

The Man with No Nose

by Michael Fine

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He had a smooth face, by which I mean a face without even a hint of a nose – large eyes that were dark brown, set apart and knowing, that met yours when he faced you, that searched your expression for evidence of what you were thinking and feeling but that also waited for you to reveal yourself – bushy black eyebrows that hadn't been trimmed, prominent cheekbones, smooth tan skin and full lips with a wide mouth and sparkling white teeth. Between his eyes and mouth ran two faint vertical ridges that were the color of his lips, and these moved in an interesting way when he spoke -- but there was not even a trace of a nose. The space between his eyes and mouth was otherwise flat. It tilted in to meet his eyes. He had sandy brown hair flecked with gray, and small ears that moved when he spoke.

He was a bureaucrat, true, but he was a bureaucrat of an enlightened sort, a man of the people, if you will, here to listen to us and make sure we had what we needed. Bureaucracies have their own weight, he told us. Systems exist to perpetuate themselves, not to service communities, not to care for individuals, so it takes hard work to keep them on the straight and narrow, he said, and suggested that he was the man to do that work, that he had come among us to listen. I'll carry back what I've learned to the people up on the hill, he said. Those people mean well. They are dedicated public servants. But they never leave the government buildings, so they have no idea what you are going through. No idea about your lives and how difficult we

have made it for you to live. No understanding that your jobs and families matter more than their rules. I think I can get them to listen, he said. I just need facts and solid evidence, so we can motivate them to change. Stories about the victims, so people can visualize the problem and feel the importance of acting now.

He had a blowhole in his neck beneath his collar button, of course. You can't really live without a nose. Or, more precisely, you can't eat and breathe at the same time or speak and breathe at the same time if you don't have a nose and you can't chew, swallow and breathe, or say more than a few words in a row.

You couldn't see the blowhole. It was hidden under his shirt. But you could hear it if you listened closely, the air moving in and out in short bursts that sounded like someone snoring. And you could see the fabric over the blowhole quiver with each breath, if you looked closely at the place his neck dissolved into his chest. We have all learned not to stare at women's chests. We've all learned the art of subtle glances, assessing the truth but not staring. Of checking it out but not being caught doing so.

That was what we did with him. Peeking, as it were, when he wasn't looking at you. It was simple curiosity. No prurient interest at all. Just wonder, just trying to decide if what we saw was real. At first. But later, perhaps, there was a little more to it than that.

I'll come back in two weeks, the man with no nose said. Please take notes. Let me know if things have changed. For the better. Or for the worse. We must keep our eyes on the problem if things are to improve. Circle back. Hold one another accountable. Make sure the team is getting up to date information. We are all in this together, he said, although we hadn't asked him to come, didn't care much about what he was asking about and didn't quite know who he meant

by “we”. We live as we always have, and know one another, know our strengths and our weaknesses and understand what it takes to live together as one people.

He is a different kind of human. He talks to people we don’t know, and never has to sleep where we sleep at night. Eyes on the prize, he said. Although it wasn’t clear to us what the prize was. Unless his coming back was supposed to be a prize. Which of course, it wasn’t.

He was interesting, true. An interesting oddity. No one had ever seen a man without a nose. But I can’t say any of us would have given it a second thought if we never saw him again.

Two weeks passed. Nothing changed. But then, we weren’t expecting anything to change. Life usually goes on the way it always has. Things do change, of course, but change so slowly you don’t notice the changes.

Those changes are often brought about by some kind of new gadget or another. Someone invents a computer or the cell phone. An electric car. A drone. The flat screen TV. Or some app or program on the cell phone. Those new things appear, curiosities at first. And then they spread like wildfire and before long everyone has one. Or had one, until they fade away as quickly as they came. We change our relationships and our lives to fit these new things because these new things don’t change to fit us. It’s always the other way around. We make room for them in our lives, and that changes us, our lives and the people around us.

The man with no nose didn’t return after all. We thought we saw him drive through in his car one day about two weeks later. A red car we didn’t recognize drove slowly into town and

stopped in the town square. Some of us thought we recognized the driver – the man with no nose. The car remained in the town square for almost an hour. But then the red car drove away.

