The Immortal Life of the Green Monster

Lily Stein
I found your signature on the wall last night, I murmured into the receiver to him. There was silence on the other end. I regretted leading with this. He was a stranger, even if he had once lived in my room, the room that I was sitting in now, tucked under covers with phone to cheek.

He drew in a breath. “You’re talking about the signatures in the third-floor closet?” Yeah, those ones, the third-floor closet, I replied, beckoning him to continue. Another breath. “I haven’t seen that wall in years. We signed it on our last night in the house. We wanted to leave something of ourselves behind, and it was the most inconspicuous place we could find.”

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It was late October 2008 and the world was grappling in the aftermath of a global stock crash. The worst recession since the Great Depression. But its effects weren’t yet felt at Penn, other than through the buzz of voices down Locust Walk during passing periods.

Eric Mead was eighteen years old and shuffling between philosophy and political science classes. He would eventually move to New York, work a corporate job as a product manager for a cinema advertising company, and live in Harlem with his girlfriend and their brussels griffon, Caddis. But Harlem was another world away. For now, he was preoccupied with Locke, Rousseau, and making it onto the ultimate frisbee team.

Eric had recently signed a lease for an off-campus, upperclassmen residency: a distinctly light, almost mint, green three-story house that sat on the corner of 41st and Locust Street in West Philadelphia, a block away from campus buildings and dorm housing. Signing was a leap of faith, having been only briefly acquainted with his soon-to-be housemates. Fifteen years later, he calls it instead a stroke of luck. Each had some connection to the others—childhood friends, freshmen roommates, hallmates—making up a motley mix of personalities and affiliations. And making up the signatures on the left wall of the third-floor closet that I would find a decade and a half later.

The signatures were written in light, almost mint, green. They were cryptic, each name inscribed in distinct handwriting and most paired with a nickname in quotation marks. Underneath the signatures were notes to their future residents, only some distinguishable.

*Never Stop Celebrating.*
*Paint it green.*
*Don’t you ever forget.*

Other notes were written in what looked like code, scrawled in chicken-scratch across the badly painted white walls. I crawled into the closet space, dodging dresses and blouses, and carved out a space for myself on the floor to better study the writing.
We call it Green Monster, the house. It’s been a refuge for us in the chaos of college, a light in the dark of the pandemic. I know every inch of the Monster, every hidden attic and every rickety railing, from head-to-toe. Living on the third floor of three stories, I’ve run up and down its blue-carpeted stairs so many times that I could hit every step with my eyes closed. I’ve sat in broken IKEA chairs at our little dinner table with my seven roommates, my stroke of luck, every night for two years. I’ve celebrated three birthdays at that table too, blowing the candles out on a grocery store-bought confetti cake. It is in this house that I’ve watched myself and my friends as we leave behind our time as a gaggle of teenage girls gawking at the newness of college and learn how to be the kind of women that we want to be—how we change our hair colors, how we try out new clothes, and how we slowly realize, all on our own time, what we want out of this life of ours.

We learn from each other, but we also learn from this house. It binds us. It teaches us to respect this time, these moments. Its walls—quite literally—are steeped in history. The white paint chipping in sheets down the hallway. Edward, our lovingly named kitchen mouse who scurries across the floor in the cold months. The ominous water stains on the ceiling of the first-floor bedroom. The strangely placed and primitively built extra wooden doors between the bedrooms that we seal shut for privacy. Every inch is beautiful to us because every inch is ours. Our Monster.

I look up at the green writing on the wall and try to make out the chicken scratch. I pick out a name at the top: Eric “Tall Ass Fruit” Mead.

He tells me about the day he inherited his nickname. He was walking back to Green Monster from a warehouse party early in the morning, dressed in tight and colorful rave clothing when a West Philadelphia resident called from his car “That’s one tall ass fruit!” The name became legend as did many other seemingly innocuous moments in a house of eight college-aged boys. Others at Penn frequently referred to him and two of his redhead roommates as The Gingers. Given his cool, nonchalant demeanor, evident even from the first minutes of our phone call, he is likely still a man of many friends and many nicknames.

Above all nicknames, most Penn students did and still do refer to the group as The Green Monsters. The name ‘Green Monster’ was allegedly coined by Eric’s roommate David Fried, who is now a Brooklyn-based comedian whose professional biography self-identifies him as “a cynical optimist focusing on the absurdity of the everyday.” And that’s precisely how Eric remembers him—as the heart and soul of the Monster. His other roommate, Dylan Aluise, was the brain. Living in the coveted first-floor room complete with a spacious loft space and marble fireplace, Eric describes him as the “ringleader” of the group. His room was not only an extension of the living room for the
Green Monsters, but a gathering place for all of Penn. Eric remembers students from every corner of campus hanging out in Dylan’s room for hours on end.

