

# In the Bed Where I Died

by Olivia Humphreys

I have strange dreams in the bed where Topher died. I should have thrown out the mattress a long time ago. At the very least, I should have told you. But you wouldn't have slept in it if you knew.

Years ago, I went into a 7-11 and asked for a pack of *American Spirit Naturals*, light blue. It was around noon. I had just gotten out of a calculus test, knowing I had not done well. That was my excuse of the day, the reason that it was okay for me to go and buy a pack. The man behind the counter looked me up and down and said, "You're too young and too pretty to smoke." That's what they usually said, so I said what I usually said.

"Talk to the stupid 14-year-old me that got me addicted."

And he laughed and I paid and as I was collecting my change and unwrapping the plastic, the man behind me stepped to the counter and said, "You're an adult now. Can't blame the past for the past," and got himself a pack of *Marlboro Reds*. He had a straggly beard and dirty boots, and a mean side of myself wondered what right he had to tell me anything just because of those dirty boots. I gave him a soft laugh, a little annoyed, and left. As I was sitting on the curb with sweet smoke wrapping me up and calming me down, I realized I was annoyed because he was right. I've been trying since then to stop blaming the past for the past. I am not very good at it. But this is me trying. I wonder if he still smokes. I do. Even though it's started hurting my chest and making the bottoms of my lungs stick together. I did try to stop for a little bit. But it made my skin itch.

The cough came to Topher gently. Just a cough. And he was sleepy, but then again he was always a little sleepier than I was. And then the blood, a little butterfly of red on his pillow.

Last night, we talked about how we do not know each other. So you asked me some questions, and I asked you some questions, and I don't really think I know you anymore than I did before, but we tried. And then we did what we are good at, in the dark, where I couldn't see your face and you couldn't see mine. Where the white sheets turned gray blue. We've never done that before in the dark, I'm not sure if you noticed that. But I liked it. It smelled like sweat and like you. I think the truth sits in the hours between one and three in the morning, but you go to bed early, and maybe that's why we don't know each other. The dark is as close as we've gotten, even though it was only five in the afternoon.

And while we were lying there, all tangled, you said something that sounded like me. "What are you thinking?" I heard my own voice, speaking to Topher a long time ago, come out of your mouth, pitched higher than yours.

And when I opened my mouth, he poured out without my noticing, because I said, "Nothing," which was not true. I was thinking about the way the air left your chest with my

cheek pressed against it. I was thinking about how easy that was for you. I was thinking about how I could be asking you questions, how maybe I should be asking you questions right now, but mostly I was thinking about how nice the silence was. And when I said nothing, I caught myself and twisted my tongue but what came out was strange, what came out was, "Your eyes look like black holes," which wasn't entirely true either. Your eyes were blue. They did look like black holes, but like the kind of black holes I could fall all the way into and I wouldn't be compressed or implode. I would just hang among the stars in your sockets and not mind hanging there. But that wasn't what I said, and so I twisted my tongue again and I said, "and you're comfy," which wasn't true either. What I meant to say was "You're comfortable" and I don't know if you feel a difference there but I do. And so I twisted it one more time. You see, I was just trying to make my voice my own again, so I asked you what you were thinking about, and you said, "You have a beautiful body."

Topher never said things like that to me. I like that you say things like that to me. That you get me flowers. That you always make sure to run your hand along my back when we are walking. That you reach your arm across my body while we sleep to hold my hand. But none of that stops what happens when I sleep.

I am standing beneath the redwood tree. Everything is made up of magazine clippings. He is a distance away. Walking towards me, and there is a sound playing, not unlike flute, but not like one either. His hands are in his pockets, walking with a saunter that I can spot from miles away. When he gets close, his face isn't his face at all, it's a mask composed of six different faces, none of them his. His right eye is that of a woman, his left is green, when his were brown. There is a wide smile pasted on with impossibly white teeth, but he always smiled with his mouth closed. And his ears, which are each different, are too high on his head. His skin is the wrong color and far too smooth. When he touches me, the magazine clippings begin to flick away in a breeze that is sweet and fresh. The grass begins to smell like grass, not stale paper, and the blades rise around my feet. They tickle at my callouses. My hand starts to round, becoming something three dimensional, the magazine clippings disintegrating. I look back to him, waiting to see a face I know better than my own, but he reaches up and peels the paper down, revealing muscle structures and bone and as I open my mouth to scream, crumpled up pieces of paper begin pouring out and out and out.

I have strange dreams in the bed where he died.

I met Topher in the dark. We had known each other for months, but I met him in the basement of the house where my grandfather died when he kissed me for the first time with the only light being from the street, shining through the window. The beam of light landed on the brown leather couch and brushed against the white piano. I don't know if he felt a difference when we met at that time, but I did. I met him and knew him with all the light that shone out of the spaces in between where our lips touched. I knew that sometimes, when I traced my hand along his ribs, he squirmed and laughed and light fell off his tongue. I knew that sometimes, when he traced the tattoo of a wisp of smoke on my hip, his touch illuminated the ink. I knew

that when he came back from a run and scooped me in his sweaty arms, his sweat glistened in the sun. Mostly though, I knew the darkness. I knew that he always sat suspended with no intention of imploding, and that the darkness was no place to stay, but at least I knew him. To know someone is a rare thing. It is a hard thing to let go of.

