

## **The Mask**

“No, I don’t think so,” Rolando said to his friend Chub Bennett.

“Come on, man. We got to do this,” Chub said earnestly. “It’s free!”

They stood in their high school’s main hall looking at the bulletin board. “I can’t dance, Chub,” Rolando said, shaking his head. Then he read aloud from the poster they were discussing: “Annual Scarlet Fasani Costume Ball.” He glanced at Chub. “Who’s Scarlet Fasani, anyway?”

“Dunno,” said Chub. “My grandpa went to school here. We can ask him. He’s driving me home today. C’mon.”

“It’s a tragic story, with an air of mystery about it,” said Chub’s grandfather. He glanced up into the rear view mirror flaring his eyes at Rolando in the back seat, and Rolando knew they were in for one of grandpa’s ‘tales’.

“Her father,” the old man continued, “was probably the richest man in town. He had everything, and, to him, Scarlet was the jewel of his collection. When they found out she had leukaemia and was going to die, he was devastated. But she had always wanted to be princess at one of the school dances, so he staged a costume ball, gave it her name and declared her the princess. It was the biggest thing to ever happen for our school – or any school in the country, I imagine. He rented the auditorium downtown, brought in one of the biggest dance bands of the day – Glenn Miller, I think it was, or Benny Goodman. He even sent one of his underlings to Paris to bring back a fabulous gown for her. They say it cost more than the president made in a year.”

“Did you go to the dance?” asked Chub.

“No, I was just a freshman then. I didn’t go.” Grandpa looked at Rolando in the rear view mirror, as he could hear him starting to fidget. “And neither did Scarlet. She died the night before the dance. They say she was trying on her fancy dress when it happened.”

“Yeah, but why do they still have a dance named after her?” asked Chub.

“Because her old man still pays for it, or the endowment he funded does. He died in ’81, I think it was.”

“You mean he fixed it so there’s a dance every year, forever?” Rolando said.

“Yep. He wanted her to be remembered. So he had the Scarlet Fasani ballroom built at the country club, and every year good old South High gets a first-class costume ball out there – as long as its named after her.”

“Wow,” marvelled Chub. “And everything’s paid for. Free food, live music, and everything.”

“So what’s mysterious about all that?” Rolando wondered.

Grandpa glanced into the mirror with eyes widening. "Every eight or ten years a male student dies a few days after going to the dance. The last one was nine years ago."

"Great," said Rolando. "I can't dance anyway, so let's not go."

Chub looked back from the front seat, with a grin. "He's putting us on, man. Don't you get it? He's always trying to scare me."

The old man chuckled softly, "Heh heh heh."

"Besides," added Chub. "We don't have to dance. We can just cruise around the ballroom, have some free food, mingle with the guys *and* talk to the girls."

"Nah. I've never been to a big dance. I don't like to go to dances." Rolando brushed the back of his hand across his upper lip where the scar disfigured his face. Chub would know that's really why he didn't want to go. Chub never called him 'harelip' like others did, but Chub would understand.

"Come on," urged Chub. "Everybody goes. We can dude up in costumes, wear goofy masks. This could be your chance to meet that sweetheart you're always dreaming about."

Rolando looked out the car window. He felt really uncomfortable with going, considering someone dies every eight to ten years after the dance. 'How am I going to get out of this one, now?' he thought to himself. Chub had struck a nerve with that last remark.

Rolando wanted a girl friend so badly it made him ache. His longing was stronger even than the fear of rejection because of his deformed face. A girl friend. He thought about that all the time. Alone at night, he would hum love songs and kiss the soft flesh between his thumb and forefinger, pretending he was kissing the sweet lips of some girl he'd seen at school. In the real world, girls would look at him and quickly glance away. He couldn't blame them. Who could stand to look at a harelip? Only another harelip, maybe.

He glanced back at Chub. "Well, if we wear masks... Okay...maybe."

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By the time the night of the dance arrived, Chub had acquired a Mardi Gras mask and an extra long raincoat to use as a costume. "This coat has pockets inside and out," he said.

"It beats any 'doggy bag' by miles."

Rolando spent two weeks' allowance for a rubberised Prince Charming mask that slipped over his head. With it, he wore a fancy ruffled white shirt and his uncle's dove grey tuxedo jacket with the maroon satin lapels.

“Chub,” he said, removing his mask, “I really don’t think we should go tonight.”

“What?” exclaimed Chub.

Rolando stared at the mask in his hands. “I asked the school librarian if she had anything about Scarlet Fasani. One of the books she gave me said that since the original ball, five boys have died mysterious deaths after attending the dance. Your grandpa was telling the truth.”

“Man, that first dance was years and years ago. Hundreds of guys who went to this school have probably died since then.”

“It said most of those boys were seen behaving strangely at the ball.”

“You’re just looking for excuses. Stop thinking about that stuff and think about meeting the girl of your dreams.”

Rolando stroked his lip silently for a moment. “What time is your grandpa going to pick us up to drive out here?”

“I told him eight o’clock. Now stop worrying!”