“This is me sipping a beer in Dylan's room. Dylan let pretty much anyone hang out in his room at any hour of the day.” - Eric Mead (circa 2009-2012)

Doron Roberts-Kiedes has the same memory, forming it two years after Dylan said his final goodbye to his beloved room. When Dylan’s room became Doron’s room, it took on a new personality as a makeshift music studio with guitars, synthesizers, and speakers. He remembers how people would sit around on his floor—which had been painted brown as a botched solution to a complaint and was badly chipping off of the wood—and listen to him play guitar. His daytime concerts were frequent and improvised, drawing a crowd that flattered him as he now admits that he “wasn’t an amazing guitarist.” But there was something about that room that was and always had been a magnet to the Penn community: the headquarters of the Green Monster.

Having stopped by the house to pay tribute a few years ago, Doron tells me how he met a girl on the porch. He asks if I know her. I can imagine the interaction vividly: Doron walking up to the concrete stairs with the spindly black railing leading up to the modest front porch. My roommate Lua looking up from her phone, cigarette in hand, sunglasses on, perched on the top step of the stairs. Lua smiling her toothy Lua smile. Lua putting
out her cigarette, unlocking the door, jangling it a little bit because it’s never not been broken, and leading Doron into the marble-floored foyer of the house. The two would turn left from the foyer into their shared bedroom, separated only by time. Doron all the while telling her how he used to have only a single mattress on the ground, no bed frame, and musical instruments scattered across the floor. How brown paint chips used to make their way into his bed and how he learned to tolerate them and how sometimes he even misses those brown paint chips. Now a software engineer in San Francisco months away from marrying his college girlfriend, he doesn’t sleep in a room with a dirty mattress on the ground anymore.

The bedroom that Doron and Lua walk into that day is filled with art. Different-sized paintings hang across the walls, some Lua’s and some Lua’s inspiration. Wet paint dries on canvases strewn across the floor, paint brushes and different colored tubes orbiting around them. Her finished paintings, some the size of an entire wall, are stacked to the side of the door in preparation for her upcoming art show. A camera tripod stands next to the paintings. In all the chaos of a girl who saves everything, for everything is art, her bed is made.

It would be a few months before Lua would contract COVID-19, self-isolate in this room, and use that time to make a short film called 2.15.21: Quarantined, which would win the Penn Student Film Festival. But I’m sure it wasn’t hard for Doron to imagine the room as a movie set, the room was already a character in itself.

Doron later tells me on the phone that this made him happy, meeting her and seeing her create something. He murmurs something about legacy, the room staying the same even as it has changed in the last eight years.

He adds that his girlfriend was trailing behind the two as he visited, adding a layer to the image that I hadn’t anticipated. He had just proposed to her, a girl two-years-his-junior named Maya, and this, Green Monster, was a part of their story. Doron and Maya had met in the cramped, fluorescent-lit second-floor bathroom one January night during an animal-themed costume party. They’d been inseparable ever since. Maya lived next door, in a house she called ‘Hosham,’ with undoubtedly its own rich history. But she also belonged to the legacy of Green Monster. When I spoke with her on the phone, I could hear the same affection in her voice when she recollected memories of the house as I heard in Doron’s stories.

During his two years living in the house until his graduation in 2014, Green Monster belonged to PennQuest, an outdoor orientation club known widely for its wild parties. Six out of eight of Doron’s roommates were PennQuest leaders, which meant that nearly every club gathering was a Green Monster event, and which meant that the house often had noise complaints. Doron describes this era as the heyday of PennQuest, when the club had two separate chapter houses. As a PennQuest leader myself, I can empathize
with him. I don’t have the heart to tell him that we have none anymore. The pandemic broke nearly every tradition I know.

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Ashley F. Saunders was born in Illinois in 1876, one year after Green Monster was built. Forty-nine years later, in his middle-age, he would buy the house that had grown up in parallel to him.

History of the house before 1875 is spotty at best. The working hypothesis between me and the specialists at the Philadelphia City Archives is that the lot that Green Monster now sits on was once part of a grand estate. In fact, the eight student-occupied houses to the right of Green Monster, nearly the whole block of 41st Street, were supposedly owned by one family. I am told that the estate most likely had a large main house in the center where the family would have lived and that gardens, guesthouses, and servant quarters were scattered across the land.

It is impossible to know when this grand estate was first built, but it is slightly less impossible to know when it was torn down—if one only has the patience to pore over hundreds of brittle, yellowed land deeds. In September 1875, two relatives, most likely brothers, by the name of James and George Rorke bought this grand estate, split it into equal lots, and built eight distinct houses on those lots. The Monster was born.

Green Monster’s first owner was a man named William S. Kimball, who curiously bought and sold the house in only three days. The house was then passed over to another William, last name Messick, and his nameless “wife” (the land deed spares no ink in assigning her an identity, this was 1876). The document that officiated these sales describes the house as a “two-story brick messuage or tenement with stone front and mansard roof and lot or piece of ground belonging situate at the northwest corner of Locust and Forty-First Streets.” Despite adding another story to the house to make it three levels, this description rings true to this day. Reading it leaned over a desk in the musty Philadelphia Archives building, I wonder if attorneys still use this 146-year old description. I flip to the end of a ten-inch stack of yellowed papers—some papers jutting out horizontally to indicate they may be of-interest to me—that was handed to me in a manila folder by one of the archivists. The last land deed is dated 1980, and yes, the language has achieved immortality. I flip back to 1876. Back to Williams and nameless wives.

