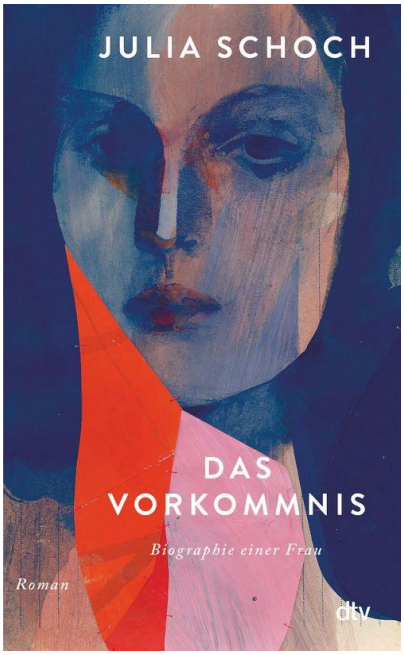

Julia Schoch

The Incident

Original title: Das Vorkommnis

March 2022

192 pages

Family trees and the roots of love

A woman is approached by a stranger who claims that they have the same father. This encounter, although brief, unleashes an overwhelming wave of emotions in her. Questions fill her mind: questions about marriage and motherhood, adoption and family secrets – but most of all, questions about truth. In 'The Incident', Julia Schoch, one of the most influential voices in contemporary German autofiction, tells of a life transformed from one moment to the next. She captivatingly and cleverly draws the reader into a whirlpool of outrageous events – events which, despite being fictional, remain eerily familiar to us all.

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Julia Schoch born in 1974, works as a freelance author and translator of French in Potsdam. She received countless nominations and awards for both her writing and her translation. Her novel 'Das Vorkommnis' ('The Incident') was awarded with the Schubart-Literaturpreis in 2023. She received the 2022 German Schiller Foundation Award for her literary works.

Sample Translation
by Catherine Venner

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1.

That day, a Tuesday in December, I was giving a reading from my latest novel in the arts centre of a northern German town. After the event, a lady approached the table where I had remained to sign a book or two. She pushed her copy towards me. As I leaned over it and began scribbling my name, she said, “By the way, we have the same father”.

In my mind’s eye, I lose control of my pen. The nib departs from its intended course, allowing a long, deep line to run over the page. A fault line. As if I had been hit by a bullet in mid-signature.

In reality, I jumped up without hesitation and hugged this complete stranger with tears in my eyes. Something that I often wondered about and to all intents and purposes still do today.

The rest of the small audience was already leaving. The manager of the arts centre had put away the PA system and was waiting at the door holding a bunch of keys in his hand. We’d arranged to go for something to eat after the reading. On the way to the restaurant, I told him about the woman from the audience who’d spoken to me. I did so in passing as a funny anecdote of the kind you sometimes tell, like when somebody asks a strange question at a reading or when afterwards they try to present you with a folder of self-penned love poetry. The arts centre manager laughed briefly; his thoughts appeared to be otherwise engaged.

A little later during the meal, I struggled to concentrate on the conversation and left early under some pretext or other, which the manager accepted with visible relief.

2.

I spent the following morning wandering around the town’s high streets, which were strewn with lights and Christmas trees. In a large Niederegger shop, I bought marzipan chocolates for the upcoming Christmas celebrations. (Neither my husband nor my eldest child liked marzipan, but I liked the shiny red-gold wrappers which looked like gift-wrapping.) Later, hidden among the usual chemists and commodity stores I discovered a store run by a Playmobil collector where I bought an assortment of fire engine accessories, including a red rescue net, a hydraulic spreader and a tiny

rescue saw; my eldest child was fascinated by these toys at the time. Then I got on the train and continued my journey to another town, to the next reading.

As I travelled, I leafed through a book about the USA. I mainly read the pages about Northern Ohio, where I would soon be spending a couple of months.

After arriving, I wrote a couple of emails, gave an interview to the local newspaper and held my reading. I repeated this daily routine several times. After my reading on the final evening of the seven or eight day tour, I headed to a pub serving traditional German food with a university professor, his wife and a handful of students.

