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Put on a Happy Face

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Put on a Happy Face

by Kanika Teng

REJOICE MEN! FOR I HAVE INVENTED BEER!

HELLO
Do Me!

Photo by Matt Wood

Art and Design by Meghan Donohue

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Author's note: for this assignment, I was asked to write about a time when I felt uncomfortable dancing. Many thoughts came to my mind, but I wanted to write about this particular night because I pushed myself past my comfort zone and then I realized that I don't have to do what everyone else is doing to have a good time.

I wasn't drinking that night, but the smell of alcohol alone made me want to vomit. It was as if I were already three shots deep, laughing and dancing in a large circle with my sister, my friend Lena, and random strangers. We were in the large, non-furnished basement of a busy nightclub. Without all of the drunken people, it would have seemed overwhelmingly plain, but instead it looked like a cliché dance scene. His arm on her leg, stranger on stranger, no one seemed to care how they looked or whose back they were dancing on. At times, I didn't care either, but other times I would stop as if I forgot where I was or how to dance. I tried my best to fake enjoyment and would later find out that I was convincing. As it turns out, I'm alarmingly good at pretending I'm having a good time when really all I want to do is put on sweatpants and watch TV. That night I was wearing a black Forever-21 dress that showed more of my legs than I usually care to, but not so much that I felt uncomfortable. In that circle, I felt confident in my dance moves as I allowed the music to dictate how my body moved and whether my hands would sway at my side or jump up into the air. Still, I envied the girls who knew how to attract guys with their fluid movement, something I've yet to master. When I allowed myself to be in the moment, I sang along with the familiar top-40 music and didn't care about how silly or seemingly-drunk I looked, but every time I was taken out of the moment I looked to the stairs as if they provided a sort of escape. But they did not; leaving the dance floor only brought me to a world of drunken love-sick couples and bar parasites.

Upstairs was the bar and lounge area, which was occupied by people in deep, meaningful conversation. Old, foreign men sat permanently at the bar so they could see the females as soon as they got in and lure them with free drinks and a friendly conversation, something my friends obliged in. I watched carefully as one of the men slid his hand down my sister's back, ready to intervene if it went too far. I was surprised by how easily she flirted with these men. She was surprised by how little I cared to flirt back. "I'm just doing it for the free drink," she assured me. "What do you want to drink?" They asked me repeatedly. "Nothing," I responded, "I'm the designated driver". They didn't seem to grasp the concept. I smiled and laughed when they told jokes, but I wasn't in the mood to encourage them or stroke their ego. "You know I own this place, right?" One of the men asked me. "This bar?" "No, DC!" He shouted. A giggle and an eye roll later I went back to the dance floor.

I didn't want to go out that night, or most nights, but one of my best friends from college, Lena, was visiting from out of town, and it was the first time we could go out together as twenty-one-year-olds. So I dressed up and put on my best happy face. We met at Lena's friend's Georgetown apartment, which was walking distance from the club. When I arrived at the apartment, which was mostly occupied by college students with summer internships at significant government facilities, everyone there was already tipsy or drunk. Lena was excited to be with her friends who she had met in France last year while studying abroad. As I met them for the first time, I was amazed by how much I already knew about each of them. "OMG, that's so funny!" I said to all of their stories even though I had already heard them once before. As I stood by listening to stories told in half-English and half-French, I tried to match the girls to what I knew about them. The girl with the big boobs and bitchy demeanor, she's the one who will take care of you when you're sick and walk you home when you can't do it yourself. The small blond girl toasting the other girl's breast, she's a wallflower when she's sober. And my friend Lena who is dancing in the middle of an empty apartment, she worked at the French embassy and she'll probably change the world one day. "I love you

guys, you know that?" She slurred.

Lena was well on her way to being drunk, which allowed her already-outgoing and friendly personality to be even bigger than usual. She had no problems making new friends that night or catching the eyes of the men at the bar or on the dance floor. Too bad for them she had her mind on other guys. Too bad for my sanity, she didn't keep her thoughts to herself. Lena's other friends soon became annoyed by her constant slurred talk about her boy troubles. "Come on, let's just try to have a good night," I said happily. "Yeah, yeah, you're right," Lena said. "Forget about me, you have fun."

Though the night started off fun and carefree, it slowly became what most late nights with drunk, dramatic college students become: a complete mess. I was annoyed and ready to leave, but as I searched for my sister so we could go home, I found Lena sitting on a chair by herself crying. She didn't understand why her friends were being a bitch to her. "What's wrong?" I asked. "It's so fucking stupid," She said while crying. "I don't know why I care about him." I knew what was wrong even before I asked. She was tired of crying over and thinking about an old "we're not dating" flame. She didn't know why her new "I'm only with him for sex" hook-up was mad at her. I told her not to call him that night. Who actually likes being drunk-dialed? I instantly forgot about my annoyance and rushed to her side to give her a hug. I told her, "fuck everybody" and that I loved her no matter what. My sister found us after finally getting out of the ridiculously long bathroom line, and we decided it was time to leave.

I'm not Lena. I'm not the girl who can dance provocatively or flirt to get free drinks. I'm not as comfortable or uninhibited as she is, nor do I have her guy troubles to complain about. I'm sure it goes back to my childhood and my traditional parents. I can probably link my social awkwardness, especially around guys, to my lack of sex talks beyond "don't let boys touch you," which my mother thought was appropriate to give me after my first year of college.

I tend to be weird about guys, especially ones that I'm attracted to, and I have very little desire to be in a relationship right now, which works perfectly into my parent's plan of me not being in a relationship. But I'm not my sister either, who carelessly and innocently flirts with men. She received the same lack of sex talks as I did, and yet, like Lena, she loves going out and enjoys the attention and light flirting. Sometimes I think I'm strange for not enjoying the same things that most females my age do. I can't turn off my brain or my constant self-awareness. I don't enjoy nights out or allow myself to be stupid or playful, rather I'm always on guard and more-than-willing to be the designated driver. But then I think back on that night and the drama that ensued and I realize that I'll take sweatpants and television over dancing in sweat and crying in a corner any night. I'm all types of messed-up. I don't enjoy going out like people my age do. I don't even like staying in and hanging out with friends, I like being alone. I was ready to leave my friend at the club because I was having a bad night. I build walls, not relationships, and I'm constantly ready to leave everything and everyone behind in the pursuits of my own happiness. That night I didn't care about making new friends or flirting with guys so that we could both feel good about ourselves. That's me; it always has been. I don't have friends from high school and if it weren't for my sister, I wouldn't have Lena or my other best friends now. But I do have them and that night taught me something. These friendships I have are real and the friends that I've made, I love and luckily for me, they are messed up too. They love boys who won't love them back, and they drink to forget. They make instant connections in bars and walk away without ever knowing a name or phone number. We are all messed up somehow, just in different ways.

