

Lock, Lock, Lock

Camila lounges on her oversized, sage-green couch under a crocheted blanket with her mini bong in hand, per her strict nightly routine. She regards this bong with the same affections she would a child of her own flesh and blood, the pink heart-shaped base being the focus of her admiration as she lights the bowl the same as she has every evening prior. It is at this point in her day that she felt the most at peace. The only sound to be heard in her expansive apartment is the *Full House* theme song that plays on her sleek television screen just above the crackle of her fireplace. She arises from her position with the words *Everywhere you look, there's a heart, a hand to hold onto*, and scurries to the open area between her living room and the front door. Although she typically doesn't like her granite floors due to the chilling cold feeling on her feet, they work well with her mom's fuzzy socks when she gets a running start to slide from her kitchen to her balcony. She and her therapist have been discussing the concept of allowing herself to take up space. This bizarre form of embodiment, as well as some organic and strangely modern dance moves, fill the space until the theme song is finished. Camila hits her final pose while standing in front of an ornate entryway mirror, amused by her own panting exhaustion and appreciative of her practice of free will.

Camila's apartment resides at one of the top levels of her high-rise apartment complex. The walls that line her spacious spread are a sterile white, an aesthetic Camila would typically detest. Her sense of decor and the furniture that fills the space resembles an overpriced "vintage" shop, despite the modern architecture. It was her attempt at creating a homey feel. Her entryway, living room, and kitchen all coincide in the same space, though it feels a bit empty when you look past the quirky lamps and multicolor seating. She has made good company with the staff and guards that protect the space, and she shares the 36th floor with another single woman, no men in spaces she does not hope to coexist in.

As Camila's gaze drifts from her reflection to the front door, she feels a sudden pang in her chest as her eyes become stuck to the door handle. A non-negotiable gravitational pull drags her hand to the lock, *lock, lock, lock*. She states the act out loud each time to be sure she doesn't accidentally get the locking motion wrong the first three times. She turns her body in a 180 motion to redirect her attention away from the entrance and catches herself holding her breath. "In for four, hold for two, out for six," she hears her mom's voice assure her calmly. In for four. Hold for two. Out for six.

Upon Netflix's concern for whether she was still watching after three episodes of her favorite sitcom had passed, Camila concludes that it is time to satisfy her everpresent munchies as her next nighttime festivity. A luxury she values above all other material possessions, besides her heart bong, of course, is her beloved Doordash pass. While she could survey the contents of her pantry, she would only be met with unopened boxes of dessert mixes and various types of pasta that were surely stale and would never end up in a boiling pot. Her desire to consume more than mere ingredients as her meals did not outweigh her anxious relationship with the demands of stocking and utilizing her kitchen. Hence a sum of her paycheck, though hardly detrimental to her bank balance these days, went directly into her takeout fund. Tonight's craving, a medium curly fry and large chocolate shake from Arby's, would arrive promptly thanks to a fellow named Marcus, who she always made sure to tip well.

The elevator doors separate with a gentle ding, announcing her arrival on the first floor. Before the sleek metal doors could reveal the full lobby, Camila notices that she stands directly across the grand sweeping entry from a security guard. Not one she knew from the luxury apartment staff, though, who she made sure to know individually and personally. But she knew him. In the time it took for her eyes to lock with his, all thoughts of her food, and even where she stood in space and time, dissipated. Camila regressed back into the mind and body of her twenty-year-old self. She remains with her hands securely attached to the rail that lines the back of an elevator. The walls that surround her suddenly seem to not contain a sustainable amount of oxygen for her lungs to expand, despite the doors to the lobby still remaining open.

Camila recalls the hum of her college bathroom fan as she silently spit the venom-filled words she should've said, glaring at her reflection in the mirror. She imagines the habitual instinct to lock her door and put on her noise-canceling headphones as soon as she made it to her bedroom. She remembers the vision of her ribs pressed tightly against her skin since she could not bring herself to go to the kitchen where his room was attached.