I mention these everyday things because most of the surprising incidents in our lives appear to happen en passant. Life doesn’t stop. Life doesn’t pause. (I have always found pausing rather peculiar and something which in truth is almost impossible.) We incorporate whatever surprised us into our everyday lives. We do our work. We function. Maybe it is better like that. This is how we attempt to evade the destructive power of unexpected change. Avoiding shock and those innumerable small and large tremors throughout life may well turn out to be the cement that holds together the other, harmless and routine events.

3.

I pondered this incident for years. Occasionally, I would try to write about it. I warned myself that I shouldn’t l waste even more time if I wanted to put it into words, for I may forget my memories. But then I realised that I had already forgotten so much; even the day after, I could barely remember certain things. For example, what were the exact words the woman and I exchanged? What did we say and how long had the conversation at my table lasted?

However, today I still have a precise memory of other seemingly unimportant things. The colour of her coat (a green-black all-weather jacket with a logo of a showjumping rider embroidered on its left sleeve). Teamed with flat, practical shoes (which I could maybe only guess at from the way she was standing). Perhaps it was down to the shock that I remembered *that* more than her appearance: she approached me politely, almost timidly. Her friendly voice did not splutter forth. And although she was neither a delicate nor dainty person, and was much bigger than me, she momentarily flinched as I hugged her. She hadn’t reckoned with so much enthusiasm.

Only now after the passage of years can I see with greater clarity how the things that happened in the following months and years are interconnected. Only now can I allow myself to reflect on that

time; on that winter in Ohio that was the start of a long period in which I was incapable of feeling anything, of thinking and of living a care-free life. Even language deserted me so that I was only able to describe my suffering to a neurologist with the words that I was in a *black hole*, using the most banal images to explain a hopeless situation. (In fact, I was more ashamed of the hackneyed expression than of my condition.) They were months and years in which everything appeared changed: how I looked at the world, at love, at my husband and at my children.

Whereby the word “my” in this sense now appears presumptuous.

4.

On that evening in December, I didn’t think about writing, not even for a second. I did not feel the need to jot down anything about meeting the stranger. Once I’d taken my leave from the arts centre manager and left the restaurant, I walked through the deserted town centre and past the closed shops. As I walked, I grabbed my phone. Without hesitation, I punched in my sister’s number. My *real* sister, as I told myself. At that moment, a strange feeling came over me. Was it guilt? Shame? I called her without thinking about it. I did it automatically, or rather I was following an absolute conviction that there was only one person who needed to know what had occurred that night: my sister.

Upset, I described what had happened. I didn’t have to talk for long. Without hesitation, my sister said I was right. How absurd! What a brazen attack! My sister and I agreed. We even cracked a couple of jokes to diffuse the immensity of the situation. I was reassured.

As I put the telephone away, it started snowing and I realised that I hadn’t called my sister in a very long time. I was almost grateful to this stranger. Her unexpected appearance had given us a chance to come together. The months-long silence and her anger; all of it appeared to have been forgotten in an instant. Thanks to this woman, my sister and I had suddenly become close again.

Back in my hotel room, I switched on the TV and headed into the bathroom where I started crying. When I thought about this whole story later on, I never cried as much as on that evening. Afterwards I would think about things, weigh things up, search for reasons and engage in rational considerations. But on that evening, I stood under the shower with my forehead pressed against the tiles, the shower head in my hand, and I cried.

Maybe, as I tell myself now, my tears also had a different cause and were not just down to the surprising appearance of the woman. Maybe several emotional states combined and sought an

outlet in this way. I had used the short reading tour to stop producing breast milk after having fed my youngest child for almost seven months. Until then, I had found it cathartic to be so far away from my child. It meant I wasn’t tempted. Without feeling any regret I’d watched the white trickle disappear down the drain of a sink or bath. However, on this night the sight of the milk washing away stung me. I knew that it was the last time; my job had been done. In a few days I would be as I was before, as if nothing had happened. The mother-child bubble had been split forever, and from here on it would float through the world as two separate bubbles.

Now, after all these years, the two events have combined. In the moment that one family member was leaving me, a new one appeared. I severed one connection and at the same time a new connection was created. As if a balance were being created. A type of justice dispensed by a court that, as I occasionally imagine, has the sole jurisdiction over such compensation between the inhabitants of this earth.

5.

I only became aware of some essential aspects of this story later on.

For example: I hadn’t told my sister everything.

