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## For Granted

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## For Granted

Jeanne Smith

The last few nights I've had the same dream that I'm wearing this horrible mask and can't remove it from my face. It's gold and angular. The nose points down, and the eyes are warped triangles. The funny thing is, in the dream, my kids can't tell I'm wearing the mask. I cry to them, "Help me get this thing off!" They just giggle and take no notice. I tug at the plaster and feel that if I continue, I'll tear the flesh off my face.

I work in this retail store downtown. We have all kinds of home décor and gardening items. The other day when I was on my smoke break, it was raining like hell, so I stood in the doorway of the receiving dock. I had one foot in the door and the other in the stock room. I heard a couple of the guys from shipping talking about ripping off some of the furniture and selling it. They also talked about stealing some of the expensive window treatments or wall pictures we have and returning them at the store across town for a store credit. I just stood there minding my own business, having my smoke.

After a while, one of them came up to me and asked me for a light. My mother always warned me that beginning conversations with lighting a person's cigarette is trouble. Of course, I lit his cigarette. The one thing I couldn't do was say "No."

We talked a bit, just chitchat. Then the other one walked up and asked me if I heard anything they were talking about. I told him I didn't. They said, "Good," and I finished my break.

The rest of the day I thought about what they said. I'm a single mother, and money is always really tight. It would be nice to have some extra money for the kids.

I unloaded this huge box of candles for the rest of the afternoon, pricing them and putting them on the shelf. \$4.99. \$4.99. \$4.99. \$4.99. \$4.99. \$4.99. Pricing is tedious work. \$4.99. \$4.99. \$4.99. I thought about how little I make at this job. \$4.99. \$4.99. \$4.99. Then I put one in my pocket. \$4.99. \$4.99. \$4.99. I couldn't believe I had done it. I had never stolen anything in my life before that. I said I wasn't going to do it ever again...after this time. I put another one in my pocket and continued pricing. \$4.99. \$4.99. \$4.99. Two candles on store credit. That would be over ten dollars.

After work, I ran across town to the other store. I forgot to take off my apron before I went into the store. When I noticed it, I was already in line to exchange the candles. The girl asked if I had my receipt. I told her no, they were a gift. She snorted. She was probably saying to herself that I was a real nightmare. Trash for trying to pull a scam like that. I got the credit and then I bought some packages of noodles and sauce for dinner. I felt strange serving stolen noodles to my girls. I keep thinking about karma. I read about it in the Time Life Mysteries series. In five years I'll probably be robbed of everything I own by some twenty-three-year old drifter with a guitar. I'll come home one day, and everything will be gone.

(Continued on the following 2 pages)

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The noodles were terrible anyway. Tonight the phone rang. It was a wrong number, but the caller refused to hang up. Instead, she kept insisting that I knew her from Ivy Falls High School. I told her I never went to high school and to leave me alone. I hung up the phone.

Before I went to sleep, I put on this old pink dress of my mother's. The smell of moldy fabric and attics brought back memories. The last time I wore it I was seventeen, and I thought I was going to the prom with Billy Duncan. He told me he couldn't go with me the night before. It suited me just fine. I never was a dancer. I couldn't zip the dress up the back all the way. The arms were too tight at the forearm and too puffy at the bicep. The skirt length was just above the knee, and the whole thing shot out around me like an upside down funnel. I took off the dress and went to sleep. If someone said to make a wish, I would wish for a real night's sleep. I don't have dreams anymore. Only a few hours of choppy blackness. One of the girls always wakes up in the night with bad dreams or a stomachache or something. Jessie is ten and can't get through the night without some nightmare about her being kidnapped and nearly killed. I can't make her stop worrying. Sometimes I think they talk too much at school about the dangers of talking to strangers. This time last year, I was married...technically. Common law. Guess that's why he thought he could disappear like that without saying a word to anybody. I thought he'd leave all along, and then one day he did.

