

University of Separation Anxiety
By: Paul K.

It's about ten till three on a Friday afternoon, August 12, 2005. I'm sitting on my kitchen counter, thinking.

"Three more days," I say aloud as I gaze at my surroundings.

'This is the only home I've ever known. What in the world am I about to do to myself!? Our family has lived here since I was two. That's what... sixteen years now. Damn. And this tiny little town hasn't changed one bit since we got here. Not that I can remember anyway. Poor little Congerville, it seems like you'll always be just 500 proud citizens strong. Not that there's anything wrong with that.'

'In three days, things are gonna be really different. It will start a brand new chapter in my life; one that I'm honestly pretty scared of. What if I don't like it? Who am I trying to kid? OF COURSE I'm not gonna like it!'

I've never been the kind of person who likes change. In fact, I'm that one person everyone knows who absolutely despises it. It's the only way I've ever known how to live. When I was three years old, my mom enrolled me in a summer pre-kindergarten class. I hated it so much that I cried and cried until mom pulled me out after only a week. The first day of middle school, I was terrified of my first time riding the school bus. Not because it was scary but because it was so different than walking to class everyday. Until I was a senior in high school I had never ordered anything from a Subway restaurant except the foot long ham and cheese sandwich on wheat with mayonnaise. Eighteen years, one sandwich. If it ain't broke, don't fix it.

'My fear of change isn't gonna make this easy. As if it wasn't bad enough trying to adjust to a school with an enrollment twenty times greater than the number of people in my high school and my hometown combined. Even the dorms I'll move into have just as many people as tiny Congerville. Culture shock indeed.'

'And what about this house? My family? Our memories? How am I supposed to leave it all behind for something so alien? What if I don't even like it?'

'Just look at that countertop right there. I remember being so small that I had to be careful not to poke my eye out when running around next to that edge. I did hit my forehead on it once. It hurt like hell and left a mark for a month. And the kitchen table, where we ate all our meals together as a family. I remember that time Mom forced me to eat my applesauce before I could leave the table; I must have been about eight. I was so set against it that I cried, "It has a mouth and it's gonna eat me!"'

'There are so many memories in this house. My entire life up to this point. And in three days I'll leave it all behind to make new memories in a foreign place with people I've never seen before. I don't want to leave!'



Me

My brother Brian

My dad Linus

My mom Audrey

Just then my cheeks began to feel wet as my vision blurred. I jumped down off the counter and began walking through the house. I carefully examined each nook and cranny in every room, soaking it all in. It seemed like every square foot of this house had a story; a memory that could be recalled by just looking around.

My eyes are like dripping faucets, my mind like a cracking dam.

With every step, I feel the water flowing faster.

I want to stop the water, must stop the water, can't stop the water.

Just let it flow...

"Paul? Hello? Honey, are you crying?" My mom says. My mom!?! She must have just got off work and slipped in the back door unnoticed while I was preoccupied.

"No mom." I frantically wipe my eyes and do that long drawn out sniffle to clear my runny nose.

"Is everything okay?"

"Yes mom," I say trying to make as little eye contact as possible.

"Are you sure?"

"Yes mom."

"How was your day?"

"Fine."

"Get a lot of packing done?"

"Um, yeah, packing. I'll go do that." I headed for the stairs and sprinted up them two at a time. I grabbed a Kleenex on my way and took a look at myself in the mirror. My face was beet red from embarrassment.

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I squint my eyes as they adjust to the morning light. I can barely make out the large red lights on the clock. It says 6:15. I pick up my phone from under my pillow. It reads August 15, 2005. Yep, the big day has arrived.

"This is it; don't get scared now," I mumble under my breath.

'Toothbrush? Check, Toothpaste? Check, Contact solution? Check, Razor? Check, Shaving cream? Um, shaving cream? Where did I leave th-- oh, here it is. Check.'

'I've got that terrible feeling; I'm gonna forget something I just know it!'

Move-in starts at 8 A.M. Right now it's 7:10. I'm all dressed and ready to go as Dad helps me put the finishing touches on the cargo packed in the back of the pickup. Both my parents took off a half a day to help me move. My girlfriend, Kristen, is coming with us too. She's driving over from her house and should be here any minute now.

I can feel the butterflies in my stomach. I'm pacing because I can't hold still. This is such a big deal and no one seems nervous. Why isn't anyone else scared?

Do you know what it feels like to fall off a cliff?

Do you know how it feels to drown?

To be pushed into danger out of your will,

And keep falling, down down down.

I know what it feels like to be in a car,

With three of your closest friends,

And to see them drive off over the edge,

While you fall down to your end.



