PERSONAL ESSAY

Love letter to L-Dub: In defense of beautiful misery

// BY ERIN MUSE



ILLUSTRATION BY JOYCE KIM

I think we need to break up.

I've spent the last six weeks defending him to my friends. I've overlooked his flaws, lowered my expectations and insisted that what we have is something they simply wouldn't understand.

But lately, I've been wondering whether love is supposed to be this uncomfortable.

He never gives me space. His personal hygiene leaves much to be desired. He makes disturbing noises at all hours of the night, and he's been seeing other girls. And guys. Lots of them. I've tried setting boundaries, but he doesn't seem to understand the concept.

My friends tell me I deserve better. That there are others out there with more to offer. More space. Better amenities. Functional plumbing. And the worst part is, I know they're right. But every time I come home, I remember why I've stayed.

His name is Lanman Wright Hall. And unfortunately, I think I'm in love.

I realize how this sounds. I consider myself a reasonably rational person, capable of recognizing a red flag when I see one. And yet I've developed an inexplicable attachment to a building that seems determined to make itself unlovable.

But perhaps this shouldn't surprise me. Human beings have always had a weakness for beautiful tragedies.

We write poetry about heartbreak, make art out of grief and spend an astonishing amount of time romanticizing people who were objectively terrible for us. We have entire literary traditions dedicated to the proposition that love is most meaningful when it hurts. Romeo and Juliet might have benefited from better communication, but I suspect Shakespeare would have struggled to fill five acts with a healthy relationship.

Perhaps there's something irresistible about love that requires suffering. We like our devotion tested, our affection hard-won and our happy endings preceded by an appropriate amount of misery.

Which brings me back to L-Dub.

I've begun to regard my top bunk as an exercise in humility. The lack of personal space has become an opportunity for intimacy. The building's inability to accommodate its residents has somehow become evidence of its extraordinary community. I've taken the very things that should make me resent this place and turned them into reasons to adore it. I'm not entirely sure when this happened. I'm even less sure whether it's a good thing.

Apparently, I'm not the only one who has developed this peculiar talent for making poetry out of misery. Teague Shamleffer '30, for instance, has managed to find romance in the bunk beds.

"You have your whole life to sleep by yourself," he told me. "Why not sleep with someone else for a year?"

I had never considered the inability to sit upright in bed a fleeting privilege, but apparently I've been approaching the situation with insufficient imagination.

There's something almost admirable about our collective ability to rebrand inconvenience as intimacy. We've taken a housing assignment none of us chose and transformed it into a philosophy of living. Privacy is overrated. Comfort breeds complacency. A little suffering builds character. At this rate, I expect someone to suggest that the plumbing is an exercise in spiritual purification.

But there's something unsettling about how easily we do this.

I've watched people defend relationships they would have begged their friends to leave. I've heard exhaustion described as ambition, loneliness as independence and emotional unavailability as mystery. We're remarkably skilled at transforming things that make us miserable into things we insist are worth keeping.

Perhaps it's easier to call something beautiful than to admit we wish it had been different.

Nathaniel Hochman '30, a Saybrook first year, seems to have avoided this particular crisis of interpretation. He contrasted L-Dub's cramped rooms and alleged rat problems with Durfee Hall's spacious singles and high ceilings.

I found his assessment both reasonable and deeply offensive. It was one thing for me to complain about L-Dub. It was quite another for someone with adequate square footage to agree with me.

Therein lies the problem. I knew Hochman was right, at least about the rooms. There are objectively better places to live. But somehow, my attachment to L-Dub has become so entangled with my sense of belonging that his criticizing the building felt almost like criticizing me.

I wondered whether this was how people ended up staying in relationships long after they stopped making them happy. Whether, after defending something for long enough, we begin to confuse the effort we've invested with evidence that it was worth the effort.

But I couldn't quite bring myself to dismiss my affection for L-Dub as another exercise in self-deception.

Aryan Hernandez '30 described L-Dub's courtyard as "always buzzing with life and love." It was a generous assessment of a place that has witnessed its fair share of questionable decisions, but I knew what he meant.

I thought about the bench outside, where I'd once sat having a particularly miserable night while my friends brought me water, Gatorade, a hair tie and entirely too much compassion. The same bench where relationships had begun and ended, where students studied for midterms and nervously opened their grades, where the highest highs and lowest lows of our first six weeks at Yale had unfolded.

There was nothing particularly poetic about throwing up on a bench. I would have preferred not to do it. But there was something beautiful about what happened around me. And perhaps that's the distinction I'd been missing.

The misery hadn't made the moment meaningful. The kindness had. My friends didn't need a cramped dorm to become good friends, and I certainly didn't need to be throwing up to appreciate them. But those were the circumstances in which the memory was made, and now I couldn't separate the place from the people who had made it feel like home.

Maybe that's why we're so drawn to beautiful tragedies. Not because suffering is inherently romantic, but because we're capable of finding something worth loving in the middle of it. We take experiences we never would have chosen, search them for meaning and turn whatever we find into stories we can bear to tell. The trouble comes when we begin to mistake the suffering as the source of the beauty.

We become so determined to find meaning in hardship that we forget the good might have existed without it. We treat discomfort as a prerequisite for intimacy, sacrifice as proof of devotion and endurance as evidence of love.

And perhaps nowhere is this more apparent than at Yale, where sleepless nights are practically a competitive sport and suffering has a remarkable tendency to masquerade as achievement. We romanticize exhaustion, glorify overcommitment and congratulate ourselves for surviving circumstances we might have been better off avoiding altogether.

I don't think there's anything noble about inadequate plumbing. I don't think my top bunk is making me a better person. And I certainly don't think the friendships I've formed would be any less meaningful if we'd had a little more room in which to form them.

But that doesn't make my affection for L-Dub any less real. There's a strange tenderness in the way we've made this place our own. We've turned inconveniences into inside jokes, complaints into traditions and a building none of us chose into one we're fiercely reluctant to leave. Maybe that's the trouble with beautiful misery. Sometimes the beauty is real, even when the misery is unnecessary.

I started this thinking we needed to break up. Unfortunately, I think we're getting serious.

Contact **ERIN MUSE** *at erin.muse@yale.edu.*

WEEKEND RECOMMENDS:

RAKING LEAVES