

Honors Thesis

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Introductory Essay

I am driven to write stories set within a larger historical context as my future as a writer continues—so much so, that I am currently working on a novel entitled *Three New Yorks*. For my Honors Thesis, I wanted to create a project that utilized both my major in Creative Writing with my minor in History to write the first two chapters of my eventual novel. With my history minor, I utilize my appreciation for the events of the past, specifically with a focus on the twentieth century, to define the stories I want to write. By analyzing notable epochs in history throughout my undergraduate studies, I have become very interested in depicting these moments through the written word because I believe there is a connection existing between the position of people today and the actions of people back then.

Three New Yorks is a story focusing on three friends—Charlotte Buchanan, Adrienne Weisierski, and Heath “Heathcliff” Carter—growing up in New York City from their teenage years to their early thirties. Beginning in the late 1960s, the three protagonists navigate their futures, both together and separately, while defining the world around them through their own, unique philosophies. This project will be divided into three parts to signify not only the passage of time, but also, to establish their place in time.

For my Honors Thesis, I wanted to focus on the first two chapters specifically as the beginning will eventually set the stage for the course of the novel. In the first chapter, we see Charlotte beginning the story by going for a night out in Harlem and using that experience to explain her personal philosophy on the world. In the second chapter, we see Adrienne attending the first NOW New York Chapter Meeting, which will further her journey in creating her own identity as a feminist. Lastly, the reason for Book One beginning with an excerpt from

Wuthering Heights is because one of my main characters, Heathcliff Carter, is inspired by the novel and because my story reflects the original in that my three protagonists' relationships with each other become strained by social expectations, maturity, and distance from each other. Each Book or Part will begin with a separate excerpt from *Wuthering Heights* and they will be excerpts that match the tone of the section it corresponds to. For Book One, I chose this certain excerpt because I feel like it accurately reflects on the youthful and innocent times of adolescence of where my characters begin as compared to the drama and hardships they will face as they grow older.

For my research for this project, I exhaustively studied various sources from academic books and articles to documentaries that focused their attention of the social upheavals and societal makeup of the 1960s. Furthermore, I used several sources of entertainment to develop my sense of this time in history from novels, movies, TV shows, music, and even plays. My last source of research came from texts designed to help young writers understand how to write their first novel.

Because of my research, my writing process was directly informed by it. As I was writing these chapters, I always made sure I had my sources near to me fact check if a certain phrase was correct, or if a building was actually existence, and even if the fashion I wrote about was around at the time. The hardest part about my writing process was choosing a specific time in which to begin my story. At first, this story was present day before I changed it to the early 2000s, but then it began in the 80s, and later the 70s, and finally, I chose the 60s because of the decade's outpouring of revolution in social norms like music, fashion, sexuality, human rights, film, literature, art, and so much more. I think the 1960s marks a great time period to begin this project as my three narrators reflect the counterculture that developed during this time. Before I began

each chapter, I made an outline of what would happen and how it would happen and this really helped me to not become lost and confused. Also, the revisions and edits for my thesis was improved by my putting these chapters through workshops and gathering opinions from my peers and taking their points into consideration as I rewrote. The final version of my thesis is the aftermath of rewriting the same story almost six times, but I'm glad I did because it's better than where I originally started.

Sources:

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2. *The 60s: The Story of a Decade* by The New Yorker and edited by Henry Finder (Academic Book)
3. *The Girls* by Emma Cline (Novel)
4. *11/22/63* by Stephen King (Novel)
5. *The Feminine Mystique* by Betty Friedan (Novel)
6. *Mad Men* (TV show)
7. *Three Martini Lunch* by Suzanne Rindell
8. *The Crown* (TV show)
9. *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* by Ken Kesey (Novel)

10. *In Cold Blood* by Truman Capote (Novel)
11. *Slaughterhouse-Five* by Kurt Vonnegut (Novel)
12. *Hairspray* (Film)
13. *Blow-Up* (Film)
14. *The Age of Entitlement: America Since the Sixties* by Christopher Caldwell (Academic Book)
15. *The Long Sixties: America, 1955-1973* by Christopher B. Strain (Academic Book)
16. *The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage* by Todd Gitlin (Academic Book)
17. *A Visit from the Goon Squad* by Jennifer Egan (Novel)
18. *City on Fire* by Garth Risk Hallberg (Novel)
19. *Daisy Jones & the Six* by Taylor Jenkins Reid (Novel)
20. *Valley of the Dolls* by Jacqueline Susann (Novel)
21. *Wuthering Heights* Emily Brontë (Novel)

Three New Yorks

Book One

Teenage Rebellion

1967

The little souls were comforting each other with better thoughts than I could have hit on; no parson in the world ever pictured Heaven so beautifully as they did, in their innocent talk; and, while I sobbed, and listened, I could not help wishing we were all there safe together.