Despite meticulously writing down the name of every buyer and seller throughout time, the names don’t take me far. I’m not able to find any information on the residents in historical census records or track down their descendents via Google. Of the nine owners between 1876 and 1920, the only way I can reach them is through my imagination.

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Robyn Zimmerman Rubino is fifty-six years old and sitting in an office study in her home in Boca Raton, Florida. She is surrounded by colorful scrapbooks, newspaper clippings, and Polaroid photographs, which she holds up one-by-one to her computer camera for us all to see. There are four women on the video call and one almost-woman. I, the almost-woman, live in a green house, they lived in a white one, but it is the same house. As Robyn holds up the pages of her scrapbook, I learn that the Monster can change colors. It had grown up to be green, but it was born white.

Robyn, Ronni, Deborah, Amy, and I all occupy a small square of my computer screen. The four women are graduates of Penn’s class of ‘88. Some of their lives have remained intertwined despite the geographic distance—Robyn and Amy are both Nashville natives and have been friends since they were three years old—but Deborah and Amy have lived in the same city for the last twenty years and have only just realized this fact on the video call. They pledge to get a drink soon in Manhattan.

The women talk fast, talk over each other, laugh loudly, and go on long tangents that take us far away from the house. I listen, and later, I don’t attempt to transcribe the call as I did for the other residents I interviewed. Four years of shared history and thirty-four years of separate histories are being crammed into the call. There aren’t neat quotes that show me who these women were when they lived in my house as much as there are actions. Like the way everyone yells at Amy for not remembering certain stories or the way Robyn has kept every shred of paper accumulated since she was a freshmen living in the Quad.

Deborah posing in her third-floor bedroom, which is now my bedroom and decorated much too similarly (circa 1986-1988)
Watching them piece together their imperfect memories, I can see from a distance their life in the Monster. It is the late ‘80s and crime is rampant: Ronni tells harrowing stories of serial killers at the nearby McDonald’s and a certain sociopath who walked down Locust during passing periods stabbing people in the chest. Their side of 41st Street is darkly-lit and considered more dangerous than the rest of Beige Block, the up-and-coming off-campus student housing block. When Deborah walks home from Smokey Joe’s, the campus bar, at night, she is never alone. The first Urban Outfitters in the world has just opened up kitty corner from them and it’s more of a neighborhood general store for obscure novelties than a clothing shop. Their favorite lunch spot, Salad Alley, is next to Urban Outfitters and the women can still recite their orders.

The porch to the house is so unsteady that Robyn’s dad doesn’t dare walk up the concrete steps. He stands outside and yells at Robyn through the window. A dirty, torn-up couch sits on the porch and the neighborhood bum (as they refer to him) sits on this couch all day. They do not question his right to their porch because they are young and it is the ‘80s.

Walking in, the house is a house of walls. Lua’s room is a living room with no loft and two twin-sized beds turned into daybeds pushed against the wall. The beds face a twenty-six-inch television, where the women watch soap operas in the afternoon and eat Chinese food from their favorite food truck on 40th Street. *Days of Our Lives* or *General Hospital* play through the house for hours, sometimes broken up by *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, which premiered the year they moved into the Monster.

The first-floor bathroom attached to this makeshift living room has an old-fashioned white clawfoot tub where their roommate, Beth, washes their beloved and infamous house dog, Theo. The dining room is next, split off from the kitchen by a wall that does not exist anymore. In the kitchen is a built-in pantry filled with Charleston Chews and

![Theo, the house dog, napping on a resident (circa 1986-1988)](image)
Squeeze Cheese strategically placed on the highest shelf, which Theo climbs and seizes for sport.

Many of their memories of the house have faded and warped. One of the few moments that they still collectively remember is a night where they tried on boxes and boxes of glittery, puffy-sleeved prom dresses that were shipped to the house by a boy that liked Robyn and happened to have parents that owned a dress shop in Altoona, Pennsylvania called Kaufman’s Wedding World. The story is told to me slowly, not for dramatic effect but because of the deep belly laughs that interrupt Robyn’s narration. “We tried on dresses for hours. If someone had lit a match, we would have all gone up in flames,” she says. The boy’s gifts didn’t work out as he had hoped, but he did make a lasting impression. Three decades later and he’s all they can remember.

There is a landline phone hanging on a wall on each of the three floors, but the women are rarely there to answer it. They don’t cook in the kitchen or throw parties in the living room or study at desks in their bedrooms. “We were out all over campus. It wasn’t like people stayed in their house,” says Ronni, after being asked to describe her day-to-day living in the Monster. The women all nod their heads in agreement. “We didn’t have the internet. No one had a computer,” says Amy.

