

## Dress up

“Excuse me, sir, I can’t seem to find your lizard masks. I’ve seen gorilla masks, suits of armor, even dead presidents, but as much as I’ve looked I can’t seem to find any lizard masks.”

“You wouldn’t happen to have that sort of thing in stock? My office is having a costume party this week and I really need a lizard mask to make my costume work.”

Standing behind the checkout counter, Gene racked his brain as he considered the customer’s request. While thinking about what he had in stock, he equally weighed the truth of the man’s explanation.

A lizard mask? For an office party? In late July?

Unknown to the stranger, there was no sexual proclivity Gene hadn’t seen. Every fetish, no matter how bizarre, had succeeded in finding its way into the costume shop.

Customers always liked to believe they were the first con artists to come up with a clever ruse. Business parties. Charity balls. Volunteering at an orphanage. When they used sick and dying children, that was Gene’s favorite.

How people couldn’t see their own transparencies was baffling, how obvious their sweaty palms and tauged pants made them. Why they lied he never knew.

Sometimes, it was just easier to tell the truth.

“Lizard masks, well let me think? Closer to Halloween we always carry a variety of creature masks but during the summer months we tend to clean out the old inventory.”

“Let’s go check by the Murder Wall. I think I might have something over there.”

Leaving the safety of the checkout counter, Gene wandered back behind the registers, past the clown noses and fake mustaches, beyond all the last minute, half-off crap peddled to bratty children, their tired parents worn down into purchase.

Beyond the shit bins Gene led the customer past rows of princess costumes and spaceman suits. Fillmore’s Costume Emporium had served Kansas City for over sixty years, but as much as fashion evolved, the standard repertoire of the costume shop remained the same.

Aisles 1-3 were filled with kids’ costumes, best sellers, and an always dwindling section dedicated to the children’s movie *Frozen*.

If it was possible to curse a cartoon character to hell, Gene prayed with every fiber of his being that Ella and Ollie would spend eternity in fiery, unfrozen anguish.

Aisles 4-6 were filled with celebrity masks, costume accessories, and smoking jackets. During the slow parts of the year, when college kids needed a bowler hat for a Gilded age kegger, a fake ass insert for a babies got back blowout, it was between those rows where they dug.

Past the costume aisles, on the far side of the store was the ever-popular Murder Wall. Jason Voorhees, Freddy Krueger, and Michael Myers hung from metal hooks, their menacing gazes made docile by unfilled, drooping latex.

Gene stopped as he looked at the wall, scanning from row to row searching for the mask. When he spotted it, tucked behind a surprisingly convincing Hell Raiser, he reached down and pulled out the disguise.

“Here you go sir, this is the closest thing to a lizard mask we’re going to have in stock. Think this will fit the bill?”

Grabbing the mask, the customer evaluated the soft rubber as if it was some strange animal whose demeanor he had not yet come to trust. He turned the mask in his hands, slowly, deliberately, rocking back and forth on the toes of his Adidas slides. The man’s calf high tube socks, yellowed and frayed, stuck out beyond the edge of the slides, and as Gene waited for his answer, he wondered just how much of a weirdo he was dealing with.

“I’ve seen this mask before. Not sure where, but wasn’t this a character in some movie?”

Gene was surprised the man couldn’t place the film.

“You’re absolutely correct. That is an official Jar Jar Binks mask, a character from Star Wars Episode One, The Phantom Menace. I’m afraid that’s the closest thing we have to a lizard right now. If you want I can see about ordering something else, but I don’t know if we’ll have it in time for your party.”

Still swaying on his tiptoes, the man seemed momentarily taken off guard by the mention of the office party. Gene had him caught in a lie, but soon enough the customer continued on, unfazed in his dedication to secure his disguise.

“Why do you have a Star Wars mask on the Murder Wall? I mean, if it was Darth Vader I’d understand, but shouldn’t this one be back with the other movie characters?”

Gene had to fight to hold back from laughing. It’d been his idea to put the mask on the Murder Wall, and although his statement to the world went unseen by most, he still relished the barb.

“Well, sir, we save this wall for the most heinous villains. If you ever get the chance to see the Phantom Menace, lets just say you’ll see why we keep this one here.”

Gene smiled to try and let the customer in on his joke, but the man suddenly viewed him as if he was the weirdo. Unable to find another lizard mask, however, he told Gene that Jar Jar would do just fine.

After ringing in the mask and saying farewell, Gene was alone. On a Tuesday evening with over three months until Halloween it was common to be the only one in the store, but in a room full of faces, Gene always had company.

For nearly fifteen years he’d run the Costume Emporium, fifteen years since he’d purchased the building from Mr. Drake Fillmore himself.

Thinking about it like that, Gene couldn’t believe how long it’d been.

When he first purchased the building, Gene had envisioned the costume stop as a stepping-stone. Using his early inheritance, Gene became a business owner at the ripe age of twenty-five, but although he’d been a proud proprietor throughout the years, he had originally bought the shop for different reasons.