—Emily Brontë, *Wuthering Heights*

Charlotte

If there is one thing I have learned from my nineteen years of living, it's that people are either an *Annunciation Triptych* or an *Autumn Rhythm*. And I'd like to say that Robert Campin personally painted me, but there's currently a cigarette perched between my middle and index fingers that says otherwise. I take a long drag from it and the end of the Marlboro flares an amber hue before I flick the ashes down on the asphalt. It's my third one tonight—seventh cigarette overall today—but the exquisite delight I received from the first one this morning still has not heightened in the slightest. Truly a shame. I relieve my throat from the cloud of smoke that has been billowing there and I allow the sweet embrace of the nicotine to wreak its havoc upon my consciousness. The paper of the cigarette smolders closer and closer towards the butt end of it and smoke wreathes around me like a heady blanket. It becomes a fog I choose to revel in.

I am sitting on the roof, my feet are swinging four stories above the street, lightly kicking against the edifice of the building. There is no garden up here. Helen could never be bothered with a chore, which could otherwise distract her from the daunting task of performing as my father's housewife. She is definitely an *Annunciation Triptych* because she knows what she wants, but her hues are too technicolored and her form too fake to be lauded in a museum. So, there is only asphalt up here and the light breeze coming from the East River. On the wind, the sounds of the city life below greet me like a plastic cup being shoved ceremoniously into my hand after walking into a house party: the excited murmurs from people who must be tourists, the constant honks of taxi cabs, the pattering of shoes on concrete. Past the McCarson's brownstone across the street, I can make out the very top of the Triborough Bridge and the moon perches itself just right behind it.

Flicking the ashes off the cigarette, I bring it to my lips—the butt is stained with Garnet Flame, the intricate stains of my lips imprinted by the violent shade of red. I relish that final bitter taste, which is relinquished by the woody flavor before tossing it to the street below. I do not respect my stepmother, but I would rather not deal with my father’s anger if Helen found my cigarette butts up here. I may come up here often enough to burn my sorrows by cigarettes, but this height is still intimidating, so I always have to scoot back a little from the edge before standing up. The autumn air causes me to wrap my cardigan tighter around my frame. It’s November in New York City, and soon enough, the nights will begin to herald in the bitter cold of winter. Walking towards the door leading inside, I hear from the street, “I hope you have more if you’re hoping to go out tonight!”

Adrienne Weisierski. I go where I had just been and peer out onto the street to find her standing at my front steps with the discarded Marlboro in her fingers. The street lamps illuminate her mahogany eyes as she raises one eyebrow questioningly. As if I could challenge her. Her full lips smirk themselves into a grin as she runs a hand through her ebony curtain of hair. She studies film production at NYU and works behind the concessions counter at the 55th Street Playhouse. Adrienne wants to make films that explore the ‘current American condition’—whatever that means. We met when we were seventeen—in one of the bathrooms of Stuyvesant High School, she asked me to watch the door while she snorted a line of coke before biology with Mr. Hansen—and have been inseparable ever since. Adrienne Weisierski is definitely an *Annunciation Triptych*, though she pretends to be an *Autumn Rhythm*. Noticing the tight-fitting overalls she is wearing over her umber sweater, I realize that perhaps I did not just finish my last cigarette for the night.

“And just what do you have planned?!” I cross my arms over my chest.

“Heathcliff told me that he could get us into Minton’s Playhouse tonight!” Heathcliff—his name is actually Heath, but we do not affiliate with formalities—is a sax player we met at a jazz bar that was not Minton’s Playhouse; the actual name of the place escapes me. After his first show, the three of us took shots of tequila together before he started rolling a blunt.

“Far out! That live music club in Harlem?” I say. We usually go see Heathcliff’s shows at Jimmy Ryan’s, a very prominent jazz club on 54th Street. Despite usually being paired with only his sax, he always outperforms the acts that try emulating Frank Sinatra.

“Exactly that one! So, are you coming or not?”

“Hell yeah! Let me change and I’ll be right down. We’ll need to get another pack before we go, though!”

“Fine by me!”

We see the line trailing outside of the establishment before the taxi even drops us off. Rounding the side of the building, people have continued gathering in single-file formation for almost two blocks. The venue is situated on the first floor of the building with its doors opening up on West 118th Street. Jutting out from the stucco building is the navy storefront that announces the entrance to the club: **Minton’s Playhouse**.