“It was a completely different world,” says Ronni.

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I try to imagine the house as it was. I think Emma L. Soule—“wife of Julius” as Green Monster’s 1904 land deed refers to her—kept an herb garden in the backyard where, over a hundred years later, beer cans hide in-between the patchy grass and unruly weeds. The Soules may have kept a Roosevelt for President sign in the same front window where Lua pasted up a Women for Hillary sign. I think Paul R. Browne and his wife Belle Wolfe, buying the house the first year of the Prohibition, hid alcohol in the corners of the cold, dark basement. I imagine that Charles A. Robinson and Sarah Westcott had five children, and for Christmas in 1925, gifted each one a copy of The Great Gatsby, which F. Scott Fitzgerald had published two months prior.

I don’t have to imagine, I know that Ashley F. Saunders and his wife Laura bought the house after that Christmas. They lived in the Monster for thirty-six years, allowing modernity to creep into their story deep enough that I am able to trade imagination for reality. From census records, I know that Ashley was forty-nine years old and Laura a year younger when they first walked up the concrete stairs with the spindly black railing leading up to the modest front porch. And I know that many years later, Laura was widowed while living in the Monster. Her husband died at eighty-five years old from causes unbeknown to me. He could have died in a hospital bed, or while visiting relatives, or maybe he just collapsed suddenly on his regular rounds through West Philadelphia, but he also could have died in the Monster. It’s a mystery that, if solved,
would explain the varied tales of ghosts and hauntings that have been compiled over the more recent history of residents.

It was 1961 and Laura Saunders, alone in the big house, sold Green Monster to a corporation called Val Inc., which began renting out the house. The Saunders would be the last family to own the home. Throughout the next few decades, different housing management companies would buy and sell the house. And it wouldn’t be until 1980 that a Penn student would first call it home.

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I was in the Caribbean when I heard the news. St. Lucia. 2:16 PM. March 11, 2020.

A couple hours later, I was drinking a mojito at a restaurant on the ocean with six of my closest friends. We were sophomores on our college spring break. The weather was just warm enough to crave a cold drink, but just cool enough to not break a sweat. The sky was all pastel. We were so close to the shore that we could hear the waves through the pauses in the local island music.

We clinked our mojitos together and toasted to the end of the world, but it still felt like a joke. We got up and danced with strangers. We drank some more. We hiked up a mountain in the dark to our Airbnb. We watched reality TV and ate popcorn on the couch. I called my boyfriend who showed me the Paris skyline from his window. The world was still big, its mysteries still explorable, its future still uncertain in a certain way. Like the waves, our lives had never been still, things always moving up and down and around, but also always moving forward. We could always count on forward.

As I laid in bed that night tucked under a mosquito net with the reality sinking into me that Penn would be shuttering its doors indefinitely, I tried to imagine what forward would look like now. I didn’t know at the time that it would look like a green house on the corner.

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We moved into the Monster in August 2020, height of the pandemic. Eight girls with a plan to live there until we graduated. In a simple world, the house was already a monument in the history of our lives—the last stop on our way out of college and the last time many of us would live together. But we carried in our many suitcases, second-hand furniture, and large cardboard boxes with an appreciation greater than the run-down house probably warranted. It wouldn’t be just a monument to us, it would be a city.

Life quickly turned inward. Some days the white wood-paneled walls of my room felt like they were closing in on me, especially when I was in one of my many quarantines—whether from exposure, infection, symptomatic concerns. The days I was
shut in my room I walked in circles around my bed and carpet. I counted the trees outside. I counted the seconds and the minutes. I discovered a crawl space outside my window where I could breathe in fresh air. The days I wasn’t shut in my room, I was still shut in my house. Life at Penn became tribal. We stuck to our pods. There was no room for outsiders in the Monster.

We each had chosen a room when we moved in, which we meticulously and unintentionally personalized to become a physical manifestation of ourselves. When there was no longer space in the world for us eight girls, we had to make our mark somehow. Glitter and pink makeup smudged across Sandra’s desk next to her sewing machine where she expertly tended to hemming her dresses shorter and shorter. Ivy’s large, minimalist room with the white bay windows. A framed black-and-white portrait of a young couple making out on the train hanging on the wall to the right of her desk: spontaneity within limits. Sam across the hall, her laying in bed surrounded by her collected and carefully-sourced antiquities. Maeve upstairs with a canvas photograph of planet Earth larger than her modest and sparsely decorated room. Liv, Katie, Lua, me. Most of my junior year was spent wandering from bedroom to bedroom, each its own ecosystem.

Seven of us posing in front of Green Monster, our future house (circa 2019, a year before we moved in)
We had house gatherings often, sometimes themed and sometimes getting rowdy even if we had no more secrets to share. New traditions were created like Maeve’s semestery fall feast, which still takes place at the start of each semester despite its name and in which she cooks her late grandfather’s pizza recipes and asks everyone to share a poem as we sit around the kitchen table. We got to do things we never would have dreamed of doing like renting a house in the Poconos in the middle of a school week or turning the cameras off on our Zooms and having dance parties in the living room while we were in math class.