A few weeks after that, the Mayor gave a speech in front of city hall in honor of the veterans of foreign wars to help us remember all those who died in combat, defending our way of life. A few people gathered to hear the speeches but not as many as in past years when the memories of those wars were still fresh in everyone's minds. Now many of the men who fought (in those days, only men were the kind of soldiers who fought in wars) have died off, and others are infirm. Most people now look back on those wars as an embarrassing part of our ancient history, a time we'd all like to forget.

To our amazement, there was the man with no nose, in a sharp looking blue suit and a red silk tie, standing right next to the Mayor. As the Mayor spoke, a blond-haired child of three or four broke out of the crowd, ran up to the dais, and jumped into the arms of the man with no nose. A dark-skinned woman with thick black hair wearing a bright green dress and a brilliant orange and blue silk scarf walked quickly out of the crowd, chasing the child. She stopped at the steps once the child had jumped into the arms of the man with no nose. The child buried her face in the shoulder of the man with no nose, and we couldn't tell, couldn't answer the only question we had at that moment. We couldn't see the child's face. And so we didn't know if the child had a nose or not.

Just after that the lockdown began. The man with no nose had emerged as the Mayor's right-hand man. He was put in charge of the police and fire departments, of the schools and the

teachers, even of the garbage trucks and the clerks who work in city hall. He went on TV and on social media, broadcasting live. Please stay in your homes, he said. No travel beyond three blocks from your house. And you may leave your homes only every other day, a day determined by the first letter of your last name. Essential workers must carry permits to travel. This is a state of emergency. We will send alerts by cellphone and there will be police cruisers in the streets. They will give instructions by loudspeaker. Prepare for a long siege. Plan for seven or more weeks inside. The seven lean cows are eating the seven fat cows. Stay close to home and make sure you know where your children are, every day and every night.

From then on, the man with no nose was everywhere. He was on television and radio. We'd see him walking the streets, checking to see if people were following the rules, but also checking to see if anyone was in trouble, checking to make sure that everyone had food and shelter. He visited the schools and the nursing homes, the stores, the hair-dressers and the high rises that housed the elderly, disabled and infirm. We'd see him in his red car, arriving at city hall in the morning. And the red car would be parked in front of city hall long after we went to sleep at night.

But it was all to no avail. The situation got worse, not better. All day long there were drones and low flying aircraft screaming over our city, so low you thought they would smash into a building. They made the ground shake. We would feel a blast of air when they flew over, a wind so strong it would knock you over if you weren't careful, and they made an awful noise, the noise of a dentist drill and a garbage truck put together, so loud you had to cover your ears, a noise that somehow made it hard to breathe. The sirens of police cars and ambulances sounded

on and off all day and throughout the night. Once night fell the bright white, red and blue lights from police cars, fire trucks and ambulances bounced through our windows, into all our rooms, even though we kept the blinds closed and our reading lights dim.

Even so we'd often see bodies on the street in the morning, and wild dogs sniffing at them. Before long, a truck would come to take the bodies away. No one walked outside. It was a time of sadness and of fear.

Winter came and that brought a constant freezing rain, and a wet chill that seeped into all our bones.

The man with no nose began to drink.

One day an ice cream truck rolled into town. It was white, the way most ice cream trucks are, white with bright blue and red banners painted on it, with flashing red lights and a very loud sound system that played old carnival pipe organ chimes and whistles so loud that the music, if you wanted to call it that, could be heard half a mile away. It made no sense for there to be an ice cream truck in the city in the middle of the winter. Ice cream trucks are for summer, when the playgrounds and school yards are filled with children playing in the playgrounds, and when those kids are everywhere on the streets, playing stick ball, kickball, touch football and stoop ball and are clustered around the fire-hydrants which are opened to give off a cooling spray. Those kids come running when they hear the music from ice cream trucks' speakers -- or they run into their houses to beg their parents and grandparents for change.

Somehow, and for no reason, people poured out of their houses when they heard the carnival music from the ice cream truck's speakers. They wore heavy cloth overcoats, scarves to keep their necks warm, heavy cloth hats with earflaps of the sort worn by Russian people in the old Soviet Union in winter, and gloves, and they lined up in front of the ice cream truck's window, a little steam cloud coming out of the nose or mouth of everyone standing there in the cold, stamping their feet to stay warm.

