

[Student's Name]
[English 300 Level Course]
[Instructor]
[Date]

Soft Endings/Hard Landings

The email that I received mid-August informed me that the room was 9 feet by 16 feet, but looking around I'm convinced it's actually smaller. The brown tile floor must have been cleaned recently, evidenced by the strong smell of some industrial style all-purpose cleaner, but from the looks of it you can't tell. There is a small sink awkwardly positioned in one corner of the room that gives the space a feeling more reminiscent of a prison cell than a college dorm. Two good-sized closets occupy one wall of the room. The doors were removed sometime in the 1970's because students were using their closets to grow marijuana instead of hang clothes. Or at least that's what I've heard. There is a big window on the far wall between the two identical wooden bed frames that looks out onto [Street]. That might just be the best part of the room—those few inches of blue August sky that are visible through the double paned glass.

We've carried the last of the cardboard boxes to the fluorescent blue bin at the end of the hall. Clothes are neatly folded, put away in drawers. My closet is full of dresses and sweaters and jeans, but I'm sure I forgot something. My desk is organized—a pile of textbooks stacked neatly on the top shelf, its height causing panic each time my eyes pass over it. A year's worth of Costco-sized cleaning products and shampoo are tucked underneath my twin extra long bed. Our long morning of frantically unpacking and running

to the store and repacking and moving things in and out has finally come to an end. We are trapped in an awkward intermediate where there is no reason for my parents to stay any longer, but none of us are ready to acknowledge it yet.

Since my roommate has yet to make an appearance and my dad is terrified of leaving me alone in Michigan with the stuffed bear on my bed as my closest friend, he walks into the room next door and introduces himself. It can't be more than a few seconds before he yells down the hall for me to come and introduce myself, too. I realize I am like a kindergartner who needs her father's help making friends on the first day of school. After a few moments of coaching and calming from my mother, I reluctantly walk down the hall and introduce myself to my neighbors. [...] [T]hey are from [City]. I ask where [City] is. They say it's in Michigan, but in a way that makes me feel like I probably should have known that already. In an attempt to recover from my out-of-state blunder, I offer my hand, flattened, in true Michigan fashion and ask them to point it out. I've got the wrong hand, they tell me, the thumb is on the other side of the state.

I comment that it's such a coincidence that they are both from the same city and ended up being roommates. No, they tell me, not a coincidence. They signed up to live together. I awkwardly say, "Oh, you already know each other," my disappointment apparent. If my dad was looking for a fellow lost and lonely freshman to set me up with, he'd have to walk farther down the hall. My dad gracefully bows out of the conversation; I mumble a few nervous words about our RA or windows or something and retreat back to my dorm room.

We find my mom bent impossibly over my bed carefully pulling the baby blue cotton sheets tightly across the twin extra long mattress. My mom is obsessed with making my bed. She's been talking about sheets, springs, and pillows since we landed at the airport. I inherited lots of things from my mother — my thick hair, my height, my indecisive sometimes blue/sometimes green eyes. Of all the traits my mother gave me, worrying is by far the worst. My mother is a worrier—not in the oh-all-mothers-worry-that's-their-job kind of way—a chronic, passionate and unforgiving worrier. I imagine that this moment, one for which she has been preparing for years, is simply too much for her to handle. Because there is no possible way for her to worry about everything that she needs to in the capacity her psyche demands, she has chosen to preoccupy herself with mattress covers and linens and down instead.

I follow creases into patterns as she methodically folds sheets and blankets, fluffs pillows, and makes perfect lines across my coral colored comforter. There is a guy down the hall blasting “Fireflies” by Owl City on repeat. Little do I know, the song will soon become so engrained in my mind that it will quietly but constantly play in the background of all of my dreams. Every time I hear this song on the radio, I will be immediately taken back to studying General Chemistry at the end of the [...] hallway trying to figure out how a song with the lyrics “Cause I'd get a thousand hugs/from ten thousand lightning bugs/as they tried to teach me how to dance” could have become such a radio sensation.

The owner of the stereo system that is projecting this obnoxious song on repeat is named [...], and he is the nicest, most infuriatingly good intentioned human being I have

ever met. Earlier that day, as I carried my most important earthly possessions up the stairs of the [...] stairwell, I heard rumors of the kind-heartedness of this elusive character. He was the first person to introduce himself to me—only a few moments after I started unpacking he had come into my room attached to a brimming smile, shook my hand in an overzealous gesture of friendship, personally welcomed me to [Residence Complex], hurled a million and a half questions about [City] in my direction, and complimented every single thing I had already unpacked.

I will come to know [him] as the roller-blading, Jesus loving, always optimistic, incredibly intelligent engineering student with a serious passion for Christian music. But for now I know him as [...], the kid who lives two doors down from me and is so much happier than I am. As he skipped back down the hall towards his room in two impressive bounds, my dad turned to me and asked, “Is that kid on drugs?”

I glance across the room and my eyes meet the second set of furniture, still stacked together in jig saw puzzle fashion, the empty closet, and the bare walls, and I try to imagine my roommate’s presence. I’ve done the usual Facebook stalking and awkward email exchange, and I’m expecting a multitalented goddess of sorts. She is a concert violinist majoring in performance in the school of music and a varsity athlete. In a moment of pre-move-in psychosis I did a little digging on Google and found a satellite image of her house and her track and field records dating all the way back to middle school. I haven’t even met her yet, but I can tell you how far she could throw the javelin in seventh grade. It is clear from day one that I won’t be winning any popularity contests in [room].