The house could have been a prison, but we made it a paradise.

And maybe we would have been okay even without the house, maybe we would be just as close to each other and just as able to make ourselves happy, but a world without Green Monster is unfathomable. Inheriting the house came at just the right time, when we needed to belong to something bigger than ourselves and call something, anything home.

It was a completely different world, I agreed with Ronni.

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Every day Ashley Saunders woke up early, dressed in whatever dress an Operating Manager at the Philadelphia Warehousing & Cold Storage Company wore in the early half of the 20th century, and went to work. He worked thirty-five hours a week, fifty-two weeks a year. He brought in $5,000 dollars at the end of the year, the equivalent of a little over one hundred grand in today’s money. It is unclear how long this routine lasted, how many years he held this job in totality, but it’s proudly listed as his employment in both 1930 and 1939 U.S. census documents.

As a child of immigrants—an English mother and Canadian father—and having only completed eighth grade, Ashley was living the American dream. Neither he nor his wife attended much formal schooling (Laura Saunders only made it to fourth grade), but they owned the Green Monster, which was in their time, valued at $30,000. If I could interview Ashley, and I have tried relentlessly to track down his descendents as a proxy, I’m sure he would tell me that the Monster was his pride and joy. Maybe not in those words, but with whatever loving nickname he gave the house, which was the embodiment of thirty-five hours a week, fifty-two weeks a year.

The success of his American dream is strikingly bright when cast against the grayness of the Great Depression. There is nothing to suggest that the Saunders were impacted by the Depression, nor other historical events of the time. Ashley was not a veteran, and he would not be a veteran. He had avoided the World War I draft, and at the time of the 1939 U.S. census when he marked down his non-veteran status, he would be on the brink
of avoiding a second national draft. World War II was lurking in the shadows. In a matter of months, Congress would pass the Selective Training and Service Act of 1940, which would require all men between the ages of twenty-one and forty-five to register for a draft. He would be sixty-four. He would continue working at the warehouse.

The Saunders owned a radio set, which, to my surprise, was of national importance. The 1930 U.S. census has a column dedicated to documenting which families owned and did not own a set of their own. The majority listed on the census are a “no,” but tracing my hand down the page, I can see that the Saunders are in the minority. They were wealthy, or at least successfully middle-class, by 1930 standards. Even with their modest education, they could read and write. They probably listened to the news. Ashley went to work every day and Laura stayed home, tending to the Monster. I’d like to think they were happy.

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We inherited the house from eight girls. Because I had lived some of their time in the Monster, having known Lily Snider and her roommates fairly well and having attended a few of their gatherings as an underclassmen, I thought I could write their story without asking. I called Lily in particular because I thought of her as a free-spirited English major who saw the world with a nuanced poetic lens—I knew she wouldn’t cling to what I could see with my bare eyes. And I was right. There were more layers to her experience than I ever could see.

“What does Green Monster mean to you?” It’s a question I asked every resident, sometimes in different words.

“It was home.” She sucked in a breath. “It’s hard to narrow down to one thing because it was actually, for better or worse, the most consistent home I had.”

I asked what she meant by this. She explained that, throughout her teenage and college years, her parents were separated, divorced, back together, divorced, remarried to other people, single again, engaged, once again single in a constantly changing cycle that caused her four younger siblings to make a home for themselves in many new houses. Green Monster had given her a home when she most needed one.

Two years later, she is calling me from her apartment in Los Angeles. She works many jobs: a freelance fact checker and researcher, a production assistant on a show, a personal assistant, a Fulbright semi-finalist for a research project on Portuguese cryptojews in the Azores islands. She is once again a nomad, but this time it is because she chooses to be. Green Monster is still to date her most consistent home. And it’s clear from the clarity and color of her recounted memories that her mind wanders over the house quite often as she roams the world. When she describes her room, she starts with orange curtains.
“They’re a deep burnt orange and I have them with me now. I take them with me because the light that comes in through them is really warm.” She goes on to describe her record player sitting in the little crevice between the closets, her pink carpet on the ground where she would sit next to an ashtray and smoke weed at night, the second-floor bathroom that had letter stickers stuck to the window. She goes farther back in time, back when she was the first of eight girls to move in and it was summer and she was just a sophomore about to become a junior and she would sit in front of a single fan in her room and cry. She can’t remember what she cried about, but it meant something to her that she had a room to cry in.

