Seriously?

Mindful Bitchface

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After a lifetime of strangers scurrying from my path, coworkers asking if I’m angry with them and people looking back at me with a panicked “What?” I accepted my diagnosis. I have what medical professionals call severe chronic resting bitchface. My features naturally relax into a scowl somewhere between judgy stone statue and pre-strike hooded cobra. When concentrating or listening intently, my brows angle down like train cars about to collide. Occasionally the left eyebrow makes a break for my hairline in an arch that would make Scully flinch.

Did my childhood RBF save me from sharing a seat on the bus through elementary and middle school? Sure. But the perks have been few. I’ve tried to manage my RBF and soften my features when ordering food or taking notes in meetings. Apparently I’ve been unsuccessful, though I’m told I look fine smiling in photos so long as I don’t bare my teeth. If not laughing or eating, say, a very good piece of cheesecake, I look like I’m planning your death, where to bury you and how much salt I’ll need to make sure nothing ever grows there again.

When people recoil, I’ve always responded with, “This is just my face.” But lately, if you ask me about my RBF, even if I happen to be reclining by a pool, drinking from a pineapple, I might overcome the reflex to dismiss my expression and reply, “I’m filled with a molten rage that could turn this whole place and everyone in it to silvery heaps of ash. Thanks for asking.”

Because holy hell.

I know I’m not alone. But getting through the day, especially for women, people of color and LGBTQ folks, requires a certain amount of camouflage. Smile, though your heart is breaking, goes the song. And that’s what most of us — especially women — are trained to do. We smile while crushing news comes in through our screens. We smile in uncomfortable or even frightening moments, trying to soothe the very people who make us want to run while we bite holes in our cheeks.

So instead of fighting my bitchface, I choose to live my authentic facial truth, to be fully present in my scowl and to inhabit it mindfully. Here, I give it meaning and purpose in the world. I hereby dedicate it on behalf of all the angry people for whom a chilly side-eye is not available. I may be a woman of color but I’m cis-hetero and light-skinned Asian, so my anger isn’t going to earn me the same criticism as a black woman, for example. And I’m happy to use my bitchface privilege to remind those who might otherwise glide through the day unbothered and unaffected that we are not all fine, not all happy, our placid expressions exhausting work that not all of us want to do.

More generous people than I will open hearts and minds, tug us gently back toward the better angels of our nature. But we all must use the gifts we are given and mine is a gorgonesque expression that never wears off. Some give voice to the voiceless. I’m bitchfacing for the faceless.

But how will you know, should our eyes lock at the self-checkout line or the topplings bar of a frozen yogurt place, whether my bitchface is for you or at you?

Well, are you willfully misunderstanding players kneeling at a football game as protesting “The Star-Spangled Banner” and a slight against veterans (more specifically white veterans?) rather than disproportionate and deadly police violence against black people? Then this bitchface is for you. Are you chuckling along as the president mocks a survivor of sexual assault? I’ve got something special for you. (Spoiler: It’s a bitchface.) Maybe you’re good with children being forcibly taken from their families and locked up. If so, please come to the front to collect your bitchface.

Still pretending, in the face of dizzyingly grim scientific data, that climate change is a hoax? Congratulations — it’s a bouncing baby bitchface. Worried about giving equal time to white supremacists in news media? Behold my bitchface as it melts you like an Indiana Jones Nazi. Did you just tell me to smile? It sounded like you ordered a bitchface.

To my sisters with RBF: I see your mighty gazes and recognize their power. Join me and embrace your stern faces, mighty gazes and recognize their power.

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