

Black Lace Eyes by M.G.

The first time I donned the burkha, I was sure I'd put it on wrong. A tight band of black encircled my forehead and waves of black cloth draped over my body, scraping the floor, eerily-- ghost-like. I could barely see inside of all that black. There wasn't a slit for the eyes, no Halloween mask holes to peer through, just stiff black lace. I was alone in a vacuum. I couldn't see behind me or on either side of my body, my entire view was one of filtered light through the eyelet holes in the lace. My first step felt strange to me-- the weight of the cloth was pulling me down, and without peripheral vision, I couldn't tell if I was going to trip or run into someone. I gathered a fistful of cloth in my hand so I wouldn't trip and followed a lacy white ribboned thong through the crowd.

We took a turn about the room holding up posters, interrupting diligent students and lazy conversations. Most people made a concentrated effort not to see me. Instantly chemistry became fascinating, the pattern of the ceiling was riveting, or it was a good time for a nap. I heard one group of guys snicker, a girl gasp, and somebody behind me whisper, "What's this?"

Taking this as my cue, I began to say hello in a cheery voice to each person, asking them if they would be interested in learning more about Sunsara Taylor's talk. The answers were varied; I recognized the familiar cop-out I had used in dozens of similar situations, "Oh I have class tonight... I guess I can't make it," the more standard, "No thanks," accompanied with an uncomfortable shifting of shoulders, and the occasional hesitant, "Eehoooh um sure..." I smiled in response, shrugged off dismissals, and communicated with body language the way I often do to show my ease with a situation and my enthusiasm for the event I was advertising.

About halfway around the room, I realized that all the subtle statements my body movements and facial expressions were making, were completely hidden by the burkha. No one could tell if I was smiling or frowning, if I was slouching or tense. I was a figure obscured in an ocean of black. I wasn't a person with a face, mannerisms, or way of walking, I was simply a cloud of black moving through a crowd. I passed several classmates and friends-- Seamus with whom I eat lunch every Friday without fail, and Alexa, the first girl I'd met from my Writing the Essay Class that fall-- neither of them recognized me. I was shocked. Was I so identified by my face, my body, my appearance that without these visual cues I was nobody? Was this how Muslim women who wear the burkha feel everyday? To have no identity or self to define, was surreal. No one knew who I was. For the first time, I thought about the burkha as a method of the objectification of women-- I was not a woman, I had no name, I had no face, I had essentially no vision; I was an object, I was a burkha, nothing more.

Although I'd always been a feminist, researched the treatment of women around the world for various essays and articles I'd written, it was an entirely different experience to represent the struggle. I had wanted to be a part of a protest for a very long time. Activism, it seems is in my blood, and it felt right to finally be standing up for what I believe in. When I'd first heard about Sunsara Taylor's talk, I'd never expected to become involved, to end up with a group of wonderful people, agitating for women's rights. And maybe I wasn't sure about revolution or communism, but I was sure that I was doing the right thing. The oppression of women is a real problem, and it's relevant today-- not just in Afghanistan, Iran, or India; but in America too. Now is the time to forget labels, prejudices, and affiliations. It's time to listen to each other. It's time to work together to make a better world for humanity.