She laughed more than she cried. Similar to me and no doubt many others, Lily celebrated her 21st birthday in the Monster. “We had a crazy blowout party with all my friends and we were spraying champagne and I was dressed in gold and I wore a little crown. All my friends lifted me up in that kitchen on a chair like it was a bar mitzvah and there are photos of me just getting hoisted to the ceiling. It’s not a very high ceiling.” Also similar to me and no doubt many others, Lily remembers the house as the beating heart of campus—a place where students would gather on sanctified Penn holidays. One St. Patrick’s Day, the girls engineered a green beer funnel that ran from Lily’s second-floor balcony to the street. They would make each student drink from the funnel to gain admission into the Monster. “It’s crazy that on those weekends we just left the front door open all day,” she says. I can hear the smile in her words.

I ask her if there’s anything else she wants to add. “I fuckin’ love that house. I love walking down to it from 42nd Street. I love going in-and-out of the back door. It was so beautiful, it really was. It may be that some of those people you moved in with don’t fit anymore, but I still think of those people with such fondness because together we shared Green Monster.”

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“You saw where we signed our names. One of my strongest memories was the last night we lived there and we had this big love fest and signed the wall ... we’re all still very close and there’s a picture of me at my wedding with all my best friends who I lived with at college. I think that just shows the durability of the relationships we made in that place.”

I was talking to Charlie Oshinsky and Max “Never Lost A Game” Effron. Two more signatures on the wall, next to Eric “Tall Ass Fruit” Mead. The durability of their relationship doesn’t have to be so neatly quoted by Charlie, it’s already clear to me. The two sit side-by-side smirking at each other and at the camera, at me. Max had just flown into Seattle where Charlie lives and works as, in Max’s words, “a doctor, a real doctor.” A mechanical engineering major at Penn, Max is now a product manager at a tech company in the energy industry. They see each other often despite their busy lives. I walk them through the Monster, slowly because each room we visit triggers a waterfall
of inside jokes, some of which are explained to me and some of which are left ambiguous.

“We all lived together for so long ... we kinda developed our own language of nonsense and inside jokes that substitute for communication,” Charlie half-apologizes, half-boasts.

“One of my favorite photos. Charlie doing some pose ... you can see so much in the background. We found an old fraternity composite somewhere one day and took it back to our house. We replaced all of the photos with ourselves and named ourselves a fake Greek association "Gamma Mu." You can see that our furniture was present, but in dismal shape. You can see some remnants of halloween costumes on the chairs. You can see a Natty Light case on the floor. This would be a typical scene at the end of the night.” - Eric Mead (circa 2009-2012)

They lived together in Ivy’s bedroom on the second floor, so we head there first. The room is soaked in sunlight and minimalistically but beautifully furnished. Ivy sits writing a philosophy paper at her desk, looking up at me as I introduce her to her Monster ancestors. Charlie and Max can’t believe this was once their room and demand a full walk-around. They remember little about the actual architecture of the space, only that it was dirty and there were often squirrels running around.

I continue on my tour of the eight bedrooms, introducing them to various girls along the way. We collectively bond over the incompetency of Herman Realty and the dangers of the haunted basement. Charlie takes a sip out of his tea and I notice his thermos has the Green Monster logo that Eric had shown me: a three-eyed green monster holding a beer mug. I spot it immediately and he looks down in surprise, not noticing the fabulous coincidentally of him happening to sip out of his Green Monster mug while talking
about Green Monster to young Green Monsters that are sitting in his old room in Green Monster. To him, this is natural. Green Monster is life.

Charlie Oshinsky is the keeper of The Scroll. I have been told this by several of his housemates. He takes his job seriously—safeguarding The Scroll and carrying it with him through medical school, through various moves, through travels. Again, I don’t have to be told this to believe it. The second I ask about his keeper status, he is walking to grab his treasure. It has been ten or eleven years since Green Monster “pledge” Neil Dubey wrote out the Monster commandments on a piece of paper and dubbed it The Scroll, but Charlie still knows where that slip of paper is at all times.

He pulls out a tattered green folder that reminds me of the signatures on the wall. In chicken-scratch handwriting, he has written “Scroll” at the top of the folder, followed by “Birth certificate,” then “Social” underlined. He calls it his “folder of important documents” and it also happens to contain his medical license and the title to his car. But these don’t earn a spot on the folder’s title page. The Scroll comes first.

He proudly shows me one of the most tattered pieces of paper I have ever seen. An amorphous, faded white page with deep red lettering (“we wrote it in blood”) and black signatures (“just kidding on the blood, but it felt like that”).

He begins to read The Green Monster Pledge, as it’s called:

\[I, \text{ state your name, pledge to commit to serve my dedication to Green Monster excellence for the rest of my life. I promise to do whatever it takes, wherever it should be taken, and to take and give back to the Monster that feeds us daily, nightly, and ever so rightly.}\]

Below the Pledge are ten signatures: eight original Green Monsters and two “pledges,” now official Green Monsters, who were moving into the house as subletters. One of the pledges, Neil Dubey, who is now an emergency room doctor in New York, had written the words—no doubt dictated to him by a more senior Monster.

