

Petra and Jack

“The door was always covered in stickers, sometimes streamers, too. Inside the room, on the left, there was my bed at a high captain height, with teal and white sheets. There was a map of the world above my pillow. Across the room was Mavis’ bed at the lowest possible height, with blue and orange sheets. Mavis’ side was more organized. Mine was always a mess, and my closet was overflowing. There were these ugly green walls and—”

“Burge smelled musty, almost dusty and moldy, but not like, *bad*.”

“Yeah, like a wet burnt smell.”

*When Mavis and Petra first moved in, on that sticky, chaotic Iowa morning, a summer morning when things are confusing and air clings to the body, air that hangs lingers solidifies, air that you have to swim through like a koi fish in an overgrown pond, they were struck with a slight tinge of disappointment. A summer of build-up, even four years of build-up, to simply and plainly this. This room of burnt musk and someone else’s memories. This room with peeling green paint chips, almost teasing them with the clean whiteness once painted over. This room that was not going to be a home, but merely a place.*

*As her dad hauled boxes of books and video games into the room, Petra focused on hooking the television and game console up on the new media stand she’d recently bought from Walmart. Climbing up and over the beds to reach the inconveniently placed outlets, Petra noticed the black mold building up in the window AC unit. Just submit a maintenance request, her dad had told her. But as months passed, no one came to inspect the toxic fungus.*

*As her mother stocked the new mini-fridge with pre-cooked meals, Mavis focused on instructing her father on how to lower the dorm bed to the lowest possible height. While conducting, she noticed a brackish, brown stain under the bed, right under where her head*

*would rest at night. Mavis would later complain to Petra, but never tell her parents of the blemish in fear of their disapproval.*

*The two fell asleep that night independently unsure of if what lay ahead was fruitful or fruitless. Perhaps the school work would carry out as planned, but would the change of life they were promised be what they hoped for? Petra recalled a conversation she had with Mavis while eating lunch together in the high school cafeteria for the last time. Mavis said that they were finally going to find out who they were going to be. Petra said that they were finally going to figure out what mattered.*

Petra and Jack are three years and ten blocks from the place, the time, they miss the most. They are sitting in the apartment that Jack and the Sams share, reminiscing on the times when things felt so new. It is a reflective nostalgia, but the fear is that it may sometimes cross the line of restorative nostalgia. But they know that things change. The lights are low and everyone is in the space between excitement and sleep. Sam is slipping away on the velvet green couch while Laine is sleeping on the torn-up floral couch. Petra, Jack, and the other Sam are sitting around some candles at the dinner table.

They live right on the train tracks, every half hour the freight rushing past, howling through the night, shaking the crystals hanging on the window panes and the flowers on the dinner table. Their conversation is filled with pauses, moments of silence, as they wait for the performance to end.

“It is a place that I want to go back to, but I’m also fine with the impossibility of that,” Petra explains. “It happened and that’s all that matters I suppose.”

“We are still together now,” Jack says. “Most of us are, but people keep moving, that’s good.”

The place was 2319 Burge Hall. There, Petra and Mavis moved into the room that all of their friends would call home during freshman year of college. Petra and Jack explain that Laine, the Sams, Joan, everyone, was always around. They've all been friends since elementary school, but this place made them an almost inseparable family.

"We really came together that year," Jack explained. He's sitting in his apartment now, still with, mostly, the same people. "It feels more like a memory, or like a dream. It was long enough ago where it doesn't feel like a memory in the past, but not recent enough to where you remember a lot of stuff. I just feel it"

*Jack moved into a newly constructed dormitory across the road from Petra and Mavis'. He had to pay more for room and board, but it was a sacrifice he was willing to make for the single-user bathrooms and reliable elevators. His room was filled with the smell of new construction and crisp air. He covered the grey laminate wood, shiny and clean and only moderately sticky, with a fuzzy white rug and filled the built-in shelves with business suits, bottles of Diet Coke, and his beloved collection of Catan expansion packs.*

