

DAVID BULLEY

TRUTH AND JUSTICE

BEAN REACHED BETWEEN the cushions and pulled out what was there. It had been bugging him all night, watching the TV, tipping a few, anti-celebrating his son's departure back to his mom's house. Bean hated that sudden deafening absence of Boyd's being gone. Sunday night felt like a betrayal somehow, only he didn't know who got betrayed or how or why. He pulled up a black Lone Ranger mask—Boyd called it the Long Stranger mask—and studied it.

It was cheap plastic, with a rubber band attached to either side through holes dug in it. The eye holes looked made for a hamster. Bean twirled it in his fingers fast enough for the rubber band to fly out like the flare of a twirled skirt. "Up, up, and away," he said.

On the TV, one college football team beat another. Bean forgot who was playing so didn't know if he should be happy or not. He slapped the back of the phone, and knocked it out of its cradle, up into the air and twisting. He caught it, even through his buzz, and hit the number three speed dial. "I'd like to place an order," he said.

By the time he answered the door, he was wearing the mask. The rubber band cut into the skin around his temples. He could barely see. He felt like he had to look at things almost cross-eyed in order to see at all. A light film of tears covered his eyes. The delivery guy looked up and saw him. He put one hand up in the air and the other holding the pizza box out to the side and he backed up a step. "Dude," he said.

Bean touched the corner of his mask. "Are you on the side of truth and justice?" he said.

"Yeah, okay man, whatever, fifteen-fifty, okay?"

Bean paid him. As the guy walked away, Bean leaned out his door and yelled. "The truth is the way!" Then he shook his head back and forth and grinned to himself and ate his pizza.

He found himself outside, drunk, walking. A cop car drifted by, cutting the nighttime like maybe a blade through an oil slick. The police spotlight lingering on him, dancing across his face. The black absorbed the light so it didn't bother him. He shoved his foot against the wet tar sidewalk, scraping it hard, until he brought out the high pitched squeak he'd been looking for. Then he twirled his other leg around in the air and set out jogging.

Two blocks later, Bean set his hands on his knees and panted. Two young women, bar age, walked by giggling. One leaned back over her shoulder. "Are you a weirdo?"

Bean stood up straight. "Truth and justice!" he said. Then he talked through his chin and stuck out his chest and said, "Do you young women need an escort?"

They opened a car door and got in and drove away without answering.

Bean walked into a convenience store. The clerk said, "I don't want no trouble."

Bean paid for his Doritos and can of Bud with a credit card. "Trouble finds me," he said. "Evil seeks to destroy me," he said. "But you are safe, so long as I am here."

Bean woke up to the white noise being played on the TV. He went to the bathroom. He looked into the mirror and noticed the mask still on. He noticed the discomfort of it, how it was too small and dug in and made him see wrong. He slung it off. In the mirror, everywhere the mask had been was red.

After work the next day, Bean sat in his recliner for a long time just gently holding the mask between the tip of his forefinger and the tip of his thumb, gauging the heft of it. He rubbed it over his face, let the hard plastic edges scratch him. He held it tighter and scraped it against

his beard, hearing the noise of it, trying to remember the commercial that used a playing card to scrape a beard and determine which foam or razor or whatever did the better shave. Finally, it drifted onto his face. Bean breathed out and didn't bother breathing in until the ache in his lungs forced him.