Max thinks back on that night, “a whole night of hazing and shenanigans,” as his favorite moment of college, right up there with the signature-signing farewell night where each Monster stood up and shared their favorite memory in the house before signing the wall. Charlie and Max can’t remember what anyone said that final night, but they can remember how it felt to be there.

I can imagine it’s a lot like what they feel as I walk them through the house, hearing and seeing all of the ways in which the little decisions they made in college added up to create a legacy larger than the two of them.

“We had no idea this house had any staying power,” Charlie says to Max who nods.
They tell me that me finding their signatures is the same as Green Monster being reborn from the flames like a phoenix. I tell them that it’s not like this because the Monster never died. It’s 147 years old and it hasn’t died yet. I know this because I’ve made it my job to keep it alive. They make jokes about how their silly, twisted traditions have survived and whether that’s a good thing, their nonsense having such a shelf life. When they talk about this staying power, they don’t say anything seriously, but they also don’t say anything un-seriously. I can tell they feel the full weight of their words, it’s clear on their faces. The root of each joke about the Monster is planted with a seed of truth and sincerity.

I don’t say this to them, but I think to myself that this is what it looks like to suddenly learn that you left a legacy, however small. It’s shocked faces mixed with the inability to stop beaming mixed with the inability to stop talking over your friends. It’s what I’ve seen and heard in Doron, Eric, Deborah, Amy, Ronni, Robyn, Lily and it’s what I hope to see one day in myself.

* * *

Bundy Wist doesn’t recall where he was or what he was doing, but he does recall seeing the ad. It was thirty-three years ago, many years longer than I’ve been on this planet, so I don’t blame him for having only the haziest of details. What he does remember, in retrospect, is that the ad was old-fashioned: a piece of paper posted up on a bulletin board with little tendrils containing a phone number hanging on it. With some combination of words that I do not know, the ad called for Penn upperclassmen to apply to be the eighth and final roommate to a certain house on 41st and Locust.

He asks if we still have those kinds of ads. I say we do, but I’m not sure if a paper ad hanging on a random wall promising housing would attract the Bundys of the world anymore. We have Facebook for that.

The ad came at the perfect time for Bundy, who had been living off-campus by himself in a single for the past year and wanted a change of scenery for his upcoming senior year. He grabbed a tendril, called the advertised number, and promptly interviewed to live in the Monster. This orderly process makes me laugh, but then I suppose I sort of interviewed too, if all friendships somewhat start as interviews. His was a notch more formal than acting cool at the freshman dining hall, instead, what he describes as a “personality compatibility test to make sure I wasn’t a weirdo.”

He passed the test and moved into a second-floor bedroom in the summer of ’89. There were just three people in the big house that summer, and they happened to all share a wall: Bundy and his girlfriend of “four plus-or-minus” years in one room and a guy named David Klur on the other side.
Geography made them close, but experiences that summer made them even closer. Bundy recalls that, one night, the three of them were hanging out in his room and he happened to glance out the window, only to see a man tearing the Monster’s back door off its hinges. Unknowingly echoing the stories of his predecessors, Bundy laughs that this was classic for the ‘80s. As David sat at the bedroom door with a baseball bat in hand, Bundy called 911 three times. Getting no response, the makeshift gang crept out of the house and walked down the street, undoubtedly with David still bat in hand, to the Uni-Mart on the corner of 40th and Locust where cops were known to hang out and eat donuts. They brought the cops back to the house, made a police report, and went to sleep trying to forget that their back entrance was now an open entryway. Driving past the Monster for his twenty-year reunion, Bundy noticed two things: 1) the house was green, and 2) the back door had a wrought iron gate over it now.

I ask him if it was ever difficult being the sole outsider to an established friend group. The formal, not informal, applicant to these boys’ lives. He doesn’t hesitate in saying no, which gives me an idea for who he was at twenty-two. The photographs that he later sends me of his room give me an even more complete portrait of him.

There are many pictures, but they are all set within the walls of his room, door closed. He had a refrigerator in there, his own bathroom, barbell weights for working out, lots and lots of books, a dumpster-picked TV, a fish tank, a twin-sized bed, a wooden desk, a very ‘80s-looking stereo, a black cat named Lynx, and always his girlfriend. My instinctual thought is what a great room this would be for a quarantine. For Bundy, it was an enclave. He liked to sit at the bay window and look out at Locust. He liked to watch his cat watch movies on the tiny box-shaped TV on the hanging bookshelf. He loved his hometown girlfriend from Richmond, Virginia who came and joined him at college, even if she married someone else at Penn and had five kids with him. They’re still Facebook friends, and she is still the main character in this episode of his life.

Bundy’s girlfriend and cat, Lynx, photographed in his bedroom (circa 1989-1990)
Bundy has no regrets from his year in the Monster, other than losing his class ring somewhere in that room. He asks me to ask around for it.

