**The Art of Pretending**

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*The stage is dark, no lights illuminate the stage, and the audience is left with nothing. Slowly, a plain, dim, grey light appears on stage. It slowly spreads until the stage is lit in a soft grey light. The simmer of violins can be heard in the background. The violins begin to crescendo lightly, and reach their peak; still very quiet, just a soft hum in the background, and yet, it is clear that it is louder, and that the suspense has grown. The NARRATOR then appears on stage, standing still in the corner at upstage left, only just lit by the dim glow of the soft light. The NARRATOR slowly begins to walk further onto the stage - a spotlight illuminating them - and as they do the stage comes to life around them. The music in the background becomes spiritly, and more full of joy, other instruments now dancing with the joyous chorus of violins. Lights embedded in the black background curtain now illuminate, twinkling like stars. Little candles hanging in the air at downstage illuminate, the flicker of their light dancing to the chorus of instruments now playing. As the NARRATOR continues their slow walk to centre stage, the lights that they pass - both the candles above their head and the lights on the background curtain - illuminate. When the NARRATOR arrives at centre stage, the lights that they do not pass, on stage right, illuminate. Now, the entire stage is alight, dancing the soft hues of the lights, and the gentle melody of the music.*

*Here, at centre stage, there is an old armchair - worn with age and love - having previously been covered by a black curtain sheet that also twinkles with the lights, the chair blends into the background. The chair is uncovered by the NARRATOR in a casual manner, the lights twinkling before turning off; the blanket is draped casually onto the ground. The NARRATOR takes a seat. The NARRATOR gazes out at the audience, a soft smile on their lips, and a manner of knowing about them. They are all-knowing: they are the past; the present; the future (this will be demonstrated by the clothing that the NARRATOR wears, and will change as the story continues). Currently, the NARRATOR is wearing long, brown pants and a white button-down shirt, with brown formal shoes. The NARRATOR sits and looks out at the audience, the knowing smile still gracing their lips, and the twinkle in their eye is comparable to the gleam of the stars still glistening behind them. They sit casually in the armchair; their legs crossed nicely and their armed braced gently on the arms of the chair. When the NARRATOR speaks, they speak as much to the audience as they are speaking to themselves - closing their eyes, and taking in the atmosphere of their surroundings - subsequently finally delivering the first lines.*

NARRATOR:

We are introduced to the art of pretending at an early age.

*Behind the NARRATOR, the lights on the curtain are flickering, and disappearing.*

Most of us were scared of the monsters that lurked underneath the bed. And so what did our parents tell us?

*Shadows of monster-like figures dance across the stage. The stage lights slightly as two actors are illuminated centre left and centre right stage, one male, one female.*

MUM and DAD:

 Pretend that the monster is not there, and it will go away.

*The stage dims.*

NARRATOR:

 And the monster did go away. And so we believed our parents for years.. Until we found out that the monsters never really left…

 And growing up, as children do, most of us scrapped our arms and legs whilst playing outside. Again, we were drawn in by our parents, cradled in their arms as they whispered words of comfort in our ears. And then when we had stopped clinging to them, and the trail of snot and tears left an imprint on our young faces, our parents repeated their vague advice - always insisting that we look past it immediately.

*Stage lights up again as PARENTS give their lines.*

MUM and DAD:

 It is nothing but a minor scratch maybe. You will be fine. Just don not look at it and it will not hurt. Stop your whining. You should grow up and quit your complaining. If it will not matter in five years, do not bother spending (more than) five minutes on it. Pretend that it is not there. Pretend that it does not hurt.