But grandpa had car trouble and didn’t pick them up until half past ten. As he drove them towards the country club, Grandpa said, “Now you boys want to be careful who you’re dancing with tonight. It might be Princess Fasani. Heh heh heh.”

Chub snorted and replied, “Who’s gonna dance? I just hope there’ll be some food left.”

“Oh, there’ll be plenty of food. You’ve never seen the kind of spread they put out for this. Lobster, prime rib etc. You could feed an army!”

When at last they made their way into the ballroom, Chub immediately took off to locate the buffet tables. Rolando gaped in wonder at the other kids in their assorted costumes. The musicians were just returning to the bandstand from a break, apparently, for their leader announced, “This will be the last set, kids. We will play two of your kind of songs, the final number of the evening will be the traditional closer for every Princess Fasani ball, her favourite song – dedicated to the memory of Princess Scarlet Fasani – Hoagy Carmichael’s Immortal Stardust.”

‘Stardust?’ thought Rolando, ‘I’ve never heard of it.’ Then he saw the girl.

She was standing in front of the bandstand and he knew, at once, she was the girl he’d been dreaming about. Her costume was a dazzling white gown with a high collar that covered her throat, and she wore long white gloves that reached to her shoulders. Beautiful, wavy red hair cascaded down her back and contrasted sharply with the stark white mask she wore. It was one of those Halloween Skeleton masks with deep black eye sockets and large teeth outlined in black.

‘Behind that mask,’ thought Rolando, ‘I’ll bet she is so beautiful it hurts your eyes.’ He adjusted the mask on his own face. ‘This is your chance, man. She won’t be able to see your lip. You gotta go for it. Hurry up. Nobody’s asked her to dance, and the orchestra’s already finished one song.’

Quickly, he scrambled his way through the dancers until he stood facing the girl. Without saying a word, he held out his left hand. The red-haired girl said nothing. The holes in her mask were so small he couldn’t even tell what colour her eyes were, but she seemed to be looking him over.

After a breathless moment, she reached up and took his hand in her velvet glove. More excited than he had ever been in his life, he backed up, leading her onto the dance floor.

The orchestra leader announced, “This is the last song, kids.” Only then did Rolando remember that he couldn’t dance!

The music began and the girl put her left arm over his shoulder and drew close in the old-fashioned ballroom position. Rolando took one hesitant step backwards then, suddenly, she began to sing the words to the song and he forgot his feet,

“Sometimes I wonder why I spend the lonely night dreaming of a song.”

Her voice from behind the mask was warm and fragile as an April sunbeam. Completely absorbed, Rolando glided across the dance floor with her in his arms. He felt as if they were floating together, like a pair of twin clouds carried on the music.

“The melody haunts my reverie,” she continued to croon softly. Then she gave a little nod to him and squeezed his hand gently. “Join me,” she coaxed.

“I don’t know the words,” he said happily. “But I’ll join you anytime, anywhere!” He hummed loudly in his clear tenor voice as she sang:

“And I am once again with you,  
when our love was new,  
and each kiss an inspiration.”

Without looking, he became aware that no one else was dancing. Everyone had moved back and formed a huge circle around them. He didn’t care. This was an experience that would live in his memory forever.

“But that was long ago  
and now my consolation  
is in the stardust of a song.”

Their voices blended in dulcet harmony. Their dancing seemed guided by angels.

They whirled, they dipped. An idyllic couple. She was his. He was hers. This was an ecstasy beyond anything he had ever imagined. He wanted it to go on forever, but

soon the last note of the song hung in the air. The girl began to withdraw her arm from his shoulder. "Join me soon," she murmured softly.

"Hang on a minute," he said, thinking: 'For the perfect ending, we'll take off our masks and kiss goodnight.'

When he opened his eyes, she was gone.

'Had she seen his lip and darted into the crowd to disappear forever?' Rolando was so disappointed tears flooded his eyes. 'How can I join you? Where?'

The other kids on the dance floor were gaping at him like he was a total freak, and a frightening idea filled his head. 'Oh, my God. Have I been dancing with Scarlet Fasani? Was she invisible to them, and everybody thinks I was dancing by myself?' The image of spinning around the dance floor all alone stunned his mind. Then another chilling thought struck him. 'Has Scarlet chosen me? Am I the next one to die?'

A flash of white near the exit caught his eye. It was her! "Wait!" he yelled and raced to catch up with her as the redheaded apparition glided out the door.

Outside in the moonlight, the white dress moved across the parking lot like a filmy, glittering cloud. The hairs on Rolando's neck bristled and he trembled with fear but continued to run after her. "Wait," he called again.

She stopped and turned. The skeleton mask still covered her face. As Rolando got close to her, the headlights of a car illuminated them like a spotlight on a stage. He knew she could see his lip. "You said to join you," he blurted. "Are you..."

The girl pulled off her mask and he saw her face clearly. This was no ghost. This was a real, live girl – a girl as beautiful as he had dreamed; though some might not think so. She had been born with a cleft palate same as he had.

Rolando took her gloved hand in his and smiled. "Were we made for each other or what?"