

The Roommate

It was 6:35 am on a Monday and Maggie Orfield already disliked her new roommate. For starters, she was a spoiled brat. Her simple beige sweater and baggy jeans might've fooled your average Wisconsin male into thinking she shopped at Walmart, but not Maggie. Maggie *actually* shopped at Walmart. She knew those weren't Walmart jeans—they were rich person jeans imitating Walmart jeans. This was worse than just wearing obviously nicer jeans, because if said average Wisconsin male were looking at Maggie in her Walmart jeans and her roommate in her rich-person jeans, he would think that her roommate had a nice fat ass while Maggie had a rumped, weird ass. Fact: rich person jeans always made your ass look nice.

Her new roommate was also short and pale, like Maggie. This would have normally been inconsequential— had her new roommate not had a cute button nose. Maggie had a bald eagle nose, meaning that if your average Wisconsin male were to meet them, he would automatically classify Maggie as the uglier version of her roommate. Not that Maggie cared what average Wisconsin males cared about. Sometimes it's just useful to have a benchmark.

And as if these two reasons weren't enough to that her, her new roommate had also parked her in.

“Hiiii,” Maggie said, putting on her most insidious smile. “I’m Maggie. So nice to meet you!”

“Mom, put that down!” her new roommate shouted. “It’s too heavy!”

“Hi—” Maggie started, but the girl ran outside to help her mom carry a huge oak desk, forcing Maggie to follow her like a little dog. She tapped her roommate’s shoulder. “Hello, I’m—”

The new roommate jumped, screaming. The desk fell with a bang on the mom’s toe, who also screamed and began clutching at her foot.

“Jesus Christ you scared me. Who are you?”

“I’m Maggie, your new—”

“Ohhh, you’re Maggie. We’ve texted. I’m Lydia, obviously. Nice to meet you. Mother, how’s that toe?” The mom mumbled some curses and hopped away to the front steps.

“She’s going to sit this one out,” Lydia said. “Mind helping me move this desk?”

Maggie stiffened. The *nerve* of this girl.

“Actually, I need to go to work. I was going to ask if you minded moving your truck?”

Lydia stood up from attempting to lift the desk and wiped her forehead. Up close, Lydia saw that she had deep bags, frazzled hair, and two huge pit stains on her nice sweater. Maggie a seed of sympathy for the girl. She probably drove here through the night.

“I thought you said in our texts that you worked at Memorial Library.” The sympathy vanished. Maggie detected an accusatory tone in Lydia’s voice.

“I do.”

“That’s ten minutes from here.”

“And?”

“It’s 6:30.”

“Well, closer to 7 now.”

“Right,” Lydia said, drawing out the word like she was teaching it to a kindergartener. “I just thought that they didn’t open til 9. That’s why my mother and I are moving in so early.”

“OK?” Maggie said, crossing her arms. These pointless questions were making her even more late.

“Well can you order an Uber or something? It’s just that it took like, half an hour to get the truck where it is now.”

Maggie blinked.

“Sooo sorry,” Maggie said. “I’m already running late. I don’t want to wait for an Uber.” Maggie gave the most disingenuous smile she could summon. To Maggie’s delight, Lydia gave her one right back.

“My mother would pay.”

“My car works perfectly fine.”

“Great.” Lydia turned and hollered to her mom, “Maggie wants us to move the truck!” Her voice echoed in the early-morning street. A man walking a black Lab looked at them. Maggie wanted to crawl under the truck. The mom cursed loudly and spat on the sidewalk.

“Tell her to wait!” Did they not realize they were ten feet away from each other? Had they gone deaf over the drive?

“She’s being very insistent!”

“I have work!” Maggie shouted. “That’s why I’m being insistent!”

“She is extremely insistent!” Lydia shouted.

“Well tell her to wait a minute! That truck moves like it has arthritis.” Lydia shrugged her shoulders and gave Maggie a smile that could’ve cracked glass.

“She’s had a long morning,” Lydia said.

“Me too,” Maggie said, wondering if it was too soon to punch Lydia in the face. She hadn’t felt this much open hatred to another woman since high school. Judging from Lydia’s expression, the sentiment was mutual. But as they beheld each other, Maggie felt a strange kinship with Lydia. The hatred between them in that moment was so pure that she felt like she had nothing to hide. For the first time in long time, she felt seen.

