

I Need to Know If You Have the Mask

I need to know if you have the mask. The one I'm wearing. Can you hear me okay? I know it's hard to hear me sometimes when I'm wearing this thing even if the voice box isn't working. I hope you don't mind if I don't take the mask off. I feel more comfortable with it on.

The mask I'm looking for is part of the Shutojin Action Set that comes with a dart gun and targets. I don't need that other stuff but the set is the only thing you can buy that has the mask with the voice box. I saw some regular masks hanging up in the Halloween aisle but those won't do me any good. If I don't have a mask with a working voice box when I pick up Brandon he will freak out. Worse than freak out. Freak out doesn't even begin to cover it.

Brandon is obsessed with this show. Brandon's my son. He's four. He watches nothing else. I don't know how it started. We didn't like to plop him in front of the TV at home because my husband thinks too many parents do that and their kids wind up total zombies sitting there for hours on end. But then Brandon must have seen Shutojin somewhere. One day I picked him up from day care and it was all he wanted to talk about it. He wouldn't say where he saw the show though. He was talking about the show like it had always been a part of his life. So I put it on for him when we got home and that was the end of no TV in the house. You make all these rules for your home and then you send your kid out in the world where they don't believe in your rules. All the stupid baby books I read before Brandon was born and none of them ever mentioned that.

Shutojin came from a distant planet that was blown up by the evil Kanjumon Klan and now the Klan is threatening earth. The Klan is hidden all over the world and Shutojin must find all its members before the Klan can unite and create a force that will destroy humanity. That's what they say over the opening credits of the show. I have it memorized. We can't watch anything else at home now. I have 200 episodes on my DVR and thank god I do because it's not available on-demand anymore. I tried to get in touch with someone at the cable company to find out why it's not available on-demand anymore but I couldn't figure out who I should talk to. I work for the cable company and I can't even get a straight answer from them. Actually I work for their customer service call center and we're contracted so I don't work for them directly. But still. You'd think they could do me a favor. I'm the person who has to field the calls when someone's screaming bloody murder at me when their own favorite show isn't available on-demand anymore. As if it was my decision. I have to calm them down and if nothing else works I give them a free month of HBO and they're always happy to get it. I'm not supposed to give that out to everybody but it makes them feel better so why not.

It's so different now. When I was a kid you had to wait for kid shows to come on. You got home from school and you had this tiny window when all your favorite shows were on. And then the 6 o'clock news started and that was the end of that. All adult stuff from that point on. But kids today can watch whatever they want whenever they want and they know they can too. Brandon has no concept that he can't watch a show at the precise moment he wants to. Once just to get a break I tried to tell him Shutojin wasn't on right now. He looked at me like I was speaking foreign language. It's is a completely alien concept to him that there are only certain times when you can enjoy the things you enjoy.

My friends without kids ask me if I've seen season 6 of this show or that show and I tell them I haven't even seen season 1 of whatever it is because the only thing we can watch in the house is Shutojin. If Brandon's in the house Shutojin has to be on the TV and I have to sit on the couch alongside him and watch every minute. Sometimes Brandon makes us watch the same episode three or four times in a row or he makes me rewind the bits that he really likes and he grabs my arm super tight the whole time and won't let go. When my husband asks Brandon if he wants to watch something else he says What do you mean. Like it's never occurred to him that other shows exist.

The Action Set is hard to find because the toy company stopped making it. I don't think the show is as popular as it used to be although Brandon wouldn't know that. If you go on eBay people want crazy money for the Action Set now. I paid through the nose for one just to have an extra mask in the house. The seller's description said it was in mint condition but when it came in the mail the packaging was open and the voice box didn't work. Never again. Sometimes I luck out and I find an Action Set at dollar store like yours. I was hoping luck was on my side today.

The voice boxes break easily. One second they're working and the next poof. I think it's from moisture. It gets very humid behind this thing. It's a lot like those plastic Halloween masks they made when I was a kid. The ones with the tiny mouth holes that could cut your tongue. Your breath condenses on the inside of this mask and I think the electronics can't handle the humidity. When the voice box is working everything you say through the mask sounds just like Shutojin. But when the voice box shuts off mid-sentence Brandon can't handle it. He hears my voice and starts screaming at the top of his lungs. It's not a tantrum. It's true terror.

