

LIAR

By Ken Broadway

Had I known the horrible thing that fate had in store for me, I would have passed right by, no--run screaming from, the old cathedral on Ninth.

But fate has an annoying way of keeping secrets until it's too late.

Making my way home from Turner's Tavern after cashing on a sweet deal--I'd set up old Farley good--he wouldn't be seeing anything without bars in front of it for a long, long time, thanks to the crooked cop who was more than willing take down my, well, let us say...embellishment, for a price--I lavished in the sweet warmth of whiskey spreading through my belly.

Fingering the crisp wad of bills in my front pocket, I thought about Farley for a moment.

Of course he was innocent, he wasn't even there the day that those four men had coming racing out of Bell's Credit Union on Downing--but the cops had been on him for some time now, and one cop in particular was hot to nail him down.

So, for a few drinks, and a few more Franklins, nine to be exact, I lied.

What the hell after all...Farley was about as smart as a blonde in a library.

I'd probably done society a favor.

Putting it out of my mind, I jammed my hands into my sweat jacket against the cold and headed home.

But as I made my way past the old cathedral, the unmistakable, irresistible sounds of partying reached my ears.

A party in a church?

I had to check this out.

Ascending the granite staircase to the heavy, iron laced wooden doors, I pulled one of them open and found myself standing at the entrance to a great, eighteenth century style ballroom, complete with massive, glittering

chandeliers that hung halfway from the grand ceiling to the floor.

Last time I looked this was supposed to be a church...

But then, I had never actually looked before.

Besides, it was their church and they could do what they wanted with it.

I estimated that there had to be at least a hundred people or better filling the impressive room between the incredible, oak paneled walls.

From the lavish costumes they wore: waistcoats, stockings and those white powdery wigs for the men, and beautifully decorated floor length dresses--the kind that show lots of cleavage for the women, I assumed that I had stumbled into some sort of weird, period masquerade party.

They all had those tiny masks that just cover the eyes.

Most of the people were coupled off in the center of the huge, highly polished floor, dancing the minuet or at least a form of it, moving crazily forwards and back as a four-man rock band pumped out a strange, yet, very cool sounding, version of some classical tune.

Dressed in my jeans and sweat jacket, nobody seemed to notice me as I stood there in the doorway...until I stepped through it, that is.

"Excuse me sir, but you must remove your mask and be recognized," spoke a voice from my right, deep with authority.

A tall, impressive looking fellow, also dressed in a waistcoat, wig and stockings appeared at my side...he must have been their version of a bouncer.

"But I'm not wearing a mask," I answered...after all, I wasn't.

"Your humor is appreciated sir, but please remove your mask to be recognized."

"But I don't have a mask on..."

With frustration in his voice, the bigger man took a step towards me.

"Sir, I must insist, please remove the mask, or it will be removed for you."

The look on his own masked face told me he wasn't kidding.

Beginning to feel uneasy with the situation, I turned back towards the door to leave.

The man placed a hand on my shoulder to stop me.

"The mask, sir?"

What was I to do?

Raising a hand to my face, I felt no mask, yet apparently, this clown either thought I was being

belligerent, or...somehow, he was under the impression that I was actually wearing a mask.

Not desiring of a good pummeling from this guy, my mind raced, before at last deciding on a direction.

"Sir," I asked, mocking his slow, slightly, British drawl, "do I appear to be wearing a mask to you?"

Clear and direct his retort shot from the hip:
"Everyone is wearing a mask sir, now please remove it."

Then it came to me...reaching behind my head, I pretended to untie the mask that I wasn't wearing and stretched an empty hand in his direction as if to hand it over.

"Here'ya go," I said.

The world exploded in a white-hot sheet of pain, raining needles on top of my head, as I staggered backwards into the wall, arms flailing, searching for anything that made sense to steady myself.

He hit me!

Before I could retaliate, he slugged me again, this time in the midsection.

I doubled.

"LIAR!" he bellowed.