In line, I can already see the odd assemblage that usually congregates at these types of places—closest to the door are the wizened crones who still try to cling to how they behaved when Hoover ‘governed the country’ (they will light the first cigars and give out whiskey kisses), in the back are the dejected adolescents who are sporting awkward plaid patches on their bell

bottoms that they must have bought out of some bohemian Gap catalogue (they will be the first to leave when they realize that Billie Holiday won't be making an appearance tonight), and in between the polar opposites lies my crowd: some of us will wear those saffron eyeglasses with frames shaped like circles while modeling the newest denim jacket and we always, always have a cigarette ready to be lit in our hands (we are the ones who trip on substances in the bathroom). Before we left my house, I changed into a wardrobe fit for the occasion—a cropped black turtleneck, a cream short skirt, and of course, a denim jacket to top it off.

Walking upon the crowd, Adrienne glances at the hippies and says, “Charlotte, I’m going to need a cigarette if we’re going to have to stand through another flower child’s opinion on how artisan coffee is better for the bean.” I snort as I pass her one.

I take a cigarette for myself as well and light up. “It could be worse. The oldies could be telling us how the Beatles don’t know what real music is.” Adrienne snickers as we take our spots in the back of the line. “Did Heathcliff say where we should meet him, by the way?”

“He just said he would meet us outside,” she shrugs. Checking her watch, Adrienne remarks, “It’s 9:37 right now and the show starts at 10, so I’m assuming he’ll find us soon.” She looks up and tries craning her neck over the people in front of us. “I’m too short to see over all these people, can you see if he’s at the door?”

The cherry red platforms I decided to strap on give me the advantage of seeing over the crowd and all the way to the doors that lead inside the venue. I estimate that we are about forty people from the entrance, which causes me to squint as I’m surveying the front, but soon enough, I see him.

He has close cropped hair with the front stylishly gelled up. The smattering of rainbow light emanating from within the jazz club gives his normally-chestnut hair a colorful sheen that is

actually unsettling. But his eyes are unmistakable—they have longer lashes than mine and their ice blue glow shimmers even from this far away. Besides the magic he can make with his hands as they strum their way across a guitar, they are the most beautiful quality about him. He told us that he can play four instruments besides whichever one he will be performing with tonight and that he attended Mannes for a semester before dropping out since he decided that he did not want to be taught what he already knew. He speaks matter-of-factly and only sings when he's had enough to drink. Heath "Heathcliff" Carter is like me; he is an *Autumn Rhythm*. His musical tendencies smatter themselves into a collision of rhythms that he professes for us on nights like these. He affiliates himself within different styles of music and goes through them as quickly as he goes through a compact of hair gel in a month. Heathcliff does not know what he wants, but God, is his spirit so bright.

"Over there! I see him." I point towards his direction, so that Adrienne can see. "He's at the entrance like you said."

Pushing me out of the line before grabbing my arm, she pulls me with her towards the front. As we shoulder past everyone, glares upon the annoyed flicks of cigarettes are thrown our way. We come upon the entrance, "Well, well, well Heathcliff, it's been too long. What are you playing for us tonight?"

His eyebrows casually raise as he surveys us with that intelligent smirk of his—cast wholly to one side, lips pursed only a little. "Well, for *y'all*, I was planning on playing a little bit of Sinatra." Heathcliff is from Oklahoma. I forget the name of the exact city, but from what he has told us, I don't think it can really be considered a town, let alone a city. This upcoming March will be his third year living in New York.

"Oh, wow how you woo me." I roll my eyes at Adrienne's remark.

“So, you can actually get us in here, tonight?” I ask.

“Of course, that’s not even a question. Come in with me and no one should care enough to confront you.” One of the perks of being friends with a performer is that we can always get in for free and ahead of everyone else. “Just try not to make a scene like last time.” His chuckle escapes his grin.

A month ago, Heathcliff finally invited Adrienne and I to one of his shows down in the Village; it was also the first time he showcased his punk talent in front of an audience. Like here, we were allowed to skip the line and we didn’t have to pay to get in, but according to Heathcliff, we may have taken one too many tequila shots since we may have ‘crashed’ his stage. We were only giving the people what they wanted that night: a live rendition of “I Got You Babe.”

“We’ll certainly try our hardest, but you know we can’t promise anything.” Adrienne winks at him. “Charlotte and I just might do a line off of one of your guitars. You really never know.”

