

*When The Mask Slips*



## Here In Hopes of Filling Space

Snuggled, warm, Rizzoli lies in bed slightly awake, covered by the bed's thick blue comforter. Opening one eye, he sees a shaft of morning sun streaming in the window onto the struggling spider plant dangling a single scrawny offshoot. *Needs water!*

As he awakens more, he senses an odd feeling in his stomach; he slips his hand down to his belly button and discovers the skin there feels like *crepe paper...with slight pressure, it just caved in? To make...a cavity? A deep cavity? Opening is lop-sided the size of... a softball. Opening's edge is... dry? Bit raggedy.*

*Odd, I've no pain, no wet blood.* Gently, he moves his finger down the hole. *Sides are lumpy...and craggy, sealed-in somehow.* Deeper and deeper, he puts his rounded hand into the opening until his fingertip stops midway, touching a wrinkled something...*me? Yes, hole goes to the end of my stomach.*

This shocks him out of this phase of icy exploration of his body change and plunges him into lightning-like fear and anticipation. *Am I soon a dead man? Of course, I am. No stomach! I can't eat? Other vital organs likely missing too, causing I don't know what complications? Has to be a new tropical disease got me.*

*No need to worry this anymore, I'm a split-second goner.* Closing his eyes, he fights to calm himself and assume the stoical mindset he needs to accept what seems to be a death penalty.

Next to him, Phoenicia lies sound asleep. Rizzoli debates whether to wake her; no, he decides not to alarm her. *Let her sleep.* Marveling at her serene beauty in sleep he chokes up, then blows her a kiss. *In my whole life I've never loved anyone more than you.*

*She'd urge what? He can hear her words. Rizzoli, look at the positive side. No pain. Sealed up, no blood. Sides of the stomach hole are each braced with...separated by...parallel...hips? And some ribs... like dual towers holding your chest to your butt cheeks and muscled legs. What's more, you still have lungs to breath. And a spinal cord, too.*

*Can't do the positive. I'm humped.* He closes his eyes, regains a stoical mindset, and waits and waits, ready to die.

Time passes.

Risking it, he lifts one leg out from under the covers, foot onto the floor. Then lifts the other. Sitting bedside, he stands and turns to the kitchen hallway. He holds up his long, striped pajama top to see the hole.

*I've no belly button, gone is the last trace of my umbilical cord, that link to my mother; like the mother spider plant vine dangles to its baby offshoot.*

Glancing over his shoulder, he sees his dear Phoenicia's face maybe for the last time, looking beatific under the blue comforter. Then he lets his pajama top down to cover over his stomach hole.

With mincing steps, he goes down the hallway (...*slowly, so I don't snap myself in half, that's it. Keep it together. That's it, guy.*), goes into the kitchen, opens the fridge. He's dying for some orange juice. He gets out the carton.

A noise from behind; he looks and sees Phoenicia, in her tied white robe. She smiles and sleepily utters, "Good morning."

"Good morning." He smiles back slightly and then, orange carton in hand, says, "I don't know how to tell you, but I'll make it quick. I'm dying. Look at this." He pulls up his pajama top. "Hole into my stomach halfway to my back."

“Listen Rizzoli. Just like you to get all upset about a thing like this.”

“What, it’s nothing? No stomach?”

“In the last year or so, scientists using...”

“Phoenicia, I’m dying. I want to share our feelings together...”

“...scientists using the newest, huge, super-electron, AI microscopes...have unveiled unusual spatial openings inside our bodies that were never before known to humans or shown on any medical machines. Until these new microscopes. Remember, a while ago, when new, super telescopes showed us distant universes we’d never seen before in our cosmos?”

“Phoenicia, where’s my stomach?”

She goes on. He decides to listen.

“Rizzoli, what scientists detected is termed ‘shadowing,’ like your stomach had a shadow hole or interior cavity evolving for a long time while you were not aware of it, all was just normal, right? Until it became a skin opening, a ‘gone shadow hole’ – no longer just an inner shadow hole but a *visible* hole opening out like your stomach.”