Atkin-Colby Residence Halls
(photo courtesy of Illinois State University's Website)

When I walked past the sign that reads "Atkin-Colby Residence Halls" for the very first time, I remember thinking that these ten story buildings looked more like a run down Days Inn than what I imagined a dormitory would be. Going against all my good judgment, I approached the revolving doors and pushed. As I turned around and waited for the rest of my party to enter, I felt like a mother goose leading her ducklings at a distance. And as much as I hated this, I pressed on.

I stood in line with the rest of the students, trying to look cool and act like I belonged. I flashed my new ID, picked up my key, signed a bunch of papers without reading them and was handed a bunch of literature I was told to read. Evidently there was a new alcohol policy this year. How exciting.

"I have my key. It's room 768." I announced to the group as I finally made it back to where they were sitting in the lounge.

"Alright then, lets do it!" My mom said with far too much enthusiasm.

After the third trip up the elevators, we had made it with all of my belongings. Now for the tricky part: finding a place to put it all.

Kristen took over clothes detail, Mom got bedding and Dad and I moved all of the heavy stuff into place before unpacking the rest.

After about an hour and a half, my roommate Eric arrived with his mom and brother. Luckily, we were almost done organizing so they now had enough room to spread their stuff out and get it unpacked. We introduced ourselves and they all seemed like nice people. He was a Journalism major from the suburbs of Chicago, really into music and kind of loud. But most importantly, I didn't get a psycho vibe from him. Every college freshman has a moving day nightmare of being stuck with the floor psycho; I was just thankful it wouldn't be me.

'See Paul? It's not as bad as you thought. Comfortable beds, lots of space, plus a huge window with a view overlooking the entire town? AND a roommate that isn't a psycho? You just can't ask for any more than that. What were you so scared of anyway?'

'Well, none of that really helps the fact that everyone will be leaving soon. And then I will be left in my comfortable room with the great view and this person I've known for ten minutes who I hope isn't a psycho.'

"Okay Paul, we're gonna go downstairs and pull the truck up." My mom said after Eric and his family left. "When you and Kristen are ready, come on down. We'll see you there."

The door closed leaving Kristen and me sitting on the bed next to each other. I turned and looked at her. I could see the look of disappointment in her eyes.



Kristen and I – Move-in day 2005

Kristen was my high school sweetheart. I met her when we took Journalism together. What started off as just being friends blossomed into something more one night when she invited me to watch a movie at her house with some friends. From that day on,

I've been totally hooked on her. I asked her out, took her to prom and I've been with her every spare minute I've had since then.

For the first six months of our relationship we've had to overcome the hindrance of being twenty minutes away from each other. Today, our hindrance becomes a major obstacle. We will now be forty five minutes apart and because neither of us has a car, she might as well be in a different state. Needless to say, we won't be seeing each other as often as we used to.

"Well, this is it, isn't it?" I asked her.

"Yeah, the moment we've been waiting for," she replied sarcastically with a smile.

"Kristen, we can do this. We can make it through. I know we can."

"Distance makes the heart grow fonder," she said with tears in her eyes.

"You know I love you." I said as I put my arms around her and held her close.

"I love you too. We're gonna be alright. I'll come see you as much as I can."

"Please do. Please come see me."

"I will, I will." She held me with the same tenderness of a mother holding her child. I sobbed in her arms as she cried on my shoulder. We sat there holding each other for a long time, neither of us knowing the next time we would meet.

"I will always love you, more than you will ever know."

"No matter what happens, I will always love you too."

"Always and forever baby?"

"Always and forever Paul."

We sat in this sweet embrace for what felt like months; neither of us saying a word and neither of us wanting to be the first to break away. I couldn't stop crying. I was scared of being alone in this strange place and more importantly, being without the one I loved. Kristen couldn't stop crying either, for all the same reasons.

Just then the door swung wide open. Frantic scrambling! Don't look like you were crying! Conceal the position of weakness! Who is it anyway!? Oh...Eric...

"Oh! I'm sorry! I should have knocked." Eric said with an astonished look on his face.

"No it's okay," I lied, as I tried to hide my face behind a Kleenex. I was trying to get him to take the hint and leave. Kristen followed suit.

"Alright, I'll be back later," he said with a sense of embarrassment. He left the room and closed the door behind him. I looked at Kristen's red face and I knew mine had to be even worse.

"Oh man..." I said to her as I got up to leave.

Kristen and I met Mom and Dad downstairs to say our last goodbyes. There were hugs, handshakes and tears all around. They wished me good luck and told me they would only be a phone call away if I needed anything. I watched them all climb into the

truck, fire up the engine and drive away. I sat watching until they drove out of sight.
Then I hung my head, turned around and forced myself to walk back into that building.

When darkness finally came around,
I climbed into my bed,
I didn't want this time to come,
My mind was filled with dread.

I looked up at the new ceiling,
Not yet in my archive,
I've never been more scared or alone,
In all my years alive.