The rest of Maggie’s day sucked. Her workplace, Memorial Library, was designed like a prison. The walls, floors, even the bookshelves were painted the same shade of Death-Star grey. And before you ask, Yes, Maggie liked Star Wars. She had not only seen all the movies and TV spin offs she had also read the books. Yes, she knew this attracted unwanted attention from all four corners of the mouth-breathing man world, but this was her cross to bear, and she bore it well.

Furthermore, her work actually expected her to work. Put away books, retrieve books, scan manuscripts— her entire shift. This was unacceptable. As a student worker at a student library, her job should’ve been not having a job.

And if Maggie thought that making a good first impression on her boss would’ve given her leeway in not working, that chance was ruined by Lydia making her late. Well, not technically late. Maggie arrived at work 10 minutes early. Her boss arrived 10 minutes late. But Maggie had also wanted to arrive before the library doors even opened just to say she had, and Lydia had ruined that.

The only highlight was pulling into the driveway and seeing that Lydia's U-Haul was still parked outside. Maggie and her own mom had nearly come to blows during her move-in. Being a spoiled brat, Lydia almost certainly had a shittier time of it. Maggie ran up the front steps, hoping that she could walk in right as Lydia and her mom were screaming at each other, or at the very least catch Lydia looking like even worse than she had that morning. Maggie already knew what she would do if that happened: she would slowly look Lydia up and down and say 'looks like somebody had a rough day.' There was nothing Lydia would be able to say to *that*. Maggie could almost taste her revenge.

But when Maggie opened the door Lydia and her mom were on the couch watching Gilmore Girls. Their legs were folded over each other and their hair was still wet from showering and the room smelled like pizza. They looked so happy that Maggie couldn't summon the rage to tell them that they were using her TV without asking. Instead she muttered a greeting and headed straight to her room.

Without her anger she was empty. She laid on the floor and stayed like that for hours, listening to Lydia and her mom chatting softly in the other room. Sometimes she imagined she was a Sith Lord from Star Wars— a villain trained not to feel anything but rage and sorrow. But if she were Sith she would be able to harness her negative emotions to create force-lightning and force-choke people and foresee the future. As of now, she could only harness her sorrow to stay in bed all day. Maggie stared at her room light, the emptiness in her chest swallowing her alive.

The next morning Maggie cautiously re-initiated hostile relations with Lydia. She asked if Lydia wouldn't mind taking down the posters she had put in the living room, because she had a sensitivity to loud colors. Lydia said of course she would take them down, and while they were being honest, would Maggie mind only playing music on her headphones? Lydia had a sensitivity to loud music.

Later that day, Lydia complained loudly that whoever arranged the furniture before them must have been as blind (they both knew it was Maggie). Maggie told Lydia that if she hadn't recently injured her back she would help her move the furniture (She wouldn't have. Her back was fine). Lydia said that her mom would help her, and they spent the rest of the afternoon rearranging the living room and disparaging the previous layout while Maggie read and offered bad advice from the kitchen.

School started Wednesday. It was just as horrible as Maggie thought it would be. Enormous classes, hordes of stupid freshmen, and more ugly buildings. The only silver lining was that Maggie was too busy to see Lydia until that Friday during dinner.

Maggie was scrolling through her phone at the kitchen table, waiting for the water for her Mac and cheese to boil. She glanced up and saw Lydia wearing the most ridiculous apron and chefs hat. Obviously she had to say something mean about that, but instead of responding in kind, Lydia asked her how her day was.

“Bad. Classes suck.”

“As to be expected of a public school. I could teach the classes better.”

“No, you couldn't.”

“Probably not. But I *could* design the buildings better. They look like an uncoordinated preschooler built them.”

Maggie immediately joined Lydia in shaming UW-Madison architecture. If there was one thing that Maggie was always ready for, it was a hate session. Her mom said she was a genius at it. Most connoisseurs of hate were satisfied to merely dissect the aberrations of the world, but Maggie liked to go one step further— she liked to devise unique punishments for her hated objects. For example, whoever designed Memorial Library? Consigned to spend the rest of their days in a sewer, because they clearly didn’t value natural light.

After they finished their hate session and were doing the dishes, Maggie felt slightly awkward. . She didn’t want Lydia to think that this was a bonding experience. On the contrary, their shared hatred for Madison had only cemented Maggie’s perception of Lydia as a spoiled elitist. Maggie hated the university’s brutalist architecture and huge campus. Lydia hated its brutalist architecture and the smallness of the city of Madison. Typical elitist— just because the coastal cities were big didn’t mean Madison was small, Maggie thought.