*Is she saying a human is-- part here and part not here at the same time? Or, put another way--part flesh and part not, with these invisible empty holes only revealed recently by these super microscopes?*

“I think I get it,” he says. *Do I?*

“Oh, Rizzoli, I forgot, all humans have these various size empty holes but cannot see them, oh, sorry, did I say that before? But, this is key, even now for still unknown reasons, it’s only a few who can detect these empty inner or outer holes with the naked eye, in themselves or others...”

“Most still never see their holes – only see the wholeness of their own or others’ normal bodies? Paradoxical, yes, but come to think of it, it’s like an electron that is both particle and

wave at the same time. You know? But the good news is you and I, BOTH, can see the opened hole in YOU! ISN'T that REMARKABLE?"

"It is." Rizzoli is distraught, but he smiles to make her feel good.

"You understand that at the same time every human is both flesh and emptiness, few are aware of our body's spatial cavities? However, WE TWO are of the FEW who are aware of some of the emptiness. ISN'T THAT GREAT?" Her enthusiasm stuns Rizzoli. *Are we both freaks?*

"Remember, the electron is both a particle and a wave. So, you have a real stomach simultaneously with your tunneled through stomach."

"You're saying," Rizzoli finally asks, "I do and do not have a stomach this instant?"

"That's right. But I'm not absolutely positive, to tell the truth. Slight chance I might be getting my science a little mixed up here, but generally true."

"But nothing can be done about it, so what's to worry?" Rizzoli responds. "That's useless, huh?"

Before trying a drink of orange juice, he does worry. *The juice will spill out of my stomach like a waterfall...the juice will leak into my lungs and drown me, eh?* It tastes good on his tongue. He takes a small swallow. Waits. He puts his hand into his emptiness to see if the sides are wet. *No. Where did it go? No wet marks on the floor. A mystery stomach and a tunneled- out one at once?*

Rizzoli eats the rest of his breakfast: scrambled eggs, toast. Nothing. No evidence of where it went, but he feels full, nourished...*in my mystery stomach?*

Phoenicia is pleased and, after breakfast, helps him devise a way of dressing that works for the outside world. Mainly,

he wears shirts on the outside to better cover over the awareness of his emptiness.

When people ask how he's doing, he always answers, "Same old. Same old. You know."

*If only they knew.*

Time passes.

One routine day, he glances at the palm of his left hand and sees a hole the size of a silver dollar. Easy enough to hide. He can slip it into the pocket of his pants or jacket or clasp his hands behind his back.

Then he begins leaving it out for anyone to see. No one ever notices. Even if he puts a finger from his right hand through it, most others see his finger stop in his solid palm. The empty "gone shadow" hole is there only for a few to see. Still.

Phoenicia is the exception; she gets a laugh whenever he sticks a finger from his right hand up through the whole in the palm of the other so it appears freakily like that left hand has a thumb and five, not four digits.

Time passes.

One night, after dinner, he and his beloved lady are sitting watching the streaming of a movie on their computer screen. In jeans and a T-shirt, Rizzoli looks down at his right arm. *NO! What the fuck, pencil-round holes everywhere going in and coming out of that arm's bicep and forearm. Looks like a weird spaghetti strainer, that arm.*

He alerts Phoenicia. She laughs and says, "Your stomach and left palm, both those holes I see are empty, gone shadows, but what's this about many mini-holes – you're making that up."

Rizzoli can't convince her of the profusion of holes into his right arm, so he gives up trying to get her confirmation and consolation. These holes multiply in the right arm, not the right hand, until one night his complete arm vanishes.

Casually he asks Phoenicia what evolves after a series of empty holes cover over the same body part? Anything?

"Yes, my dear, the jargon is 'lost' or 'ghosted' part," she answers.

"If a part is lost, then does the body as a whole still appear normal to others?"

"I wish I knew the answer to that."

No one, not even Phoenicia, notices his right arm is completely missing. Instead, others see that arm as being completely normal. She still lovingly wraps her arms around her guy's "regular" but at the same time "lost" right arm. Rizzoli accepts the arm is "lost" and that in "reality," his body's emptiness is expanding at the expense of his solid matter.

*It's a paradox. I see the arm "lost" while most others see it as there. Normal flesh. So, as Phoenicia says, "What difference does it make"? If I use the missing arm in all ways that they see and feel are normal? Let Phoenicia see it-- the visible hole in the left palm, but not the whole lost right arm, to each her own.*

*In body, we are both here and not here at the same time; isn't that how Phoenicia put it?*

Time passes.

