

## Feel No Evil

by Deborah Omolegan-Obe

Ezra slouched in her chair as Dr Boa droned on about the origins of the *motion masks*. She made sure to include all the major details: the type of world people used to live in, the poor efficiency of citizens, and the emotional dysfunction that plagued society. Ezra was indifferent to formal education, if she was living in the 'Hyper-Expression Era' she would have said she 'hated' school, but that wouldn't be permitted. That level of expression was tolerated only in children who hadn't yet crossed the developmental milestone of overt expression. Whilst school was not something Ezra looked forward to, she did mildly appreciate its value in informing her imagination. Whenever she found herself with a few spare minutes in the canteen, or on her walks home, she would catch her mind drifting towards the days before Arthur Mackfield - the pioneer of *motion masks*. Ezra noticed that whenever Dr Boa would speak about him, her usual monotone voice would slightly change in pitch, Ezra racked her brain for what word she would use if she lived in the H-Era 'enthusiasm'. Yes, the people back then would say Dr Boa was enthusiastic. All of the Seniors had enthusiasm when it came to Arthur Mackfield, he was their saviour. The one who salvaged the remains of society and brought it out of its emotional ruin. According to Dr Boa, Arthur had given the world the cure for its pain. Ezra in Year 5 had been forced to memorise a passage from his famous memorial speech back in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This was the speech that ushered in a new era.

*'When asked what the answer to our plight was, I replied nothing. When asked what was to be done, I said nothing. The response we need is no response, if we remain uncompromising in our indifference, we will remain consistent in our peace'.*

When Ezra spoke about Arthur Mackfield her voice never changed in pitch. She was not enthusiastic.

Dr Boa said that when Arthur began his work on the motion-masks and brought his campaign to international platforms he had received countless death threats and much opposition. People called him radical, a threat to the social wellbeing of the world. He responded to everything with calm neutrality, and in the end when the nation needed him the most, his philosophy prevailed.

Dr Boa always phrased it like this

*'When the world, like a convulsing child, had had its fill of hurt and torment, it looked to Arthur as its saviour, and what was his response? Nothing'.*

If Ezra were living in the past she would describe Dr Boa's eyes as having lit up as she spoke of Arthur, but Ezra was not living in the past, so she would always describe Dr Boa's eyes as they were - blank.

In the past people were so used to being ruled by their emotions, and it were these emotions that made their life hell. Arthur taught them how to shut them off, and ever since the world has lived in peace.

Ezra never questioned Dr Boa's account of Arthur, she never questioned whether Arthur truly existed, whether the images and speeches were fake. But she did find it difficult to imagine how one man could change the world so much. History lessons, by teaching Ezra of the past, had forced her to evaluate the present, and as she knew, this was a dangerous thing to do.

Ezra had visited Jesus College, Cambridge on a school trip to see where Arthur had studied. She imagined him walking the streets in a world full of anxious angry people, people who had no control over how they felt. She imagined Arthur staring at these people, prodding at their flushed faces, a sign of stress and disorientation. These people were sick. Very sick. Their own minds were killing them. Arthur had given them a gift. *Motion-masks*.

Ezra sifted through her bag and pulled her mask onto her lap underneath her desk. She examined it, the heat sensors were connected to the local emotional security system. Whenever she wore one, she was being monitored, information was being transferred to her doctor - who would review her data during their weekly check ins. The mask monitored her heart rate and alerted her on her phone whenever she was becoming too 'expressive'. The last time she'd had one of these notifications was five years ago, if she kept this up, she'd become an intermediate in the next two years, and a senior before she was thirty-five - how revolutionary. Ezra wanted to be like the seniors who didn't wear masks, who could be trusted to keep things under control, if she were in the H-Era she would say she envied them. But Ezra couldn't feel envy, her brain didn't have the capacity to.

Arthur's research was ground-breaking not only because he developed the *motion masks* but also because he discovered something truthful about the human brain - its ability to evolve rapidly under the right conditions. Brain plasticity was not just limited to functional recovery after injuries and trauma, it could be extended to emotional restraint. If people no longer saw extreme emotion and were deprived of opportunities to express it, the parts of their limbic system dealing with emotion would reduce in volume and soon the urge to express emotion would disappear. It was evolution - to Arthur emotions were a primitive flaw, one that could be erased with the right conditioning.

Ezra was not the type to be curious, no one used the word curious anymore because attentive was more appropriate. But one day she asked Dr Boa a question she knew she shouldn't have.

'The people who were trying to stop Arthur Mackfield had called him dangerous, they must have had a reason for that belief. I want to know what this reason was?'

If Dr Boa, a senior who had evolved above motion masks, could express emotion she would have felt indignation or insult, for an insult to Arthur was an insult to her.

*'Because anyone who wants to change the world for the better will always have opposition'*

This wasn't the answer Ezra wanted, she wanted to Dr Boa to be as in-depth as she was about everything else in History. She wanted to know the exact arguments against Arthur, she wanted to hear more about the view that emotions were an essential part of being human, that what Arthur was doing was not evolution but devolution. Ezra had read this all in a library book, the types of books that were hidden from the public at the bottom of the unused piles.

She wanted an answer for the awkward feeling she sometimes felt when people turned her down. She wanted an explanation for the awkward thump in her chest when her doctor read the data from her motion mask and noted a close miss of expressed emotion. She wanted to understand why when she saw her grandmother wobbling up the stairs, she felt some tug in her heart. Ezra was not foolish, she knew she would not get the answers from Dr Boa, but if she was capable of being hopeful, she would have hoped that Dr Boa would tell her everything she wanted to hear.

But of course she didn't. To everyone Arthur could never be anything but right.

On her way home from school Ezra imagined life before Arthur, she imagined a world where children ran free without masks, where doctors diagnosed broken bones rather than broken minds. Where people ran wild killing and stealing and dying of broken hearts. A world of disorder. There was something appealing about this.

As she crossed the road Ezra caught sight of a child wailing, her mother was hushing her as she wiped the blood from her knee - it was only a small graze. People stopped and stared all around, this was why people rarely brought their children out, they hadn't yet learned how to kill their emotions. Ezra continued walking, she expected the world to resume, for the child to be hushed back into their home and the people to turn away and carry out their business. But this didn't happen, what Ezra failed to see the first time she looked was the child's face which was red and puffy, water streaming down her cheeks. She hadn't seen tears in years - children were mandated to wear their masks in public, so why had this child not done so?

The sight of the child made Ezra uncomfortable, she hadn't seen eyes like those in a long time, they were eyes without indifference. They weren't cold like her own, or like Dr Boa's.

If Ezra were in the times before Arthur Mackfield she was say she was shocked, or disturbed.

Her hands began to feel clammy, she couldn't take her eyes off the child's face that looked so much like how she felt when the world seemed to be against her, when she looked in the mirror and saw her limp hair and dull eyes, when she wondered how long she could keep this up - the blank day and night of life. Ezra couldn't never put these things into words, and through seeing the child she realised she didn't have to. These thoughts were never meant for words - they were meant to be water dripping down a red flushed face.

Ezra's phone buzzed

The notification read:

*Expressed Emotion*