After a few minutes, a red car drove up the street, passed the line of waiting people, turned around and parked. The man with no nose stepped out of the car. He was also wearing a cloth coat, a heavy dark gray hat, a brown wool muffler and fine black leather gloves. He walked the line of waiting people, greeting each one, shaking the hands of every person, all the men, women and even the hands of the children. Short puffs of steam came from high on his chest, near his neck. People shook his hand, met his gaze, doing their best not to stare at his face or neck.

When he reached the head of the line, the man with no nose went to the door of the truck and knocked on it.

It was dusk. The truck had on its spotlights, and it sat in a circle of bright white light., A few of the people at the head of the line – and now the man with no nose -- were brightly illuminated. All the other people waited in the shadows. The knock knock knock, the sound made by the knuckles of the man with no nose as he rapped on the window of the hollow white steel door echoed off the stone houses on the dark street.

A hush fell over the line of people, who had been chatting excitedly amongst themselves as they waited to be served.

The ice cream woman, a heavy-set person with disheveled strawberry blond hair held in place with a red kerchief, who wore a grey hoodie, stopped serving her customers and disappeared deep into the truck, which bounced on its springs as she walked inside. She opened the door of the truck.

There were raised voices. The man with no nose spoke calmly and quietly. Only the ice cream truck woman who shouted. She raised one hand, pointing at the man with no nose with an outstretched finger as she made her case.

Then the ice cream truck woman came down the steps of the cab, the front end of the truck bouncing again as she went from step to step. She came around the front of the truck, asked the people standing in line to step back, and then she pulled a rope which brought a hinged metal door down from the roof of the truck so that it covered the vending windows and blocked out the bright white light inside the truck. The door that was painted with bright red, blue and tan pictures of ice cream cones, ices, and ice cream sandwiches. The ice cream truck woman secured the cover over the truck's window, went back into the truck, and then one by one began to turn off the spotlights, the flashing light and the music from the loudspeakers, so the street collapsed into the quiet darkness from which it had come.

People milled on the street for a few moments. The man with no nose looked about for a place to stand where he could be seen by the whole crowd, as he felt it was his responsibility to address the people who had gathered for ice cream and to explain his decision and his action.

All of a sudden, we heard a car door slam. Then we heard the sound of running feet.

A blond-haired child had emerged from the red car. She ran down the street toward the ice cream truck and the man with no nose.

The man with no nose found the stoop of an old brownstone, climbed to the landing in front of the door, and prepared to address the people who were still milling about in the street. We fully expected the little girl to come running up the steps and jump into her father's arms.

But the little blond girl stopped in front of the ice cream truck, which was now cold and dark. She raised one and then two fists and began to pound on the front door of the truck with both fists.

The door opened. The ice cream truck woman, lit from behind by the truck's cab light, looked about. It took her a moment to see the little girl, who was so small., at her feet.

The little girl spoke.

Then the man with no nose, who could see what was happening, came down from the steps of the brownstone and walked quickly to the ice cream truck.

The little girl grabbed onto her father's leg and hid behind it.

The man with no nose spoke, again quietly. The ice cream truck woman raised one arm again, and shouted, pointing one finger at the man with no nose, who looked at the ground and shook his head just a little while enduring the lecture from the ice cream truck woman.

Then the ice cream truck woman went back into the truck.

All of a sudden, the strange carnival organ music began again, so loud people covered their ears. The ice cream truck woman came down from the truck and pulled open the cover over the sales window. Then she went back in the truck, and turned on the lights, one after the next, so soon the truck was in the center of a halo of bright light once more.

No one said a word.

The ice cream truck woman went to the back of the truck and could be seen at work, scooping ice cream. She came out the front door of the truck, came down the steps of the cab one by one, squatted next to the little girl hiding behind her father's leg and handed her a ice cream cone.

The she returned to the truck. People stayed orderly, coming one at a time to place their orders and receive their ice cream and hand their money through the truck's window.

The name with no nose lifted his daughter and walked with her in his arms back to the red car.

No one noticed whether the little girl had a nose or not.

By that time, it didn't matter.

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