

The Man With the Upturned Lips

By Ward Ricker

There was a loud cry, and she knew what it meant. The men had returned, and they were successful. The group would eat meat tonight. She ran out to watch as the men started pulling the animal apart with the sharp rocks and primitive tools that they had available.

She was happy, as were all the people in the small clan, but, like the others, she showed no expression. Some other women gathered around. They also showed no expression, but she knew that they were also glad for the meat to come.

She was happy, not because the animal was dead, but because she would have a good meal tonight. The clan had recently discovered how to control fire and how it made the meat taste so much better, so it was a treat when the men came back with an animal to feed on.

She watched as the men did their work. The women didn't do this work. The women found plants along the savannahs and woodlands to eat, but it was the men who brought back the animals. She didn't know why this was, but she accepted that this was how it was done and had spent her years gathering many berries, roots and other plant food. The meat was special, though.

She watched as the man with large belly worked on the head of the animal. He always seemed to eat more than the rest of them. The head was not the best part of the animal, having little meat, but they didn't waste anything that they didn't have to. This was different from other meat-eating animals who frequented the savannahs and woodlands. They would kill an animal, eat what they wanted, and go off and leave the remainder to go to waste. Of course, it didn't really go to waste—other animals would come and take their fill also—but this was different from humans. They humans, or at least, human-like beings that she lived with, were less wasteful, or perhaps they were just more selfish and didn't want to share with the other animals.

The man with the narrower face was working on removing the skin of the animal. He didn't have a name. None of them had names. It would be thousands of years before humans started giving each other names, and tens of thousands of years before they had anything like a coherent language. For now all they had were the grunts and groans and occasional sounds that had a little bit of meaning, like the cry that the men let out when they brought the animal into the camp.

Another man, the one who was her partner, at least most of the time, had pretty much finished removing the guts of the animal. These parts were pretty much inedible, but she had come to understand that they had to be removed or the rest of the meaty part of the animal wouldn't keep as well.

The other man working on the animal was the one who intrigued the woman. He was younger than the others. She remembered him being born by the woman with the bad hand. What intrigued her about this man was the way he would frequently look at a person and would turn the other ends of his lips upward as he grunted or gestured at them. Sometimes he would even do it when just working or resting by himself. This was very strange. She had never seen anyone do this before and was always wondering what it meant. It didn't seem to be a bad thing. In general, the man was not too much different from the other men in the group, except for this one feature, although it did seem to her that the man was a little more kindly or thoughtful when he did this.

On one occasion she had watched him do this, and another man in the group had walked up to him and tried to bend his lips back where they belonged, but the upturned-lip man had pushed him away and run off grunting loudly. She remembered, though, that it had been the same day that the man had returned and was doing that same thing with the lips again.

She watched him work for a minute or two, and then the man looked over at her, and, as he did, he did the thing with the lips again. She was still not sure what to make of it, whether it was a good

thing or a bad thing, but he seemed to have a bright and kindly expression in his eyes. That is, until her partner saw him. When he saw it, it seemed that he didn't like it, because he reached over and pushed the man to the ground. The expression immediately disappeared from the downed man's face, but he didn't run away this time. He got back up and gave a loud growl, but no further violence ensued, and the men continued their work until the animal was ready.

Another group of men had already started making a fire. Everybody knew how much better tasting this would make the meat, so several joined in and helped. This, once again, was the men's job, though. Again, she didn't know why this was, but she just accepted that that was the way it was.

As the fire roared upward and evening approached, they cut off pieces from the animal and laid them over the fire. Soon they pulled the pieces off and distributed them, first to the men who had brought back the kill, and then to the others. The one who was her partner most of the time brought a piece over and offered it to her. It was delicious, she thought. Although the berries and other plants that she gathered sometimes were pleasant to eat, nothing was like the roasted meat from the fire.

The whole group sat in something like a convoluted circle, enjoying the taste of the meat, when she looked over and saw that the man had the corners of his lips upturned again. This time no one pushed him or tried to wipe his corners away. She noticed some of the others watching the man, and they, also, seemed to be wondering why he would do such a strange thing.

The she looked over at the young girl next to her—her third and oldest daughter—at least the third and oldest one that had survived. The girl was also watching the man's face with an inquisitive expression on her face. Then, as she watched her, the girl started doing the same thing and curling the ends of her lips upward.

Now there were two of them! What could this mean? She wasn't sure what to make of it, but, as she watched, the girl seemed to be enjoying what she was doing. The others in the group also noticed and watched both the man and the girl, whose eyes caught each other and seemed to display some sort of recognition. Somehow, they seemed to have some sort of mutual understanding.

The woman continued to watch and wonder about this phenomenon. Was there something to this upturning of the lips? Did it really do something useful? She continued to watch, and the two continued on with their lips upturned as they ate, with the upturning seeming to increase a little higher when the two looked at each other.

Then she noticed another man in the group starting to do the same thing. The man hesitantly started curling his lips upward, as if he wasn't sure if it would hurt him or not. He looked at the other man with upturned lips who looked back at him, as the second man continued until his lips had a large curl to them. He looked like ... well, he looked like he enjoyed this action, like he was somehow pleased.

She continued to watch and wonder until she noticed the man who was her most-of-the-time partner starting to do the same thing. She still wasn't sure what to make of it, but her partner looked at the first man and seemed to have the same recognition that the girl had had. Then, as she watched, a couple more of the men, and then one of the women, did the same thing. It was spreading! This was incredible! They were all copying the man with the upturned lips. This lip curling thing, instead of being an unusual quirk that one strange person was doing, was becoming a group practice.

Finally, the woman could wonder no more. She was just plain curious as to what this was all about, so she decided she would at least try it. She carefully started lifting the ends of her lips upward, feeling awkward and thinking at first what a strange thing she was doing, but when she finally did so and looked around at the others who were doing the same, she found that, for some unknown reason, it actually made her feel better. Not only that, but she felt the same recognition that they seemed to have, and felt like somehow she shared a common understanding with the others.

This was amazing. How a simple curling of one's lips could make such a difference was a mystery to her, but, she found it so pleasing, and she could tell that the others who were doing so felt

the same way, that she thought that the man with the upturned lips had started something that was going to continue on and become a natural thing.