

The man-faced boy

by Siren of Brixton

Once upon a time a boy was born with the face of a man. He was pushed, squalling, into the world in the usual way, but when the blood and mucus was wiped away he had none of the features of a baby. He had a patrician nose, deep set almond eyes and a lantern jaw, all set in a head the size of a grown man. His was, as the doctor remarked to his wife, a face only a mother could love.

And she did, in her way. But his father was a man of strong seed and unquenchable vigour. When she discovered he had a wife and would never make good on his promises of riches she took the man-faced child and dumped him at his father's door.

The man-faced boy wailed and cried and so did his father's wife but there he stayed. His stepmother was not an uncaring woman but she had many mouths to feed and something about his calm gaze and manly features helped her forget he was just a child. She went to him when he cried, fed him and changed him but there was never time for comfort. His siblings, a home-grown gang who ruled the neighbourhood with violence and fear, avoided him.

And so the man-faced boy grew alone, knowing little of kindness and love. As he grew, he explored the limits of his cold world; crawling in dusty nappies, toddling in hand-me-down rags, at last walking on worn sandals, haunting the edges of human life looking for his place. Doors were closed on him, old women made the sign of the cross, pretty young mothers shielded their children's eyes. His face, he came to understand, was his stigma, his stain.

He sought the company of animals, who didn't care how he looked. A horse would not shy away from a look at him. A dog would lick his face as readily as any other. Through animal eyes he saw the brutal cycle of life and death. A fox laying waste to a hen house. A sheep's throat torn out by wild dogs. A rabbit eating her kits. None of it surprised him.

The day came when the man-faced boy had to go to school. He was dragged from the dog's kennel, cleaned up and put under the

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charge of his eldest brother, Pedro. In the vicious savannah of the playground, Pedro was a lion, endlessly stalking the herds, looking for the weakling and going in for the kill. But he was smart as well as brutal and when he saw the fear the man-faced boy inspired he saw opportunity.

Pedro let it be known that the man-faced boy had strange powers, that he could curse you or cure you. For a fee, he offered protection. The man-faced boy made his brother a king and so, for the first time in his life, he felt the glow of acceptance.

When their father got wind of his son's powers, he beat Pedro for not sharing the money, then gripped them both to his vast chest in a flush of pride. This would be the making of them all!

The man-faced boy's fame spread through the region. Coached by his father and brother he became fearsome, spitting bile and phlegm, speaking the language of drunks and whores and delivering pronouncements both profane and violent. Sometimes he would lash out, lunging at the customers, scratching and kicking, eyes bulging, face red with rage while Pedro held him back. It was dark theatre and it worked. Pilgrims travelled great distances to be blessed by him. Money flowed like blood. The family prospered. The ache of loneliness faded from the man-faced boy's memory as he was embraced in the bosom of his family. If the price of acceptance was making himself a monster, it was a price he was willing to pay.

One night when the man-faced boy was nearly ten years old, he was summoned to the home of the wealthiest man in the region, a devout man who had publicly decried him as a false prophet. His father beat him so he understood the importance of the job.

Nothing in the man-faced boy's life prepared him for this. The home was vast, bigger than the hospital in town. Inside, everything was cool and quiet. Even the maid's shoes made only the softest of squeaks in the polished marble foyer. She showed them into a room where the walls were lined with shelf after shelf of books, and where windows as high as the ceiling looked out over clipped green terraces. They were greeted not by the wealthy man, but his son, a young man not much older than Pedro but possessed of a grace and

sophistication Pedro would never know. The man-faced boy felt like a beast before him.

The young man explained that his sister Isabella was unwell, gripped by a wasting no doctor could explain or cure. She was, he told them, a sickly baby and had been left blind by an earlier illness. His mother couldn't cope any more, she had collapsed from the strain and although his father was set against the idea, they were his last hope. He swore them to secrecy. The man-faced boy could smell his desperation and knew this would be a rich prize.

The young man led them upstairs to his sister's sickroom. A pall of death hung in the air, clung to the rich furnishings, invaded their breath. The man-faced boy was startled to discover Isabella was little more than a child. Her illness had flushed the rose from her cheeks and shaded dark hollows beneath eyes but her delicate beauty was still evident. The man-faced boy was uncomfortable; everything about this seemed wrong. But his father was beside him, and he knew what he had to do. Isabella screamed and sobbed at when the man-faced boy thrashed on the ground as though possessed, and her brother clutched her to him, himself sobbing with fear and regret. The man-faced boy's father declared there were demons at work, and it would take many visits to drive them from her side. The young man agreed their fee in spite of himself.

That night the man-faced boy took refuge with the dogs for the first time in a long time, haunted by the memory of the delicate child who seemed so loved.

The next day they went back to the mansion, his father crowing about the riches before them. The young man took them straight to Isabella. She was afraid and the man-faced boy ached with the knowledge he was the cause. He threw himself into his performance, drowning his doubt in the rituals. When he laid hands on Isabella to draw the demons out, she pulled away, twisting in fear. His father barked at her brother and they held her down. The man-faced boy took her hands in his. He gripped tight, expecting her to pull away. She gasped, and after a moment she squeezed back. Their hands were almost the same size.

The next time they went to the mansion, Isabella wanted to see the man-faced boy alone. His father was unhappy, but allowed a short meeting. The man-faced boy crept into the room, his heart beating with a fear he couldn't name. Isabella seemed to be sleeping and he turned away, only to be stopped by her frail voice calling him to her side.

"Take my hand," she said. He obeyed. Her soft hands traced the geography of his. She reached out and touched his arms, his body, felt his clothes. The man-faced boy was too scared to breathe; scared of what was happening, scared it would stop.

"You're a child?" she said. The man-faced boy froze. He panicked. He wrenched his hands free and lunged at her with a howl, screeching and clawing. His father burst into the room and threw him from her. The man-faced boy slammed into a chair, the wood splintering around him, but seemed to feel no pain. He leapt to his feet and tried again and again to reach the girl, his determination testing even his father's strength, a torrent of filth flooding from his mouth. It took both men to drag him from the room.

His father beat him unconscious that night and Pedro threw in a few kicks for good measure. The next day the news reached them that Isabella had passed away in the night. Knowing her father would come for them, the family fled.

They soon set up shop in a new area, far distant from their home. The man-faced boy resisted at first but with fists and boots it was made clear to him that his face was his fortune. With nowhere else to turn, he accepted his lot. Life returned to its familiar patterns and the days and weeks passed. Winter turned to spring, spring to summer and summer to autumn, and with each passing season the man-faced boy grew taller and stronger. And as he grew, he stopped being the man-faced boy, and just became a man.

He tried hard to compensate. His performances became more violent, more brutal, more extreme. But his visage no longer inspired fear and the pilgrims stopped coming. The money dried up. He lost his usefulness to his family and they blamed him for their failing fortunes. He had no real skills, no understanding of the way

the world worked. He looked like a man but was as helpless as a newborn. They turned him out on the street. Soon he was back haunting the fringes of life, looking for his place and each night his dreams were haunted by the blind girl who saw the truth.

