

Wilderness House Literary Review 18/2

Barlow Crassmont

Roommate (Un)Wanted

Elodie's text would've been bewildering even if I didn't receive it in the middle of the night.

Can you spot me \$20? I'm outside.

It was below zero, our front steps were likely covered with a thin sheet of ice, and the frigid air was bound to make my eyeballs freeze solid in my half-conscious state. By the time I trekked through the crunchy snow, the cab driver's obscenities were spewed in a thick Eastern European accent, the mist from his mouth a visual manifestation of his anger.

I didn't have enough to pay the fare, Elodie said. Also, I threw up in his back seat.

If only that had been the first time I came to her aid. She was often unable to afford the weekly groceries, and I had to dip into my savings to cover her. For three straight months, she was late with her half of the bills, and we had to go without electricity for a few days until I straightened it out (have you tried living without wifi? It's no picnic). And let's not forget the countless concerts we attended on my dime, all which she promised to repay with "her next salary" (I'm still waiting).

But there were plenty of good memories, too. Elodie made the best couch-ready popcorn, and her ability to break down a movie was second to none. She was in the minority to criticize the universally adored *Top Gun:Maverick*.

It was well made, sure, but where's the story? Not even Tom Cruise can save a mediocre script.

During summer, she knew the best beach spots, where the water was purest, people were fewest, and the scattered trash on the sand minimal. Being an excellent swimmer, she saved me from a certain drowning one hot day in July, when an unexpected cramp nearly caused my premature demise in the wavy depths of Lake Michigan.

You should drink more fluids during the day, she said. Cramps are usually caused by dehydration. Elodie never told anyone of the incident, sparing me the unnecessary embarrassment. I owed her in more ways than one.

When we camped at Starved Rock National Park in late October, her skills at assembling and taking apart a tent were so impressive that the Forest Rangers sought their advice in such matters. Afterwards, we smoked a joint and drank cheap beer over a warm fire, all the while giggling like schoolgirls under the striking starry sky, unimpeded by light pollution typically prevalent in a big city.

You are the best friend a girl could have, she told me. I reciprocated the compliment, and we hugged as happy tears welled in our blood shot eyes.

But no good time lasts forever. Elodie's irresponsible spending (several pairs of shoes too many, daily take-out meals, too many visits to the bars on the weekends) eventually caught up to her. Down to her last time, her constant tardiness with the rent created a rift that I could no longer repair.

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If I keep covering you, I'll go broke fairly soon, I told her. Who will help us then?

With a heavy heart, I suggested she move out and find a studio of her own, and that she'd needn't worry about repaying me any old debts. Her genuine apology was accompanied by a poignant bawling session. At length I joined her, and we sobbed together for hours, until the last tear was shed.

Today, I share my two bedroom Ukrainian Village unit with Taegan, an up-and-coming intern of a downtown ad agency. An ambitious young woman, she religiously follows a regular schedule of morning workouts and yoga, adheres to a strict vegan diet of grains, nuts and fruits (she nearly bit my head off when I mistakenly poured some of her granola into my bowl without asking), and binge watches Hillary Clinton's *Gutsy* like it's the holy manual for the modern American woman. If only she'd show the same interest in *Ted Lasso*, we might actually begin to bond.

Saturday night's visit by Gary and Joanne had us drinking wine late into the night, and reminiscing about time of yore. Occasionally our volume exceeded that which Taegan deemed appropriate, and she wasn't shy to let us know.

Can you please keep it down? she cried through the narrow opening of her bedroom. *Some of us have to be up early, even on weekends.* The ensuing slamming of the door encapsulated her mood more than her words, and the resulting awkwardness stung so potently that my favorite couple never visited me again, even after several pleas. Now my weekends consist mostly of solitude, for my roommate is as distant as the moon that hasn't been visible since Elodie left.

Movie nights no longer have the same feel, not without a familiar insightful banter. And the summers have become just another season, far removed from the fond memories of cocktails at beach bars and the pleasant smell of sunblock. It all passess too quickly these days, but simultaneously with a contradictory slow, laggish strut.

When autumn leaves turn brown, and I long for sleepless nights under the country stars, I picture her face, and smile endlessly while reminiscing about the laughs we shared. Yet the thought of the grief my parting words caused her leaves me bitter; I'm unable to hold back the tears on the train ride home.

At length, I'm laid off from the publishing house where I worked, my company's financial losses turning the lives of six of its employees upside down. Unless I find another gig soon, next month's rent will be hard to come by. Taegan said she's unable to cover me, so if I have any family or close friends, now's the time to contact them. She seems as keen in helping me as she is in consuming gluten. If Elodie knew my current predicament, she'd surely flash an ironic smile.

If only I could share this misery with her.