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## The Professor's Black Veil

by Allen Frederick Stein

After my morning shave, I took one more look, a long one, into the mirror and then put on the black veil. I stared into the glass again, darkly, as it were, this time. Through this scrim, this filter, I saw a veiled face staring back at me, but I couldn't see its features, other than the thin lips, turned up slightly now, and the chin that I'd always thought a bit weak but that now seemed to take on a salience and solidity. I seemed all at once to have gained the *gravitas* that I'd always felt had inexplicably eluded me.

I went downstairs, finding that I was moving somewhat more slowly than I typically did each morning. The kids, as usual, were at the kitchen counter, elbows splayed, Pop Tarts and Eggo waffles in their hands, Marcie was muttering at the cranky coffee maker, and, unwatched, the TV, wedged between the small wine rack and a three-year run of *Bon Appetit* (our subscription long since discontinued), was showing CNN, where a panel of experts was discussing once more whether Jeb Bush had the requisite "fire in the belly" to take on Rand Paul, Marco Rubio, and Ted Cruz in the 2016 GOP horse race. Everything, then, was at it had been, but I noticed it all seemed somehow farther from me now, a not unpleasant sensation.

"Wow, Dad, that is awesome," Jason, my seventh grader (or is it eighth?) said approvingly. "You look like you could be a crazy killer in this new Video game Josh Mittelman has, 'Blood City Nights 3.' There's this dude in it who wears suits and ties, but with a skull mask, and he uses his tie sometimes to strangle people, and the mask has this like really creepy jerky little smile, kind of like you have right now."

"I promise to keep my tie on," I said, smiling faintly.

Spraying bits of Pop Tart, he said, "Keep the veil on for a while. It's like crazy awesome, no kidding. Why are you wearing it? You gonna try and scare someone?"

"I'm wearing it for class."

"That is really totally lame, Daddy," Sarah said. "What does that have to do with your class, anyway?"

I found myself speaking more softly and slowly than I usually did. "Well, you remember, child, I told you once, I think, of a tale by Nathaniel Hawthorne, you know, the fellow who wrote *The Scarlet Letter* and"—

"Yes, Daddy, I'm sixteen, I know who wrote *The Scarlet Letter*."

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I nodded and smiled. I'd thought she was still fifteen, but I didn't mention it.

"Well, you'll recall, then, child, that I told you how in a story of his the Reverend Mister Hooper covers his face with a veil, and it changes everything."

"No, I don't remember, and why are you talking so slowly and quietly like that? It's dumb."

"Well, I thought I'd told you of the tale, anyway," I said slowly and quietly, and then told them all that I was teaching "The Minister's Black Veil" in my American Lit survey class that day, and that my own veil might get the students more involved. I didn't tell them that both the story and the students had gone stale for me after all these semesters.

Sarah said, "Dad, the kids in *my* school would think that was lame, even if it didn't look so goofy hanging over your glasses, so what do you think your college students are going to think?"

"That's what we'll see today, child."

"And stop calling me 'child.' You never have before. It's creepy."

I nodded again, slowly, never losing my smile, which struck me now as conveying a somber, boundless tolerance and sympathy I'd never felt before for poor humanity's foibles and failings.

Sarah sighed again, neither tolerant nor sympathetic. "And why are you wearing it now, anyway, instead of like putting it on just before you go into your stupid class?"

"I thought I'd see what it feels like, get some practice with it. And perhaps, child, more than I knew I felt an obscure need."

Marcie had observed all so far with a wry smile. Wryness was one of my wife's defining traits. Now, cup of coffee finally in hand, she said, "Whatever you spent on that ratty piece of crepe, it cost too much. I could have gotten a better one for less at Target."

"Ah, but would it be so potent in its effect, my bride, as this, which I found tucked away in an obscure corner of my great-grandmother's old trunk in the attic?" Actually, I'd cut the crepe for my veil from a frisky little Halloween bed-time get-up I'd bought Marcie at Victoria's Secret years before. A few years later, when she figured that both it and our friskiness were about worn out, she'd tossed it in the trash. I'd salvaged it secretly and hidden it away, knowing I'd find a purpose for it sooner or later.

"That's appropriate, sweet, because you told me your great-grandmother was a nutcase. Well, if you want to be the campus coot, I

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guess that's your free choice, sweet."