It only happens with me. Brandon's fine with my husband. He can play with Brandon for hours and Brandon's happy as can be. When Brandon was playing I mean. Brandon used to like to go to the park and ride his bike but now he doesn't want to do anything but watch Shutojin. My husband can take the show for maybe two minutes. He says the voices drive him nuts and he'll go off to the bedroom to read instead. Or look at his phone or whatever. I can't get Brandon to bed before 10 on most nights and by the time I get to bed my husband's fast asleep. At least Brandon lets my husband leave. If I get up even to get a drink from the fridge Brandon pulls on my arm and says I can't go anywhere because I'll miss something. He won't let me pause the show. I remember being annoyed by the voices too because I thought they were super high pitched and hyper-rushed spitting out these long nonsense speeches like If we don't get to Dagoran Mountain before the next Haruman Moon then the Rikkien Invaders will be unstoppable. They don't annoy me anymore because they're in my life so much. I would be like being annoyed at the sky.

Maybe you can look up the set in the computer. It's SKU 073145672399. I can't believe I've memorized that. I had it written in a note on my phone so I could pull it up at a moment's notice at the customer service desk. If I had a nickel for every customer service desk I've stood at in the last few months I wouldn't have to work at a call center I'll tell you that. Then one day I was at customer service at the Target near here and the lady asked me what I was looking for and the SKU came out of my mouth before I could reach for my phone. It was a weird feeling. I felt accomplished but also like maybe this was an accomplishment I shouldn't be proud of.

I have to pick up Brandon at preschool in an hour. He's fine at preschool. He's never had any problems there. No fights or tantrums. He's learning his letters and numbers and all of that. The counselors always tell me how sweet he is to them and to the other kids. But if I show up at day care and I'm not wearing a Shutojin mask with a working voice box he'll scream at the top of his lungs. It's awful. He can almost sound like a grown up when he does it. His voice goes down an octave. At least. If you were walking past our apart while he's screaming you'd swear someone was being murdered.

No. That's the Lupojin mask. Shutojin can turn into a wolf-eagle kind of thing called the Lupojin. He can turn into a lot of things but that's the only other mask they used to make. Even if it had a voice box in it I'd be afraid to try it because I know what works and I feel like I can't take a chance on what might work. And it doesn't have a voice box. So.

I'm sorry. Can you check again. I really need to find this mask right now. I used to have a bunch of extra masks at home but I've burned through them all. The first thing I did when I left work was to go home and check under the sink because I stashed an unopened Action Set down there. But when I got under the sink I saw there was a little leak in the elbow pipe and the leak had been dripping on the package for who knows how long. Of course when I ripped open the Action Set the voice box didn't work. I was so mad I flung it across the room and it crashed against the front door and broke into a million pieces. I didn't even stop to clean it up. Ran right back to the car and raced to the mall. Toys R Us didn't have any. They haven't had any for months but I had to check. I looked in the closeout toy store but they didn't have any either. I looked in the GameStop and the Lego store and the J.C. Penney. I don't know why I looked in those places except

that I had to look somewhere. I have this idea in my head that a mask is around here somewhere very close to me and if I keep looking I'll turn a corner and it'll be on a shelf waiting for me.

I left work an hour early to do this. I was at the call center and I was on my break and I thought to myself I better check that this voice box is working right now. Something in me just knew there was a problem and sure enough I switched the voice box on and it wasn't working anymore. I told my boss that Brandon was sick and I needed to go get him right away. It's not really a lie because if I don't get a mask with a working voice box he will be sick. Believe me.

He would wake up screaming. That's how it started I would rush into his room and it was like he didn't see me. He would scream I want mommy but when I would look right at him his eyes went through me. I'd say Mommy's here and I would hold him tight but that made things worse. He would flail his arms and legs and struggle to get away from me and the whole time he'd scream Mommy help me. Like I wasn't his mother but some stranger. Hitting me with real fists. Balled fists. He'd only stop when he wore himself out. Like his batteries ran low and suddenly he'd be snoring.

The next morning Brandon would be fine. Like nothing happened at all. And since my husband never woke up during these episodes I had a hard time describing what happened. He thought I dreamt the whole thing. I'd roll up my sleeves to point to where Brandon hit me but even though I still felt sore there were no bruises to show.

The screaming kept happening until one night it finally woke up my husband. When he came into Brandon's bedroom and saw me trying to hold back his punches he insisted we take Brandon to the hospital. So we all piled into the car with Brandon still

kicking and screaming and I had to drive us to the ER because my husband can't handle driving at night. He says he gets spooked by headlights coming in the direction. The whole time I drove to the hospital I was telling Brandon it would be okay but when I looked at him in the rearview mirror he was rocking in his car seat back and forth trying to break free.