When we spoke on the phone, I kept it back that I had hugged the stranger. Or was it that I simply didn’t mention it? Is there a difference between keeping something back and not mentioning it?

The fact is I didn’t say anything about it. I was ashamed of the hug. I was surprised at myself. Why had I done that? I thought that this gesture might reveal something about me that I wasn’t even admitting to myself.

Maybe I worried my sister would be offended if I told her. When was the last time I had just hugged *her*, spontaneously, following a blind impulse and full of emotion? In fact, I wasn’t even sure she expected anything of the sort from me. Both of us have always considered gushing displays of emotion to be excessive.

Anyway ... if I had told her that I’d heartily embraced this woman, this stranger, our sudden alliance would have immediately disintegrated. This short moment in which we, my sister and I, faced a mutual enemy together would have been over before it had even begun. She would have regarded me as a traitor. She never said as much but something in her tone indicated that I had to pick a side. Would I trust a stranger more than her?

She demonstrated what she thought of it. Her disinclination towards this interloper, this wannabe family member, could clearly be felt. Her staunch resistance that under no circumstances could we accept this. It left the door open for anybody to try it on. And anyway, it was all founded on a mistake.

My sister, a past master in keeping distance. Her resolve had relieved me, at least momentarily. What she was saying sounded reasonable. While I always verged on being engulfed by life’s small and large catastrophes, she didn’t allow things to get to her in the first place. You can’t let things get to you - that was the only correct approach. At the time, I would have never even considered that her reaction was but a strategy. A strategy to deal with the whole affair.

In the same way as my immersion, which I call “writing”, is a strategy.

6.

“And anyway, it was all founded on a mistake.” How I would have loved to see it like this; how I would have loved to believe it was a mistake.

The truth is: I’d always secretly expected it. That someday we would meet, this stranger and I. I knew it in the way that you sense something amorphous but are still just as overwhelmed when it takes on a concrete shape. Like a defenceless creature, immersed in its own animal life, I was assailed by the memories.

As it is the way in such matters there is always prior knowledge, unknown yet known hunches that stem from inconsequential comments from your mother, a distant cousin or someone else entirely. Crumbs of knowledge, these harbingers of the actual revelation, unerringly enter your mind. Would I have otherwise embraced a complete stranger without this awareness? Would I have not doubted it, the enormity of it, when I asked her questions that first time at my reading? Assuming I had misheard, I would have looked at the woman without comprehension instead of rushing to give her a hug.

I had known that there was another child. A girl, born a year before my sister and six years before me, on a summer’s day at the end of the sixties. A girl of whom nobody would have ever heard, if shortly after her first birthday my mother had not discovered a slip of paper informing of this child’s existence. To be precise, this slip was an acknowledgement; an official letter regarding paid maintenance that she’d found in her husband’s coat pocket.

She carefully read the correspondence several times. Then she refolded the slip and waited for her husband to come home from work (i.e., to the room in which they, all three of them, were living as lodgers). Before she took him to task, she pulled their child out of the cot and held her in her arms, maybe as protection or maybe as a reminder to him. My sister, barely one year old, had silently looked between the two of them, anticipating what would happen next.

As it turned out, the story had already concluded, payment of maintenance was no longer necessary and the excitement had all been for nothing. The child for whom he had assumed paternity had been given up for adoption by the mother a few weeks after birth.

(p. 38 – 41)

16.

During this initial period, those first days in Bowling Green, was I thinking about what had happened to me at home? Did the distance from Europe offer me relief or absolve me of an obligation? The obligation to react?

On arriving at the office in the mornings, I would lean back for a while in my desk chair with my arms crossed behind my neck. I say this because I do not want to give the impression that I was feverishly working or had great motivation. Such an impression would be incorrect. I didn’t immediately get down to work. Often after a short while, I would even leave again to sit in the cafe of the Student Union or the main building, where there are coffee shops, food stalls and shops selling clothes bearing the uni’s mascot, a falcon. A coffee in front of me, I would sit behind the large glass windows and stare perplexed at the campus’s naked trees and paths.