When I enter Minton’s Playhouse, my senses become a little disoriented. Inside, the lights are low and the dark wood tables are plentiful, their black coloring soaking up all of the available light left in the dingy space. The chairs are plush and already pushed in. The walls have portraits of famous jazz musicians: Billie Holiday rests over there above the piano, Miles Davis perches himself between the restroom doors, Frank Sinatra winks from his position over those tables against the wall, and there is Charlie Parker sitting on top of the stage. I smell the musty scent of cigarettes that were put out the night before. The audience is already milling about the entire place, and the waiters move to and fro with drinks and hors d’oeuvres that violently shake on the

trays they balance so effortlessly on their hands. I hear no singing, nor am I trying to sway to some slow, intelligible rhythm because it is absent. This din of noise is only present because of the crowd of people.

I love it here.

“I’m the first show tonight,” Heathcliff says. His eyes flare up above his smile as he rubs his hands together. Embracing both of us, he exclaims into our hair, “Thank you so much for being here.” Before letting us go and leaving us, he adds, “Y’all better be the closest ones to the stage!”

“Do you think he’s nervous?” I ask.

Adrienne surveys the setting around us. “I would be if I were him This must feel like a once in a lifetime opportunity for him.” She looks at the stage a bit more. “So, we better be as loud as we possibly can.”

“That’s not going to be a problem for us!” I glance towards the bar. “Shall we get a drink first?”

“You read my mind.”

At the bar, we both order double Manhattans—Adrienne loves her whiskey and I love my cocktails—as I look around the club. While it is not crowded yet, the people waiting outside have begun to filter in with us. There are a few people already shadowing the stage—four of the oldies and three of the hippie Gap kids. So far, it won’t be much of a struggle to get in the front. The bartender gives us our drinks and I thrust Adrienne and I in between the two separate factions to get to the very middle of the scaffold. Adrienne mutters “sorry” and “excuse us” and “sorry” again as we meander through the throng of people. Slowly nudging our way forward through shoulders and over stray feet, I recognize the irritated looks given to us, but when we reach the

front, when the stage is only a bristle in front of me, I realize it does not matter. “Cheers,” Adrienne and I clink our glasses together. Looking over everyone else’s angry scowls, I register that a lot of people have come for the show tonight, so much so, that I can no longer make out the entrance. “I had no idea that Heathcliff had *this much* of a following.” It was no surprise that he had a small following—local performers usually pick up devoted admirers, especially if they are as talented as him.

“Maybe they’re here for the other show.” Adrienne muses.

“Do you know who it is?”

“No idea.”

I almost check my watch for the time, but soon enough, Heathcliff starts walking out on the stage and the dizzying cacophony that was present before climbs in volume. His saxophone is strapped around his body by his favorite purple-and-green-checkered strap and his fingers gently nestle the keys, teasing them for their sound, testing how vibrant their fervor will be tonight for us all. Heathcliff struts towards the microphone and speaks, “How is everyone doing tonight?” I suppose he saves his y’all for us. Behind him, an electric guitar sits on its stand, silently judging the performer in front of it. Perhaps it is for the next singer.

The familiar reassurance by the audience through their raucous cheers makes him smile. His teeth are fully showing and his gentle laugh croaks throughout the room. He finds us at the front and winks before addressing the entire place again. “I hope you don’t mind if I play a little something for y’all tonight.” There it is. Claps and croons of delight answer him. “I’m counting on the fact that if you guys don’t enjoy the show, at least my only two friends here will.” He pauses for dramatic effect. “Because they have to.” Heathcliff laughs as he glances at us again.

He clears his throat before bringing the mouthpiece of the instrument to his mouth.

Heathcliff has taught me the parts of the sax before, so when his digits splay over the spatula keys, I know that when he presses each one, he's manipulating the sound that is actually being produced by the reed. He rests the bell against his leg and dances to his own song. Eyes closed, lips pursed in concentration, his throat bobs each time a new note interrupts or comes behind the one that was played before it.

We all sway together, not in unison, but in disjointed pockets, each of us understanding the musicality differently. More people have been let in to see the show since he started playing. His sound is comforting and wraps me in a cocoon that separates myself from everyone else. A wrinkle appears in the crease right above his nose and his eyebrows are furrowed as the intensity of his timbre conquers and eradicates any thought I had before listening to him play. The flawless harmonies each preserve their own kind of agony and the vibrations of the resonance replace harsh realities with the fantasy I need. It is brassy and beautiful. It is the kind of sound that makes me want to stab the canvas at home with all the paints I have ever bought. Smatter here. Douse that color out because it just throws off the entire masterpiece. Splatter there. Carefully construct that line along the edge of it. Splash that tint right there in the white space of it all.