With a degree in Theater Arts and no prospects in Kansas City, pursuing a career in Theater became a shit or get off the pot proposition. Many years before Gene visited New York during school. He'd even spent one summer as an unpaid set decorator at an Off Broadway production, but New York never felt like home.

That was why he bought the shop. It wasn't like he planned on running a costume store forever, but with contracts secured with local playhouses, the store kept him in touch with his true love until his real calling came along.

Deciding that Jar Jar was as good a sign to close up shop as any, Gene started shutting down. If his father had still been alive he would've chided him for closing early, for passing up on the chance of another unlikely sale, but his father was long gone. Gene was never the son he'd expected, and so many years after his passing forgetting pop's ideas on life became easier and easier.

After flipping over the open sign and locking the door, Gene made his way back over to the register. Besides Jar Jar, his day had been relegated to an old lady buying costume jewelry for her grand daughter, a gay couple arguing over who should be Starsky and who should be Hutch for their Cops and Robbers party, and a young, homeless woman who had browsed for nearly half an hour before asking if she could wash her hair in the bathroom sink.

Gene had allowed the simple courtesy, and after the woman finished he'd given her ten dollars from his wallet. Between the costs of the rest of his day, the utilities and the property tax, the salary he was supposed to receive, Gene knew it was a loss. But he didn't worry. In his experience, worrying never did a thing.

After counting the register Gene debated whether he should vacuum when he heard the sound of keys in the front door. Only one other person had a set of keys to the Emporium, and although he hadn't expected to see her that evening, Gene heard the door shut behind Meg as she let herself in.

"Excuse me, sir, I wanted to know if you have any giant baby costumes? It's not for me, of course, but if you have any adult sized diapers that would be great."

Gene chuckled as Meg stared at him in full sincerity. Still wearing her Starbucks apron, stinking of roasted beans and spilled milk, Meg looked out of place. Her pudgy face, soft and doughy like the rest of her body, was bright red from the summer heat.

She had her hands on her hips, and although Gene could tell she was trying to hide it, she was out of breath from her walk.

"Adult Baby Costumes, well mam, I think you're in luck. We keep those next to the biker gear, right behind the assless chaps."

Meg could only keep her face straight for a moment longer before cracking up. Her laugh was big, almost confrontational. It filled the silent space of the store like a bullhorn. Gene had heard it so many times that the laugh had almost become endearing. Almost.

"I didn't think I'd see you tonight Meg. Thought you were closing up."

Meg shrugged in indifference as she told Gene that she'd left one of the other baristas to close. As assistant manager it was Meg's duty to close on weeknights, but more often than not she called her days early. With excuses ranging from her aching back to her cat Jenkins, her boss let it slide.

Meg had nothing else in her life aside from Starbucks, except maybe Gene, and although she didn't know it, the idea of firing her made her boss depressed. He put up with her laziness, and Meg coasted on the rewards.

"Well excuse me mister but didn't I see the closed sign hanging out front. Sounds to me like the pot calling the kettle black. Besides, we had this one lady today, and believe me, if you had to deal with her you would've left early as well."

Meg proceeded to launch into a story about skim milk versus one percent, of demanding customers and judgmental, gaged eared coffee makers, but it was a story Gene had heard before. He still nodded at all the right times, even mustering a laugh as Meg let an unanswerable question hang, but he was focused on shutting down. There was a new episode of Survivor on television that night and Gene knew that if he could get done fast enough that he'd be able to make it home in time.

Spraying the front counter with Windex, Gene watched as Meg started to wander through the costume aisles. The fluorescent lighting overhead highlighted each curve of her body, each shape and flab that threatened to push through her cheap, black shirt.

It wasn't like Gene was in a position to judge. His curly hair, bundled and thick like a packet of Ramen, had turned gray years past. His paunch had grown as his meager frame reduced, and although he'd once envisioned himself on the stage, Gene knew that he was far from a picture of desire.

So he watched Meg. It'd been almost ten years since she'd started coming into the shop, and throughout those years they'd developed a close friendship.

Nothing more had ever come from it, though, and although both Gene and Meg were single, neither one had ever had the courage to push things further.

From across the store Gene saw Meg pick up a princess hat, its pink top rising into a cylindrical cone. Meg slipped the hat on her head, and turning to courtesy, assumed her role.

“Good evening fair sir, I am a noble woman but I’ve become dreadfully lost. Might you know any good knights to accompany me home?”

Reaching into a bin, Meg grabbed a gold and grey wand hung with sparkly tassels, waving it through the air in front of her in girlish circles. She stood waiting for Gene, a come hither glare of desire on her round face, but Gene wasn’t in the mood. Something about the lizard mask, about his entire day, kept him from joining in.

“I’m sorry m’lady but I’m afraid that there are no knights here tonight. Maybe if you come back tomorrow Lancelot will be waiting.”

Meg made a pouty face as she snapped her wand at Gene in disappointment. Putting the wand and princess hat back, she left him to close as she skipped throughout the costumes. Every once in a while Gene would look up and find her trying on random disguises, but he didn’t stare for long.