At the time, I didn’t see it. Today, I think that my state of mind was linked to the fact that the unknown woman had contacted me again after our meeting. She had written to me. In the brief letter, which must have reached me while I was still in Germany in the excitement of the travel preparations, she had apologised for showing up. In a way, she took it back. This correspondence was almost a sample letter, polite and distanced. I later discovered that there are certain rules for people who are looking for relatives and want to get in touch out of the blue after years or decades, out of the depths of time. In such cases, psychologists advise them to exercise caution when making contact: not to impose themselves; not to make demands; not to make accusations; and only to say that they would be happy to be in touch.

That is exactly what she did. She didn’t impose herself. She didn’t make any demands. She simply reminded me that she existed.

How are you supposed to answer such a letter? It was clear that I would have to respond. She was waiting for an answer, I was sure of it. In her place, I would have been waiting. And wasn’t she entitled to it? Considering her *fate*, did she not at least deserve an answer? At the thought of the long journey that she must have embarked upon to search for us and the effort of the research that she must have undertaken, I felt indebted to her. I had taken her father from her. Wasn’t that the case? She had to go, so that we, my sister and I, could be born. Did we not somehow owe our existence to this woman?

I sat in front of the computer, put my fingers on the keyboard and stared at the empty email. What was the problem? Faced with the task of telling a stranger something about myself (which in my mind might as well mean *everything*), I inwardly froze. The whole thing reminded me of the American dating ritual, when on the first date the man asks, “so, Melissa/Susan/Ashley tell me something about yourself, what do you do?” Even just imagining it gives me the unpleasant feeling of being in an exam. The majority of women appear to always be prepared for these questions. Without blinking, they start to talk and give the inquirer a summary of their life.

But here was a conversation where the questions were missing. What should I tell her? What tone should I use? Should I go into excessive detail? Should I keep it short? Too much intimacy would have meant: I accept our story and I embrace it. Cool distance would be interpreted: in truth, I think this is all a huge mistake. Every alternative appeared to create a certain effect, and none of them felt right to me.

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20.

At the time, I wished I was writing a novel about it all. A novel can include sentences, such as: the weeks went by, the summer came and X forgot about meeting the woman in December. I yearned for material that I could approach playfully. I wanted to let off a bit of steam, nothing more.

In my office in Shatzel Hall, I would run my fingers along the shelves. I remember wanting to keep a lookout for books that could help me in my situation. I wasn’t looking for an explanation or comfort. I wanted proof that I was in a situation that could be described.

I had felt the same after the birth of my first child. I had looked for books by authors who were also mothers. It was almost a gratification to read that Marguerite Duras had sent her small son to a boarding school, far away from Paris, in order to devote herself to literature and her lovers. After fleeing her communist homeland and settling in Iceland, East German author Helga M. Novak had her children looked after on a farm, while Susan Sontag left her son behind in the USA so that she could continue her *self-creation* in Europe. Only the image of Françoise Sagan sitting at a small table under an apple tree and typing intently while her baby sleeps in a cradle beside her still haunts me today, like mocking laughter.

Regarding my current search, the topic of half-siblings primarily appeared to be consigned to cheap novels. Did the silence of literature mean that I was overreacting? Was I looking for something so commonplace that it was not worth talking about? Perhaps it was actually the most normal thing in the world. But love was also normal, and yet literature never ceased to speak of it and would probably continue to do so for the next thousand years.

My search for works of world literature that covered the topic provided slim pickings, as did searches on the internet did. After I had entered the words into the search bar, I was confronted with mainly legal matters. A brother or a sister who suddenly came on the scene appeared above all to be a threat. Inheritances had to be shared, houses forced into compulsory sales and claims asserted.

Almost in passing, as if I was keeping it from myself, I asked the internet about another topic that over the course of the weeks I was becoming increasingly curious about: adoption. I was not indignant. I was not shocked. Maybe I wanted to use my research to normalise the fact that the child had been given up a few weeks after birth. For a while I investigated figures and statistics. How often does a woman give up her child for adoption? How often did it happen back then? In East Germany?

I didn’t go down this rabbit hole for too long. Of course, I should have reckoned that the search results would exclusively deliver pages concerning forced adoption in communist countries. At the end of the day, it was an incident that occurred in the nineteen sixties in the Eastern part of Germany. I noticed how this automatism annoyed me. I was almost offended. Was I not permitted a normal, private drama?