Heathcliff will sing later in the night once his groupies buy him a round at the bar, but for now he stops and the crescendo of quiet becomes deafening. We are at a loss for our usual quips and still struggling to cope with the silence. I am the first to clap. I am glad there are no tears pooling in my eyes, but if I were to cry, at least it would be for art.

Everyone else puts their hands together after I do.

He chuckles. "Thank y'all so much. Thank you!" I cannot tell if his eyes are glinting because of the stage lights that are clearly blinding him, but he brushes a hand against his eye

and the watery quality disappears. He pauses, “I’m only allowed to play one more song, and it’s going to be a little different.” As Heathcliff begins to shrug off his saxophone, a stage hand flits from the eaves to take it from him before he grabs the electric guitar behind him. Striking his thumb upon the chords of it, the instrument announces itself to us, “Lately, rock music has become a popular genre for me, so I’d like to show y’all a piece I have been working on.”

I sense the crowd drawing closer to the stage while he inches closer to the microphone. And the delicate quiet, which suffocated us after his first song, is now shattered with erratic chords roughly lashing it away. The rhythm of the chords angrily speeds up, igniting a fervent excitement from us. Instead of swaying and allowing the music to coarsen through us, Heathcliff’s unrefined vocals—the lyrics expressing themselves through wailing grunts—inspire us to utilize our mutual agonies and aggressively brandish them upon the storefronts of 5th Avenue. Despite not knowing the composition of this song, we all match our projected pitches to his influential chant. Our bodies pulse to the volatile tempo as we coalesce into one another while wholly separating from each other at the same time. Heathcliff’s bizarre tune becomes our normality—we grant it the power to strike out. It is destructive and intoxicating. I am motivated to attack a canvas with all of the reds and browns and whites and blacks puddled on my easel. There can be no symmetry because there is no order to this abstraction. I want the colors to interrupt each other as they frantically scramble to conquer available territory. I want these sinister shades to pull me into their dangerous games.

“HEATHCLIFF! HEATHCLIFF! HEATHCLIFF!” Adrienne begins the chant and it’s soon taken up by the entire audience. I didn’t register the moment Heathcliff stopped singing and they began cheering because I am stunned. That was not just art. It was too exhilarating. That was an *experience*.

He looks down at us and mouths, “Thank you.” He stands there for a minute or two more and thanks the crowd three more times before retreating backstage.

“Will you go to the bathroom with me?” Adrienne interrupts the awe of my night.

I take a moment, “Sure, but when we come back, let’s get some food,” I reply.

The bathroom is across the entire place and we are in the middle of everyone, so as we struggle through the masses, constant apologies are made on my part to these strangers. Like me, everyone’s face is still lost in admiration for what just happened. It was an experience that can have no real words to describe the actual beauty of it, but I will try to express it for the rest of my life most likely. Or just ask Heathcliff what his intentions were.

I register that we are in the bathroom when the door slams shut behind me. I realize I was lost in thought the whole journey there.

“Okay, you ready?” Adrienne starts.

“For what?”

From the front pocket of her overalls, she brings out two neatly-cut, tightly sealed squares of aluminum. Oh. “We’re about to fucking trip. Imagine listening to Heathcliff sing while rolling on this.” Before I can reply, she starts unwrapping the foiled drugs. I see distorted smiley faces looking up at us—their yellow complexion starkly contrasting against the silver of their packaging.

I look back up at her, “Cute.”

Wrinkling her nose, Adrienne says, “I made sure they were double dipped, too.” Holding her tongue out while scraping the tab out from the aluminum with her right index finger, she delicately positions the drug under her tongue. This kind of reminds me of that one kid from fifth grade who always held their tongue out to see how fast it would dry. Tony? Robert? I do not

know and I drop the idea of him with a shrug because he's not here now. "Thank God, there's no coppery taste this time. You ready for yours?" She unfolds my square.

I dip my finger and slide the tab onto it. I close my eyes and with my tongue out, I hurriedly place the smiley face under it—inadvertently suffocating its dazed smirk. Opening my eyes, I can see myself in the mirror.

The whites of my eyes flash all over the place. My splattered skin looks rough in the harsh fluorescence of this bathroom lighting. Are my cheeks sallow because of this drug or the cigarettes I smoke? Is the tab on my lips or is it just a shine in the mirror? I rub the glass, but still cannot tell. But for a second, I think I see black rings embedded in my gums and almost recoil in horror. I blink again and they're gone. My hair, usually hanging close to my neck and right there above my shoulders, distresses itself in stringy champagne strands. There is an ethereal heat that is enveloping my skin; a light sanguine shadow blushes across my face, which further erases my former fair-skinned complexion. My fingers are tingling, my body is buzzing, my sense of shape begins to blur in the mirror when I look down at myself. Robert Campin never got the chance to paint me because Jackson Pollock already did. I look up at my reflection one more time, "Damn, I still need a cigarette."

