A Time To Pick Up

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IT WAS 6 a.m. Marce knocked the alarm clock off the nightstand as it clanged its good morning greeting. She buried her head under the pillow and tugged on her blanket. But her roommate Lisa was shaking her shoulder.

"Come on, Marce. You've got to go to work this morning. You've got just 20 minutes to catch the bus or you'll never make it by seven."

Marce's eyes squinted from beneath her pillow hide-out, adjusting to the morning sunlight. It gleamed through graceful patterns of frost on the window. Beyond it was snowing on the factory smokestacks, framed by the white outline of the Rockies.

There was no rug on the floor, so the coldness of the linoleum shocked Marce awake. She rubbed her hands together, hoping to generate heat, and pulled on her bathrobe.

She looked at the thermometer mounted outside the frosty window. Ten degrees. Down on the street, the old strings of Christmas lights still blinked as the snow plows pushed through the drifts. The snow was grayed with soot.

A Christmas tree sat in the corner of the apartment on a table that was missing a leg. The tree was only a few feet tall and was losing its needles already. A few presents, wrapped in tissue paper, were set underneath it for Christmas next week. They were mostly from home, 600 miles from Colorado.

Marce's eyes were still drooping as she shuffled into the
kitchen for a bowl of cereal. Post Toasties were all that was left to choose from, and there was no milk in the antique Frigidaire. She sat down at the kitchen table and stuffed handfuls of the dry cereal into her mouth as she stared blankly at the cracked walls.

The landlord kept promising to paint the dingy apartment. But he was more concerned with the tenants in 2B—people said they stole things but he couldn’t prove it.

Marce picked up the broom by its bristles and banged on the radiator, but the heat still wouldn’t come on. The yellow pictureless walls looked even colder than usual, and she shivered.

“Better get dressed,” Lisa said from behind the newspaper comic section. She was lounging on the frayed davenport, their only piece of comfortable furniture.

“Yah, yah, yah.” A hair roller fell out as Marce slowly bent over the clothes heaped in the corner. She pulled out her waitress uniform and brushed off the dust balls collected from the floor. “Don’t really care if it does need ironing,” she mumbled.

The wind blew fiercely, and Marce was back in bed under mounds of blankets. “I can’t get dressed—it’s too cold. Maybe I could call in sick today. Besides, I still have lots of Christmas shopping to do and it’s getting late.”

Lisa looked up. “But I called in sick for you two days ago and you need the money. Go to work.”

“Nah—they’ve got enough girls on today. They don’t need me and I just don’t want to go.”

Within seconds, the drooping eyes were sealed in sleep and the waitress uniform lay crumpled beside the bed.

A hand was shaking Marce again. “Get up! You’re going to have to drop biology if you don’t start going to class, Marce. If you hurry, you can make it over in time.”

“Ung!” Marce rolled over in bed. “No book. Can’t go to class if you don’t have the book.”

“Okay, okay. That’s the last time I’m going to try.” Her roommate slammed the door to the dorm room as she hurried off to class.
It was noon before Marce woke up. She reached for her wire-rims—too tired to put in my contacts, she thought. She tripped over a boxful of books as she got out of bed. A popcorn popper coated with greasy old maids sat on the floor next to her dresser, and clothes were stacked on the foot of her bed.

She pulled an old sweatshirt, torn at the neck, over her head to match her worn cut-offs. She ran her fingers through her straight hair to smooth it before she went downstairs for lunch.

At the table, Marce was silent. But no one else was.

“How can you sleep all day long?”
“Marce, you’ve got to start going to class!”
“I mean, I don’t want to push or anything, but you are paying for being here.

And so it went, from all sides.

Marce was behind the locked door. She knelt, tilted her head to the floor, and groped for the brown envelope under the bed. She opened it up as she sat on the floor, spreading the contents in front of her. Brochures of snowy mountains and ski jumps. One beautiful blonde in a furry parka smiled atop a ski slope. And there were pictures of Colorado in the fall, with aspen turning to gold. Her map, bordered by photographs of Colorado night life and of mountain recreation, had red arrows pointing to Denver drawn in.

She reread the letter again from the girl she would share an apartment with. “You’ll love it here,” Lisa wrote. “There’re parties all the time and nothing to ever worry about. Can’t wait for you to come.”

There was a knock at the door, and Marce hastily slid the brochures under her bed before getting up to answer it. Jill breezed in, and before Marce had a chance to say hi she blurred, “Hey, what’s that? What’re you doing with a map of Colorado? Planning a vacation, kiddo?”

“Oh it’s nothing—just something I got in the mail.” Marce grabbed it and tried to fold it up. But she couldn’t figure out which way the creases went and threw it down. “Okay—I’m dropping out of school.”
Jill, for once, didn’t say a word. Her double chin increased as her head tipped toward the floor, and all she could mutter was “Why?”

“I’m tired of being pushed—by my parents and all of you. I can’t concentrate, so why should I be in school?” Marce’s finger followed the grain of the wood floor, and she didn’t look up at Jill.

“But. . .”

“Look, I need excitement, and there isn’t any here. I’m not cut out for studying—maybe I could’ve been if my parents had read to me when I was little. I learned that much in psych—if your parents don’t read you stories, you’ll grow up to be retarded. That’s just what happened.”

Jill had nothing to say. As she was leaving the room, she mumbled, “I’m sorry.”

Marce stacked up her Colorado pictures and hesitated over one of horseback riders on a mountain trail. Not too long before I’m really there, she thought. It’s 4:00. That’ll give me about an hour to sleep before dinner. And then maybe I’ll try to study after that.

She crawled into her unmade bed and went to sleep, thinking of skiing and mountains and parties.

“Marce, I mean it. I’m not calling the restaurant for you again. Just get up and go.” Lisa was standing over her bed.

Marce got up and looked out the window. People were walking in the dim morning light, heads hunched down into collars. They leaned into the wind to make any headway in the grayish snow. Far beyond were the mountains—Marce had been skiing there once and sprained an ankle.

“No. I’m staying here today. Besides, I hate that place—all of them speaking Italian in the kitchen so I won’t understand what they’re saying. They hate me. Well, I hate them, too!”

Marce absent-mindedly picked up her college yearbook from the chipped coffee table and leafed through the pages. “Y’know, maybe I’ll go back to school. Or maybe I could even go to a different school. Anything’s got to be better than Colorado. . . .”