

THE MASK ON THE BENCH

A short horror drama by
Ramiz Monsef

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CAST OF CHARACTERS

JACKSON, African-American, 17, male.

KARIM, Middle Eastern, 17, male.

(A tiny bedroom in a tiny apartment in a city somewhere in America.)

(JACKSON [17, African-American] is watching an old horror movie on an old TV. There are records and comic books strewn about.)

(The movie blares, but Jackson isn't listening. He has his headphones on and is making a beat on a little sampler. An SP-404 kind of thing. He gets frustrated with what he is doing and rips his headphones off. He gets sucked into the movie for a moment.)

WOMAN IN MOVIE: No, Richard. Don't come any closer. Your face it's...it's hideous. What have you done to your face?

MAN IN MOVIE: I made a wish. That's all I did! I made a wish! What's happened to me??

WOMAN IN MOVIE: Oh Richard. You...you need to stay away from me! Stay away!!!! Nooooo!!!!

(Jackson's phone rings.)

JACKSON: Karim, what's good, man? You alright? Why you sound so out of breath? Where are you, man?

(A face appears in Jackson's window.)

(Jackson turns and sees it. It spooks him and he jumps.)

What the —

(KARIM [17, Middle Eastern] opens the window.)

KARIM: What I tell you about watching those movies at night?

JACKSON: What I tell you about climbing the fire escape? You know Raoul got a shotgun one floor down, right?

KARIM: I know.

JACKSON: So, you think you some kinda master thief? You gonna dodge security lasers *and* buckshot?

KARIM: Yo c'I come in or what?

JACKSON: What are you, Dracula? You need an invitation? You already scaled the building. Come on up in this house.

(Karim cautiously crawls through the window. He holds his backpack like it contains precious cargo.)

KARIM: Your moms asleep?

JACKSON: Yeah.

KARIM: Word. Manny?

JACKSON: He passed out. You know that old drunk can't keep his eyes open past 9:30 and a fifth of Seagram's. Wack-[ass] stepdad.

KARIM: Ok word.

JACKSON: Wassup? You look like you just found the Ark of the Covenant or something.

KARIM: Yeah yo. Kinda. Yo, yo, crazy.

JACKSON: What's in your bag? Nobody followed you or nothing, right? You look mad guilty. What did you do?

KARIM: I didn't do anything! I just put it on! And-and...

JACKSON: Put what on?

KARIM: Check it.

(Karim opens his bag, and both he and Jackson look inside. A golden light emanates from within.)

I found it on a bench in the train station.

JACKSON: Whhhhhhhhaaat is that?

KARIM: It's a mask.

JACKSON: I know it's a mask but—

(Jackson tries to touch it.)

KARIM: Don't touch it!

JACKSON: Yo, ease up. What's your problem B? You coming in here like someone's chasing you.

KARIM: That's 'cause they might be.

JACKSON: Who?

KARIM: ...Chup. Well not Chup, but his people...

JACKSON: Chupacabra? Yo, get out of my house. I don't want that fool or any of his goons knowing where I live! That guy is mad dangerous B!

KARIM: You think I don't know that? But yo listen, this mask...I found it at the station. It was just sitting on a bench.

JACKSON: You said that.

KARIM: Yeah but you don't understand. It was like it was waiting for me. Like it put itself there.

JACKSON: Is that metal? Is it moving?

(Shakes his head in disbelief.)

I've never seen anything like it.

KARIM: Yeah. And it's weird – it's like the more you look at it, the less you can understand what it is you're seeing.

JACKSON: Yeah...waaaaait...you high?

KARIM: Look in my eye.

(Jackson does.)

JACKSON: Ok. So we serious.

KARIM: Super serious. Yo peep though. I found it, right? I pick it up. It feels mad heavy right? Like heavier than it looks. And I see on the inside, it's glowing. Crazy.

JACKSON: Crazy.

KARIM: You know me. I'm the curious type, so I put it on right? And yo, the whole time, walking to the train station, I'm freestyling in my head, like I always do, but the rhymes are wack tonight for some reason. Can't focus. Can't grab any references, just sorta floundering with the same old party rocks like, "Oo I'm so tight/clutch the mic/strike lightning/the kind of MC who so frightening/Now check the math/I got codes hidden in sentences and paragraphs." Wack stuff. Old stuff. But then I see the mask, right? Put it on. And like the whole world changes. It's like I'm surfing words. Like I'm floating above them and I can see the absolute best one for every line. All of a sudden I got mad punchlines flowing through my head, like I can't stop. Like I'm the long-lost son of Supernatural. It's unreal!

JACKSON: Whoa.

KARIM: But then I hear this voice. Like, "AY!" I turn around, and guess who's standing there. One guess.

JACKSON: Chup?

KARIM: Nail on the head. Chupacabra.

JACKSON: Man that dude always shows up at the WORST times. It's like he KNOWS when you got something worth taking.

KARIM: Word. Like a sixth sense. Remember when I copped those Jordans and the same DAY, Chup shows up in the cypher, spits a couple bars, and then takes one look at me and is like, "I like your shoes." I knew right then I'd be walking home in socks.

JACKSON: The man is a public menace. And he's a terrible MC! Always spitting the same 16's. Like we KNOW that ish is written!

