



A Picture is Really Only Worth 589 Words

or Sam Sullivan's Search for the Perfect Smile

We are all forced to smile. We are forced to look at the camera and say “cheese!”¹ We are forced to do this over and over and over again throughout our entire lives.² This is society's way of making us cooperate. Some of us adapt to the lens, *the all-seeing eye*, some of us become rather *camera shy*. I just want to be at ease with it. I hope to leave behind a legacy of the **whimsical spirit**, to provide some sort of comfort to my great-great-grandkids, all as a result of my various concoctions of rehearsed facial contortions. Because one day that's all people will have left of you, a collection of your faces, forever preserved, your *image*, your *legacy*, a mere 4x8 rectangle placed on a mantel or hung on a wall, following you up a staircase or planted next to a bunch of other 4x8 rectangles, all sitting on a shelf somewhere, frozen in time, together for eternity.

The pressure of the lens

It's a long, awkward journey to becoming comfortable in front of the lens. Pictures are often taken in big groups of people, with the camera shoved in your face and everyone expecting you to prove *just* how much fun you are having by showing teeth. You are stuck with the responsibility to make a statue of your face, in an attempt to convey a natural state of joy. It doesn't always come so naturally, though, now does it? Your friends, your family, your coworkers, the corporate people at the big corporate luncheon, they all want you to stand still, shoulder-to-shoulder, position yourself into a posture that exudes exuberance, and to freeze with them in unified ecstasy. They want it to appear that everyone had the best day of their lives that day. They want to capture a snapshot of the moment, look back at it and go “*man*, that day was the best day of our lives that day.” Even if it is a skewed perception of the past, they still want that. They need it. They need you to participate. They need you to give them these fond memories. The people need you to smile. And you *have* to participate or else you just look like an asshole. And nobody wants to be remembered as The Asshole.

It was Picture Day at my son's school the other day. He's nine, so he's had some experience with the *all-seeing eye*, but this year I could see a change in how he handled the pressure. I watched him prepare. The night before, he carefully selected his outfit, a mint green polo with white stripes along the collar and sleeves. Any shade of green naturally looks good on the kid. He looked handsome. He looked good. And he kept saying he was going to barely smile this time. He was practicing how he was going to do it and he showed me this casual little smirk. It was a classic smile, an effortless pose and I made sure to give him the fatherly approval with an affirming thumbs up. I remember those days, preparing for the *big smile*. My son seems to handle it with far more ease and coolness than I ever could have at his age. I'm really proud of him for that. And so then I had to pay like 45 USD to get an 8x10 of his newly fashioned smile, his sly little smirk. It was worth every penny. It was worth *a million bucks* to see him so at ease.

¹ Saying “cheese!” is a directive given by photographers to get people to smile. Other commonly used terms are “pizza!” or “ice cream!” or even “happy!” They make you do this because when you pronounce these words your mouth is forced into a smile.

² I remember my middle school English teacher, removing her prosthetic leg and slamming it against the podium, going “Repetition, repetition, repetition, repetition” over and over and over again, hammering the literary device into my studious young mind. She really hammered the point home, she really *legged* it into me.

