it was also too much a part of who I was.

This striking epiphany hit me hard, and still continues to affect me. Not making the team still irks me to this day, 8 months later, because I feel strongly about the fact that I deserve to be on that team more than many people who are luckier than I am. Yet, as time passes, I realize how freedom is acknowledging that mask that we all wear, and possessing the strength to take it off. Maybe I didn't voluntarily take it off, rather it was thrown away, but without it, I can clearly see the world, and they can see me. Being the insecure girl without cheerleading has taught me how to



**A RAINY DAY** TAMANEECA SMITH

be myself, an individual, without the safety of the team to fall back on, without 23 other girls who looked and acted just like I did. I cannot say I'm not still bitter about the situation in general, but at least I know I have stood strong in the face of adversity, stared it in the eye, with my own two eyes. Maskless.