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Safety

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Lounge couches are familiar. Their heavy stable bases conform to the outline of the wood-framed glass walls surrounding the nucleus of a dorm floor. Their yielding cushions are outposts for watching everyone who comes and goes. They are also brightly lit stages showcasing those that stay behind, but they do not pass judgment. A lounge couch lends itself just as readily to watching a movie on Saturday night as it does to holding still while the world spins on Sunday morning.

I usually choose to watch a movie.

As I lie there, I watch the life slowly drain from the wings of the dorm. Its residents disappear in noisy groups out of the heavy metal fireproof doors, and the increasing silence makes an uncomfortable background for the monaural drone of the television. With the lights off during a movie the couches provide a little anonymity from the mass exodus taking place outside the lounge walls, but not from those within. We all know exactly who is left behind.

The ones that have gone are gathered outside in the cold in tight crowds around the tiny doors. They are as much trying to keep warm as they are trying to be the first to get in. Occasionally a few newcomers push their way to the front of the pack and are admitted, causing angry but half-hearted grumbles. Still, they knew the rules. Since they didn't know anyone they would have to wait with everyone else.

Slowly they are let in as others leave to look for better parties, bigger fights, or more private places. The muffled beat grows as they make their way inside, becoming a pounding boom that fills their ears and drowns their words. They are met with cursory identification checks. They flash calling cards and library cards and sometimes their expensive fake drivers' licenses, most of which can easily be recognized even in the dim light. Hands are marked with red crosses, wrists are tied with cheap plastic bands, and tickets are distributed in short strips from a giant roll on the table in front of them, traded with five dollar bills or fistfuls of ones.

"All worth the twenty-minute wait," they say to themselves. They push their way into the stream of traffic and disappear to each other. Some are headed to the crowded dance floor and others are making their way to the lines in front of the giant silver kegs and coolers full of cans, eager to use their tickets before they attempt to steal more. They had waited all week for this.

Crowded around the DJ's table they scream the names of songs and he nods his head as he ignores them. He knows that they always request the same ones even though he can't even hear them. Dancing is difficult in the strobe-lit rooms with five-foot speakers in the corners on tall stands. The wood floors are slippery with spilled beer and littered with crushed cups and mostly-empty cans. The drunken mass moves as a rhythmic bowl of amorphous gelatin cubes, bouncing and wriggling but not moving from their place in the stack.

Groups of guys stand around the edges holding their cups and cans with one hand while the other hand counts the shrinking strip of tickets in their pockets. Some of them are searching the crowd for others looking to fight. Some are watching for a beautiful face

or the undulating movements of the perfectly shaped body. Some are just building the courage to push their way onto the floor, artificially tearing down instinctual inhibitions.

Groups of girls dance together but do not look at each other. Instead their eyes wander around the crowd and past the guys along the wall meeting with some stares and ignoring others. Occasionally one will lure someone to her and she will disappear from the circle and not be seen for the rest of the night. The remaining eyes then begin their searching again, more frantically.

In the dark corners by the stairs, awkwardly on the dance floor, or crowded together on the sparse furniture, couples are entwined in their own world. Hands explore mindlessly and blindly before a disinterested but forced audience. They radiate an embarrassed heat as they share saliva, tongues frantic and desperate. Pairs leave in regular silent intervals, neither half speaking.

By the end of a movie, we usually have watched one or two of these couples return to the dorm and quickly disappear into a room. I imagine the silence as half of each couple carefully closes a door late at night and sneaks guiltily past a roommate asleep on a lounge couch or half-awake not really watching television.

Small groups trickle in throughout the movie. Some complain about not finding anyone to come home with. Others come home satisfied, expecting or wishing to be alone. They are noisy and we yell at them for it because we can't hear our movie even though it's well before quiet hours.

While we disconnect the VCR from the TV and re-connect the cable, groups of guys stumble in loudly. They laugh at each other as they run to and from the bathroom,

but don't offer to help each other clean up. They collapse noisily on the couches with giant bottles of water and yell about the phone sex commercials on TV, silenced only when threatened with write-ups. They slowly become subdued on the couches before returning to their rooms to pass out.

I return calmly to my room, sometimes after helping someone into a bunk bed or carrying them back to their room. I do not envy their confused world as I carry them remembering my night spent on the lounge couches clearly. I know that they will not be able to say the same about their night.