

THE SMILE MAKER

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By: Riley James

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The store, tucked into the corner of the town square, had flaking paint and was crumbling with age. Lanterns hung above the door, revealing a line of sleepy citizens, spilling out onto the street. One by one they entered the building, scowling and frowning. When they left, they looked refreshed and carefree.

Just like every day, she watched them. She sat for hours completely still, watching them come and go. She was usually perched on the stair case leading to her father's flat above the store. Sometimes people complained. They said it was unnerving to be watched. They talked like she couldn't hear them, like she wasn't even there. Her father never asked her to leave, he instead informed his customers, in a business only tone, that she couldn't do them any harm.

She found it fascinating how people could enter the store with cruel eyes and cold frowns and leave with charming smiles, which could *almost* distract you from their wicked nature. It was all because of the smile makers. Her father was the best smile maker in their country. She watched as he mixed pigmented powder and water with dainty brushes to create rich paints. With a few calculated strokes he could remake your entire face. He could paint any smile you wanted. Warm smiles, big or small, smirks and grins. Sad smiles for those who mourn, flirty grins for the first date, and angry leers for the last.

The people loved their smiles, but she knew what they were, fake. People would line up from all over to have their smile made by her father. Some said he rivaled the lords' own smile maker, others disagreed. They said the lord had no need for a smile maker. They said that the lord could smile all on his own, a real smile.

The first time she had heard them talking about smiles like that, she had been confused. If the lord had a smile, shouldn't they have one too? Why did they have to paint theirs on? She decided that her father ought to know enough about smiles to answer her questions after all, he was a smile maker. She asked him on Sunday evening, long after the store had closed and he had drunk one too many glasses of the tart red wine he loved so much. She was holding his hand, calloused from painting his whole life, when she built up the courage to ask;

"Pa, does God have a smile?"

He laughed, a booming guffaw. It made his shoulders shake and his hands twitch, the wine in the glass he was holding sloshed over the edge. She couldn't see what was so funny.

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“Why are you asking that sort of question, Dot?” he mumbled over his too-heavy tongue. He turned his chair to face her.

“People have been talking, Pa. I just want to know the truth.” her hands were sweaty in his, she shuffled her feet under his gaze.

“And why would *I* know if God had a smile?” he drawled, surprisingly steady for a man who had consumed as much liquor as he had.

“You don’t know, do you,” she sighed.

He shrugged, and took another sip of wine. “I think he does. I really do, but we’ll never know. “

“If God has a smile,” she paused, readjusting herself, “then why don’t we?”

“We’ve got smiles,” he said, chuckling to himself, “*I* make sure of that!”

She noticed the paint on his face was flaking. The rouge on his lips was actually the stain of alcohol. His smile disappeared more and more with every gulp. His laugh didn’t seem so careless without the upturned lips and crests of dimples. She exhaled through her teeth; she had seen him paint all kinds of smiles on the faces of all kinds of people. But she had never, ever, seen a real smile.

“Real smiles,” she cried, exasperated, “real and true, not paint!” He looked at her, his eyes seemed to bore into her soul, but she didn’t turn away, didn’t even blink. He turned to stare into his wine glass.

“Nobody has smiled for centuries, Dorothy.” His tone warned her not to pry, but she had never been one to follow the rules.

“We used to smile?” she asked softly, her hand breaking free of his grasp. He only nodded. “How?” she demanded, “How do you smile?”

“Only morons smile.” Her father drains his cup, words slurring together. “You need to be truly happy to smile. Only fools are happy these days.” That was that. He refused to speak about smiles for the rest of the night.

As she guided him up to bed later, it came to her in a fleeting thought; his smiles were good, but that was talent. They were still fake, unperfect. The best the country had, but still, not quite right. This was because smiles came from happiness, and this man, her father, didn’t have a sherd of happiness left in him. Not that the rest of the world was any different.

That night she didn’t sleep. Instead she scrubbed her face until the paint from her smile had long since flaked away, and her face was red and raw. Then,

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she stood in front of the dusty mirror and practiced smiling until her cheeks hurt. She continued rehearsing her smile until the sun started to seep across the horizon. In the first light of dawn, she thought about everything that made her happy, her father, their store, real smiles and a happy future. And for the first time in her life, she smiled, an actual smile.

That day many customers complimented her father on her smile. They wanted him to replicate it on them. They said it was his best work yet. He nodded and thanked them for their compliments. He couldn't help but think to himself, how old must he be getting, because, for the life of him, he couldn't remember painting Dorothy's smile.

End.