

CULTURE

A defense of the dorm

 // BY HANNAH ROLLER

Written across the door to my dorm is a message in green marker. I first noticed it back in the early days of first semester, when we used to keep the door locked, and I consequently spent a lot of time fumbling with the key. It reads “ANGELA, YOUR DAD CALLED HE WANTS” and then becomes illegible. The words are faint, faded by both time and cleaning supplies. You really only notice them in the right light. Reading them triggers fleeting echoes of some other time and person, a bit like déjà vu. Facing the front of my door, staring at the words, I wonder if it’s possible that I am standing exactly where the person writing it did.

The college dorm, while occasionally glamorized on television, has an incredibly negative connotation. It’s known for being cramped, hot, dirty and maybe even mouse-infested. Often, from the second you move in, moving out is framed as the light at the end of the tunnel, reflecting off of the shiny new apartment or house or wherever it is that’s next. The dorm, and one’s confinement to it, is itchy, too easily outgrown and — if you have a roommate — overcrowded. None of these stereotypes are necessarily untrue. The dorm is certainly not glamorous, but too often it is reduced to this singular part of its identity.

Like many college students, I’ve lived in the same room in the same house my entire life. Back in August, it was hard to imagine that the lofted twin XL bed, brown desks and dresser with a hopelessly broken top drawer could ever truly feel like home. Yet, while “home” may feel like a stretch sometimes, the dorm, in particular the first year dorm, does take on a certain and undeniable role in the college experience.

If the childhood home is what helps you grow into a person, then the dorm is what helps you grow into yourself. For most, it’s the first space where you are allowed to be intentional. The first space where it is your decision how often to do laundry, whether to keep it messy or clean, social or quiet. In my Lawrence dorm, for example, I keep my shoes by our “back” door and sticky notes

from my parents on the wall. I shove my laundry under the bed and have tea mugs borrowed from the dining hall stacked on the top shelf. My desk is immaculate, but the drawer is almost nonfunctional with the amount of random objects crammed inside. We like the windows open when the weather is warm but lived off of the tiny Yale-supplied space heater when the months got cold.

In the very beginning of college, the dorm is one’s only space in an entirely new and incredibly overwhelming world. During the mad haze of orientation week, it becomes a haven, a consistent place of return even as college begins its work of altering the student. The dorm watches your friendships develop from slightly awkward, common-room couch “tell-me-what-you’re-majoring-in” chats to movie nights under your covers. It holds the exhaustion, excitement, pregames, notebooks, insomnia, late nights, meltdowns, phone calls home, snow days and ever overflowing laundry baskets. Without wavering, it holds it all.

Dorming at Yale is by no means standardized. The more modern colleges, Pauli Murray and Benjamin Franklin, are often more spacious. For this, one might prefer them to the cramped and old halls of Old Campus. Yet the dorms on Old Campus, with their variety of bed configurations, in-suite bathrooms and room sizes, have a specific charm. Living in the history, walking and then cutting through the same uneven stone paths,



ILLUSTRATION BY JANE CALLANAN

using the same hall abbreviations, gives one a sense of unity with the thousands of students the gates have held before.

At Yale, the dorm acts as a thread. I will never know Angela, or who wrote the message from her dad on my door. I do know, however, that my footprints are layered on top of hers on the floor of our shared room. The dorm, with all of its faults and inconveniences, has a timeless ability to act as a branching point from which one establishes who and how they want to be, at Yale and the world beyond. In many ways, dorm life can live up to its reputation, but at the same time it’s indispensable to the becoming of the college experience.

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PERSONAL ESSAY

Packing for Yale

 // BY LEONARDO CHUNG

I remember when I packed for Yale. I was seated between two open suitcases that looked smaller than I had expected, and I began to throw in what seemed most important to me. Black T-shirts. Four pairs of GU jeans. Cling-wrapped stacks of blank notebooks. A mug wrapped in a T-shirt. I also added things at the last minute, like a book I hadn’t opened in months, just in case I felt unprepared later on.

A week later, it was move-in day. I carried everything up in two trips to my room in Franklin, my hands stinging from the plastic grips of my storage bins. By the time I moved everything, I had sweat through my emergency-purchase hoodie from the airport. A slight scent of Clorox wipes filled the room. My parents hovered awkwardly as I rummaged through

drawers and pretended to know I had a plan of where to put everything.

After my parents left, I stood in my room for a minute without engaging in anything productive. One suitcase was still half-zipped on the floor, and my desk lamp began to tilt to one side. I could still hear people in the hallway introducing themselves, chuckling in the effortful way people do when trying not to seem nervous. I remember sitting at the edge of my bed and thinking, “So this must be it. This is where I live now.”

The first weeks went by in pieces of monotony. Every day, I mingled with other first years at events and forgot their names only seconds later. There is no graceful way — I realized — to enter a dining hall alone when everyone is already

eating with someone else. I kept waiting for a clear transformation. I expected the version of myself who went to Yale to appear fully formed, but it never happened.

What surprised me was not that Yale was difficult, but the type of difficulty. I expected the work to be hard, and it was. The average Yalee spends a great deal of their time reading, writing, solving problem sets, reviewing for tests, staying up late and learning how many assignments you can fit into a week. The stranger part was the challenges that came from smaller things. I wasn’t anticipating the experiences of having to introduce yourself again and again until your own biography became rehearsed, or trying to act natural in spaces that made you deeply self-conscious.

They say that repetition builds confidence. And yes, the life of Yale slowly began accumulating by repetition. I took the same routes to class, sat in the same chairs in Bass, and ordered the same items at Steep every day. Soon enough, I felt adjusted.

Only six weeks remain in my first year. It feels impossible that time has passed by so quickly. It feels as if Fall Fest was just last month. Clearly, I had packed some things — the notebooks, the mug — because I thought they would help me feel like myself. I did not know at the time that the more difficult task would be letting myself change without feeling like I was formally entering a Yale transformation.

This year has been a gradual rearranging. A life unpacked in increments. Some things have stayed where I put them initially, and other things had to be moved around in order to make sense. And now, with the end of the year coming into view, I keep thinking back to those two open suitcases on my bedroom floor and how impossible it felt to prepare for a life in a place I had never been, well, since Bulldog Days. I was right, in a way. I could not prepare for it. I could only arrive over and over again until the campus and life began to feel like things I now inhabited.

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ILLUSTRATION BY CLARIS SHIN

WEEKEND RECOMMENDS:

OPENING YOUR CURTAINS FOR THE FIRST TIME SINCE OCTOBER