Adrienne pulls out her lighter and my pack. "Do you think they would care if we just go ahead and smoke right here?"

Adrienne and her rhetorical questions. I take a cigarette from the pack in her outstretched hand. Clicking the lighter, I breathe in from it.

This is why I am an *Autumn Rhythm*.

Because I can never say no.

Adrienne

The trains coming through the 110th Street Station at the corner of Cathedral Parkway are always changing their alliances. Hidden within the usual collage of amateur art constantly being painted over, local mobs never fail to add their signature marks. In the mornings, the fronts of the subway trains are marred by graffitied skulls adorning top hats, signifying a new territory claimed by the Dirty Ones—a gang that has recently acquired notorious fame in Brooklyn. Sometimes, if they are feeling especially creative, they craft the Grim Reaper within a gothic cross, too. But in the evenings, the hull of the subway cars are covered in black spades to denote the gang that shares the same name. They have recently begun spreading throughout Manhattan in their aggressive search for new recruits.

But tonight, I see neither of their insignias. Instead, an emaciated devil surrounded by flames glares from the side of one of the subway cars across the platform. It's not an emblem I immediately recognize, but this is Harlem, so the possible emergence of a new gang comes as no surprise. I am waiting for the number 2 train going to the Upper East Side and it's 6:06 right now, which means it should be arriving in almost thirteen minutes—if the arrival clock overhead is to be trusted.

There are few things I lie about: I tell Mom and Dad I'm regularly attending Mass every Sunday and that my Hail Marys kiss the beads of my rosary every night; I tell my sister, Alex, I will never smoke grass or snort coke or swallow happy pills; I tell Charlotte I believe she's right about me being an *Annunciation Triptych*. And I tell my parents that to be a feminist would be to go against all that I want to achieve: to find a dependable man to marry and start a family with him one day. Of course, if that were true I would not currently be on my way to the first New York chapter meeting for the National Organization for Women. According to the flier I was

given almost a week ago, the meeting is supposed to be in the basement of some building between Second Avenue and Seventy-Third Street.

I would not consider myself a radical feminist—I wouldn't even say I am a full-fledged feminist yet, whatever that means, but I'm curious about what they have to say at the very least. I don't think that when I marry a man I will be subjecting myself to slavery or that my bras are a sign of my willing oppression. But when Diane, the nice woman who informed me about this meeting, asked if I have ever felt dismissed in my classes where I am the overwhelming minority or if I feel like I'm always being verbally harassed whenever I walk on campus, I can't deny I wasn't inspired to want to change something about it. And much to the chagrin of my father, I believe I should be given the right to fight for a better life than the one I am expected to have after graduation.

It is dim in here. Graced with viewing indeterminate, spray-painted masterpieces, I notice that the concrete walls—behind what Charlotte might describe as “artistry”—are a charcoal shade that absorbs the flickering weak light of the lamps above me. After struggling to discern the messages being professed by the ingrained chunky, awkward words, I give up and sit down on the closest bench. There are tiled panels with 110th Street elegantly scripted upon them in a cobbled patchwork pattern of white, blue, tan, brown, and green. On the platform, there are a dozen people: there is a couple on another bench cuddling the cold from outside away; against the wall, about seven others are pouring their faces into whatever daily newspaper they bought before walking down here; and leaning on the pillars are two individuals separately reading their own novels. Over there is a homeless man drumming merrily on upturned white buckets—I smile and nod at him. And then there is me.

Charlotte would never come down here because she believes it is too dangerous, which might be true with the news nicknaming the subway as the “muggers express”, but a certain kind of allure lies beneath the subway stations of Manhattan.

If I had my Super 8 camera with me, this would definitely be a beautiful scene to capture—the grime of the station, the normalcy of New Yorkers being defeated by the latest crossword puzzle, the opportunity to share company with the rats and other lowlifes. Discreetly holding up my left hand, I imagine the handle of the Super 8 nestled there and bring the metaphorical lens to my left eye and let the film roll. I catch it all as I slowly rove back and forth: the hum of distant subway cars in the tunnels, the murmurs emanating from the strangers around me, and even the cursory glances thrown my way. They are probably assuming I am a spaz, but I do not care. This is the American condition—or, at least a version of it.

