



blank slate

*3am, 4am, 5am and the first flush of sunlight rolled round.
It didn't matter. This was just a waiting room*

words *rebecca hastings*
photo *debora bottino*

Rebecca Hastings is a writer and sub-editor based in London. She also co-hosts The 2 Cents Podcast, a weekly show about millennial money. Come say hi on Instagram @rebz_hastings, where she posts far too many pictures of her cat.

On my first night away at university, I didn't sleep.

The day before, I'd cleared out my wardrobe at home, throwing most of my clothes into a heap on the floor for my younger sister to rummage through. I was, I now realise, shedding a skin. It was only when I found myself in my new bedroom, opening a flimsy Ikea wardrobe to store away the meagre essentials I'd brought with me – a checked flannel shirt, some skinny jeans, my Converse, a raincoat – that I realised my mistake. Life goes on, and this new stage of mine was right in front of me, as real as the last six years of school had been. I'd failed to prepare.

My parents had driven me down earlier that day, the car boot loaded with things like bedlinen, a pop-up laundry basket, Tupperware boxes. After they'd left, I went out and bought washing-up liquid, gloves, sponges, shower gel – feeling as grown-up and sophisticated as if I'd bought oysters and champagne. I made spaghetti and waited for my other housemates to arrive. No one did. I washed up and went to bed.

Despite having spent the day hauling boxes and bags up and down stairs, I couldn't sleep. My new bed was a double – made for two people, too big for me. I shifted from one position to another, trying to make myself fit the extra space. I felt as though I were playing dress-up, trying on

my grandmother's high heels and aprons as I used to as a toddler, comically big on my tiny body. Seagulls squawked overhead. The low-level whoosh of traffic was new to me – I'd spent my teenage years in the Irish countryside, so when you opened your bedroom window in the middle of the night and stuck your head out it was so dark and so quiet that it felt like you were in outer space – and it nested in my ears.

There was a big 24-hour supermarket across the road. If I wanted to, I could go out and see people walking around with baskets and trolleys. I could buy ice cream and magazines. If I wanted to, I could put on the purple satin minidress I'd brought with me and go to a nightclub. The thought made me dizzy. I pulled the covers round me more tightly and reached for my laptop.

The previous night, this would not have been possible. I'd grown up in a house with strict rules: no staying up too late, and definitely no laptop in my bedroom. Eighteen had felt so far away for so long, the promise of moving away for university a bright, glittering light at the end of a dragged-out stretch of grey school days. During classes, I'd stared out of the window and daydreamed, picturing myself as an entirely different person: wearing a brightly coloured coat as I walked to a lecture; sipping coffee with cream in a Parisian café on my year abroad; confidently reading out





a short story in my creative writing class, pausing for breath in all the right places.

And now, finally, I was here, and I was spending the night awake in my new bed, watching back-to-back episodes of *The Inbetweeners* and marvelling at the speed of broadband compared to the dial-up connection we had at home, the knowledge that any information I wanted was at my fingertips. 3am, 4am, 5am and the first flush of sunlight rolled round. It didn't matter – classes weren't starting yet, and there was nothing to get up for the next day. This was just a waiting room.

Soon, of course, things would become messier – my roommate would arrive in a couple of days and occupy the bed beside me, littering it with empty Lucozade bottles that I would have to gather into a bin liner

"I shifted from one position to another, trying to make myself fit"

and throw away twice a week. I would share beds here – beds with new friends, as we cemented our bonds with drunken spooning and rambling heart-to-hearts that went on all night; beds with men I had yet to meet; one morning at the end of my final year, I would wake up beside the love of my life. But as the sun came up on that warm September morning in 2010, it was just me, on the cusp of something that felt electric. All of us waiting, in our corners of the city, for the curtain to rise. ♦