But now they were doing the dishes together, like they companionable. That had to change. Maggie was just thinking of something rude she could say when Lydia closed the dishwasher.

“Maggie, I think that we understand each other.” It was as Maggie had feared. She preemptively sneered.

“I seriously doubt that.”

“Really? I was going to say that I think I dislike you just as much as you dislike me.”

Maggie actually took a step back. Her heart felt like it was going to jump out of her chest.

“Obviously we don’t get along. And obviously that fact will never change. We’re too different. I’m upper class, sophisticated, French, and you’re just a Wisconsin bumpkin. I like the Strokes, and you like Chief Keef. I have art in my room, you have Star Wars figurines. I could go on, but I would bet my dad’s Porsche that there are a thousand more things about you that I would just be horrified to learn.”

“I have a diary of people I would like to kill.”

“Hm. Me too, actually,” Lydia squinted at Maggie. “but that’s probably an outlier. We are friendship-incompatible. This venting session we had over dinner was nice, but that is the furthest I see our relationship developing.”

“I could not agree more.”

“And that’s why I’m proposing that we be allies in finding ways not to spend time together.”

“So like, we agree to be enemies?”

“Exactly.”

“Well put er up, Lydia,” Maggie said, spitting in her hand. Lydia flinched and tried to bat her hand away. Maggie persisted. “In Wisconsin, a deal’s not a deal until we’ve spat on it.” Lydia grimaced and relented. As they were shaking hands, Maggie said, “I was joking. Nobody does this in Wisconsin.”

“You were idiot back in your village, weren’t you.”

“Better than being the city slut.”

After Lydia washed her hands in the kitchen sink she retrieved a bottle of wine from her room.

“Despite how *county* this campus is, I did notice it contains a large amount of cute boys and cute bars. What say we do something regrettable?”

“I already am.”

It was nice having somebody you didn't have to like, Maggie thought as she pounded and Lydia sipped the wine. She felt strangely liberated. To test it out, she told Lydia she looked like a teenage Hillary Clinton. Lydia said that was fine, as long as she didn't look like poorly-drawn Hentai character. Amazing. ~~When they were sufficiently plastered, they stumbled out the door google mapped their way to State Street. The walk was only ten minutes, and when they got there they had to stop and admire the hordes of revelers. For all they hated about Madison, they had to admit the people knew how to enjoy their bars.~~

Sometimes drinking was nice. It wrapped Maggie up in a warm winter coat and she could careen through the night in a ball of bliss. But sometimes it wasn't so nice. Sometimes the alcohol stripped away the rage that Maggie had carefully constructed around her heart and then there was nothing but a black hole of sorrow. It usually took a couple drinks to find out which night it would be, but after the third bar, Maggie was pretty sure tonight was the latter.

This wouldn't do. Not in this packed bar with sticky floors and the worse DJ in the world. Maggie staggered away from the man she was talking to and went to the bar, where Lydia was perched on a barstool talking to a tall man and holding her rum and coke like it was a fucking Martini.

“Hey, bitch,” she said to her. Lydia looked at her as though she were some vermin.

“Do I know you?” They had agreed to not speak to each other in this bar, or something like that, but Maggie didn’t give a shit. She tipped the rest of her drink into Lydia’s lap.

“Whoopsie” She said.

“What the HELL is wrong with you?” Lydia said, raising her shoulders and looking down at her lap, as though she could distance the rest of her body from her legs. Maggie started to laugh, but Lydia threw the rest of her rum and coke in Maggie’s face. The man Lydia was talking to guffawed. Shut the fuck up, Maggie said, and punched him in the stomach. Then something slammed into Maggie’s jaw, whipping her head sideways. Lydia was standing over her, fists balled, trembling with fury. The rest of the bar had formed a circle around them. There was a bruise forming on Maggie’s jaw. Oh, it was so on.

Still doubled over, Maggie pretended to stumble over to Lydia’s left, then swiveled and executed a perfect horse kick into Lydia’s solar plexus. The breath went out of her in a whoosh. It had been couple years since Maggie had been in the ring, but the old combinations still came to her like well-trained dogs. Already Maggie was spinning into the knee that she was going to deliver straight into Lydia’s face. But she must have been more drunk than she thought because suddenly the bar was tipping over and she was on the floor.

Maggie struggled to get up but the floor was so sticky, and Lydia had jumped on her and was raining blows down on her face. Most of punches were weak, but she got a couple good ones in and this sobered Maggie up quick. She executed a scissors take down and punched Lydia twice in the head to force her to bring her hands up, and then went in for a choke to finish the fight.