You know that feeling you get when you're on an airplane and everything is going fine, but the closer you get to the landing, the faster you appear to be going and the more out of control everything seems? This is how I feel. It's like I've been coasting at cruising altitude for [years] and suddenly I'm that person who is gripping the armrest with white knuckles and frantically asking the passenger next to me if the plane usually makes noises like this. The thing is you don't realize how fast you're moving until you can see the tarmac beneath you.

Searching for something, anything, to make it appear to my parents as if there is still work to be done, and in turn, still reason for them to stick around, I take an envelope out of my desk drawer—pictures from home. I spread out the carefully selected photos across the top of my dresser and, one by one, start adhering them to the cold but smooth white walls.

I have this idea in my head, that if I hang up pictures of my friends, my homesickness will somehow disappear—as if putting up images of home will magically make things better. My dad can't understand it.

“Mom and I have to leave. You have a year to put up pictures,” he insists.

“Can you not just wait one more minute?” I don't mean to be, but I'm yelling. “All I want is for you to stand here while I put these pictures on my wall.”

To me, this seems to be a perfectly reasonable request. My dad, clearly not following my logic but realizing now how completely serious I am, sighs, turns his back to the room, rests his hands on the windowsill, and looks out across the street. Frat boys blasting “Party in the USA” are huddled around a keg on the lawn of the senior house directly opposite my

window. It's 11:00 in the morning on a weekday. He shakes his head. I turn my attention back to the pictures spread out in front of me.

I run my fingers over the satin surfaces of the printed images, trying to slip back into the past, if only momentarily.

Me and my sister, on horseback, in [State] a few summers ago. I've dropped my reins and they've fallen to one side of the horse's neck. I am looking back over my shoulder, laughing, with my hair in a loose braid. I'm wearing a white tank top and my favorite pair of jeans. She's looking at me and laughing too, standing in her stirrups, the reins pulled tight, her horse's neck thrown back in an exaggerated display of resistance.

My five best friends at prom senior year. We took our pictures at the azalea garden at the art museum. We called our group of friends "the Sexy Six." We had no shame—we both chose our name and expected others to call us by it. The picture is painful posed, our smiles entirely manufactured. Hair carefully tied back, our makeup painted with an artist's perfection, dresses chosen only after hours in the Nordstrom's dressing room. How hard we tried, how desperate we were to have this moment be perfect is evidence of our fear that this was our last chance to get it right.

My two dogs. I'm sitting out on the lawn at our house in the [Mountains]. Our border collie is sprawled out on my left, his age showing, head placed in my lap. One of my hands rests on his shoulder, the other clutches a wet tennis ball. Our golden retriever sits to

my right, patiently but eagerly waiting for me to throw the ball. I can tell the picture was taken at the end of the summer because of light brown freckles spotted across my cheeks.

My soccer team from senior year. We're standing out on the field together after losing the championship game in a shootout to [School]. The grass slick from a light, gray rain that started to fall somewhere around minute seventy. Strands of hair escaped from my ponytail and pre-wrap, and I can't tell if it is sweat or water that keeps them stuck to my face. Our white [uniforms] are covered in grass stains and soil. We are soaking wet, dirty, exhausted, and defeated, but we are happy.

When I look up my mom is standing in the doorway, eyes glossy with the beginnings of tears. My dad is still staring out the window at the fraternity brothers across the street, maybe trying to memorize their faces in the case of trouble, maybe jealous of them, but probably just trying to distract himself from the inevitable goodbye. They have a plane to catch.

I see my dad glance down at his watch as he turns his attention back to the room. He looks tired. The twelve o'clock sunlight coming in from window behind him turns his few grey hairs silver. I think maybe he just looks older. When he starts to talk I realize there is nothing more I can do to make them stay any longer. He says all the things that dads are supposed to say when they drop their daughters off at college—that I should be careful, that he loves me, that he'll see me soon, that time will fly by, that in a few days I won't even want to come home. I don't believe him.

There is this line in that stupid Owl City song that says, “I’m weird cause I hate goodbyes/got misty eyed as I said farewell.” Except it’s not weird to hate goodbyes. Everyone hates goodbyes. I’m pretty sure you’re weird if you *don’t* hate goodbyes. The last thing I need as I say goodbye to my parents is some stupid electronic-disco-Christian-pop-band telling me that there is something wrong with me because I’m not overjoyed at the thought of leaving the two people who I love most. I contemplate going down the hall and breaking the stereo system.

Instead, I do something far worse. [He] probably would have immediately and graciously forgiven me for a broken speaker or two, but my mother will probably never forgive me for what I said next.

Fighting off inevitable tears, I look her in the eyes and say, “If you loved me, you wouldn’t leave me.” I am sure that she is trying to torture me. I promise myself that when I have kids I will never put them through this. I know that my best friends are doing the same thing right now somewhere else—[Cities]—they are unpacking boxes, they are saying goodbye, too. Maybe somewhere down the line I’ll look back on these five minutes and they won’t seem like the end of the world. But for now, rite of passage, maturation, independence, it means nothing. I don’t see any reason why my mom can’t cancel her flight and book a hotel in [City] for the next four years. Of course, in this moment, all reason has escaped me.

She starts to sob. I see the tarmac rushing by. I try to make sense of it, but the shapes won’t come together. I am unable piece together memories, so instead I struggle to hold on to fragments, snapshots, like the pictures on my wall.