Thankfully, before anyone has much time to ruin the scene, the subway announces its arrival by its wheels screeching intensely in opposition of the tracks attempting to brake its momentum. Over the clangor, I can barely make out the intercom’s voice heralding the presence of it. Whatever peaceful silence permeated between us on the platform is promptly shattered when the doors open as the books are closed and the newspapers are folded and the affection ceases. Putting away the pretend Super 8, I tell myself, “And cut,” as I race alongside everyone else for an available seat on the nearest subway car. It takes almost a minute before I find a seat two away from a woman draped in a voluminous ivory overcoat. Her varnished lips just barely twitch into a smile when we make eye contact.

As I walk down Seventy-Third Street, I walk near the few trees that lie on the sidewalk. Their trunks struggle to reach the heights of the surrounding buildings, the elongated branches

attempting to stretch for the sun's light and escape the plight they are subjected to. There are birds chirping from their timbered belfries, and the few leaves still left to stand against this autumnal season suicide to the pavement each time these same birds bounce onto a different bough. Some people pass me by, keeping to themselves. Others hail down cabs on the corner and flash a finger right after they scream their especial obscenities at the drivers that ignore them. On my left, in contrast with the artificial nature to my right, there is the familiar haze of apartment buildings too indistinguishable from each other. I walk past five before walking into one of them. Once inside, I take a left towards the stairwell and descend down the steps.

At the bottom, I see a woman holding a door open with a gloved hand. She wears a plain olive dress befit with a white collar and white cuffs. Smiling as she watches me walk closer, she says, "Hello there, are you here for the meeting?"

"I think so," I venture.

"Good! This is *the* meeting to be at if you are. Miss Friedan is supposed to be our guest speaker tonight!" She squeals. "My name is Barbara!"

"Nice to meet you, I'm Adrienne." I clasp her outstretched hand and shake it.

Barbara glances behind me and asks, "Did you come with anyone?"

I wanted Charlotte to come with me, but she had some family dinner plans her father wouldn't let her get out of. And I thought of asking Alex, too, but unlike me, she doesn't lie to our parents. "No, I didn't," I reply. "Do you mind if I sit with you? You seem more familiar with this than me."

"Of course! Let's go in and find a seat. I can introduce you to my girlfriends!"

We walk in together and while I may have not come with anyone else, Barbara seems to know everyone here. She waves and exclaims greetings to every girl we pass. "Say Barbara," I start, "How do you know everyone here? Isn't this the first meeting?"

Nodding, she answers, "Yes, it's the first meeting for New York's National Organization for Women, but some of us have been meeting for a while now. Haven't you been to a consciousness-raising session?" As I shake my head, she calls to a group of girls we come upon, "Everyone, I would like you to meet our new recruit, Adrienne. Adrienne, this is Patty, Judith, Margaret, Caroline, and Diane!" She points to each of them in turn.

They all wave to me. "Adrienne!" Diane shoots up. "I'm so glad you came!" She puts her arm around me and pulls me to her side. To the others, she declares, "I found this girl at NYU last week when I was giving out fliers. See, I told you college girls care!"

"Diane, that is the first college recruit to walk through the door tonight." Patty rolls her eyes. I'm not sure if I should be offended or proud of her statement.

"Either way, do you ladies mind scooting over for us?" Barbara asks. The two of us shoulder next to them, and as Barbara catches up with her friends, I take in my surroundings. We're all sitting behind long, curved tables facing the front of the room. It reminds me of my seminar classes. Upon coming in, I noticed there was a variety in the ages of the people here, and now as I look around, I see I was right. The majority of them look like they could be in their late thirties like the women next to me, but there are pockets of women who look like they could be in their early sixties. So far, I have to admit, I am the youngest one here.

I turn my attention to the front of the room and have to hold in my gasp. Even though Barbara told me earlier that she was going to be here, I still wasn't ready to see Betty Friedan in person. Besides being an infamous name at home, her face was plastered in a lot of different

newspapers when *The Feminine Mystique* came out. I haven't read her book yet, but I've heard plenty about it. She looks just like the pictures: dark hair cut closely to her chin, a simple black shift dress with a collar, probing and determined eyes. I watch her talk with the women standing next to her. With awe, I wonder what it must be like to be her, to be able to court controversy and spark conversation by the creation of one book.

After a while, one of the women talking with her walks towards the podium in front of them and taps the microphone lightly, "Good evening, everyone. My name is Jean Faust and I would like to welcome all of you ladies to the first New York chapter meeting for the National Organization for Women." We all take up the applause she begins. "Before we start with the activities we have planned for tonight, I would like to welcome a very special guest to give a speech. I'm sure she needs no introduction, but why don't we all give a hearty welcome to Miss Friedan."