"It's comforting to think so, but does any of us ever really have free choice, my dear?" "Yes, my dear, at least one of us has a choice. You, certainly, thanks to tenure, are allowed to make a spectacle of yourself, if you want to. Is it because you think it will help you finally win that silly teaching award? But I guess my options are a bit more limited, aren't they? How long do you think I'd keep my job if I tried to sell a client a home while hiding my face behind a veil?" Wryness was spilling over to irritation. Had I anticipated any of this? I'm not sure, but whether I had or not, I found that from behind the veil all I felt once more was that pleasing potion of gentle amusement and sympathy.

I quietly told her that failing to win the teaching award won by nearly every colleague in my department who had been there even half as long as I no longer bothered me. (And, I saw now, neither did being relegated to teaching only lower-level courses because my publishing record wasn't quite up to those of the sadly misguided careerists who controlled the department.)

"Since when?" she asked as she poured herself another cup.

"Since I finished shaving this morning," I said softly.

She took a sip, looked at me quizzically, took another, and said, "You know, I never

thought less of you for not being a crowd pleaser."

"I never tried to be a crowd pleaser."

"You could say that again," Sarah muttered, and Marcie shot her a nasty look. I was touched that over the years she had refused to share with others her right to be wry at my expense.

"At any rate, honey," she asked, "why not take the silly thing off at least until you get to school? And by then it might not seem such a good idea to wear it into class."

"I feel the need to wear it all morning. It draws me more deeply into the story, my bride."

"Well, my groom, it draws you more deeply into your breakfast, anyway," she said, and nodded toward my breakfast bowl.

I looked down and saw that the edge of my veil was in my Wheaties. I said, "Thank you" and slowly wiped the bottom of my veil with a napkin.

As they were heading out to the bus stop, Sarah told Jason that he'd

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better not tell anyone what his dad was doing.

I said, "Well, there's every likelihood they'll see me drive by anyway before the bus gets there. I suspect there's almost a fatality about it."

Jason said, "Cool. Are you gonna put your sunglasses on over the veil or under it?"

"I don't know that I'll be needing sunglasses, this morning, lad. The world now seems more than dim enough for me."

Marcie said, "For God's sake, please don't embarrass them."

Laying an arm gently upon her shoulder, I said "Perhaps if they are embarrassed it truly is 'for God's sake.'"

Marcie shrugged my arm off her shoulder and glared at me. "You know, that little smile of yours is even more annoying with the veil than it is without it. And you're not nearly as witty as you think you are. You hardly ever are, to tell you the truth."

The children were out the door now.

"Well, of course, the pursuit and profession of truth has been my calling for, lo, these many years, so I'm glad to hear your version of it." After a pause, I added softly, "No doubt, your feelings about my poor wit were confirmed for you in one of your little *tete a tetes* with Dave Appleton." I stated this simply as a fact that I acknowledged as part of the general sadness of things. I'd not mentioned before that I'd seen her and Dave draw off together into the kitchen or onto the deck or off to a quiet corner at recent cocktail parties. Dave was an acknowledged crowd pleaser, both in the classroom and out of it.

Did she blanch the least bit now? The shadow thrown over all by my veil made it hard to tell. She said, "No, David didn't disparage you. He wouldn't do that."

"I accuse you both of nothing, my dear," I told her quietly, raising my right hand as if in benediction.

She sighed, shook her head in exasperation, and hurried upstairs.

Driving by the bus stop, I gave the children gathered there, a slow, all-encompassing wave of solemn good will. Jason waved back enthusiastically. Sarah looked away.

II

As I entered Literature Hall, none of my colleagues were within view, but students stared. A few pointed me out to others as I passed slowly down the hall toward my office, briefcase in hand, shoulders slightly stooped, lips turned slightly upward. I saw sadly now, as I never had

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before, that so little was their choice or fault.

In my office, door closed, I looked at the small postcard of a Hawthorne daguerreotype that I'd had on my desk for years. Through the veil, I noticed for the first time, that there was a slight upturned tilt to Hawthorne's lips, under his graying mustache and troubled eyes.

A few minutes before class, I stepped from my office to the water fountain. I took care, as I bent to drink, to hold the veil against my face. A small spray wet the bottom, though, and I caught the faint smell of sour milk.