KARIM: Yeah well, there he is. Seeing I got something he wants. And I don't know what came over me. I mean I had the mask on and it was giving me this...confidence. So I look at

Chup and I'm like "Naw." In fact, "Hell naw." And he gets this look in his eyes like he never heard that before. Like the word "NO" was some kinda alien language. And then I don't know what came over me...

JACKSON: What?

KARIM: For real J. I looked at him...and I spit the illest verse I ever spit in my life! It was like words were shooting out of my mouth and the mask, the mask was TELLING me what to say yo!

JACKSON: What was the verse??? Spit it!!

KARIM: Yeah word it was...uh...it was...I can't remember it yo!

JACKSON: You gotta be kidding me.

KARIM: I wish I was 'cause, yo, as I was spitting, it was like each bar was pushing Chup just a little further back. Till the backs of his feet was just hanging over the edge of the platform. And—

JACKSON: What—

KARIM: And I got to the end of the verse and, I don't even know what I said but I came with this punchline that was half punchline and half Hadouken. It wasn't me! It was the mask and the words! They— And I *saw* the train coming and I couldn't stop rhyming. I had to finish, but my words were *pushing* him. I saw what I was doing and I saw the train and—

JACKSON: Naw.

KARIM: Chup ain't gonna be bothering anyone anymore.

JACKSON: Whoa.

KARIM: Yeah.

(A beat as they both look to Karim's bag which holds the mask.)

JACKSON: Look, I never liked Chup, I mean, no one really liked him. Guy was a menace, and a bully, and he had that nasty milk breath and he'd always make a point of getting extra close to you when he wanted to scare you just so you smell it. Buuuuuuut...

KARIM: Yeah, I know. Look I don't feel good about it either. In fact, I've been feeling kinda nauseous and, I don't know...panicked, since it happened.

JACKSON: I guess I would be too.

(Looking at the backpack again:)

And you just...put that on?

KARIM: Yeah.

JACKSON: And you became a real life Supa MC.

KARIM: Yeah, SUPA in ALL CAPS. It's like the mask gives you what you want, but it takes something in return.

JACKSON: Word. Well, we both know ain't nothing free in this world. Anyone see you?

KARIM: I don't think so. Whoever was on that train got a pretty nasty show though. It was like...

(Mimics the sound of a big messy explosion.)

(Then a beat.)

Yo...what do we do???

(Jackson is staring at the bag now. Drawn to its power.)

JACKSON: You have literal killer bars now.

KARIM: Not me! The mask!

JACKSON: What if...what if this mask belonged to, like, some kind of evil supervillain, or like someone who *called* themselves a villain, but who was more of an antihero type, and like, he

died, but he didn't want his legacy to die too, so he left this mask on a bench for the *next* supervillain to pick up so they could carry on his...vibe.

KARIM: You been reading too many comic books yo.

JACKSON: Word...hey um...lemme try it on.

(Jackson reaches for Karim's bag.)

KARIM: What? No!

JACKSON: Come on, Karim! I been messing with this beat for HOURS. I can't get it to knock right. I've tried everything, but the snares sound tinny and I can't get the kick to give me the right BOOM.

KARIM: So try harder! 10,000 hours, homie! We both knew the rap game wasn't easy.

JACKSON: Come on! I'm stuck bro, and you got a wearable *Limitless* pill in your bag! Think about it, I put that mask on and make you some beats, then you put it on and write the rhymes, and then we can get our own spot-slash-studio, and I won't ever have to deal with drunk Manny again!

KARIM: Trust me. You don't want this. It won't fix anything.

JACKSON: This could be what puts us over!

KARIM: What?

JACKSON: Think about it. K-Mack and J-Boogie. Killing it.

KARIM: Yeah. For real killing.

JACKSON: Last show we played, audience was like zombies, man. No one cared.

KARIM: No one cared because we were playing a "show" next to a cell phone kiosk in the mall!

JACKSON: No one cared because we weren't very good dawg. We need this mask. Put it on and be the MC you were always meant to be. Or let me wear it and I'll be the Primo to your Guru. Think about it...

(Karim does for a moment.)

KARIM: Naw. That's not what K-Mack and J-Boog are about. And you didn't see Chup. That train. I mean, he went everywhere. Naw. Like, I know nothing that makes you feel that powerful can be good for you in the long run. It's gotta cost something. And I don't want to wait around long enough to find out what. Naw. If I'm gonna be a SUPA MC it's gonna be 'cause I worked on it. Me. I practiced. Naw. I'm about to go throw this mask in the river. No one should be able to feel this kinda power. I'm shook J. Straight up. I may never rap again. Not if it does that! I just needed to stop by to, like, regroup and catch my breath. This was the only safe place I could think of that was even kind of nearby. I mean, nobody liked Chup, but dude had some clout. There's people gonna be upset something happened to him.

JACKSON: Ok word. And you sure no one followed you?

KARIM: Yeah.

JACKSON: Positive.

KARIM: Absolutely.

JACKSON: Naw. Check.

KARIM: What?

JACKSON: Check outside yo!

KARIM: I did!

JACKSON: Well check again!

KARIM: What about Raoul with the shotty?

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