

They don't care if you are charming

by Tehnuka

CW: mentions sexism and harassment

People always noticed her smile. Stern-faced strangers returned it, or stopped her on the street to remark on its beauty. Some, seeing it, fell in love.

Thus she, too, was charmed by her own charm. In this land of scrubby trees scattered between grey towers, so far from the island breezes of home, what a delight to make others pause—to exchange happiness with the instinctive movement of her eyes and mouth! What power! Her smile was the one magic she brought across the world, to her new job and this new life.

She used it innocently and indiscriminately, embracing the route it offered away from her loneliness. The effects of her smile could last well beyond its duration—as with the older woman she met on a hiking trip, who adopted her as a dear friend, inviting her for walks in the mountains. Other interactions were brief but still satisfying; those who wouldn't ordinarily address a foreigner approached her for that smile. A neighbor on a train told her, through warm

steam and the smell of burnt coffee from his paper cup, of the dying schoolfriend he was going to care for. A glamorous tourist behind sunglasses chose her, from a tightly packed crowd, for help changing buses. The security guard who glowered at other dark-skinned passengers tipped up the brim of his uniform cap to greet her. An older man on a Greyhound coach opened up to her about his kids, his world travels, and the book he was writing.

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Days later, the Greyhound man finds her email address, remembering where she works, and writes: You disappeared, like Cinderella.

She answers lightly: It was past midnight, and my friend came to meet me. I didn't think to throw one of my trainers at you.

He replies again. She, working hard, forgets to answer.

He's angry: There was something between us. You must have felt it because you mentioned throwing a shoe like Cinderella. How dare you ignore me?

She drafts responses: Sorry for the misunderstanding. I was being friendly. I was being witty. I was thinking, although I've met men like you before, that you might be different because your children are older than me, and I was taught to respect my elders.

After a hike with her friend in the desert foothills, she gulps from her drink bottle and complains about the man. The water is warm. Not the warmth of her tropical ocean, the kadal, on a sunny coast—the neithal thinai, where gulls cry over silken water rippling with unbroken waves. It's the warmth of hours in a hot car, on a continent of concrete and painted metal. Even her bottle is painted metal. This is pālai, dry wasteland, the place of hardship. Instead of comfort in sea mist, and bright temples amid mangroves overlooking the lagoon, instead of generosity

and abundance, she has a grasping city in a desolate rock-scape inhabited by things that prick, sting, and burn.

She wants to despise this built-up world, these false people, but she has chosen this life and does not like to regret her choices. She wants to be able to choose how to use her smile—and she wants to protect herself. A woman, a woman of color, a woman who looks different, needs such defenses. She doesn't want to be loved for them. She wants to be loved for more than the shine in her eyes, the way they wrinkle at the corners, the lift of her cheekbones, the creases around her lips, the slightly crooked white teeth behind them. She wants to be loved for more than how she makes others feel. But she is lonely, and she has only this one magic with which to express her feelings.

The friend enjoys dating men she finds on the internet. She says: Provided you expect no more than an interesting story, it can be fun to interact with new people. You just need to be selective with dating profiles. Men you meet on the Greyhound, though, are a different matter.

She never sends a reply to him. No one has taught her to tame her smile, but she tries. She becomes selective about the recipients of her magic, offering strangers only a flat stare.

They still notice her.

A man at the library asks for her number: You were smiling at the books. It caught my eye.

There's an angry message from him, too, when she doesn't reply immediately. There's a man at a play who ogles her while she grins at the actors. An acquaintance who misreads her face as they walk in the mountains, and tries to clasp her fingers in his. A man with too many hands at her waist when she's lost in music at a dance.

This is too much frightening world to change, more than one woman could achieve with explanatory emails, so she never tries. If the water in her bottle is not the warmth of her ocean but that of urban sprawl, if her smile is no longer a defense but a danger, then she must unapologetically adapt. No magic is worth the relentless pursuit, and it is safer to remain lonely than to risk drawing such people to her.

