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To Be Loose

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VALERIE WALKER

*The first time I heard "The Young and The Hopeless"
by Good Charlotte, I was lying in a bed, waking up to realize
that I had used some guy's bare back as a pillow last night.*

It wasn't my bed. My bed had orange and pink striped sheets with a purple comforter. This bed had black sheets that smelled like cigarette smoke. I could feel the guy's skin under my cheek, the curve of his shoulder blade, the fluid rise and fall of his breathing. My stomach pressed against the taper of his side, my hand low on his hip. I froze in that tender embrace, my heart trying to break through my rib cage

This was definitely not my room. My room had a poster of Clay Aiken over the top of my bed, a poster of Tim McGraw over my computer desk, and a satin purple dress hanging in a dry cleaning bag on the back of my door. This room didn't know the meaning of the word vacuum. Black light posters with images of mushrooms, peace signs, and frogs in the center of swirls of brilliant colors covered every inch of the wall space. The closet door hung open, but the clothes lay crumpled on the floor instead of on the hangers. The bathroom door was missing, the doorway covered in a curtain of black and red beads swept to one side by a shoelace thumbtacked to the door jam. The nightstand held an overflowing ashtray, several cigarette lighters, and a pack of Marlboros.

The punk song filtered underneath the closed bedroom door to where I lay on the bed, snuggled up to this stranger. Voices mingled with the music, and I recognized my sister's bleating laugh.

She was laughing. How in the hell could she be in the next room laughing? I was supposed to walk across a stage and get my diploma tonight, graduating with all of the extra stoles and tassels around my neck. I wasn't supposed to be waking up in a bed with some random guy. I had a full scholarship to The University of Texas, something I sacrificed my sleep and any hope of a social life to earn. And now, now I was lying on this guy, unable to think past the beer to remember how I ended up in this bedroom.

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I turned my eyes up, not moving my face. I didn't want him to feel me move. I saw the tribal tattoo stretching from his shoulder to my head. I knew it continued past my head to the opposite shoulder, that the thick twisting black lines burned high across his back, trickled down the back of his arms, and teased up the back of his neck. I knew this because I remembered tracing the black lines with my fingertips, my tongue.

Holy crap, I was not supposed to be here. I inched off of the bed as slowly as possible, careful not to shake the mattress and jostle the guy. When I was clear of the bed I jerked upright, a move the beer did not approve of. My hands flew up to press against my eyelids, trying to keep the pounding inside my skull from popping my eyes out of their sockets. I felt something gushing up my throat and ran for the bathroom, lurching under the beaded curtain, and dropping to my knees on the nasty floor. I vomited. I vomited until I thought my stomach and intestines might fall out of my mouth, and then I vomited some more.

I was breathing hard, panting over the toilet bowl. At least no noise came from the bedroom. I stood up slowly this time, bracing myself against the countertop. The mirror showed me in all of my glory. Naked, pale, smeared makeup and crumpled hair. I could feel the layer of dried sweat on my body. I needed to get out of here, needed to go home and take a shower. I needed to find my clothes. I ducked into the bedroom, finding my jeans on the floor, my panties on the dresser, my Academic Decathlon t-shirt over a chair.

I was graduating tonight with top honors. My sister was proud of me for achieving what she never finished. So proud that she had insisted I come to this house with her last night. It'll just be a few of my friends hanging out. No big deal. It'll be fun. Come on, you deserve a night of fun. At the house she offered me my first beer. Just try it. You're too tense. This will loosen you up. I turned to the bed, looking down on the naked guy who was thankfully still sleeping. I had never wanted to be loose.

The black top sheet hung from the foot of the bed. Focusing on the posters on the wall, I slowly lifted the thin sheet over the guy's legs. I glanced down at the sleeping face for any sign of waking before draping the black sheet over his lower back, letting the sheet float down to cover up the guy's naked body.

I recognized him. His name was Derek, and he was a couple of years older than me. I remembered his name because I had blushed every time Derek caught me gawking at him last night. I didn't know him. I vaguely remembered my sister pushing me towards him. Derek smiling shyly while my

sister introduced us. The awkward silence when my sister left us alone. The relief of seeing my sister coming back, offering both of us another beer.

I turned away from the bed and went to the door, letting my hand rest on the handle. I just stood there, listening to the music, the happy voices laughing on the other side of the door. I couldn't believe I slept with Derek, even if he was cute. I couldn't believe that my sister would let me get plastered and come into this bedroom.

A cell phone cried out from the mess of clothes on the floor, making me jump and spin around. For about half a second, I entertained the idea of finding the cell phone and shutting it off before Derek woke up. Too late. He let out a soft groan, pushing his face into the pillow and moving to shrug himself off of the bed.

