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The Texting Smile

Richie Angel

“All the world’s a stage, and the men and women merely players.” –William Shakespeare

Katie came up to me after seminary with a knowing smile on her face. We’d been friends for over six years, but we didn’t talk much, except for that time when I wouldn’t tell her the name of my new band. (We really just hadn’t decided yet). She mostly just hung out with Sarah, so I was surprised to see her coming toward me.

But considering that my only tie with Katie was through Sarah, I immediately knew where this was going.

Katie told me that her mom had seen me walking home the other day, reading a note and sporting a stupid, beaming grin. Her mom hadn’t called it “stupid,” but I knew exactly what it looked like. Firstly because it’s my face and I’m used to it, but also because I wore that smile every day as I walked home up Chestnut Avenue in Carlsbad, California, after early morning seminary. I would walk Sarah across the street to the corner near her first class at the high school before heading home for my school, and we would exchange notes—every day. I lived about a mile from the chapel, all uphill (not a “Dad Story”), and my mom never wanted to pick me up, so I walked home alone after saying goodbye. Well, not entirely alone. I used to pretend I could hear Sarah’s voice as I read.

Those five-page letters were more than enough to make me forget the burn in my calves as I hiked back home. I didn’t dare tell Sarah how I actually felt about her, but I could be as over-the-top playfully flirtatious as I wanted in the notes and she would probably just think I was kidding. It was all a good joke. Of course, she did the same thing, and it wouldn’t be for another

year that I found out that she had liked me at the same time that I had liked her and that I should've just told her the truth. But for the moment, I just walked up Chestnut, reading and re-reading her notes, laughing at the silly drawings and inside jokes, forgetting that practically the whole world could see me through their car windows as they rushed by. I didn't care about their opinions—I only cared about Sarah.

Sometimes when we said goodbye, I would turn and watch her as she walked toward the high school and she'd open the note right away. I liked to think that I could occasionally catch glimpses of her smiling the same way, but I couldn't be sure, and I would never take the risk. So we just walked away from each other every morning, smiling at letters the way we wanted to smile at each other.

Five years later, I walk around BYU campus and continue my habit of people-watching. In my observations, I've noticed that roughly 50% of students walking around campus at any given moment are holding their phones in their hands, even if they're not using them. Depending on the day, the percentage can even be more, but it's never less. They cling to their devices—the only reality they know—like life preservers as they navigate through the storm of students. When a boy and girl walk together, however, they almost never hold phones; the person they would be texting is right next to them. I can't help but watch these couples, girls coyly playing with their hair and boys fiddling with watches that rarely exist. They just mess around with the ghost of a timepiece, rubbing their wrists because they don't know what else to do with their hands. The boy and girl both giggle and avoid eye contact, savoring their thirty seconds together before they head in opposite directions for their next class. They'll probably meet at the same place on Thursday just to avoid eye contact again and pretend they don't like each other.

But as for those on their cell phones, they let their true feelings show—just not to the people who matter, not to the ones who caused the feelings in the first place. Perfect strangers see the messages too risky to send in person. I watch as the blonde girl in the HFAC gets a text from her crush, and her grin extends past her ears, brushing her temples. The boy in the green plaid shirt laughs and sighs to himself, responding as quickly as possible so his love interest won't think he doesn't like her. Yet, I suspect that that's exactly what he would likely pretend if they were speaking in person—not coy enough to make her think that he doesn't like her, just enough so she doesn't know that he does. I don't even know these people, yet I probably know more about their love lives than their crushes do, at least from this side of the conversation. I've been there; I've made the same faces; I've breathed the same sighs. And that's how I know that as long as we smile behind screens, the words lose meaning and that the smiles are wasted.