After cleaning the counter and vacuuming the carpets in front of the registers Gene figured he was safe to call it for the night. Taking his till and small deposit, he began to make his way back towards the messy office at the back of the shop.

It’d been some time since he’d last seen Meg, somewhere around the garment wall as she jabbed at tie-dye colored prints with an oversized He-Man sword. Gene



never felt scared inside the shop when he was alone, but knowing that somewhere out there, most likely in disguise, was another person...All of a sudden he sped up as he called out to Meg.

“You better not be trying to scare me Meg, I am not in the mood. I promise that later this week we can dress up, but if you try something so help me...”

Gene let the threat trail off. If Meg scared him he wouldn't do anything. His nasally voice betrayed any chance he had of sounding tough, but as he hurried back to the office, Meg was nowhere to be found.

Back along the Murder Wall Gene started to wonder what had happened. Setting his moneybag on a half empty shelf of Iron Man masks, he walked to the garment wall and began to work his way across the store. Passing Incredible Hulk suits and afro wigs, Gene wondered if Meg had left because of his refusal to join her make believe. He'd almost made it all the way across the store when he heard a soft sobbing coming from behind one of the racks of disco era clothing.

“Meg, honey, where are you? I didn't mean to snap. I was just trying to close up so I could get home.”

Gene tiptoed around the clothing rack as he finally found Meg, her back supporting, thick soled shoes sticking out from where she plopped across the floor. When he saw her entirety, he was unprepared for what he found.

Tears were evident by the shine on Meg's round cheeks, but although Gene had seen her cry before, new to their arrangement was the baby doll Meg held in her hands. When Gene stopped and looked down with nothing to say, Meg wiped her face as she tried to pull herself together.

“I’m sorry Gene, I don’t know what’s gotten into me tonight. I guess I’ve just been feeling really lonely lately, and when I saw this doll it all just kind of hit me.”

Although not a virgin, Gene had very little experience with one on one intimacy. The requirements of soothing another person, of being there for someone when all they needed was a shoulder to cry on, when it came to those skills Gene was as unqualified as he was unsure. As was the case he tripped on his words, unsure of himself, unsure of how to make things better.

“Oh, Meg. Don’t be so hard on yourself. You’ve got so much going for you.”

The words felt wrong leaving Gene’s mouth, but once they’d been said he couldn’t take them back. Meg’s face showed how wrong they’d been, but her words hurt much more than her disheartened face.

“Gene, I am thirty-six years old. I’ve never had a real boyfriend, and ten years of coming in here to see you has left me nowhere. If I died tomorrow, no one would care. There’s not one person in the whole world who would notice if I went missing.”

A fresh sea of tears streamed down Meg’s face as she dropped her hands in her lap. The baby doll, an accessory item Gene rarely sold, rolled off her legs and landed face down on the floor.

“What are we doing here Gene? Do you ever wonder what this is all about? If pouring coffee and making fun of weirdo’s is as much as we have coming I don’t know how much more I can take.”

Sliding the baby doll aside, Gene sat down next to Meg. He could feel her gentle sobs as her shoulders rubbed against his own, but he didn't put his arm around her.

"I don't know much Meg, but I know that no matter what we keep going. That's what life is, what it's about. We don't plan on where we end up, but when we get there we make the most of what we find."

Gene patted Meg on her thigh, feeling her warm flesh through the black jeans. There was a pull between them, a magnetism that tried to stay Gene's hand, but stronger than the pull was the lifetime of inaction. Gene moved his hand before things became awkward, and as he did, Meg sighed in reluctant agreement.

"Oh Gene, I guess you're right. It just gets hard doing it all alone."

Trying empathy once more, Gene promised Meg that she would never be alone as long as they were friends. The first thing he'd said that worked, Meg smiled when she made him promise. Gene crossed his heart and hoped to die, never putting his hand back on Meg's leg.

When Gene helped Meg to her feet he skillfully nudged the baby doll under the rack of clothes. Meg seemed to be regaining composure, but Gene had an idea to help her forget her troubles once and for all.

"Hey, I've got some old costumes that I just took out of storage in the office. What do you say we unpack them and try them out, see if they're still worth anything."

For a moment Meg looked like she had something to say, something she was unwilling to let go of, but as Gene nodded back towards the office in hopeful insistence she let her idea fade as she agreed to join him.

“OK Gene, your right. But you have to put the knight’s costume on. It’s not every night I get to be a princess.”

Two hours later, long after Survivor ended, Gene and Meg were still trying on costumes. Frankenstein, the Flying Nun, and cheap cop outfits filled their evening, and after enough time Meg forgot her worries.

In Fillmore’s Costume Emporium, it was always possible to be someone else.

But tomorrow Gene and Meg would go back to normal. Meg would make coffee and wipe tables and Gene would pass another day thinking about what could’ve been. But in emporium, under the bright fluorescent lighting surrounded by other people’s fantasies, Gene and Meg became something more. They became something different, and different meant no having to be who they really were.

Pretending kept them going, but where it led, neither could say.

**The End**

