

Smile

“If you were as confident in the real world as you are in bed, you'd be unstoppable.”

The statement stung, but not in the way I expected. It wasn't the sting of a congratulatory ass smack but the sting of a dance partner stepping on my toes. Though he had the experience to comment on how I seemed in bed, how did he have the ability to comment on my confidence level? He was clearly oblivious to the thoughts going through my head. *Was I making the right faces? Did I have anything in my teeth? I hope he doesn't think that ingrown hair is a transmittable rash. Oh, God, my deodorant is wearing off.* What does he know of my confidence?

I don't know that I've ever considered in which situations I was confident and in which I was not.

What made me seem confident in bed?

What is “the real world” where I apparently lacked confidence?

I'm not denying any lack of confidence, but how do others measure that?

My only conclusion is that confidence is perceptual. It is measured largely by how others analyze my actions. This seems a little contradictory because we are taught that confidence is within us. On a small scale, it's our belief in our ability to complete a task well.

So he thinks that I think that I'm good in bed? How can he assume that I think that unless I've told him? (I haven't) So, what does he see that leads him to believe this?

I asked.

“Why do you think I'm confident in bed?”

“Sex seems to be something that you do where you know what it is you like, what you want from it, and what you're willing to do. You seem completely relaxed and just living in the moment. I don't want to suggest that you're role playing, but it's like you're getting into the experience—if anything you're being extremely authentic, like you're in a space where no one can judge you. You don't second guess yourself. When we have sex, I see a lot of potential in who you could really be if you cared less about what others thought of you.”

He wasn't wrong, but I didn't understand how that was observable. I pressed on.

“What do you visually see, though? What does my confidence look like?”

“You smile a lot...like really really smile”

He said some other things about the way I spoke with authority and without question, but I already had my answer.

A smile.

Confidence and happiness have always seemed to go hand in hand. I tried to think about a specific moment when my confidence was low—a task that proved a little more difficult than I expected, given how little I think about it.

I thought about a presentation that I gave in a cultural anthropology class. We had the freedom to choose any topic we wanted to compare amongst cultures. Mine came with a trigger warning: violence against women. As a feminist, it's been a topic I'm always ready to go to war for, but I had personal reasons as well. I did my research, focusing on the United States, India, and Columbia. I was more than prepared for the presentation.

However, in front of the class, I was clammy. My note cards visibly shook in my hands, and there didn't seem to be enough air in the room to get out a full sentence. I was holding back. The "1 in 4" statistic rolled off a numb tongue. My mind was elsewhere. It was stuck on my own place in the statistic—the day I became one of the 25%. It wasn't rape, but still fit the bill of sexual assault. Talking about victim blaming made the shitty taste of the rum from that night return to my mouth. I remembered how he guilted me into staying with the death of a friend killed by a drunk driver. The slides about rape culture reminded me of the reasons that he thought he was entitled to my body. A well put together presentation could not instill in me any sort of confidence when I was so overcome with unhappy thoughts. I couldn't have faked a decent smile during that project if I tried. My memories led to dread, which led to a compromise in my confidence. I was afraid that in my enthusiasm about the topic, I may be found out.

The connection never seemed so clear to me. Confidence is rooted in happiness. It cannot grow when the soil is poisoned by trauma, but when it can, it blooms into a smile.