

We Mask Date
by Mao Chanraksmeay

Translated by First-Class Solutions Ltd.

Blissfully pleasant jazz music emanates from a petite, amber-painted café with large, eye-catching, classic-looking windows. Once accommodating a crowd, all the chairs and tables in this workplace of mine are now empty, and the surroundings are melancholy, almost as if the world had stopped moving. And it remains unknown when everything will get back to normal. However beautiful the music is, the void in my heart tunes my ears to hear only the boring squeaky noise of a lone mop moving back and forth.

“Can we fall in love with someone whose face we have never seen?” asked Panha, my coworker, bringing me back from afar from the thoughts I was carried away by.

“Nothing else to ask?” I replied in a flat tone while cleaning the floor. Panha shrugged his shoulders and said, “There’s really nothing to ask! Every day, we just sit and look at each other’s faces, feeling extremely stressed.”

Panha then leaned back on the chair, looked at the ceiling, and continued,

“Do you think it is possible?”

“Impossible!” I replied and continued mopping the floor.

Just a moment afterwards, a shadow zipped across our view like a storm then collapsed and turned over several times in front of me before hitting the tables and chairs in the store. In shock, my brain started working again after a brief moment and I realized that it was a human!

There was a petite lady with curvy hair wearing glasses with circular frames and a mask over her face. The only thing I could see was her eyes behind the glasses. The lady stood up in haste, acting as if nothing had happened. She slipped over on the wet floor I was mopping.

“I’m sorry,” I said, approaching her in case she needed any help only to witness her moving away, trying to keep a distance of one meter between us. She then picked up a small piece of paper which I was struggling to comprehend.

“Almond Latte, low sugar, strong coffee, a bit of ice.”

Noticing that I had finished reading, the petite lady placed a stainless-steel flask on a nearby table. Covered in palm tree wood, the flask had the word “Teppy” engraved on it which was probably her name.

“Yes,” I nodded, while chuckling because of her odd behavior, and reached out to take the flask to fill with the coffee I would make following her specific order. I then handed it over to her and a note written on the flask itself saying,

“Hope your back is fine! Have a fabulous weekend! :)”

As soon as the flask was in her hand, she gave me the cash, and scooted off, almost crashing into the front door. She came in running and left speeding. I couldn’t figure out where she was rushing to. She was the very first customer of the day as well as the first person to bring a smile to my face in the past two weeks! But... would I meet her again? At this point, my thoughts brought me odd feelings; I wanted tomorrow to come sooner so I could see her again.

I got up the next morning with renewed hope, although I didn’t know whether or not she liked the coffee I had made for her.

While I was sitting with that thought carrying me away, the exact same flask covered in palm tree wood was placed near my hand with a new note,

“I’d like a coffee like yesterday! And thank you! My back is not broken yet, and I’m still alive.”

Even before I looked at who wrote the note, I knew who it was and I couldn’t hide my smile as my hope became a reality. I was lost for words. I didn’t know how to talk to her while she was standing one meter away from me. Eventually I wrote a new note to her,

“This coffee is free! To compensate for the pain yesterday!”

I was sure I had made her smile, as her big round eyes became almond-shaped seeing that message.

“Thank you!” She replied, running out of the shop again. I was smiling for hours afterwards wondering how someone could make me so happy. It was at that moment that Panha’s question popped up in my mind again...

“Can we fall in love with someone whose face we have never seen?”

I started to doubt the answer I gave him the day before, inasmuch as I might have fallen in love with someone whose face I had never really seen because, out of the blue, the presence of a petite lady shone a bright light into the dark boring world of my life. She became the reason I looked forward to getting up to go to work every morning. She became the reason I found the once boring ambient jazz music more beautiful. She became the reason I could smile every time I read a note on her flask.

On Monday, it poured with rain from morning to the evening. There was only Panha and I in the café. All I could do was desperately stare at the front door, stricken with the frustration that Teppy had not shown up to get her coffee as usual. It was an eye-opening moment when I realized I did not only want to read her note but I also actually wanted to meet her! To meet not as a barista and customer, but as something much more intimate. I was filled with wonder that I hadn’t explored who she is more clearly. Who is she? Where does she work? And more importantly...does she have a boyfriend already?

I knew that these kinds of opportunities didn’t happen much in life, so if fate brought us together again, I’d ask her out on a date. If not then, when? If I waited until my circumstances got better, how many more years would I have to wait? If I didn’t try to live my life with happiness in this hard time, there might not be any happy days again!

“That’s right!” I shouted alone, shocking Panha.

“What’s right?” Panha asked me with a frown.

“Nothing!” I replied and moved quickly away from him.

Tuesday arrived, and the petite lady came to the shop again as I expected. But this time was quite different when our eyes searched into each other’s souls in the

quiet shop where I could hear my heart beating rapidly, completely muting the ambient jazz music.

I didn't wait until she handed me the flask but instead raised the note I had written earlier so high, while my heart was pounding and beating out of my chest as I was waiting for her answer to the question on my note:

"If you are single, would you go on a mask date with me?"

I stood waiting for an answer like a statue, but I realized that she was even more stunned than I was because she did not move even a little. Not only she did not answer, but she also got out of my sight immediately. I hopelessly stared at the front door and then managed to smile. I knew that nobody was as crazy as I was to ask someone out during the COVID-19 pandemic. She was right to reject me. That's okay. At least, I tried. Whatever the answer, it was not important. She might already have a boyfriend! Or she wasn't interested in me.

A few moments later, the front door opened abruptly again and the same lady with the flowing hair and glasses, who had just run out of here, walked in. I was breathless and stunned with my eyes wide open.

"Did you forget something?"

I was about to ask her. But I shut my mouth because I had to read a word on a small note with my eyes. I can't misread it. But no matter how many times I read it, the answer was the same;

"Yes"

She agreed to go on a mask date with me!!

We stood still facing each other in one-meter distance without saying anything, letting the ambient jazz music of our glorious singer Sinn Sisamouth describe all the feelings for us. That was just enough to express how excited I was then.