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## Roommate

"Tuus, O regina, quid optes explorare labor..."

A storm of laughter hauled me away from the Latin lines of Aeneid. Someone must have told a joke in the suite commons. The sounds always wormed their way into my room from the two-inch gap below the sound-proof-less door.

Just ignore them, only five more lines to translate. I sighed and dove again into this ancient Latin epic poem.

"...' and it is my task to perform your command,' says Aeolus to Juno..."

I first met her on August 9th, 2018, the day of international boarders' move-in. She had just made her bed in the room in which we would be living together for a year. Unlike my bedsheets brought from home, hers was bought in Walmart. It was much easier to put on than mine: just wrap it around the mat and the elastic bands will hold the bedsheet in place.

"That was so smart," I thought, staring at that novelty with curious eyes.

For the rest of the year, my roommate was what I believed to be truly excellent. Her grades were good (all As, I assume); she exercised every day in the gym; she made friends with people from every grade level. While I was struggling to understand our ninth-grade classmates' discussions on pop culture and hesitating to download Instagram, she was already Snapping with a junior. I admired her joyfulness, her maturity, and her willingness to expand her friend circle. I wondered if I could be like her.

But of course, she was not like me. I liked heavy-flavored food while she liked sweets. I loved MOBA games while she preferred first-person shooting games. I was only one of her friends, not even the closest. "Roommates cannot be close friends." She once announced it in front of me. When I went back to my room during breaks, she was socializing outside the library. It wasn't a surprise when she was invited by friends to stay over for Thanksgiving, while I had to ask around for a host family.

Still, I admired her. I participated in more activities. I stayed in the library. I spent more time outside my room. Little by little, I was influenced by her to fit into the American culture.

When the dorm parents asked us to say one thing that we were thankful for before the Thanksgiving break, I said, "I am thankful for my roommate, Mary."

I came out of my room and headed to the bathroom. It was almost 11 pm and my roommate and her friend were still talking in the commons. As long as they didn't get too loud, I thought to myself, the current volume was fine. The 15-foot-ceiling in our dorm amplified every whisper right through the walls as if no barriers existed between the rooms and the hallways.

My foot landed an inch away from the edge of a laundry basket. I took a deep breath.

"Mary, can you take this back to your room?"

The same request was repeated for four nights. I already ignored the trash bag of her clothes next to her door. Maybe one day, the cleaning lady would accidentally throw it away. Maybe a cockroach would accidentally wander into it. Maybe I can drop a spider...No way! Shame on you for holding such evil thoughts in your mind!

She laughed, as her eyes drifted down towards her lap. Next to her, her friend seemed amused. Great, now my roommate was really embarrassed, and that will force her to clean it up.

"Yea, I'll deal with that later tonight."

Tonight? Did she say tonight? My satisfaction could barely hide behind my mask. "Alright then."

It was the second student concert of the Spring Semester in tenth-grade. Having successfully performed a Chinese song at the previous concert, my roommate decided to do it again. This time, she signed up for two songs.

A guy friend of ours would play the guitar for both songs and I would play the drums for the second song. Knowing the song well—or, as she believed to be well—my roommate did not practice with us until the day before the concert. Then we found that the original song was too low, the drums were too loud, there were controversies on where to enter for the second verse, etc. We had not arrived at a satisfactory run before the concert, so we gave ourselves over to luck.

The first song had to start over again because the guitarist forgot to tune up. Then it was okay and the audience swayed with the music. They received plenty of cheers before I joined them, confidently believing that fate was on our side.

I was so wrong. The main difference between a string instrument and a percussion is that the percussion instrument is much louder. I set the tempo of the piece, and unlike the guitar, I can't try to fit with the singer all the time.

The guitar was not in tune. The vocal did not come in after the interlude. She was on the wrong verse. She stopped the guitarist and they started arguing about chords. She waved and laughed awkwardly and hurried offstage, not even halfway through.

