

New Home

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The Arrival

I didn't see it first; my little brother did. He raced ahead of the family, key in hand, eager to open the dorm room door first so those carrying the luggage could file in. I didn't even see it second; my dad did. He pulled ahead of me as the small cute RA rushed up to welcome me. Greeting me with her tiny hand, her red mouth creased into a cheery smile. By the time I got past her and into the room, my family had already started unpacking my things. They had chosen which desk was mine, which dresser was mine, which bed was mine, and which sheets would go on the bed they had chosen. My sister sat at the chosen desk organizing my books, pencils, pens, jewelry box, and desk decorations. My dad was plugging in the lamps, alarm clock, and phone. My mom was hanging up my shirts, jackets, and dresses. My little brother was unpacking my jeans, socks, T-shirts. I stood invisible in the center of the cold room, staring at the bare, white cinder-block walls as my family rushed to create my new life.

The Roommate

Flannel shirt, baggy jeans, long brown hair enters the room. Her name is Jodie. "Hello, my name is Abby." Awkward silence. Shake hands? No. Avert eyes. Parents and family introduce each other with too-eager smiles. OH! "The new roommates get together for a picture." I look at the girl and she at me, returning a vacant, insecure stare. I move closer to the flannel shirt, careful not to touch. Look at camera. Smile. Flash. Snap. Picture taken. Quickly move away from Flannel Shirt.

Walk family to car. Cry a little. Hug Mom. Hug Dad. Hug Dad long and hard. Walk back to room alone. Need to cry a lot. Need to be alone. Flannel Shirt and parents take me to lunch instead. Stomach hurts so empty. So empty. Need to cry.

Eighteenth Birthday

"Yes, yes, Mom and Dad, my birthday went fine. This morning Jane's parents took me shopping, then we went out to dinner. I opened the gifts you sent me. Thank you so much for the clothes. I've really had a great birthday."

I pause, expecting an answer. Long pause. Dad clears his throat, "Uh-um, Abby . . ."

Mom picks up. "We are just so happy that you've made such good friends. It comforts us so much to know that Jane's parents took care of you today and . . ."

"Mom, I can barely hear you! There's a lot of noise coming from the hall!"

"Well! Abby! We just feel so good about how you are doing! It was tough not being with you today! And we're just so glad . . ."

The noise from the hall is getting louder. I can now make out the noise. It is the girls in the hall singing "Happy Birthday." They reach my dorm room door and the light from the eighteen candles illuminates a large group of friends. One by one they enter my room, singing. My parents can hear exactly what is happening.

My dad shouts, "Abby! It was good to talk to you! We love you so much! Enjoy your birthday!"

"I love you both, too! Bye!" I hang up the phone.

I look at my friends surrounding me. Everyone I know at school is here—except my roommate. She chose this weekend to go home.

The song ends and I blow out my candles.

The Request

I lie on my bed, looking at the book in my hands, eyes unfocused. My roommate sits two feet away on the ground. She is hunting through her backpack for something. Should I say it now? No. My uneasy stomach turns. Yes, I should. I have practiced enough times with my friends; I am ready.

Consciously, I clear my throat and begin, "Jodie?" She turns her head slowly to rest her bored eyes on me.

"What?" she asks, as if I am interrupting her at a crucial moment in life.

I press my lips together, raise my eyebrows defiantly, and suck in a deep breath through my nose. Ready. "Could you please ask your friends to be more considerate when they think I might be sleeping?"

Exhale, relax.

As she crinkles up her face into a glare, she demands, "What do you mean?"

"I just don't want people calling at 1:30 in the morning or your friends pounding on the door when I have clearly written, 'Sleeping, please don't knock.'"

"Well, maybe they didn't see the sign. I'm sure they wouldn't knock if they saw the sign," she explains as if she is speaking to a two-year-old.

This time my eyes narrow, "Could you please just ask them to be more considerate?"

Her mouth gapes like a fish and her dark eyes glare. Offhandedly, "It won't do any good, you know."

Pause "Just ask them please."

Exasperated, "You know, you go to bed earlier than anyone else in the whole dorm."

I just stare at her, astonished. "I know that, and so do your friends, so they should know not to call or come knocking so late."

"I'll tell them." Pause. "But it won't make any difference," she adds.

Long pause.

"Thank you."

She glares at me, quickly finds what she was looking for, stands, and leaves the room.

Sigh.

Talks in the Dark

My roommate and I have never gone to bed at the same time before. Tonight is different.

I crawl into bed. She steps on my bed in order to boost herself up onto hers.

I lie in bed, completely awake, thinking. The last three times I have tried, I received no response. Should I try again? Getting no response was the worst. Maybe I shouldn't try.