*Finally, all I see of my "real" arm is my right hand in air and the "lost" arm that shakes hands and acts to others like I, Rizzoli, am whole\*.*

\*See: *Around the BBC: "How much of your body is actually you?"* BBC Earth, 2020-2021

## Interlude I

### *The Forty-second Street Underground Artists*

Exiting the subway at Forty-second Street and walking the long hallway to the big plaza-like waiting area for the cross-town shuttle to Grand Central, Rizzoli always feels delighted if he hears wild drumming around the next corner. Time after time, he's enjoyed stopping to watch Leon, the lead drummer, a small black kid, age twelve or so, dressed in a sleeveless white T-shirt, jeans and tennis shoes. The blur of his sticks pounding his drums make a wild rhythmic sound, the drums being five different sized, up-ended white plastic paint cans, each giving off a different tone.

Behind him is his little brother, E.J., keeping a steady beat on a large can. Both sweating, their faces wet, they stop their set for a break. The crowd of wide-eyed New Yorkers and wowed out-of-towners gives an uproarious applause. Smiling, many put bills onto the collection drum taken around by E.J.

Eventually Rizzoli becomes friendly with E.J., who stays behind watching the drums when Leon takes the donated money and goes around the corner to rest and then bring back sandwiches, drinks and treats for the two. They call him "Mr. R."

"You two have a manager?" Rizzoli asks E.J.

"Two," E.J. answers. "Older guys from our neighborhood named Devante and Jawan. They in their early twenties and work with the city to get times and places to perform."

"I ask because I've a friend," Rizzoli responds, "who is a scout for the TV competition music series, 'U.S.A. Talent Show.'"

"No bullshit, Mr. R."

“None. But I’m curious, E.J., say you earn one hundred dollars, how much goes to your managers and how much to you two drummers?”

“We’d get twenty dollars, so five for me and fifteen for the lead drummer.”

*Managers get eighty*, Rizzoli thinks.

“But we make more than a hundred, Mr. R.”

“Oh, I know you must. But that was just for me to get a sense of things.”

\* \* \*

One morning, Rizzoli is in his favorite diner having breakfast and reading the *New York Post* before going to Forty-second. A brief news item describes a violent knife fight the day before involving Jawan and Davante, both age twenty-two. Rizzoli quickly scans it, seeing Davante later died in the hospital. The alleged killer is being held on Riker’s pending murder charges. A heated argument started the fight. The two managers of the drummers, Rizzoli thinks, one dead, the other facing trial and “prison pending conviction.”

Rizzoli doesn’t see the drummers for two months. Then he sees E.J. by chance on the street.

“What are your plans?” he asks.

“Me and my brother be training little kids to drum like us, then we going to manage and that money we’ll save and not go to buying drugs like the managers we had. The split be sixty/forty, but they work up to it.”

Rizzoli smiles and hopes all works out.

## *Losing a Perspective on Oneself*

**O**n the corner of Flatbush, I stand in place, the front of me watching the back of the other me start down Sixth Avenue, a quiet side street. It's the rear self I rarely see.

The front of me I see so often--when my eyes look down--is the familiar "me" or, my "real self." Yet this view is a distortion, as my real self is so foreshortened that I'm often missing my chest or neck when looking at my shoes. Anyway, I rarely see the back of me, and I usually view my front side in a distorted way.

With this thought in mind, I am entranced by this rare chance to see the other me from the back, walking away from myself down this long, beautiful avenue, shaded with trees and lined with handsome brownstones. My going away self keeps walking, getting smaller and smaller the further away.

Almost at the vanishing point now, the other for me is a near dot. I fixate on it while I stand still.

The distant, traveling me glances back.

Shock and terror fill me.

I am vanishing.

Into the past.

Disappearing.

DISAPPEARED.

## *Santa Croce Prison Farm Comes to Life*

Superintendent Statworth, an older man of great girth, red skinned and balding, peers over his lowered reading glasses. Elbows on his office desk, he locks eyes with the younger Rizzoli and stares. Silently he studies the candidate, then his application, and stares again at Rizzoli.