Maggie released Lydia just before she passed out, raising her hands in victory. She wasn't in Wild Jack's Cow Boy Saloon anymore, she was back in the ring, faced with an honest opponent, her mom in her corner. She looked down at Lydia, ready for more, but the look on Lydia's face froze her. It was fury, yet, but it wasn't that wasn't what was driving her. The wild way she scrambled to her feet, the unholy scream as she ran at Maggie— that was from fear.

The bouncers threw both of them out before they could resume their fight. Not that Maggie wanted to. Seeing Lydia's face made her feel small. It was no fun fighting against somebody afraid. The bouncers would've called the police but the crowd— consisting mostly of freshman boys who had been driven into a frenzy by the fight— declared Lydia and Maggie their UFC champions and insisted on escorting them back home on their shoulders. When Maggie told them they were roommates they hooted and cackled and ran them home. Depositing them on their porch, they begged them to teach them some moves. Lydia went inside. Maggie told them to fight each other like real men, and followed her.

“Hey,” Maggie said when she closed the door. Two of the freshman had followed Maggie's advice and they could hear the drunken cheers of the other freshman from outside. Lydia was standing over the kitchen sink, gulping down water. “I'm sorry.”

Lydia brushed past Maggie and shut herself in the bathroom. Maggie heard the rusty squeak of the shower being turned on.

“Hey, I said I'm sorry.” Maggie said, before realizing she was yelling Fuck, she was still drunk. “You know, you started it.”

“You punched him first!”

“Who?”

“The guy I was talking to!”

“Oh.” Maggie struggled to remember. “Yeah, he was annoying.” Then she heard a choking noise. Just under the sound of the shower. It froze Maggie’s blood— it was a sob. But not just any sob. It was a cracking and groaning of a tree falling.

“You cant just hit people!” Lydia said and Maggie couldn’t say anything. Oh god this was bad. Her head was spinning. She felt like she was going to vomit. She stumbled over to the sink and did vomit. But she could still hear Lydia’s muffled sobs from the bathroom. Pizza, Maggie thought. A good ol’ drunk Pizza would solve everything.

The oven finished pre-heating and Lydia was still in the bathroom. She was a practiced sobber, Maggie thought as she threw in the Dijjournos pizza. The sobs were barely audible over the shower. Maggie wouldn’t have noticed them had she not known what to look for.

Maggie tried to puke into the sink again but she had already thrown up all she had to offer. God, she wished she hadn’t provoked Lydia but she had been so drunk— was still drunk. Her mom always told her that her anger would get her into trouble. Maggie took out her phone to call her before getting the better of herself. She had caused the problem, and she would fix it. First things first: Gilmore Girls. Then plates for the pizza. And water, drunk people always needed water.

Once Maggie was one she collapsed on the couch. It was surprisingly comfortable, given that Lydia owned it. Rich people always had stiff couches, but sitting on this one was nice. Like sitting on a nice ass.

“What did you do?” Lydia screamed, jolting Maggie awake. All the alarms were blaring and the living room was hazy with smoke. Lydia ran to the kitchen, still soaking wet and wrapped in a towel.

“Fire,” Maggie said stupidly, rising to her feet and falling. The room was spinning and she fell onto the coffee table, but she had to get Lydia out of the house before they were burned alive. “Lydia, run!”

“Open the windows, you dumb bitch!” Lydia threw blackened saucer from the oven into sink.

“We have to get out of here,” Maggie said, seizing Lydia’s arm and dragging her to the back door

“Let go of me!” Maggie only held tighter. She had already punched Lydia in the face multiple times. She would not let her die. Finally Lydia slapped her. “It was just a burned pizza. Open some windows.”

“Oh.”

When Lydia had disabled the smoke alarm Maggie’s head cleared enough to recognize the waves of shame washing over her. Not only had she beat up Lydia, she had tried to remove her from their own house. Suddenly the two plates on the coffee table looked pathetic. The whole enemy thing was pathetic. Maggie was pathetic.

“I’m going to bed,” she announced.

“Were you watching Gilmore Girls?” Lydia said..

“Yes.”

“Well sit down. This is one of the best episodes.” It was, actually, so Maggie sat down on the far end of the couch. W

“Were you going to eat all that pizza yourself?”

“No.” By the time the episode ended Maggie had forgotten Lydia was sitting next to her.

“Want to watch another?” Lydia asked.

“Yeah.”