I lie in bed, completely awake, thinking. I recall the saying: Of all sad words of tongue or pen, the saddest are these, "it might have been."

I close my eyes and, taking a wild leap in the dark, I risk it all: "Goodnight, Jodie."

I hold my breath. Waiting. Will she respond or leave me laying there, completely vulnerable to rejection?

"Goodnight, Mags."

I sigh.

Grinning like a two-year-old, I speak excitedly. "Jodie, this reminds me of all the times I said goodnight to my sister. We would lie in bed talking for hours, saying goodnight every five minutes. We could not stop talking. The

next day we would curse ourselves for talking so long, because we were so tired." The tension eases as I speak. "Yet, the next night we would do the same thing. We would talk until one of us would fall asleep in the middle of a sentence." Jodie and I both chuckle.

"Really?" she responds. "My sister and I never shared a room and we didn't talk much, either. I never really thought of my sister as a friend until just this year. I guess I never realized that she was a real person."

"Yeah," I sympathize, "I know what you mean. My sister and I didn't get along very well either. I was never very nice to her. I guess I just didn't realize that she might have feelings. But at night, when we lay in bed, everything was forgotten and we just talked and talked. . ."

She drops her head over the side of the bed, so she can look at me as we talk.

Saying Hello

Professor Kilcoyne and I continue our conversation out of O'Neill room 255 and are talking about the Christian scriptures as we round the corner of the computer facility.

"Mags!" I look up and see my roommate with an enormous grin on her face. She is absolutely glowing with happiness.

"Hi Jodie," I reply. Mags has been her nickname for me since the first week of school when a girl mistakenly called me Mags thinking my name was really Maggie.

Professor Kilcoyne and I walk on. He turns to me in awe. Chuckling, "I've never had anyone so excited about seeing ME."

Yeah.

I smile.

Home

The floor is covered with dirty dishes from before Christmas. Worn clothes, unread books, and an empty box of microwavable rice decorate the carpet. The walls are covered carpet to ceiling with posters, pictures, and decorations from the past holidays. The empty, white walls are now just a memory. I drop my book bag and sink into my unmade, comfortable, welcoming bed. I reach down to my week-old glass of water and take a sip. Setting down the glass, I pick up the remote and press play for the CD player. I sigh and close my eyes. Comfort. Home.

My roommate walks in and drops her bag on top of dirty laundry. "I'll

clean this room, I promise," she says out of routine.

Smiling, "Sure, sure, you will." Without even opening my eyes, I add, "Anyway, I don't mind." She steps on my mattress and I roll to my left slightly as she pushes off and boosts herself up to her bed.

I open my eyes and look over to my dresser. On top, there is a stack of letters waiting to be mailed. I notice that the phone bill is still there, waiting. Waiting for my roommate's check. Posted on our dorm room door there is a list of Things To Do: Call tutor, Get new trash can, Call Dad, and Wash dishes. On the door, there are signs reading, "Remember your keys," "Mirrors lie," "When is enough really enough? Who cares," "The Rocky Horror Picture Show: Coming Friday, January 27th," "You can do better—I believe in you," and "Never give up." I can close my eyes and describe every detail in my room.

My roommate calls from her bunk, "Mags, can you set the alarm for me? I'm going to take a nap."

"Sure." I set the alarm and curl up to take a nap, too.

The Same Sense

I shove the door open with my right shoulder and push my way into the room. Unfolding my arms, I watch as the enormous burden rushes to the ground. With a loud boom, the books land in awkward, open-faced positions. I laugh.

Climbing over the mess, I collapse into bed. I lie on my back recalling the last conversation I had with my roommate. I had never heard her speak so honestly or openly as she had that time.

Pulling myself out of bed, I go to the bookshelf and grab my diary. As I sit down at my desk, the one my sister chose for me over five months ago, I begin:

"Dear Diary,

Jodie said the neatest thing this morning, we were talking about roommates and how well we get along. She said that we get along so well, NOT because we are that much alike, but because 'we have the same sense of fun.'

I like that thought: the same sense of fun."

Being Warm

I feel a slight movement and an added weight as I slowly come back to consciousness from a deep sleep. With effort, I slowly draw open my heavy eyelids.

Jodie is bending over me. Seeing me awake, an apologetic, guilty look crosses her face. She whispers, "Sorry, I didn't mean to wake you."

I look into big, brown eyes. I ask drowsily, "What are you doing?"

"Sorry," she says as she finished pulling my blanket carefully up to my chin. "I thought you might be cold."

I close my eyes and fall back asleep immediately. I am warm and content.

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