I sat in the back, played drums, stopped when the two people in front of me stopped, and followed them off when they started leaving. The light was so bright on stage that the audience blurred into a vague color patch and I couldn't tell their expressions. Were they discontent? Bored? Or amused that we just performed such a semi-finished song in front of the whole school?

And then I remembered my roommate only decided to do a song two days before the previous concert. We practiced for almost two hours together and still weren't all in sync during the concert. We had already used up our luck, yet were still placing our hope on a fluke.

But I had practiced! I had practiced drums every day since I requested to accompany my roommate. And I carried out my parts fluently on stage. I had fulfilled my responsibilities.

From that day on, I stopped admiring her.

We used to share a double room together for ninth and tenth grade. Our clothes were neatly stored in the drawers or hung on the racks. I would remind my roommate to make her bed, and she would urge me to take showers every day. Once in a while, we would sweep the floor and wipe off the dust on surfaces, doing it out of an instinct for cleanliness. Our room was always the cleanest and the tidiest in the dorm.

In eleventh grade, we started living in a three-room suite, and the scene changed. My roommate's books, sometimes laundry as well, lay idly on the armchairs and the small tables; her grocery bags were left unattended on the couch, and an unpacked container of her stuff hid at a blind spot on the corner of the commons. Our commons were often on the notes of dorm parents, but they knew not all of us were the source of the mess.

As the year progressed, my roommate spent most of her time in another suite down the hallway. She would eat, do homework, and even sleep over there, bringing her habits along the way. It has become common to find unfinished food on that suite's table.

When I witnessed the leftover food on the table for the fourth time, my friend in that other suite sighed, "She is sometimes...a little selfish."

I couldn't agree more.

Finally, with the help of dorm parents, my roommate moved into an empty room in that suite. But she didn't really "move out" of ours. Her things were spread out in both suites, with a third of them in the two common areas, and she would walk across the entire hallway to our suite to take a shower. The other suite complained that she kept her room clean by leaving things outside. All I knew was on the last few days of school, two dorm parents helped her to pack everything scattered around the two rooms, suite commons, and bathrooms.

A few days after, one night after study hall, I found my roommate's eighth-grade friend in our commons, quietly doing her work. The host's room was ajar and she was nowhere in sight.

I was about to ask her friend how her homework went, but she shushed me and explained in a restrained volume that my roommate was doing her homework, that she wanted absolute silence...

"Carla, can you be quiet?" an annoyed voice rushed out of the half-opened door. I narrowed my eyes. It was 10:00 pm, far past study hall, so she should learn to endure some noises. Yeah, how about more chatting, laughing will be even better.

Her friend tried to explain to the not-even-closed door that this level of sound should be bearable and received an even more irritated reply, "If you want to stay in my suite, follow my rules!"

"Ha! Should have told you guys this a month ago!" I smirked painfully. If only I dared to open my doors and tell them to shut up during study hall or after 11 pm. I could also keep my door open so that they would consciously control their volume. Maybe I could fake anger, maybe I could just yell...

Except that I can't. I would rather endure things or solve them from my side than ask others to do a favor for me,

let alone ordering them to do so. I'm not like her.

Maybe it's a good thing not to be her.

I still can't understand how it becomes this way, that I not only stop admiring her characteristics but also start to dislike certain traits. Has my roommate changed over these three years? Or, has my perspective changed? Maybe I am taking things personally. Maybe the shift from a once-esteemed figure amplifies my detesting of her flaws. Maybe I valued responsibility and respect too heavily. Or maybe, I used to believe that we are similar, and I hate seeing myself treading the same path.

But I do not hate her. I still enjoy her joyfulness and her energy. I still appreciate her popularity. But in these instances, I can still see the negative side of her lurking in the dark, evoking memories of the concert, the room... Immediately my smile freezes on my face.

I don't know the answer. I doubt that our friendship can return to two years ago. And I don't know if a friend of mine is similarly bothered by my personality defects.

But one thing I know: my roommate did take back the basket of laundry that night.