*The NARRATOR stands and walks around the back of the chair, where a simple tie is waiting. We watch as the NARRATOR finishes tying the fitment around his neck, and walks back the front of the chair, sitting back down in a slightly more relaxed position; they appear a bit more friendly, a bit more open and welcoming.*

NARRATOR:

 We end up growing up from our youth and going through primary school, pretending that the monsters under our beds are not real. And that our scratches do not hurt, when in reality they did, and some still do, because on the outside some may be faded scars, but on the inside the wounds go far deeper. We know now that the monsters were not real, but to a young child, they seem very, very real. No one tells the little boy or the little girl that not everything goes away if you pretend it is not there.

*The NARRATOR stands again as actors with bit parts walk onto the stage. They are dressed in similar clothing to the NARRATOR, but less attention-grabbing. Two of the bit part characters hold a dark grey jacket and midnight-black bowler hat. They flow fluently around the NARRATOR and quickly assist him in putting on the ensemble. They exit again, and the NARRATOR turns to speak to the audience again, seating themselves on the arm of the chair.*

 We grow up to become teenagers, and we pretend that we do not care about anything but ourselves, because it is cool, right? Everyone will think that you are so strong and independent if you just keep saying that you do not give a shit, right? When we grow up to be teenagers we pretend that we do not care what other people say. That we just block it out and that their words are not latching their claws into us, and tearing us apart. We hold everything in and pretend as if everything is okay. People think us cool if we pretend that we do not care, when in reality we care so much that our insecurities get to us, because we care too much about what people think about us. We care what we look like so much that we go to the extreme to try and get to a point where we are completely happy with ourselves. We care so much about pretending not to care about everything, that we end up becoming someone else. We end up changing ourselves, and end up losing ourselves in the process.

 When puberty hits, we are told:

GIRL and BOY:

 Pretend that they’re in love with me when they tear me down. Pretend that each lie and rumour they spread is not devouring me. Pretend that I don’t care what others think. Pretend like I am not wasting away on the inside. Pretend I’m not in love with you. Pretend not to be interested in whatever it is, when I am, and I just want to scream but I can’t. So just keep going through the motions and keep pretending. Because if I do, I’m following the norm, and this is cool, *(sarcastic)* and it’s not like I want to be something else. So… Just. Keep. Pretending.

NARRATOR:

 No one tells us that there is a big difference between friendly teasing and bullying. Some of us grow up as the bullies because we were told that if you love someone, pretend to dislike them and it will go away. Or we grow up as the victims who pretend that we are okay, when we are not. We pretend that we are not hurt by people’s actions because we were told to pretend that we do not care about anything and to pretend that the monsters are not real, because they will go away if they are not truly there.

 What is it with people telling you to pretend to be stupid so people will like you? Are we really going to pretend like that is something that is okay to tell a teenager? We are told to pretend to care about someone so that they will open up to us. We are told that we should brake and burn anyone that falls in loves with us, because it is fun. And that disgusts me.

There is a lot of pretending and avoiding going on in our teens. We pretend we do not see things that are wrong, that we could have easily stopped or prevented. We pretend we are okay when in reality, most of us are far from being okay. Most of us pretend to live, and enjoy these moments, when in reality we are barely surviving, and we are dying inside.

Growing older means that you are realising some of the stuff that you were being told is utter bullshit. Some of us outgrow the bully phase, some of us outgrow the ‘stop giving a shit’ phase, some of is outgrow the pretend to be stupid phase, and some of us outgrow the pretend to care about them phase. But what all of us still keep holding onto is the pretend that the monster is not there, and it will go away.

We grow up thinking that ignoring our monsters and fears, and never confronting them, will make us nappy in the end, when in fact, it ends up tearing some of us apart. We grow up ignoring our feelings and our problems when we should talk about them.

GIRL and BOY:

I pretend that I don’t love you, so it’s easier for me to pretend that my heart isn’t breaking. I pretend not to hear what you say, so that it’s easier for me to ignore the words that hurt. I pretend not to care what you do, so that it’s easier for me to forget the actions that will break me.

NARRATOR:

Why is it that a lot of us go through the world, with the art of pretending mastered by such an early age?