The numerous years of sentiments unleashed in a single instance appear to have lasted only a few seconds in reality, Camila only coming to her senses as the elevator doors begin to close with her still inside. The courageous lion her shrink had told her she embodies could not even move her feet from their frozen position backed up against the elevator wall. Although her vision had flown a mile a minute in her mind, it seemed down on earth she never broke eye contact with the man, and neither did he.

She breaks first, ashamedly, though the relief that comes from such a painful break is accompanied by a familiar gratitude, one that she can only tie back to the feeling of pressing her rickety door lock in the disheveled house they once shared. Through summoned strength she could only chalk up to her subconscious taking the wheel, she manages to make it from the elevator to the front desk, her focus remaining intently on her feet. She redirects her mind to pay close attention to the placement of each of her steps, directly in the middle of each wide marble tile, no danger of a crack to attend to. She has always loved the flooring in her lobby for that very reason.

In her peripheral, she predicts the ornate front desk. She looks up and sees Luca working his nightly shift, and he had already been watching her when she finally lifts her gaze. She can tell by his widened eyes and his slightly furrowed brow. He leans in ever so slightly, as he always does to offer her a sign of privacy.

“Is everything alright, Camila?” he asks.

Her head swarms in a fight or flight, considering how to escape the situation with as little consequence as possible. She sees her bag of Arby’s sitting next to Luca’s computer, though her long-vanished munchies are now replaced with a lump in her throat, making her nauseous enough to force her mouth shut in a tight line.

“You don’t look well,” Luca whispers when she does not respond, refusing to break eye contact with a very pale, suddenly dizzy Camila. Her eyes shift slightly in the direction of the security guard, and back to Luca repeatedly in a rapid motion. She hopes her previously avoidant coping skills will kick back into gear at any second to navigate her out of the lobby with ease and without suspicion. *In for four, hold for two, out for six.*

You have to say something, Camila, she demands of herself, her internal clock ticking down, working against her.

“Hi, sorry, I’m just cookin,” she chuckles, displaying the gentle, “genuine” smile she had mastered long ago. “Don’t tell Martin, okay?” she requests with a wink. Though considering the money she contributes to an already lavish establishment, the property manager would allow her to confess to snorting coke, for all he cared. Although she liked to keep up appearances, and surely she’d feel humiliated by her admitted adolescent idea of a fun Friday night later on, this felt like the most effective way to flee without follow-up. She has always had a particular knack for her charm, for calming others’ nerves when she herself was in a panic, and she could see she achieved her goal successfully as Luca silently smirked and handed her the greasy bag of fast food.

You have to present like you aren't threatened. You maintain your power if you appear unafraid. He is a sociopath, Camila, there is no benefit in arguing with reason. Stick to the facts and remain unemotional. Meet with an advocate at a shelter, they have resources for free. Keep food in your bedroom so you don't have to go to the kitchen. Please reach out to your landlord and tell him what's going on. Continue to make sure your location isn't shared on any devices. Is there anyone you can talk to who can defend you pro bono? I'm just a phone call away. Lock the door as soon as you come home. Promise me you will keep the door locked.

Somehow the distance walking back to the elevator feels longer than her walk to the front desk. Her new security guard's eyes dug into her back. The feeling was enough to force the tears that sat with anticipation in her eyes down her face. Another resident of the building appears from the elevator, prompting a fake cough that would allow her to subtly wipe her tears without her neighbor noticing. She trades places with the older man, a graying bachelor who wears an expensive-looking blazer with a pristine button-up. His presence in the space commands his importance. Camila feels small, disheveled with her still sickly skin tone and the pajamas she didn't think to change out of. She wonders if the man could be a lawyer, if maybe he could be her lawyer. It seems it only took a matter of a minute to re-enter her mentality of helplessness in need of defending, all of her work toward protecting her peace undone.