As I rose from the fountain, I saw Gloria Lightner staring at me, both the small gap between her front teeth and the much larger one of her cleavage now shrouded in shadow. Only the day before I might have thought bitterly of how blind she must be to involve herself with the loud young Composition Theory careerist we'd hired recently, but now I understood it all as just another manifestation of the dark human comedy that has been repeating itself with almost risible predictability down through the ages. I found myself no longer despising her for never having responded to (or perhaps even noticed) my subtle, restrained overtures.

"Bad case of acne?" she asked chuckling.

"Were that the case, I confess that I lack the vanity to hide it from the world."

"Okay, you're teaching Hawthorne, obviously, and you've decided to try to get a few laughs doing it. Good for you. I guess desperate times call for desperate measures."

"Sadly, the quality of desperation inheres most profoundly in those who don't acknowledge their desperation even to themselves," and I paused for an instant before adding, "as they reach out blindly to unworthy purposes and unworthy company." I hoped she would take my gentle correction.

She said, "Well, you'll have your students up at the mourners' bench in no time. By the way, I'm smelling something that seems like milk gone rancid; are you getting a whiff of that, too?"

I told her I wasn't and went off to class.

As I stepped into the classroom, all chattering stopped, except for a few whispers and a snicker or two. A slow sweeping gaze from me over the room quieted those, and all fell silent.

"There are two major areas of ambiguity in Hawthorne's tale," I began. "The first involves the question of whether we are to admire the Reverend Mr. Hooper, and the second the question of why he dons the veil in the first place. Let's start with the first issue: Do you admire

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the man?"

Their silence was unbroken. Obviously indifferent to literature, they had not been a responsive group all semester. I had despised them for that. I was now past all that. I was past so much. Even though wearing the veil had begun at least in part as an effort to engage them, I now saw that it wasn't any longer. It hadn't been since I'd seen myself in the mirror that morning.

I gave them a gentle smile and asked, "Why does Hooper say he wears the veil?"

There was silence. I waited and smiled. Finally, a girl raised her hand and said, "He told his congregation it might have something to do with secret sin or secret sorrow, I think. But he never spelled anything out."

"Yes," I said.

Then all was silence until a burst of laughter came from the classroom directly across the hall. That would be Dave Appleton's class. He always kept his door open as he taught—I suppose so that anyone passing by could see what a wonderful rapport he had with his classes. I was no longer irritated by this. Poor David.

"Why are you wearing the veil?" a fellow called out from near the back, as if he were more than a little annoyed that I was. Others called "Yeah, why? And "It's like just a way to get us into the story, right?" One near the front muttered to the girl beside him, just loud enough to be sure I'd hear it, "This is so cheesy."

"I wear it, I see now, for more reasons than I can articulate."

"Did Hooper have glasses?" someone asked. I was having trouble making out their features, though there were only a few in class that I could have identified by name in any case.

"Hawthorne doesn't tell us," I said.

"No way he had glasses," someone shouted, "because if he did, they'd look too stupid under a veil for him to freak everybody in town out the way he does." They looked at me and the veil over my glasses, and laughter spread among the poor afflicted youngsters. I wondered if Dave Appleton could hear it coming through the closed door of my room.

I answered softly, "One's vision may be severely impaired whether one wears glasses or not."

The fellow who had just spoken now shouted, "Why not hang it from your glasses, you know, like with a small curtain rod. I mean you could even pull it open when you wanted to get a better look and then shut it

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again." Once more there was general laughter. Just days before, I might have been tempted to open the door.

I smiled slightly, as Hawthorne himself might have. I was about to answer, when the veil, brushing lightly against my nose, brought on a short sneezing spell. As I gripped the bottom of the veil tightly with each sneeze, the class broke into raucous guffaws. Sneeze spray splattered up onto my glasses. I thought to use the veil to wipe them, but then thought better of it. They couldn't see the splatter, of course, though the bottom of the veil, already a bit stiff from the drying of the milk that I'd never quite dabbed off, might now have some visible curds of phlegm clinging to it. I reminded myself to examine it later.

The laughter finally died down, and I said, "You mention my drawing the veil open now and again. That shall not happen. Never. I have no wish ever to see without this veil again."

There was silence. Someone said, "You're kidding, right?"

"I've never seen more clearly," I said softly, my smile unchanged.