(I was similarly confused the time a journalist asked me in an interview about the case of a woman who killed each of her nine children shortly after birth and buried them in plant pots. He mentioned it to me because I was born and grew up in East Germany and this case had occurred in an East German village. He wanted me to explain the crime. He quite clearly regarded me as an expert about a nine times baby-killer simply because I had been born in a small village in Brandenburg. For him, we, the murderer and I, shared the same murky background).

No, I did not want to understand this story as a political story. I quite clearly preferred to think that the story was normal.

A normal family drama.

One which, by the way, I no longer needed to worry about.

21.

Those were namely my sister’s calming words. According to her, I no longer needed to worry about the story. My sister said nothing had been proven yet. Even after our discussion in her apartment, she remained staunch in this regard. She impressed on me that there was no evidence at all that we, this complete stranger and us, were related. All that had been established was that over forty years ago a man had signed some papers or other that named him as the father of a child. Some papers that the child’s mother was likely to have tricked him into signing. No, she did not regard the fact that a name appeared in some official book or other as evidence of our shared identity. In her eyes, a name meant nothing. As long as there was *nothing scientific*, the matter had nothing to do with her.

She kept that door shut. That my father had another child was a matter for him and him alone. It had nothing to do with the present. With our present. It concerned the impenetrable room that was our parents’ lives before we were conceived.

Yet still, it had happened.

It. Something.

More and more, I had the impression that in this matter there was no return. No matter what I did, no matter what decisions were made, whether I wrote to her or did not write to her, whether this woman regretted our meeting and took back her claim or not, whether she forgot, or *wanted* to forget - our stories had long since been entwined in each other. It was not a question of certainty. My father’s name was written in a document that had brought the stranger to me. It had happened. A DNA analysis would not change it. I didn’t need a hair from her. Her sway over my memory had already begun. She was in the world, in my *world of thoughts.* And she would always be there from now onwards.

In contrast to my sister, I was satisfied with that.

22.

Recently, I came across a comment by British author Ian McEwan in a magazine. Regarding his experience of unexpectedly discovering the existence of a brother eleven years older than him (who it turned out had grown up just a few kilometres from him and had no idea of his brother’s fame as he searched for him), he told the press, “I am not going to write about it; it is his story, my brother’s story”.

It is *his* story.

I think you can see it like that. This point of view was certainly helpful as he dispelled any expectations among the press. However, I doubt that in such stories there is a main character, a king or advocate, who owns the story and who has the right to tell it, which simply means to interpret it. I do not think that it only concerns one person, when something like this happens.

Rather it appears as if it drags a huge net behind it, drawing in everything surrounding it. Even much further afield, the story still influences the feelings, the thoughts and even the decisions of the people without them necessarily being aware of it. Therefore, who exactly is it that *such a story* happens to?

(p. 184 – 190)

70.

Several months have passed since I started to write about the incident. Have I lost out on these happy months? In the autumn I didn’t kick through the fallen leaves. I didn’t ride my bike around the lake. I didn’t ramble to the pavilion-like brick building that I can see from our flat although I had planned to do so. Since moving here, every morning I look out through the houses to the opposite side of the water, where it stands. And I think, tomorrow, I will go there, up the hill and visit it, the old court house known as *Berliner Gerichtslaube*.

Occasionally, I felt homesick for Bowling Green; it is a form of regret. Homesickness for this faraway place where I learned to believe in something without ever knowing exactly what. Although I spent the months there doing activities that you would normally categorise as “experiences”; although I travelled to Toledo, Chicago and Texas; and although my days were filled with hundreds of things which are part of a life that balances family and career; and yes, although I enjoyed happy evenings in the town’s restaurants, the jazz club, the sports bar and the waffle house; and although my mother perennially tried to remind me of other incidents, in my memory my time there remains as a strange sort of intensive *floating.*

Reading the newspapers on a night with my mother.

Visiting a newly-opened casino outside the town where I found a five dollar chip on the patterned carpet.

The glowing red anorak of my eldest child.

The snow.

The piece by Dürrenmatt, which the student body performed at the end of the semester (my slight disgruntlement that no matter where you go in the world, you always encounter a piece by Dürrenmatt).

The glass cubicle in the sports centre where my husband and eldest child tried to play squash while I watched them from another level.

The night-time illumination of the gas station on Wooster / Enterprise Street.