When her friend is busy on her dates, she only goes out to explore the wilderness alone, learning slowly to love the *pālai vanam* in solitude. She takes a bus—avoiding the route with the amorous security guard—and escapes to the foothills where she runs through scrub and cacti; up through juniper, piñon, a grove of aspens; up again through wildflowers and remnants of winter snow, to emerge on the mountain crest and look across the broad desert towards the winding river. She can see everything, and on a good day there is no-one to see her smile freely in response.

One morning in the foothills, as she ruminates on how her magic doesn't do what is needed in the places where she's seen, a *tschhhhhh* erupts near her feet.

She leaps away. Freezes.

The rattlesnake slithers back under a spiky bush. The thin twigs stop moving, but its form is visible behind them, in its hiding place of desperation.

The poor creature is as scared as she.

She could backtrack, but she thinks of Sivaperuman, crescent moon and Ganges in his hair, and a cobra draping his shoulders., and she says: I'm scared, too. Might we look after each other?

A long rattle. The bush quivers. A scaly head emerges. She steps back, fearing the snake is coiling to strike.

With a whip-crack it propels its body up to her arm, around her arm, up, up, and—as she cowers—twines around her neck.

Minutes pass. Her shoulders drop. She murmurs a welcome, keeping her voice low.

The snake wraps snugly, resting its head on hers. When she continues at a walk, up the mountain and along the crest trail, it gazes around, sharing her enjoyment from its vantage point. When they return to the foothills and it doesn't leave, she pulls apart her braid, covering its coils with long black hair for the bus ride home.

Several websites tell her snakes don't show affection, and she is pleased. Standoffishness is preferable to insincere displays of romance.

The rattlesnake is only the first of many. The next time they enter the foothills, it attracts others, clattering its tail. She gives an invitation to all creeping serpents that hide in the shadows, fearing the careless feet and beatings of humans. It is not a contract, nor a conditional such as 'Protect me, and I will protect you'. Others she has met might have done that, but she only gives the same invitation that she gave the rattlesnake.

Soon, they come from everywhere. Coral snakes from tropical oceans that snuggle together mourning lost waters; cobras and mambas spreading their hoods at one another before settling into friendship; heavy pythons and mountain boas that shrink their forms to find space on her scalp.

She has no time for responding to impatient suitors now. She's looking up care information for the Iridescent Shieldtail burrowing deep into her scalp, and listening to the whispers of her new friends. They talk of lives in beautiful homes abandoned for the companionship they've found on her head. They don't know, yet, whether this was a good trade, but agree it was a risk worth taking. No human had offered solidarity before.

Her crown glistens in a rainbow of scales. She is a careful host—managing their temperatures, eating enough so they needn't feed. Occasionally the python is tempted to swallow a mouse, and her vegan diet causes them consternation. A few will venture away seeking their chosen prey and slither back to her head, bloated, to doze. Others prefer to attach themselves firmly, letting her deal with ingestion and excretion. Their bodies and minds are unencumbered in a way a solitary snake could never have achieved. It aches a little when they first meld into her scalp, but the pain is shared between them. She and they make no demands of one another.

They travel with her for the next move, and the next, as she learns to live and work in new places. It is after one such move that she realizes she carries her home with her. The adder zigzags down and explains to a curious rat-snake coiled nearby, watching: It's not so unusual for our kind to be attached, although usually it's to a biological sibling.

The newcomer remains suspicious.

The adder nuzzles her hand—removing dead skin, not expressing sentiment. She must clean her scalp carefully, these days, brushing out sloughed snakeskin. Her appearance is glamorous only from a distance. Those who approach too close uninvited will see her companions, and stand petrified.

It doesn't matter that the rat-snake doesn't join them. Her head and heart are full already.
They are all of them free, together—and her smile, now, is only for herself.

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