I hauled the seat with Brandon still in it into the waiting room because I didn't want him running all over the place. Every time I tried to pet his head and tell him to settle down he'd scream for his mommy again. He asked my husband Where's mommy and when my husband told him She's right here Brandon would say No she isn't and scream even louder.

We were in the waiting room for two hours before we saw a doctor. The first thing the doctor asked us was if he could give Brandon a sedative and my husband said No we don't believe in drugs. I couldn't even get a word out before my husband said this. I was thinking to myself Yes we don't want our kid doped up but maybe we can relax our standards a bit when he's terrified. I tried to explain to the doctor how Brandon didn't seem to recognize me but the doctor just said Mm hm and shined a light in Brandon's ear and down his throat which he barely had to do because Brandon's mouth was wide open screaming. He was screaming so much his screams were losing strength. His throat was sore and he was starting to cough from the strain. Snot was running down his nose and I wanted to clean his face so badly and it took every bit of strength I had to not touch him because I knew if I did it would just make things worse.

The doctor said what I described sounded like face blindness except that I seemed to be the only person Brandon was blind to which isn't how face blindness manifests

itself usually. People who have face blindness tend to be face-blind to everybody and not just one person. Then he asked if Brandon had been in a car accident or fallen out of a tree or hit his head in some other way. I said No and then the doctor gave me a look. It was on his face for only a fraction of a second but it was there long enough for me to know what he was thinking. Then he asked us if he could look at Brandon while we waited outside the room. He used the word room but it wasn't a room. It was a curtained area in the ER. Over Brandon's screams I could hear people being attended to on both sides of us. An old woman in the next bed over was unresponsive and another old woman was croaking at her over and over Gladys answer me. I didn't like the idea of leaving Brandon alone with the doctor in this place but before I could say anything my husband said Sure of course and he rushed me beyond the curtain with a hand at the small of my back. I wanted to ask him what on earth he was thinking but my head was pounding so hard from all the screaming and the lack of sleep that even the idea of talking was too much to take.

We've got nothing to hide my husband said. Nothing at all. And he kept saying it as if I was the one who needed to be convinced.

The second I left Brandon behind he stopped screaming. When the doctor called us back to his side Brandon was sound asleep on the gurney. I asked the doctor what we should do for Brandon and he shrugged. It might be night terrors he said. They go away. See a counselor if you want. Then I carried Brandon to the car and strapped him into his car seat and drove all of us home. My husband said We can't keep doing this. I wanted to say What do you mean we. When have you done anything about this. It was right on the

tip of my tongue. I was totally going to say it to him. Then I saw that he'd already fallen asleep with his head against the passenger side window.

When we got home I tried to put Brandon in bed as quietly as possible but I knocked his arm against a bedpost and he stirred awake long enough to see me and then he started screaming again. I dropped him on the mattress and I wanted to run away because me being there wasn't helping anything and I didn't know what else to do and when I turned away from him I accidentally kicked the Shutojin mask with my foot. Brandon got it for his birthday and didn't play with it much. I picked the mask up and I put it on. I don't know why I did it. I've tried to remember what I was thinking in that exact moment and I don't think I was thinking anything at all. I was so tired. I remember mumbling to myself out loud I am so tired. My bones hurt I was so exhausted. And the next thing I knew the mask was on my face.

I put on the mask and said Just calm down honey. The voice box was on so it wasn't my voice saying this really. It was Shutojin. As soon as I spoke through the voice box it was like someone pulled a switch. Brandon was fine. He said Okay Shutojin. I sang the show's theme song. *I am the champion from a faraway land. My strength is my true power.* I got that far before Brandon closed his eyes and went to sleep. I climbed in the bed beside him and took off the mask and I was out in three seconds flat.

But the next morning I woke up to the sound of Brandon screaming. He'd never screamed in the day before. The mask was right against the bed where I left it so I put it on again and said There there honey in Shutojin's voice and Brandon was fine. He talked to me like I was his mother again. Talked about his friends at preschool and what they were going to do there today. But he also kept calling me Shutojin. Not mommy.

I kept the mask on throughout breakfast and in the car on the way to preschool. When I dropped Brandon off I told the counselors we were playing a little game that morning. I said the same thing when I picked Brandon up and when I dropped him off the next morning. After a week I stopped making excuses and the counselors stopped asking.

