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Moving off-campus to find a new life, and a fridge full of kale

by Samantha Herron · February 4, 2016



I am always humbled and amused by how quickly my fall finals-induced hatred of Swarthmore transforms into a being-at-home-sucks-inspired love of the same. Such is our toxic love affair with this ridiculous college: can't live with it, can't live without it. Home has non-Sharples food and your mom, but also racist grandparents and awkward social engagements with high school boyfriends. Swat has Pub Nite and your best buds, but also pasta bar and a constant sense of academic inferiority.

This mood-swing cycle of going home and coming back is emotionally draining, and it seems that the Swarthmore collective conscious believes that the only way to escape this dizzying rotation is to finally graduate into The Real World. While I still go to Swarthmore, and still go home during breaks, I've decided to expedite my entrance into The Real World: As of this spring, I live off campus.

Just two weeks into the semester, life off campus has made schoolwork less all-encompassing. My hundreds of pages of reading per week are necessarily tempered by weirder, adultier problems, like cooking myself dinners that include vegetables more substantial than the dehydrated ones that come in ramen packets. And cleaning up the flood of water spewed into my kitchen at one in the morning by our broken washing machine. And freaking out one night because the apartment reeked of natural gas after someone knocked the knob on our gas stove. I have to pay rent and buy toilet paper and worry about whether my severely mildewed shower curtain is a health concern.

Incredibly, the addition to my life of scary adult problems has somehow reduced my stress instead of amplified it. My new set of shit to deal with has had the effect of putting Swarthmore's craziness into better perspective. Now, when I want to or need

to, I can remove myself from Swarthmore's clutches, cook some food (from my fridge! With my stove!), chill in my (full-sized!) bed, and cuddle with some of my neighbors' cats (real ones!). Though I've always lived on the other side of the SEPTA tracks while at Swarthmore, first in Mary Lyons and then in Roberts, living outside of the college's purview has taken the edge off of what would ordinarily be a grossly overwhelming schedule for me. The giant stress cloud that hovers endlessly over Swarthmore's campus doesn't make it as far as the Barn. I'm free!

But, of course, there are necessarily some trade-offs. While I'm not much farther away from campus at the Barn than when I lived Roberts, I am far less inclined to get my butt out of bed and go to class or Sharples or parties. I used to feel compelled to go out on weekends just to avoid sitting in my musty, sad dorm room. While in Roberts, I roomed in a triple with no windows besides a giant, leaky skylight. The harmless but noisy set of ghosts who I think live in the walls accounted for most of the dorm's meager hall life. I never hung out there for long except to sleep. Now, I have my own bedroom in an apartment filled with a new barrage of wonderful domestic amenities, like a working bathtub and adjustable heat. I have blue bedroom

walls and like, several avocados in the fridge. I can light candles! I have a spice rack! How am I supposed to go sit in McCabe when my not-McCabe living quarters are so cozy? The weekly choice between a rando frat party and watching a John Hughes movie in my PJs is being increasingly weighted towards the latter. If you don't see me around my usual campus haunts, you'll know it's because I've tried and failed to come up with a reason to abandon my lodgings.

I won't become a complete social recluse, though. Individual barn apartments throw parties now and again, though most of campus never experiences them. By virtue of the scant space and the population of hipper-than-thou occupants, Barn parties are generally smaller affairs with weirder music. Dancing happens, but only in small bursts punctuating the flow of partygoers from one bedroom to another, from someone's kitchen down to the front porch for a cigarette. Barn parties, so far as I can tell, typically involve low-key chitchat, box wine, and a vague concern about noise levels for fear of the arrival of Real Swarthmore Police. Though you might not be able to return immediately to your bedroom when they're done like I can (!), I'd recommend keeping your eyes open for any upcoming Barn parties if you're one of those who is less

inspired by beer pong and strobe lights, but who still wants to get drunk in a gross, run-down building surrounded by Swatties.

Maybe my new, less stressed state of being is a result of a newfound maturity, but I'm pretty sure it's just my house. I moved off-campus for the heck of it, but little did I know dorm life had been a detriment to my mental health. Only 7% of students live off campus! Who knows how many people are wasting away in Willets wondering how they will ever escape the Swarthmore blues? When will they realize that freedom lies only a few blocks away in one of the several non-Swarthmore College housing options? I realize I've never actually lived on campus, so I can't really speak to its effects on student well being, but I will stand by my assertion that a personal bathroom, a fridge full of kale, and a 1000-piece jigsaw puzzle in progress on the coffee table will improve anyone's semester.

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