I like to call this phenomenon “the texting smile.” People can be themselves when they're holding a cell phone—not in what they text, but in what they do while they text. Their emotions are genuine, their smile sincere. They have no fear of rejection because they can choose their words as carefully as they please, and the only emotions visible to the recipient are emoticons. Laughing, smiling, touching, and complimenting can easily be misinterpreted—trust me. Even worse, they can be understood correctly yet not reciprocated—trust me. So thumbs do the talking and emojis do the smiling, but not too much! Too many emojis or exclamation points are also a dead giveaway. Any combination of the two reaches the next level of “like,” and wise young lovers are careful not to oversell—even in writing. The key to sustaining a “texting smile” relationship is meticulous subtlety. In person, smiles are crafted so that the delicate art of flirting can prevail; but no one needs a facial façade in a faceless conversation.

A year before I met Sarah, I sat next to Jordi in seminary every morning in Glendale, Arizona, convinced that she would be my first date when we finally turned sixteen. We, too, wrote notes, and we, too, said nothing of how we really felt. But when my dad's work transferred him after only nine months, I knew I had to act quickly. But I didn't. When I saw her for the last time at Devin Cathcart's house, knowing that I would never forget her, I chickened out. So I hugged Devin instead as I turned to leave, and I saw Jordi's expression out of the corner of my eye, her blue eyes wide and her body twitching forward as if she were about to say something. But she didn't.

Jordi and I kept in contact over Facebook for the next three years, and a week before my mission, I posted a song I had written for her, knowing she would listen to it like she always did. She messaged me within the hour and asked me what the inspiration was. I knew she knew it was about her, and she knew I knew she knew, but we still beat around the bush like it was in flames. This charade went on for days, neither of us willing to directly breach the issue. Finally, the day before my mission, I told her what she'd always meant to me. I sent a dramatic confession, reliving every significant moment we'd shared together. I told her that I would log off after pushing "send" and that I wouldn't see her response for two years. I just needed her to know. But even in my hopelessly romantic imagination, I knew it was too late.

I wanted to know that I'm not the only one with a problem of communicating largely through technological means (to say nothing of my flagrant indirectness), so I went on Google the other day to find out exactly how much time we actually waste on our phones as a general rule of thumb. I found a recent study by Bloomberg Business Magazine¹ that shows that we spend an average of ninety minutes on our cell phones every day. After a year, that means we've

¹ <http://www.bloomberg.com/bw/articles/2014-11-19/we-now-spend-more-time-staring-at-phones-than-tvs>

spent roughly twenty-three days glued to our phone screens, reaching just about four years in a lifetime dedicated solely to staring at a cell phone. A study from Women's Health Magazine² geared specifically toward college students found that young women spend around ten hours on their cell phones every day, while men clock in with eight. If you average that to nine hours per day between men and women, that's six times the Bloomberg daily average of ninety minutes. I may just end up confusing both of us, but try to stay with me here—I'm improvising: six times twenty-three days (Bloomberg yearly average) equals one hundred and thirty-eight days (five months) of straight cell phone consumption per year by college students. After four years of college, that's five hundred and fifty-two days spent staring at a phone. So by the time I get my degree, I will have dedicated just over eighteen months of my education to my smart phone.

Sometimes I wonder what would happen if "the texting smile" became my actual smile. What if I didn't hold back my feelings when I was with somebody I cared about? Isn't it strange that I'm only me when I'm holding my cell phone? I can think of so many times when I should've said something sooner than I did, or at least said *something*, anything at all.

I came back from my mission determined not to make the same mistake. I started dating again immediately, and I could generally tell that I was interested in a girl by the second date, which is why I asked her out on a second date. But Provo is its own kind of dangerous. Provo girls understand that when an RM asks them out, it's not just as a casual pastime, so they always ask, "Why did you ask me out? Where do you want this to go?" Before my mission, I would have responded by avoiding eye contact and saying that I just wanted to have fun. But nowadays, I tell them exactly what my intentions are: "I'd like to get to know you better, because with what little I already know, I think you're great." They respond, "Why do you want to get to know

² <http://www.womenshealthmag.com/life/hours-you-spend-on-your-phone>

me?” so I answer, “I want to see if we’re compatible enough to date again.” “How many more times?” “If all goes well, exclusively, eventually.” After everything you and I have discussed about our texting smile culture, I think you can see why this strategy doesn’t go over so well. Even when they’ve expressed reciprocal interest earlier in the dating process, the directness of my comments always surprises them. In just over four months, Kate, Kelsey, Talia, Stacia, Ciara, Jamie, Katie, Holly, and Casey have all shown interest initially, yet withdrawn it when I’ve told them the truth—a truth which they asked for. At this point, I should probably change my strategy, but at least I feel like I’m finally being more honest.