I wear the mask on the job now. Most days I keep it on after I drop Brandon off and I still have it on when I show up for work. I'm in so early most days that nobody's around when I get to the call center so nobody says anything like Why are you wearing that thing. Most times I forget I'm wearing it. I have my own cubicle at the call center and the customers who call in can't see me and everyone else who works there is busy at their own stations fielding calls so they can't really see me either. As long as I keep the voice box off customers can't tell I'm wearing it. No customer's ever said anything about my voice. I try to keep my eyes peeled for supervisors but most of them work remotely. One's in Abu Dhabi. Isn't that crazy.

I'm a little worried because we've gotten a bunch of memos from corporate that we'll all have to undergo training on how to do video chats with customers. That's the wave of the future I guess. I really hope they don't move me over to video because I can't wear the mask on a video. Maybe I'd have to quit. I don't know. The call center hours work for picking up Brandon and dropping him off too. I don't know what other job would give me that kind of flexible time. And my husband says his job is strict with hours and anyway he's got his online classes too so. Guess I'll cross that bridge when I get to it.

A lady from child services came by a few weeks later. I'm guessing it was because of the ER doctor who gave me that look. She watched Brandon play with me and

we all watched Shutojin together and Brandon was fine just like he is whenever I leave the mask on. She asked me and my husband questions like do we do drugs in the house or are we ever abusive to each other in front of him. My husband said No of course not and the lady took down the answers on a clipboard like she was conducting a survey on the street. She asked if there was an inciting incident that made Brandon act out and I told her No and anyway Brandon wasn't acting out. He wasn't causing trouble or hurting other kids or even wetting the bed. He just doesn't seem to know who I am unless I'm wearing the mask and even then he doesn't really know but he's better at least. The child services lady insisted that Brandon must be starved for attention. I told her that I spend every moment he's awake and not at preschool with him. The therapist sighed and suggested a therapist.

That was a mistake. When we showed up for our appointment the therapist said he wouldn't talk to me unless I took off the mask. I explained to him that Brandon would scream if I took off the mask and the therapist said Brandon might work through his issues more effectively if I didn't enable him. So I took off the mask and of course Brandon screamed like crazy. The therapist asked me questions about our home life and how Brandon was doing at preschool and the whole time Brandon was bawling Where's mommy I want mommy. I begged the therapist to let me put the mask on and make Brandon feel better. The therapist told me the worst thing I could do was normalize and reward behavior like this. But Brandon wasn't misbehaving. He was in pain. There was something very simple I could do to stop that pain and this therapist wouldn't let me do it. The therapist even made me hand over the mask so I wouldn't put it on. So I had to sit there and get grilled by this jerk while Brandon was screaming Mommy mommy five feet

away from me and all my husband did was say It's okay buddy she's right here. I cried the whole hour.

The minute we left I put the mask back on and Brandon was smiling again. I was so god damn angry. What kind of person can just sit there and let a child scream like that.

My husband was pissed too but he was pissed at me. He wanted to argue about it all the way home from the therapist. He said we had to let Brandon cry this out like when he was a baby and needed to go to sleep instead of being coddled. I told him this was different. Something's wrong with Brandon and maybe he'll get over it and maybe we'll figure out how to make it go away once and for all but in the meantime I can do a very simple thing and make him feel better. So I have to put on a mask and talk like a cartoon character. Who cares what it looks like to everybody else. Whatever pain he's feeling it makes it go away. Tell me why that's wrong.

My husband didn't say anything for a while. Then he brought up the time he threw out his shoulder pushing Brandon on the swing. When Brandon was little he never wanted to leave the swings so we would push him and push him until he fell asleep or we distracted him with the promise of doing something more fun at home. One time my husband pushed him until he felt his shoulder pop and he went to the doctor and found out he dislocated it. My husband brings this up so much he must think he deserves a purple heart for it. Try giving birth I want to tell him.

Then he tried to appeal to Brandon. He asked him Hey buddy don't you miss your mom? But Brandon looked confused and said No of course not. And he smiled at me in the rearview. I don't know if he meant he didn't miss me because I was right there or if

he actually didn't miss me. It didn't matter. I knew I was there and he felt better. That's all that matters really.

Wearing the mask feels better than not wearing it now. When I take the mask off there's too much air on my face. And when I'm wearing the mask on Brandon sees me again. He looks at me like he did before all of this started and when I look at him I can see myself in his eyes. It's me with a mask on but that's me now. When he sees me I know I'm real and I know I'm there for him and I know he knows I'm there for him and. So if you could check in the back maybe.