When my grandfather died, I had been living in California. Just after I graduated college. I should have sent him mail. I never send mail, but I should've sent my grandfather mail. My mother had called me and told me that he was going to die soon. Just of old age, like he was supposed to. She asked me to send him mail. My grandfather loved getting mail. He would always check the chute first thing in the morning, and when something besides bills and junk was there, the wrinkles around his eyes dissipated. He would rip it open like if he didn't it was going to disintegrate in front of his eyes. But I didn't send him mail. I didn't even call. I think maybe I was in denial, and if I sent mail it would be real. And denial which is fine when someone is dead, but it's not fair when someone is dying. I moved back to Maine after my grandfather died, into his old house. I don't know if you know that. That we sleep in the house where my grandfather died.

Maybe if I had learned my lesson with the mail, I could have caught Topher's sickness by the cough and you would not be in the bed where he died. But then again, maybe I doomed it from the beginning by letting him kiss me in the basement of the house where my grandfather died.

I have strange dreams.

I am a bug and I have six legs. I am a tiny bug in a pile of wood in a garage, and in this garage there is a sculptor. In this garage there is also the Statue of David. He is staring at the Statue of David with envy. I do not think it is strange that this man has the Statue of David in his garage, not when I have six legs. There is an empty slab of marble in front of him. A chisel and hammer in his hands. He does not touch the marble. He presses the chisel to his bicep and slams the hammer down and a little bug in a pile of wood screams. The skin flicks off like marble, like it shouldn't, and the blood begins to pour, but he keeps going and chiseling and clink and clinking until he falls down in a pile of marble skin and liquid blood and there is blood on the marble but not on the Statue of David, the Statue of David is just staring at him still, staring triumphantly.

When Topher and I used to go into the 7-11's, they changed. The lights still flickered gently, and the hum of the hot dog rollers was still the only music. The lottery machine still flashed green, and the candy bars still crinkled. It was just that no one said anything to me anymore. They didn't tell me I was pretty, or young. They didn't tell me to grow up. They just gave me cigarettes and let me pay and told us to have a nice day. Maybe it was because he stood away from me when I asked. Maybe they could tell that the little coughs he made were fake. Maybe they could smell the past hanging off of me. Maybe I just wasn't young or pretty anymore. I never felt young or pretty with him. I'm glad you still think I am. You don't mind that I smoke. I appreciate that. You are not a man at a 7-11 who thinks he can tell me what I am,

nor are you a man full of darkness who thinks he can tell me what I am. Sometimes, I wish you minded, though. It's bad for me.

It had been bad for him too. No one could explain how he got as sick as he did as fast as he did, a healthy young-ish man like that. Pneumonia for a non-smoker. I can explain it though, because I watched him. The way he leaned into it. I saw it when the cough first came, in the way he started breathing in the smoke that left my mouth. The way he kissed me before I pulled a cigarette fully away. And the worse he got, the closer he leaned into my tobacco soaked chest.

When I met you, you were singing, the live music attraction of the night at Dirty Tony's. I was drinking, not sipping, whiskey. When you were done on stage, you asked me if I sang, that you could tell by the way I watched you. To be perfectly honest, I don't remember watching you at all. But by then, the world was hazy enough to bring you back with me. While you were in the bathroom, I remembered to flip the pillow to hide the butterfly.

I washed the sheets for the first time the morning after you left. I hadn't realized bringing you back with me meant your smell would cover up his. I wouldn't have brought you back if I had known. I wouldn't have ever washed them, even if the butterflies starting soaring the back of my throat and even though I dream.

There are six men standing outside my home, although it isn't really my home and they are not really men. My house is bigger here, and drafty, like a castle on a hillside above the ocean. The men have the wrong faces. There is a cow, a pig, a goat, a lion, a bull, and Topher. They are not trying to get in. They simply watch me watching them through the peephole. The bull opens its mouth; in turn, my mouth sets on fire. I open my lips to let it out, and my teeth tumble out. Their bloody roots are wide. Somewhere in the distance, I think I hear you singing.

Back when I was 14, the first time I went into a 7-11 with the intention of buying a pack of cigarettes, my neighbor Maddie was messing with my makeup around the corner. Maddie and I were not really friends, more like partners with a business deal to make. I looked older than her, that's why it was my job. As she unbuttoned the next button of my top, revealing my almost cleavage, she said "Ok, just remember to look old, and they shouldn't say anything."

I walked into the flickering lights and the hot dog hum. The man didn't look up. I took a Kit-Kat bar and a small bag of Fritos and placed it on the table.

"Is that all?"

"That and a pack of cigarettes."

He looked up at me. And then down. And then up.

"What kind?"

"Uh. The blue ones."

He turned to the rainbow of little boxes with a raised eyebrow.

"With the guy on it."

"These?"

"Yeah."

"How old are you?"

My heart was in my lungs.

"23." We picked 23, because it's out of college but still passably young, and an age that allows no special privileges. He looked me up and down again, lingering a little on my almost chest, and then placed the cigarettes on the table.

"Twelve bucks even."

And then I left. Millie had a bright look on her face, and then we realized we didn't have a lighter. I tried to get her to go in and get it, but she wouldn't. When I came back in, he did look up. I placed a lighter on the table and he breathed heavily out his nose.

"Stay warm out there," he said, even though it was summertime. I left as fast as I could. I didn't like the first cigarette I had, but I smoked them with Millie outside the 7-11 until I felt my stomach churn, and the next day and the next day until the churning turned to a filling. I don't know why. I still don't.

When you're young, there are just things that you do. And I've found that hasn't changed, I've just had to be better at coming up with reasons. But I don't have a good reason for you. I'm sorry that we slept in the bed where Topher died. It's just, the dreams.