Snatching me roughly by the collar, he dragged me towards the ballroom, where the dancing crowd had already

parted, revealing a small circle of shiny, hardwood floor in the center.

"THIS MAN IS A LIAR!" he announced loudly, tossing me towards the open space, where I hit in a two-part movement, landing first on my knees, and then plopping forward onto my face.

"UNMASK HIM!" he shouted to the onlookers gathered around me.

Terrified, I rose to my knees. Getting one leg under me, I thrust myself up to stand, before someone in the throng reached out and shoved me over onto my backside.

It was apparent that I was to stay that way.

"He's a liar!" said a woman's voice rose from somewhere behind the now swelling throng. "And I bet he's a thief too!" chimed in a man in front.

"Liar..."

Without warning, a chant formed in the center of the crowd, low and growling at first, but quickly gathering momentum.

"LI...AR...OFF WITH THE MASK...LI...AR...OFF WITH THE MASK," they repeated in a sing-song, closing on me.

In sheer mind-numbing panic, I balled over, throwing my arms above me in an attempt to shield myself.

"LI...AR...OFF WITH THE MASK...OFF WITH THE MASK," the chant continued, rising in pitch until it echoed off the walls and ceiling of the great chamber.

This was crazy, and though I was panic-stricken, my anger was also aroused.

After all, enough is enough.

Rolling up onto my knees to face them, I gathered my strength and screamed: "I'M NOT WEARING ANY GODDAM MASK!!"

I screamed hard and long with every available fiber, holding the last of it until I thought my throat would implode.

When the final syllable of the final word had finally drained out, I fell forward on all fours, gasping for oxygen, like a drowning man, but steeled for their reaction.

But they were silent...like a Broadway musical where the main character belts out the big finish, and the entire cast freezes for a long moment before the next scene.

It was ludicrous.

All at once the circle parted to my left, opening a small hole, through which a superbly decked figure stepped, striding boldly to where I was sprawled at an awkward angle on all fours, stopping a few feet from me.

Still fighting to compose myself, I looked up at him from my rather humiliating position on the floor.

His trappings were rich, and I judged him to be some sort of dignitary or leader among these maniacs.

"Why do you refuse to remove your mask?"

He was the first to speak, talking down, in what sounded to me like a condescending tone. "You must remove your mask and be recognized," he said again, before I could answer.

The ballroom was heavy with silence, like a hole had been punched in the air.

Rising slowly, I eyed the whacked assemblage before me, waiting for an attack. When none came, I brushed myself off.

"Why do you insist...why does the big oaf by the door insist..."

Turning in a circle, and addressing the crowd, I continued, "Why do all of you insist, for whatever insane reason, that I am WEARING A MASK?" I had punctuated the words WEARING A MASK by stabbing a finger at them.

More silence.

Finally, the leader spoke up again.

"Why sir, do you insist that you are not?"

Were these people completely crazy?

"And sir, why do you insist on not removing it to be recognized?"

I saw that I was getting nowhere and tried a different tack.

"Why are all these people here, yourself included, wearing masks?" I shot.

"We all are required to remove our masks and be recognized, before we are allowed to enter...we have done so, and now sir, so must you."

Daring a glance to the door, I saw that the ruffian who'd socked me earlier was closely guarding it--no good there--but it was the only exit that I could see.

With that option gone, I had no other choice but to try and talk my way out.

"Sir," I began, addressing the leader again, "if I am wearing a mask, please tell me...what does it look like?" I crossed my arms, pretty pleased with myself, figuring that would throw him...but it did not.

"Your mask is as all masks are, sir...it covers your eyes."

That's it?

It covers my eyes?

"I will ask you once more to remove it."

"Sir, I can't remove something that I'm not wearing," I said, dropping my arms to my sides in resignation.

It was apparent that there was no way out of this mess, and I couldn't very well take off a mask that I didn't have on in the first place.

"Very well, sir...is that your answer?" he asked again.

The crowd was beginning to grow impatient, with shouts of, "He's a liar," at the back.

Grabbing on to that, to buy time, I addressed the leader again.