This morning the girls wanted pancakes with fruit. I poured each of them a bowl of cereal and some orange juice in these little glasses with bears on them that say, "Home is like a hug."

We ate together silently. I didn't eat much. The girls kicked the legs of the table and made their cereal slosh around in the bowls. I told them to quit it. Julie, my youngest, asked me if I liked her anymore. I told her I did. "Well, you always seem so tired," she said.

My eldest slapped her across the back and told her to be quiet. We finished the meal. After breakfast, I remembered that I'd forgotten to listen for the weather. I turned on the radio to an AM station. The girls groaned. On the radio, the announcer said there would be more rain today. I wasn't surprised. Work was slow today. A typical Wednesday, I guess. On my break, one of those guys from shipping, Chris, offered to get me a sofa.

"No one will know," he said. I'm not so sure. I told him I'd think about it.

After work, I went to have a drink with him. We talked about work and our families. I didn't find him attractive in particular or interesting enough to think about later. Still, he was sort of nice. I looked at my watch. I told him I'd better be getting home. The girls must have been home alone for a few hours now, and they would be worried. Chris walked me home. I told him I did want the sofa as long as he was sure it wouldn't be a problem. "I'd like to see more of you," he said.

I told him I didn't think it would be a good idea. "I'm no fun," I said. "You'll see." It had stopped raining, but the sky was still soaked with soggy clouds.



The front porch of my house was dark and cluttered with leaves, and the door handle had a mess of those ads that get attached with a rubber band. The windows were dark in the house, like nobody had been there all day. I told Chris I'd see him tomorrow and that he should go. He said he'd just wait to see that I got in okay. I dug in my purse for the key to the front door and then put it into the keyhole.

There were no lights on in the house. I called out to the girls, but there was no answer. I switched on the hall light and made my way through the house. Chris followed behind me. I went to each room and didn't find my girls. Chris asked if they could be at a neighbor's or something. I shouted at him that they were supposed to be home and made him leave. I sat down on the couch and put my face into my hands. I couldn't think of a single place to look for them. We didn't have any family near us. I phoned over to a friend of the girls', and they hadn't seen them since school. My mind got all jumbled up, like I was having a nightmare or something. It was nine-thirty.

I decided I should call the police. They sent someone over, but he was a major waste of my time. He must have asked me seventy-five questions. Did I have any enemies? Had the girls acted in a strange way recently? Were things okay between us? A bunch of silly questions, if you ask me...and half of 'em were downright insulting. The cop left, and I sat on the couch to have a smoke. A round ashtray fit on my left knee where I could balance it if I had my feet up on the coffee table. No telling how many I smoked. Each cigarette burned down to the filter nearly singeing my fingers. The girls hated my smoking. I quit for three days once, and the girls got really hopeful that it was for real. They made little cards for me that said, "Thank you for not smoking." The next day, Jessie broke her arm climbing a tree. I was a wreck. The fall knocked her unconscious, and I wasn't sure what would happen. I've smoked since then.

The doorbell rang. I opened my eyes and lifted my head. It was two in the morning. My neck ached from sleeping so long sitting up. The ashtray had spilled all over the carpet, and my fingers stung from a nasty scalded spot between my smoking fingers. I was groggy when I opened the door and saw Jessie sitting on the porch, shivering, with Julie, asleep, in her arms. I knelt down beside her and touched her face.

"I'm sorry," she said. "We were going to go away so you could be happy again."

I drew back my arms to my body and crossed them. I looked at the girls. Jessie looked at me, real sad like. That's when I slapped her hard across the face. I picked up Julie and led Jessie into the house. We didn't say anything to each other. She went to her room and shut the door. Through the walls I could hear her whimpering and mumbling to herself. I took Julie to her room and put her into her bed. Her eyes opened slightly for a second and then opened wide to look at me.

"Mommy!" she said happily.

I stood up and turned away from her. The door banged shut behind me. I didn't care if they woke up in the morning.