The giant TV in the foyer of the halls of residence that showed the hunt for the Boston Marathon bomber live over several days.

Even the Bob Dylan concert that I attended that spring, of which I only knew that he got on stage without addressing the audience and then, after a good dozen songs, silently disappeared again.

I even forgot that I had a reading. My mother reminded me of it. A reading that took place in the small auditorium of the institute, a room which I cannot bring to mind no matter how hard I try. At the reading I spoke of disappearing, not just about places that have disappeared but also about how everything that I took for granted as a child, *the old world order*, was fleeting or at least had been atomised.

After the reading, my mother tells me, a man stood up and said to the assembled audience that he was surprised that I, a European, could speak of disappearing. A couple of people nodded their heads in agreement. For him, Europe was a continent of archives, of preservation and of the protected past. He said that nothing disappears there and that it is the continent of eternity.

I block out such things. I was surprised to hear that the man had asked what this sentence in one of my books means, “when something disappears, then a square appears in the landscape. Sometimes it’s a circle.”

Later, in those dark years, when I remembered Bowling Green, I generally saw the railroad in front of me; the tracks that run in a straight line through the town and cut it in half, so to speak. I would often stand there on an evening. The crossings did not have gates; rather, the trains announced their arrival with long honks - that mythical sound signalling there is a country waiting for you, to which you will one day travel. The trains were very long, often with over a hundred wagons laden with oil, milk or grain. Anyway, that's what I imagined. Despite being so far from home, I would feel wanderlust as soon as I heard the honking shortly followed by the train passing me in the dark.

You never know in whose company you are living. Sometimes our thoughts are elsewhere for a long time, on people and incidents from another time and other places. I wonder if longing is therefore like elastic that can be stretched so far that the yonder always stays the same distance away?

71.

The story about the stranger, my half sister, may have appeared as another dream to me, like something that happened in an unreal time, had I not met her again.

It took me a long time to contact her.

Years.

The thought of sitting opposite her, talking to her, chatting about this and that, appeared tremendous and ludicrous in equal measure. Maybe she felt exactly the same. At any rate, after our initial correspondence she did not bother me any more or beg to meet. Her silence, which was an answer to mine, appeared to me like a polite rustling from afar. There was more at stake for her than for me. Is that why she didn’t try to get too close? In order not to corner me but to give me the choice?

I no longer thought of her so often. But when I did, I had the impression something was unfinished.

Much later, when I was again capable of talking to people, of working and of going to the cinema, I wrote to her and suggested a meeting. Once again it was December. I travelled to her, to northern Germany, to the town where we had met for the first time. When I alighted from the regional train, it was snowing like back in that winter when she came to my table after the reading.

I didn’t recognise her immediately. (It isn’t necessarily always the case that seeing someone again is the best way to jog memories). She was waiting at the entrance to the train station. She saw me first and came towards me. Her hair was different to her style at our first meeting. At least, my memory of it was different. She looked more feminine, and older too.

Later in the cafe where we had gone to eat, I told her that I had to write about our story, her sudden appearance and what it had triggered inside me. She said she understood and that if she were me, she would do the same. I asked her questions. It turned out that the majority of what I had dreamt up about her was correct (the dark dyed hair of her mother, the atmosphere in which she had grown up and the silent kitchen with the milky coffee etc.). We talked about our children and our work. Her son was already an adult and lived in another city. She showed me a photo of him and one of her dog, a border collie. On the photo, the dog was lying in the sun in front of her house.

I also told her about my, our, father. I told her that we didn’t see each other often. I said that so that she did not have the feeling that I had an advantage over her. I did not want to hurt her or kindle a longing in her. But then she said she was in regular contact with him and that they would occasionally write to each other. I tried to disguise my surprise at that.

When we left each other, we promised to stay in touch. At the same time, I sensed that with this meeting I had drawn closure on something.

On the return journey in the regional train, I watched a woman with two small children. The train was full and many passengers stood with their luggage and bikes in the small passageways between the rows of seats. Suddenly, the woman cried out in shock. Her son had found a few crisp crumbs on

the floor and was sticking them in his mouth. The woman shouted, “No!” She did it twice and then in her helplessness she covered her eyes with her hands and laughed. She is like me, I thought with surprise. She wears a mask in public.