*  *  *

David Fried pulls out his phone to take a photo of the signatures on the wall. I pull out my phone to take a photo of him taking a photo of the signatures. We stand there laughing—me, David, my roommate, and the names on the wall. I had just given him a brief tour of the Monster, and similar to Charlie and Max, he was astonished by the sheer cleanliness of it all. Is a living room void of strobe lights, fog machines, DJ equipment, and a pong table really a living room at all? What David remembers has since been replaced by Lua’s paintings, framed portraits of our house, Anthropology candles, collected vases with dried flowers. There are tequila and vodka handles—we aren’t mennonites—but they’re stowed away on a tasteful bar cart.

“Jesus, this is how twenty-year-olds live now? What the fuck were we doing? We were like twelve-year-olds compared to you guys,” David says as his eyes dart around the room in awe.

He is thirty-two-years old, and unlike most, his professional biography is entirely true. He exudes energy and “the absurdity of the everyday,” tamed with bouts of self-deprecation that make you immediately like him. Out of all the days he could have made the journey from Brooklyn to Philadelphia with his girlfriend on their spontaneous weekend getaway trip, he happened to visit the Monster in the height of Penn’s Spring Fling party weekend. He couldn’t believe his luck.

We walk up the stairs to my bedroom, which he had also lived in for a time. He is still gasping at the cleanliness when my roommate, Sam, walks in. The three of us, all devout scholars of Green Monster history, climb back in time and reminisce, him over decade-aged memories and us over a moment that we know will soon turn to memory.

As we leave my bedroom to finish the house tour, he asks if he can have a final look at the room—as if it’s not the size of a shoebox and as if we hadn’t been standing in that shoebox for twenty minutes. He walks a few steps to the other end of the room, he looks out of the window at the pink blossom trees blooming on Locust Street, he stands in place and spins around with his arms outstretched and maybe his eyes closed.

We stand outside on Sam’s deck and people-watch the hordes of kids darting around to various pre-games, many clutching bottles of cheap champagne. David provides a running analysis on how the fashion trends have changed (“guys don’t wear tank tops anymore”) and how out-of-place he feels on campus (“I don’t remember the last time I went to a party”). His final Spring Fling in 2012, the Green Monsters had hosted their annual pre-game brunch and kept a running tally of how many times Carly Rae Jepsen’s “Call Me Maybe” played. Life was all neon and Fling parties were on campus. Style has
since lost a lot of its color and the parties have moved to clubs downtown. David can’t wrap his head around this.

“This was a typical Fling morning. We would pregame early in our Green Monster Fling tanks ... you can see here we made a three-person megaperson. You can also see some cereal boxes on top of the fridge that would fall over and get ground into the carpet at our parties. We didn't have much on the walls. We tried several times to hang stuff there, but our “guests” would grind up against the walls and rip whatever was hung there down by the end of the night.” -Eric Mead (circa 2009-2012)

Before he leaves the deck—he has to get back to his girlfriend and the life of a thirty-two year old adult—he tells me and Sam that he can see that we love each other and that it makes him happy to see. Sam responds that we’ll be friends forever. I smile and it reminds me of something David had said to me about the Monsters a few weeks ago: “I love them and I tell them I love them everytime I see them and everytime I say goodbye to them.” He still sees many of them every weekend. Their kids call him Uncle Fried.

The goodbye is coming soon for us, too soon. But I know we’ll be back standing on this deck one day, me and Sam. The music will be unrecognizable, the styles will have changed, and we will have changed with them. But we’ll be back all the same.

*   *   *

When I began asking David Fried questions about his time living in the Monster, he prefaced his stories by saying “all reality is bullshit, memory is entirely flawed, and we
just live whatever narrative feels good to us.” I laughed at first, then I thought about it a lot, then I wondered if it invalidated my investigative journalistic project if everything is just “bullshit,” then I decided that it is the very validation for my project, maybe even the thesis.

From my psychology classes, I know that, in ten, twenty, thirty years, the moments that I remember about the Green Monster will be far and few. Say I’m sitting on our porch and Ivy says something funny to me. I’ll have to first pay attention to what she’s saying, which is the easy part. Then I’ll have to rehearse the memory, maybe by retelling the story to the other girls. Then I lose control and my brain takes over. If I’m lucky, this little moment will be encoded, consolidated, and housed in some comfortable long-term brain resting place that I can’t remember the name of and I can remind her of her funny porch joke at our twenty-year college reunion when we undoubtedly pay homage to the house and sit on the porch together again. But even then, my memory will be what David calls bullshit. It’ll be twisted and tainted and brimming with holes that I won’t even know I’m filling with my imagination.

This project is filled with holes and imagination, too. I’ve created two-dimensional characters and narratives from three-dimensional people and places. But it is my best attempt to remember how it feels to be twenty-two and to live in a beautiful green house on the corner with seven people I love.

By patchworking together all the little moments that maybe did and maybe didn’t happen but could have happened within the walls of one beloved house, I’d like to think I created some kind of truth we can all cling to in the sea of bullshit and holes and imagination. In the sea of whatever comes next.

And with this, we can say we lived this life and it mattered and may we never forget it.