Rizzoli peers away, unnerved, then glances around the office at various effects.

On the desk is (*a paperweight?*) a metal sculpture of a six-inch chrome pipe with a wire figure poking up with tiny rifle arms. On the back wall is a glossy calendar image of a field of "Organic Broccoli," and a photo of the smiling face of a black man with the caption, "J.J Stokes: Santa Croce's Man of the Month." Stokes looks familiar, Rizzoli thinks.

"A native Californian, huh? Rare breed with they're letting anyone pour into the state these days." Rizzoli looks up, but doesn't acknowledge this. *California native? No way. Sounds impressive, though. I get this temporary adjunct position and Phoenicia and I'll be back in Brooklyn all the sooner.*"

"Rare, uh-huh," Rizzoli adds, level sounding, so as not to affirm the possible implied racism.

"Now the final step, Professor, before I can hire you for the satellite course to teach U.S. History at Santa Croce Farm is for you to understand this institution recognizes no hostages should a detainee..." (*Detainee? A prisoner?*) "...hold you for ransom. Here, sign this special Form 9 confirming that and we're done." He pauses. "Any questions?"

"Clarify this Form 9. It says I'm on my own basically?"

"Not entirely. It only applies to our refusing any ransom demand in exchange for your life." Statworth laughs. "Keep in mind nothing stated in Form 9 rules out any attempts on

the part of our guards to rescue hostages. Or shoot their captors.”

*Caught in a flaming crossfire, do the odds of my life being saved improve or not? Who knows?*

“Well, anyway all this is a formality...”

*Formality?* “Your word ‘detainee,’ don’t you mean ‘prisoner’?”

“To me, last word makes violent criminals of them all, while only some are...but, yes, ‘prisoner’ is still ‘official.’”

“Still? Could you explain that?”

“Sure, when the state leased this correctional institution to our private corporation to operate for a profit, we thought it more apt to use ‘detainee’ and also not Santa Croce Prison Farm, but simply ‘Santa Croce Farm.’”

“How long have you worked here, Superintendent?” Rizzoli asks.

“Since it went private two...no, three years ago now. Place is now starting to turn a profit besides meeting our other aims ...but let’s get back to our business.”

“Yes, our business,” Rizzoli says. *Ironic, the Sup says, “our business.”* “I think you’ve given me all the information I’ll need to teach a course here. Besides, before my first day, I’ll go through this booklet with the map and directions.”

“Perfect. Then you’ll take the job I presume?”

Rizzoli nods.

“Enough talk. I’ll point out just a few things in your booklet.”

The Sup comes around and opens the booklet to the map on page 17 and says, while pointing, “Here’s the eagle’s eye view of the layout. Headquarters, where we are.” He points to a square with an “X.”

“For the AA degree extension course program offered by your Braxton College,” he continues, “our campus is along the street inside the area enclosed by the fences. See? ”

“I do.”

“The whole detainee area is roughly a square city block. The two concentric jagged lines signify the borders marked by the two fences, one electrified and the outside one with rolls of razor wire. Outside the double fences in the distance, see that large rectangle? It’s a vast lush green area, signifying our large organic vegetable farm that the trustees work daily to supply a growing number of corporate supermarket chains. The profits pay most of the cost of operating Santa Croce; the trustees are all former detainees with repeated releases and usually minor offenses.”

“Are they paid?”

“A returnee, who usually can’t find a real job with a prison record, gets a small paycheck, then he pays us back for room and board. They find it satisfactory.”

*(Must be sharecropping...postmodern form?)*

“Another matter is, any student of yours who is a first-time current detainee who passes your course gets credits towards an earlier release date.”

*(Is it a circle? An earlier release-- an earlier return date because of the prison record leading to no job?)*

“One more thing. Your first class is Thursday, so I’ll arrange for a farm trustee to meet you at the gate to walk you through the steps, getting in, going to the right building and pointing out other buildings. So, be at the front gate a half hour early. The trustee’s name is J.J Stokes. He will meet you just inside the entry gates.”

\* \* \*

At the appointed time, Rizzoli is outside the entry's high-fenced closeted area in front of the outside gate. Stokes is opposite him in the prisoner area. Each smiles and waves.