"Don't move." My mind shouted, but my voice was insanely calm. Derek squinted up at me. "I'll get it for you." My eyes flipped to the thin black sheet covering Derek's rear end. I dropped to the floor and found the phone chirping from a pair of blue jeans. I held the cell phone out to him.

Derek stared at me for a long moment before taking the phone.

"We had sex, right?"

"Pretty sure."

"So why you flipping out over seeing me naked?"

I let my mouth sag open and stared at the floor.

Derek shut off the alarm on his phone.

"You wanna give me my pants?"

I held out the blue jeans for him.

"Dani, right?" Derek paused long enough for me to nod. "Ain't you Candi's little sister?"

I nodded again, watching him roll to a sitting position on the bed, one hand keeping the sheet at his waist.

"You ain't nothing like her." Derek grinned, taking the blue jeans from me. "Candi'd be climbing all over me right now." I squeezed my eyes shut, turning my head away. God, I did not want to hear this. I didn't even want to be here. "I've never been with Candi. Buds of mine have. They told me." Derek's voice trailed off.

"I just... could you put your pants on so I can open the door."

"You wanting to leave?"

"Be nice."

"I thought you rode here with Candi."

"Yeah, she's my ride."

Derek motioned towards the door and the voices playing with the music in

The mirror showed me in all my glory.

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the next room. "Don't sound like she's ready to leave."

As much as I didn't want to admit it, he was right. Candi sounded like she was having so much fun in the next room that I'd probably have to beg and plead to get my sister to take me home. Not too enthusiastic about making a scene in front of my sister's friends, I slumped down on the floor, sitting on a worn out sneaker.

"I'm graduating tonight. I need to get home, take a shower, get ready. My parents bought me a dress for the ceremony. Cost almost two hundred dollars. Don't know why, not like anyone's going to see it under my robe. It's nice, though. Purple. Satin." Why was I telling him this? "I'm graduating and going to UT in the fall. Got a full nerd scholarship. That makes my parents happy, seeing as how we'd have had to take out some major loans to afford it. My parents are probably worried about me by now." Nope. No idea why I was baring my soul to Derek. I guess he's already seen me naked, so why not? "I'm not really one for staying out all night. I'm not really one for going out at all, not even to the movies. My sister talked me into coming--"

"You were a ..." Derek cut me off, stopped in the middle of pulling his jeans on underneath the sheet. He looked from his lap to me.

"Was." I breathed, wrapping my arms around my stomach. Oh, God, I did not want to think about this right now.

"Ah, man." Derek shimmied the rest of the way into his jeans and flung his legs over the side of the bed. "If you woulda said something." I stared at the floor, hugging my stomach tighter. When Derek spoke again, his voice was so low that I almost didn't hear him. "Sorry."

We listened to the voices in the next room, laughing over the music. How do people live like this? Get drunk, sleep with random partners, and then go back to joking the next day? I didn't think I'd ever smile again. Maybe in a couple of weeks, if my period hit on schedule, I might let out a grin. After that, who knows? I mean, one night. One night and I'm not me anymore. I'm not the good girl that always did her chores, had dinner every night with the folks, and stayed up until three o'clock in the morning over studying for a dinky quiz. That wasn't me anymore. I felt like my sister. I tightened my jaw, forcing back another wave of nausea.

"I don't mean to rush things," Derek stood up and started picking his

way through the room. "But I got an appointment." He leaned over to grab a black T-shirt from the floor and gave it a little shake before shrugging it on. "I gotta go get cleaned up, drive across town. My thing's in, like, an hour. Ain't no way I can be late." He picked up a pair of black combat boots and stared down at me. "You, um, you want me to give you a ride home?"

"You're leaving to get cleaned up?"

Derek nodded.

"This isn't your room?"

"You think I live here?" Derek grinned, casting a quick glance at the black light posters on the walls and the hidden floor. "Naw, I think this is Jacob's room. He's kinda friendly with the pot." The grin fell from Derek's face. "We didn't, like, smoke or shoot up anything, did we?"

"I hope not."

"Be cool if you knew for sure."

I shrugged.

"So you want me to take you home, or what?"

"If you don't mind."

One night and I'm not me anymore.

Derek slid into his boots, leaving the laces untied, and opened the window.

"What are you doing?" I shoved myself to my feet, flapping my arms out a little for balance. "The door's right there."

Derek popped the screen out of the window and tossed one leg outside.

"Yeah, but you really want to see all those people right now?"

Derek dipped through the window and then turned back, holding a hand out to me. A rowdy burst of laughter chased the music under the door. I walked towards the window and Derek's waiting hand.

I stopped in front of the window. "What is your appointment?"

"Huh?"

"Where do have to be at in an hour?"

"Meeting with my parole officer."

I put my hand in Derek's hand and let him guide me through the window.