Again there was silence, no chuckles or snickers, the only smile mine. "My dear young friends," I said after a moment, "Yes, the Reverend Mr. Hooper is indeed to be admired, a truth, I confess, I had never grasped fully until this morning. He is to be admired for perceiving the shadow in which he and his congregation move—the shadow of their dreary mortality. And, my dear young friends, we, you and I, move in the dimness of that same shadow. I look out at you now through this veil, and truths about you are revealed. You learn nothing, you wish to learn nothing, your eyes are devoid of light, of life, save for the lurid flicker of lust and avarice. As air is the natural medium for the bird, and water for the fish, so are ignorance and corruption yours. You, too, wear veils, invisible ones, I now perceive—each of you does, without your knowing it. It is a veil that keeps you from seeing anything of value and that keeps you from seeing how truly pathetic your lives are." I smiled gently upon them.

The silence after this was broken only by the sound of a girl, one of my slightly less inept and indifferent students, rushing from her seat and out the door, which now remained partially open. She had seemed disturbed, even on the verge of tears. She had my sympathy. They all did.

"Please understand, my dear young friends," I said softly and slowly, "I don't hold you accountable for any of this. Your destiny has been shaped for you by the confluence of these poisonous days and your own all too human natures. You were doomed from the start. I so wish it could have been otherwise." I shook my head and smiled upon them all.

They said nothing. So I turned to the discussion of the story. Quoting Hawthorne copiously, I told them of the tale's dark truths I now

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perceived so fully. Usually, even in the midst of their general indifference, several might ask a question or make a comment. Today there was only silence. I say "only silence," but actually it was, I could see, far more. It was the profound attention that an audience affords a speaker who is delivering profoundest truths. Today there was no looking out the window, or at electronic devices, or each other. All eyes were upon me.

Finally, glancing at my watch, I made out that it was time now to let them go. "My dear young friends," I said. "Have you any questions before you depart?"

After a long pause, one said, "Well after all you've said about the sorry shape we're in, what would you advise?"

I heard the hint of sarcasm in his tone, but I could tell that beneath it, more than he realized, there was terrible urgency.

"I would advise humility," I told him. "Humility, I now find, brings insight and sympathy. As T. S. Eliot said, 'Humility is endless.'"

Silence greeted my answer. It was, I saw, the fitting response, the one that was all I could wish for. I raised my hand now in a gesture of benediction. Reciting, almost chanting, the final words of Jonathan Edwards' sermon of farewell to his flock, I said, "My dear children, I leave you in an evil world, full of snares and temptation, God only knows what will become of you."

As they slowly filed from the room, I overheard the fellow who had spoken of the veil as "cheesy" say to the girl with him, "What a load of horseshit." The poor fellow feared to acknowledge how deeply he had been touched. In time, no doubt, he would see.

As the last student had left, and as I slowly gathered up my books and notes, Dick Habegger, the Head of our department came in. Dick had built what he no doubt considered a fine career for himself on his studies of the eighteenth-century women poets of the American mid-Atlantic colonies. He was accompanied by the girl who had rushed from my classroom and by two uniformed campus security officers.

He had the girl leave, then told me he had stood at the partially open door and heard the last five minutes of my class.

I nodded, patiently expectant.

"I must confess," he said, "that the way you finished it, and what this young woman has had to say to me, and, well . . . your veil, do cause me, well, some concern."

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I nodded toward the security officers and asked Dick if he thought me dangerous.

“Well, I don’t know. This is certainly disturbing . . . inappropriate to say the least.”

I smiled sadly at poor Dick. He was what he was. “Dick,” I said, “these gentlemen can search me, and my office and car, for that matter. I have no weapon—no weapon, that is, save the truth. Through engaging Hawthorne’s tale more intensely than I ever have over the years, I’ve come to insights that I endeavored to share with my students. It’s an act of pedagogy and an act of loving concern. If it is disturbing to them and to you, I simply answer that it is appropriate for a teacher to unsettle all that seems settled for his students.” The shade in which I saw Peter and the officers seemed to deepen. I reached out gently to touch his shoulder. He jumped back.

The officers searched me. They were polite and professional. Needless to say, they found nothing. One did ask whether anyone else smelled sour milk. He also said, “Sir, if you want to go on wearing that, you might want to wash it. It’s got some gunky flecks of something or other on it.” I thanked him.

He said, “I expect you’ll be taking it off now, anyway, now that class is over, right, sir?”

I told him I thought not.