"Here", Stokes says, "I'll guide you through what needs to happen every time you come through these two gates, hear me?"

Rizzoli nods.

"You've a key to that first gate."

Rizzoli opens it, walks through. It clicks shut behind him, enclosing him in a cage, facing the second gate.

"Good. Now in-between gates, turn left and face the guardhouse with the smoked glass window so the guard inside is invisible to you."

A drawer comes out.

"Put your briefcase and wallet in it to be searched for contraband. If you're clean, these are given back. Then the gatekeeper opens the second gate. Only that unseen gatekeeper has a button to open that second gate so he controls whether or not a person like you gets inside to teach class or, more important, gets *outside again after class*. Or, in a rare instance like a riot, is kept locked inside the prisoner's...or, sorry, detainee area, so no prisoner forces himself out the gates with you, understand?"

"I do." *Prisoner riot. A mob chases after me to take a hostage. What! No-face gatekeeper locks me in the prison area. What can I do? It is what it is, huh?*

Rizzoli is now on the detainees' side.

"Hey, Mr. Stokes, good to meet you," he says, extending his hand. They shake.

"Everything clear so far?"

"So far, so good."

Both look down the main throughway with male inmates coming and going, all dressed in blue, the same as Stokes,

baggy pants, T-shirts with S.C.F. stenciled on the chest and slip-on canvas shoes. Many give Stokes a friendly acknowledgement.

Stokes says, "Now the best, quickest way for me to show you around this place is for you, Mr. Rizzoli, to tell me what you already know from the folder given you."

Rizzoli agrees. "This is Main Street. Nearest to us on both sides it's lined with white, newly painted buildings. The main building is on the left. The one-room schoolhouse is opposite on our right, that one with a cross is the church, next and closer is the community center. Buildings farther away, mostly brick, are the workshops: laundry, carpentry, building up-keep and more."

"Good. You got this main layout down. After it became a for-profit, the corporation did a major makeover, and this was re-named Main Street and the buildings painted or restored."

He laughs. "Gentrified."

Rizzoli laughs. "You got it. The neighborhood is moving on up." Both laugh.

"Now, for the 'detainee' part, did Sup use that limp word with you?"

Rizzoli nods, with a smile and says, "You and I know the gentrified swap their use of vile words like 'prisoner,' or 'criminal' for 'detainee.'"

"You on the money, dude. The 'blues' we call ourselves. So anyone 'blue' at any time outside in the yard is supposed to be *guaranteed nonviolent* by a computer test using AI that the administration never doubts. Can you fucking believe it? 'Blues' also include those charged with less serious crimes or 'safe' returnees from an earlier date--most charged with nonviolent crime and awaiting trial. All do daily tasks.

"Over there behind the church, looks like a giant chicken coop? That's the bull pen for those charged with a new crime

after having once or more served their time for previous crimes and returned, often due to an inability to pay fines or moving traffic tickets or stolen credit card fraud.

“And in that far cement bunker are the most violent. Mostly those convicted and awaiting space in prison or jail are in there. Separated out and in lockdown with rows of one-prisoner cells. Cell blocks. All are under armed guards.”

“Not many guards out here,” Rizzoli says.

“They think,” Stokes says, “if all the blues are guaranteed nonviolent by computer AI then there’s no real need for many guards.”

“Do you think they’re right?”

“I’m going to let you in on a little secret,” says Stokes. “I feel we together on this shit. The deal is that fucking test is not foolproof – in fact, some badass gangbangers can fool that test and come out nonviolent. The outside blues include a few of those; rumors about who; but nobody knows for sure who. Oddly enough, a special kind of ‘crazy’ fools their test just like with a lie-detector test.

“Most of your students will be from the innocent awaiting trial for nonviolent crimes or those returnees we know are all right guys... but one or so might be a real badass gangbanger who tested false as a nonviolent.”

## II

Professor Rizzoli is in class early about to begin his U.S. history midterm in the schoolhouse. Six weeks of class have passed, and Rizzoli sits at his desk with copies of the test. Calmly waiting, looking ahead, he sees three receding rows of small desks with large inmates scrunched into them. The last students file in and take up empty seats.