*Jack would be living with a stranger unlike the rest of his friends that paired up with old familiars. He was optimistic though. His roommate seemed nice enough, and he knew his friends were a two minute walk away. Jack walked into the university prepared to soar and within his first few weeks at the business college it became apparent he was set to create a lasting impact on its diversity and outreach programs. He skipped dinner in the dining hall with his new roommate that night to eat out with his parents at their favorite Iowa City restaurant. That night he fell asleep wondering if Petra and Sam would be up for breakfast at the dining hall in the morning.*

“I feel like all of the years have just gone by in a flash,” Petra says while looking at Sam asleep on the velvet green couch. “We are all very different now, than when I lived in that room— it is its own pocket universe when I think about it. Yeah, I had so much more coming in life than I had ever thought.”

*You just can't stop moving, no, don't ever stop moving! Petra was teaching Sam how to play what would become the friends' most treasured video game— a first-person shooter that was only to be played in a mode that killed zombies. The others patiently waited as Sam struggled through her first round of the game and patiently waited as she struggled through many more following rounds. Nonetheless, the friends would gather in Petra and Mavis' room nearly every night to spend hours eating snacks, specifically jalapeno cheddar Cheetos and Mountain Dews, and scream at the television screen. The act resulted in many noise complaints, but the resident assistant was never around to deliver any sort of reprimand.*

*As the Sams, Petra, and Jack would lose it, Joan would sit on Petra's bed braiding Laine's hair. Mavis would curl up in bed, facing the peeling chips of paint on the wall, and zone out on her phone. All that mattered was that they were together.*

*You just can't stop writing, no, don't ever stop writing! Sam was yelling at Petra as they were each four lines and four shots into a night of a game they called “lines.” The two would stay home as the others went to the bars and sit in room 2319, passing back and forth a bottle of Smirnoff, an amber bottle filled with a mix of caffeine and propylhexedrine, and a notebook. Through the game, the two felt like they were really, finally collaborating. Sam and Petra would finish the sentences the other began to write, collaborating. The night would be filled with a series of “that's it!” and “don't be a fool, don't be pretentious” until the two would inevitably pass out in Petra's bed together.*

Petra is in her senior year of college. She has three majors (English and creative writing, film, and criminology) and she is excelling in all of them. Petra is coming to terms with some personal and familial health issues. Nonetheless, she has plans to move to Denver in June in search of a publishing career. She hopes to move with Sam and Sam's partner. She hopes that maybe they'll get more chances to write together, or even become coworkers, or at least just start skiing together again.

"If I went back to our room and saw it, I feel like I would see a very uncertain, but fun, person. It was me, and I am not separating myself from that, but I feel so different, and wiser."

*The friends celebrated Valentine's Day in Petra and Mavis' room. They got together there before heading to dinner at the Hamburg Inn No.2. Jack brought a bottle of white zinfandel and they toasted to each other's love. Petra had come down with the flu and before leaving, Jack made sure to leave her with a wet washcloth over her forehead and a fresh cup of water at her bedside. He told her he'd bring her back an order of mac and cheese.*

*When the friends returned to Petra and the room, they exchanged cards and gifts. Jack handed everyone a homemade friendship bracelet and told them he loved them. He was crying and engulfed in hugs. They all wore them until they broke off.*

Jack is juggling multiple leadership roles in organizations tied to his major while also being a very involved uncle to his nieces and nephews. He returns to his hometown almost every weekend for family dinners and to lend a hand to his brothers. This doesn't stop the urge to party in him, going out most days of the week. His signature karaoke song is, and he says always will be, "Believe" by Cher. He's hoping he can finally find a man that will treat him nicely when he moves to Chicago after school.

“I like who I am now better, but I definitely miss certain aspects. Not of who I was then, but I just miss everyone always being able to be together. A lot of times, we weren’t even talking to each other, just exhausted and hanging out, existing in the same space. You don’t realize how special it is to live with all of your best friends until they’re gone. I guess, most of all, that time taught me how to find a home in other people, even when I felt lost or confused or scared. I don’t know what to say, I’m happy and I love my friends.”