In the hierarchy of core values in American culture, positivity outweighs honesty by a long shot. I learned both as a missionary in Chile and growing up in a Mexican atmosphere that Latin culture is the exact opposite. For Latinos, no matter how harsh or unfiltered, the truth is always beneficial. In America, if we must receive coal for Christmas, we’d much rather it came in a green-wrapped box with a red ribbon. We don’t want the truth if it won’t make us feel good about ourselves; appearance is everything. Did learning that Taco Bell’s beef actually contained less than 35% real beef a few years ago change its taste or just the way we tasted it? Did it change the fat content on the label or just how fat we felt when we ate it? The facts had always been there, but new information changed our perception to the point of disgust. We do the same thing any time we hear anything unpleasant. Shel Silverstein wrote, “Tell me I’m clever; tell me I’m kind; tell me I’m talented; tell me I’m cute; tell me I’m sensitive, graceful, and wise; tell me I’m perfect—but tell me the truth.” We don’t want the truth. We can’t handle the truth. We either want the truth to be different, or we want to live in ignorance. Emily Dickinson said, “The truth must dazzle gradually.” I prefer to throw it on all at once.

Part of that is because of Jordi. When I got back, she hadn't responded. She texted me three days later and told me that she was in a relationship and that I was to thank for it. My letter, perfectly timed, had given her the courage to give her boyfriend Trevor a chance, even though he wasn't the obvious choice. She acknowledged that if I had known the outcome from the beginning, I wouldn't have sent the letter. I'd like to think I could be more chivalrous than that, but she was probably right. When I came up to Utah a few weeks later, she asked me if I would like to record a song with her. A twisted part of me hoped that that meant that she and Trevor had broken up. They hadn't. Still, although it was the first time we'd seen each other in four years, all of the old feelings came back just as strongly. I met Trevor afterward and had to admit that he was a really nice guy. Later that week, I was the first non-relative to find out about their engagement, and she will never know what that did to me.

I went to their reception, despite counsel from concerned friends and parents not to go. Jordi asked me about my music videos, and Trevor and I talked football. He made me promise that I wouldn't tell him how the Michigan vs. Michigan State game ended, and I agreed, but at this point I wanted to think that I'd probably done enough for this guy already. But then I saw the way he and Jordi looked at each other. They were smiling—really smiling. Not a texting smile, not an emoji, not a hand-written note from a frightened fourteen-year-old or a last minute song dedication from a young man about to leave the country. They were in love, and they made no attempt to hide it from anyone, especially each other. That's what Jordi deserves, and I can't be upset with anyone but myself that I wasn't the one to give it to her.

I saw Sarah again at a wedding reception this summer. After two years, she was just as beautiful, but with her defined features and confident bearing, she was noticeably more mature. She had become a woman. We talked and laughed about the "olden days," but we never

mentioned the notes, nor the songs I'd written for her, and there really would've been no point in doing so because two weeks later, she left on her mission to Mexico. If all goes according to my plan (married within a year off the plane), I'll be married long before she gets back—not that waiting for her would do me any good anyway. It'll be almost seven years since the notes by the time she gets back. Seven years is a long time. I bet she's forgotten them by now. Even if she hasn't, I don't think a marriage based on adolescent love notes or text messages would last very long anyway.

I'm still trying to find that balance between subtlety and sincerity. Being too forward is frightening, but being too hesitant is a prison. Of the eighteen months I'll spend on my phone before graduation, I think half will be purely devoted to planning out how I'm going to respond to text messages, wishing I could give the same genuine smile in person that comes so naturally when my screen lights up. Hopefully, somewhere in there, there will be enough time to be as honest as I want to be. But for now, when I'm looking into the eyes of somebody special, my hands tremble, my breathing becomes choppy, and I play the game just like everybody else.

But when I get a text, I can't help but smile.