Dick said, “But you don’t teach Hawthorne in your other courses today, do you?”

“Nonetheless,” I said, smiling slightly.

“I’m afraid I’m going to have to report this to the Provost, and she’ll certainly take the issue to Legal.”

I imagined them all scurrying about in the shadow that was their environ. Sad, scurrying creatures. They seemed so far from me now. Their world was no longer mine. “Dick,” I said, gently, “the university has spent the last two decades encouraging innovative teaching methods, has it not?”

“Well, yes,” he answered, unhappily.

“And the evaluations I’ve received from the department, signed by you, have suggested that I ought to attempt some innovation in my teaching. Isn’t that so?”

“Well, yes.”

“Dick, I’m being innovative,” I told him. “Let the Provost run that by ‘Legal.’ I’m not sure that you or the university would want the courtroom drama that might ensue, when I invoke my academic

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freedom to try an innovative teaching method to make literature seem more meaningful to our students.”

“So you’re not going to take it off, then?”

“I think not,” I said.

“But the students will complain.”

“Let them, if they fear to face the truth.”

“Let me see your face. You’re kidding about this right?”

“No, the whimsical has become the necessary, whatever I’d thought I intended.”

I taught two more classes that day, and though Hawthorne was not on the syllabus, I spoke of the stern lessons of his wondrous tale. I dispensed with questions and did all the speaking myself. Again, I perceived that my words had a telling effect. The students in both classes, as with my first, listened intently. In neither did a student ask anything or comment. I’d never felt that I’d accomplished so much in a fifty-minute class. In each, I closed once more with the words of Edwards’ sermon.

Both at the start and finish of my third class of the day, a crowd of students and some faculty had gathered in the hall to watch in silence as I entered and left. There were a few whispers among them, but I could make nothing out.

As I left my office, satisfied with my day’s effort, Dick and the Dean were waiting. Both asked me if I’d like to take a sabbatical with pay, a “good and well-earned rest,” I believe the Dean called it. I told them that my schedule wasn’t at all arduous, and that I felt so invigorated, actually, that I thought I might teach a summer session this year.

### III

No one was in when I got home, and I went upstairs to examine myself in the bathroom mirror once again. I wiped the veil clean with a damp cloth, smelled no more sour milk, and stared into my reflection.

After a time, I heard Marcie drive up, heard the front door open and shut, and the voices of my wife and children in apparently deep conversation. They must have seen my car, but didn’t call out to let me know that they were home. Instead they continued to talk among themselves. I couldn’t make out much of what they were saying, but I did hear Marcie say something about phone calls and heard her say “the Dean” and “the Provost” more than once.

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Then I heard footsteps coming up the stairs, footsteps and whispers. I continued to gaze into the mirror. In another moment, I saw their images in the dimness behind mine. I couldn't make features out clearly, but, sadly, they all looked troubled, even Jason. They seemed far from me, yet, oddly, I'd never felt so concerned for them. I knew that I would never cease doing all I could to help them. In their way, they, too, were my students.

Trying but failing to sound the tone of her usual wryness, Marcie said, "All right, the joke's over. You've had your little laugh. It's time to take that thing off."

Still staring into the mirror, I said nothing.

"Daddy," Sarah said, a note of terror mixed in with her usual stridency.

"Dad, *please!*" Jason said, and in a moment he and Sarah were crying.

"For the love of God, don't just stand there looking at yourself in it. Just take your hands off the sink and pull the goddamn thing off," Marcie said now, her voice breaking. The children were sobbing.

"It's out of my hands," I said, leaning still on the sink, staring at my veiled visage, and seeing my family weeping in the shadow behind me. I'd never been happier.

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**Allen Frederick Stein** teaches American Literature at North Carolina State University. He has had two previous stories published in *SNReview* and one each in *Aethlon* and *The MacGuffin*. He's had poems published in *South Carolina Review*, *Southern Poetry Review*, *Aethlon*, *Modern Age*, *Roanoke Review*, 5-2: *The Crime Poetry Journal*, *Juked*, *Cape Rock*, and *Leviathan*. He has two poems forthcoming in *Modern Age*, and one each in *Juked* and *Aethlon*. His poem "Edna Pontellier Undrowned" has been nominated for the 2015 Pushcart Prize. His novel, *Gatsby's Daughters: A Romance of the Last Century*, is available through Amazon and Kindle.

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