She looks across the lobby one last time before the doors close in on her. With a level of separation protecting her now, her escape plan almost complete, heat rushes to her face as she notices the height of the security guard's stature. He stands at about 6'3", almost a head or two taller than the figure who still haunts sober dreams, though few and far between. His features appear sharper, too. A more angular nose and chiseled cheekbones dictate his expression. It's not Andrew. If she squints, she can make out only four letters in the name embroidered onto his uniform.

"Going up" an animated voice from the elevator speaker announces as his expression, framed with a furrowed brow, is replaced with her flushed reflection in the metal doors.

I forget that frat bros exist

until I am in a crowded basement with
sticky floors and neon lights
a guy who looks like his name is Chad holds a
Natty Lite
watching my girlfriend
and I kiss
she and I both wear our favorite corset tops
mine pink hers black
like her pretty hair

he approaches us with a buddy
You two seem to really like each other
my girlfriend grabs my waist
pulls me away
I make a nasty face
I wonder if boys like that always watch us at parties
I forget that not everyone has a gaydar

and outside in the city streets

everyone appeared peaceful,

are they all faking it too?

It was month four

of my utter unrest,

and no one could save me.

I played my part.

I put on a smiling face

and locked my bedroom door

from the outside and in.

I forgot how to breathe

and remembered to

ask for help.

A shelter,

a legal advocate,

a hotline,

“We cannot help you”

they told me,

even though they wanted to.

It's just me

against you,

and you're winning.

I WANT TO BE AN ARTIST BUT MY BRAIN WON'T LET ME

So I rot away in my bed with a list of ideas in front of me
because all I ever do is make lists. Lists, lists, and lists,
of things I will never achieve, tasks I will never complete, challenges
I will never attempt. When repeated thoughts pile up in your head
it's only a matter of time before you no longer have control.

Do other people think like this? Like they are a victim of their own mind?
Free will is a privilege that many take for granted.
My art is an expression of who I am.

If I, being my own brain, do not allow myself
to create anything, what does that say about me?
Maybe if you can trick me into drawing a quick doodle
or writing a single page, I could overcome this.
Though the rules in this crowded echo chamber
sound like voices,

and I am nothing
if not submissive to authority.

I focused the majority of my revision work on my short story, *Lock, Lock, Lock*, as it has been my biggest pride of all the works I've written this semester. I really enjoyed being able to practice patience as a means to focus on detail. My largest point of feedback has been my tendency to overexplain emotions rather than leaving it up to the reader to decipher themselves. Following my meeting with Josh, I made it my mission to only use the backspace button for any further revisions (beyond edits I had made immediately following my workshop time). This was an anxious experience, as I oftentimes overexplain to be sure that I am getting my point across properly, so I had to use the same patience in trusting the capabilities of my story as I did with my patience for articulating details. I am really proud of how little simplifications have made the piece feel more polished, and I know with time and further reflection I will be able to make it even more concise. I went through a similar experience with my poem *I forget that frat bros exist*. I really appreciated the feedback for this piece, namely because others picked up on a slight sense of danger that even I myself had downplayed when experiencing the event firsthand. I think by taking out some unnecessary connective tissue I was able to focus more on that feeling, as it was likely the sentiment that motivated me to write the piece to begin with. I did get feedback that it was hard to follow the train of thought at times, and that it felt like there could be more order in where the focus lies. I decided not to edit this because it was intentional despite being interpreted otherwise. I wrote the piece in a way that would follow my focus as it occurred in real life, and the focus of reality is rarely ordered in a logical manner. I noticed my surroundings, then the frat bro, then turned my attention back to my girlfriend before being approached. I can see why this may be difficult to follow, but I wanted to challenge myself to keep what felt authentic to me rather than being swayed by the opinions of others. *and outside on the city streets* I decided to leave as it was because I enjoyed putting my own words to someone else's structure, to expand beyond myself, and I felt deeply connected to each line I wrote. I did decide to personalize *I WANT TO BE AN ARTIST BUT MY BRAIN WON'T LET ME* because I felt the original format actually hindered the content of the piece. Such topics felt compartmentalized and I hoped by fixing the layout to match that, the reader would experience the train of thought more similarly to how I experience it myself.