"Do you think I'm a liar, sir?"

His answer was swift.

"You are telling me that you are not wearing a mask, is that correct?"

"Yes I'm not wearing a mask," I answered quickly, albeit with a touch of sarcasm.

"How is it, sir, that you swear you have no mask, when it is plain to all that the opposite is true?"

He had me there.

"I don't know, sir," was all I could think to say.

"If all the people say that one thing is true, and one person denies it, then who is perceived as the liar, sir...the one or the company of many?"

His logic was basically infallible, but in this case, I was sure that he was wrong. I knew that I was not wearing a fucking mask.

"But sir...really, I'm not wearing..."

"ANSWER THE QUESTION!" he roared.

The crowd reciprocated, chanting

"AN...SWER...AN...SWER...ANSWER."

Standing silent in their midst, I studied them worriedly, hoping that the leader would somehow calm them down before they turned on me in a frenzy. Finally, after a few minutes, the chant died.

The leader waited.

The crowd waited.

I waited.

It was like some deranged Mexican standoff.

Finally, I spoke.

"Sir, by your logic, you are correct..."

The crowd jeered, cutting me off at that point, and I waited for them to quiet before continuing.

Finally when they were silent again, I said, "If all the people say that something is true, and one person says that it is not true, then that person could be perceived as a liar."

The crowd went wild.

Raising his arms in front of him, he quieted them once mor--driving home the point to me that my fate was in his hands, and I wondered how much longer he could contain them.

"Then by your own admission sir...you are a liar."

Talk about using your words against you.

"Sir...are you admitting that you are a liar?"

This had gotten way out of hand.

What started out as a question of whether or not I was wearing a stupid mask, had somehow warped into this maniacal circus.

My honesty was at question here...I was being tried.

"Why, for God's sake," I pleaded, "do you think that I am wearing a mask after all? Can't you see that I am not?"

It was a last ditch effort.

"You are the one who does not see sir, the mask of dishonesty that you wear blinds you to your own lies..."

"Uh," I stammered, "does that mean..."

"UNMASK THE LIAR!" he wailed at the crowd.

That was the cue that they had been waiting for.

In madness, they rushed in from all directions, like the Red Sea closing in on itself.

Instantly, I was pulled under, feeling hands and fingers, reaching, poking, grabbing, tearing at my face, snatching bits of skin, and pulling at my hair and ears.

Screaming, and writhing, I fought them, trying vainly to cover myself...but there were far too many of them.

My arms were pulled behind me, and I was held helpless, exposed to their ripping. The side of my head suddenly detonated as my left ear was jerked from its place, spewing out blood in great, jetting gobs on the woman who held it up like a grisly prize.

The thundering mêlée was deafening, soon I could make no sense of up or down as I fell beneath a darkness of bodies. A finger found its way to my right eye socket, putting it out in a shattering glimmer of pain. Another dug its way into a nostril, and forming a hook, tore its way out through my nose. My cheeks were clawed and twisted, until finally, someone managed to tear most of the left one off.

Most of my hair had been torn away by now and the blood from my battered scalp ran thickly into my remaining eye, blocking out any sight I had left.

What felt like armies of feet kicked and stomped me from every direction, breaking bones and smashing vital organs as the blood-crazed, mindless horde beat me numb,

leap-frogging over each other from behind to get at me, where I twisted beneath them at the center.

Teeth were kicked and ripped from my mouth, and someone got a hold of my tongue, yanking it violently before tearing it from my throat. My lower lip was next to go.

Little by little, they pulled and shred me, slowly reducing me to bloody pieces.

Amazingly though, I managed to remain conscious for quite some time through all of it. By the time I lost my other eye, I had long stopped feeling the pain.

Eventually, I had to give up to them and accept my fate--the fate of a liar.

Thinking about Farley again, as I slipped into darkness, I finally understood the error of my ways, for I had been unmasked.

As I said before, had I known what thing fate had in store for me, I would have run screaming...and I never would have lied about Farley in the first place.

END.