*The NARRATOR moves to the side of the stage as characters begin to appear on the stage. All children that are pushed around are pushed on the stage trolleys by their parents - the symbolism of the adults in our lives fuelling the art of pretending in our lives, and manipulating us to believe certain things. First, a gamer boy. His headphones are on his ears, and he holds a controller in his hand. He appears to be gaming whilst he sits in an orange beanbag. He can hear slight noises of the game in the background, and his directions to his teammates. His character is seated on a stage trolley. He is being pushed across the stage by his mother and father. As the group reach centre stage, the boy’s words are clear, and spoken out to the audience. The nerd girl is next, her two mothers pushing her on a stage trolley. Her stage is laid out like a library, a tall bookcase lies to the side of the mini-stage, and in her hands she holds a vintage book, its cover an elegant maroon trimmed in a faded gold. She reads it internally, barely looking up from the book to utter her line, as her mothers push her across the stage. A young boy in a typical karate uniform throwing punches and kicks, a stern look on his face - determination clearly present. He is pushed across the stage by his father, a single parent, clearly pushing his son to be proper and dignified, on a stage trolley that has nothing on it. Panting, the karate kid bows, and states his lines in a command-like manner. A sport child is pushed across the stage by their mother and father on the stage trolley. They are standing on a raise, a podium, standing at the top on first place, with their medal around their neck, and a bouquet of flowers on their hands. They are looking out at the crowd, smiling a waving - their smile not quite reaching their eyes. They take a break from the smiling to deliver their lines.*

GAMER BOY:

 Level five, art of pretending.

NERD GRIL:

 Chapter ten, art of pretending.

KARATE KID:

 Red belt, art of pretending.

SPORT KID:

 First place, art of pretending.

NARRATOR:

Whether we like it or not, we all have learnt to have it mastered, so that by the time are teenagers, we have built these walls around ourselves that are as tall as Mount Everest, and as strong as diamonds. Just because we have always feared the monsters under our beds, and we dread that we are not strong enough to face them. And when we do finally pluck up the courage, we find that we have been running from nothing our entire childhood. Maybe there are monsters out there and they have been haunting us, but we can fight them. And we can start by getting rid of the ones under our beds. Stop pretending that the important things do not matter.

Because what would have happened if we were not told to pretend it does not hurt, when in fact it hurts like hell? When all we want to do is cry, and tell someone that we are not okay, and we are hurting like hell, and that we need, we want, someone to tell us that it is going to be alright, instead of being told that we should pretend like everything is okay?

LITTLE KID:

 I know there isn’t a monster under my bed, because I looked.

MUM and DAD:

 It’s okay to cry if it hurts.

TEEN:

 I may be “cool”, but I still care about what you say.

BOY and GIRL:

We know you’re not in love with us, and we’re not going to pretend that it doesn’t hurt, but we’re okay with that.

 I am smart and if you’re not cool with that than I won’t pretend to care.

 I am sorry for pretending to care.

 I do give a shit.

 I do love you.

Words can hurt.

My scars will heal.

I mastered the art of pretending.

And now I’m done with it.

NARRATOR:

Everybody has a certain glow to them. Something that makes them, them. Even when they are pretending. But people glow differently when you are not pretending. And there is something beautiful and slightly fascinating about someone not pretending for the first time. Because it shows that they have stopped pretending not to care. And that are ready. Because you cannot pretend forever,- that is not how life works. Lose the illusions, and be who you really are. Because no matter who you are. What skin colour you wear. What personality you hold. What ideas you create. You are the most beautiful version of you, when you stop pretending to be someone you are not. The monsters will go away, the scars will heal. Your heart will mend, and the words will fade to distant memories. But face your biggest monster of being yourself. Let the words wash away. Someone will always be there to help hold your heart. And the scars are just beautiful reminders. You are beautiful. Be yourself.

So cut the shit. Stop pretending.

Thus, the beginning of *ending the pretending.*