

# Conceal and Reveal

Jackelin Martinez

There was one in my backpack, a pack in the car, and it seemed like my house had more masks than a hospital. I felt prepared for the new school year. It was my first year of high school. I was excited to leave the house, finally. But all my excitement was decimated as soon as I was put in line. Six feet from the person in front and behind me. 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6 whole feet. Is this how the rest of my school years will be?

A classroom had never been more awkward. Filled with teenagers that most likely hadn't had much social interaction in months. I could feel all the eyes skipping around the room.

*Why does she keep making eye contact with me? Is she? I can't tell. Why does she look so mad? I don't think she likes me.*

*Are they smiling? How am I supposed to smile back?* The corner of my eyes squeezed tightly to make it obvious. *Yeah, I think that works.* But I noticed I put my hand over my mask too. I had a habit of covering my misaligned teeth. No worries, there's a blue shield on at all times to hide them.

Lunch wasn't the same. No moving around. While eating with our masks down, my hand kept covering my mouth to cover my chewing. It was strange to see mouths. I never realized how much of a difference it makes. I probably looked so different with the mask off too.

My English teacher won't be able to tell I got like five hours of sleep, I could yawn all I want. When I had forgotten to brush my teeth in the morning no one would know, but me.

The mask we wore for hours every day soon became an evil spell on my skin. A spell that caused red, oily bumps on my face. But at least I was able to cover it up.

When will the day come? A day when seeing mouths don't scare me? A day when I won't have to wipe and spray every desk I touch? A day where I could talk without it sounding muffled? A day when I could hug my best friend without thinking twice about it? A day when I won't have to take a health-check survey? A day when I could visit and give my grandparents a hug with no worries? A day when we could shake hands and say *peace be with you* with visible smiles? A day when I won't be reminded to keep my mask up?

That day felt so... *far away*.

The rumors. Rumors spread faster than any pandemic at a small school. I had heard that we would be able to take our masks off completely in two weeks. Un-im-a-gin-a-ble. I was excited plus scared which equaled anxious. I had become attached to wearing the mask. The mask that hid my acne, my morning breath, my chapped lips, my misaligned teeth, my ambiguous jawline, my yawn attacks, and my constant lip tucking.

When I entered the school building with my mask in my pocket after the mask mandate was lifted, it felt like a sin. But it was okay. Cases had decreased. The mandate was lifted. Many were vaccinated. I had to embrace my true self. My face, His image and likeness. My teachers and peers looked like completely different people to me. *Reaaallllyyy* different. But I soon found comfort in the smiles of my closest friends and all the people there with me. Facial expressions were more clear and easier to read. Conversations weren't filled with awkward pauses of pure, silent-blink-blink-eye contact.

Since then, I haven't touched a mask. There's no mask in my backpack. None in my car. There's one box at home. But it's in the back of the medicine cabinet.