The clapping that ensues grows in volume as Betty Friedan takes over the podium. Unfurling the papers she draws from her purse and placing them in front of her, she clears her throat and reads, "Equality of rights under the law shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or any state on the basis of sex." She looks up and fixes her gaze on all of us. "That is what we are fighting for. Now, I know I don't need to tell you this, or why else would you be here? But right now, in the United States of America, a woman can be discriminated against simply because she is a female. Simply because she was not *fortunate* enough to be born a man." A knowing smile stretches across her face. "Every day, across the nation, *we* are harassed and ridiculed at our places of work, *we* are dismissed in public, and even in our own homes, *we* are expected to maintain its sense of safety, while not being able to find any for ourselves." For each

point, she counts up a finger. Looking back down at what I am assuming is her speech, she speaks, “August 18, 1920. Does anyone know why this day has significance?”

Someone must have raised their hand behind me because Betty nods and points in my direction. I turn around with the girls at my table to see who is answering. “It was the day the Nineteenth Amendment was ratified and women were allowed the right to vote.” Patty’s earlier assessment of this congregation is proven wrong. Clearly, I must not have been the only college girl Diana managed to convince to be here because this girl seems to be my age, too. She’s wearing an orange and purple checkered pleated skirt that rests right above her knees with a blouse tucked into it. Her strawberry blonde hair is expertly combed back with a headband.

“You are exactly right. Women have only had the right to vote for not even fifty years. And it is one of the few rights we are even afforded.” Casting her hands out to the room, she really begins to get into her speech. “This is why we are here tonight, why we *need* a National Organization for Women. Contrary to what Phyllis Schlafly or the news might say about me, what I propose is not women taking over society, but for men and women to be considered equal under the law, and in time, by society. And I know we can make this dream come true if we refuse to give up. Thank you.” Cheers sound throughout the room as she steps away from the podium.

While I felt ashamed earlier for having never been to a consciousness-raising session, I realize I didn’t need to be as this first meeting seemed to take the form of one. First, we go around the room and give our name, age, and what we do, which proved I was right about that girl, too, as her name is Jacqueline—she prefers to be called Jackie—and she is a student at Columbia Law. After we’re done introducing ourselves, we are encouraged to stand at the podium and share the problems we’ve experienced in our lives as women. Barbara tells me it’s a

great way to make us realize that we're not as isolated as we may think we are, but I choose to stay seated and observe. Woman after woman come and go from the podium: Jean tells us how her old boss kept promotional offers from her, Patty talks about how her husband won't allow her to get a real job, Diane hopes she won't give birth to daughters for fear their father will love them less than if she had a son, and Jackie bravely confesses to us the abortion she forced herself to get after being raped when she was a student at Radcliffe. She doesn't shed a single tear nor does her voice falter as she recounts the most gruesome details. The entire room is captured by her story and when she finishes, we all slowly stand and applaud her.

After the consciousness-raising session, we vote for our first chapter president to which Jean Faust gladly accepts the position, and we decide on the structure of the organization. Creating four separate governing branches and a few other smaller committees, I choose to join the Arts Committee. The other women in my committee and I will be responsible for the promotion of women actively participating in the arts around the city. Barbara and her friends make up most of the Board of Directors and Jackie joins my committee. We conclude our first meeting with plans to meet in two weeks on the same night at the same time.

I wonder what my family would think of me as I pledge my signature to the first National Organization for Women New York Chapter roster.

I can't imagine my parents would be too proud to know that their youngest daughter is now a feminist at least by writing.

I get back home an hour after the meeting ends. Tiptoeing through the doorway, I try to quietly nudge the apartment door shut, but that creaking noise squeaks throughout our apartment all the

same. Jim, our maintenance guy, tells Alex that he can have that fixed every other time he checks on our apartment; however, that was almost two years ago and my sister has lived here for three.

This upcoming January will mark the first year that I have lived with my sister, yet after almost eleven months here, I can honestly say there is still no trace of myself in the rooms that are not my bedroom. I almost take a left towards my room, but the kitchen light still lashes its glow against the gray hallway walls. “Alex? Why are you still up? Don’t you have work in the morning?” I creep towards the kitchen after putting my coat on the hook by the door. My sister sits at the table, her favorite mug steaming precariously close to the book in her hand, and her glasses press tightly against her eyes.

Noticing me standing in the doorway, Alex takes off her glasses and says, “I could ask you the same question.” Alexandra Marie Weisierski, a woman married to her work and desperately hoping to someday have the same status with James, who she’s been going steady with for almost two years now. Growing up, where I spent most of my money down at the local cinema consuming as many films as I could, Alex built up her own personal library, which is why she was quick to jump on the opportunity to be a secretary to some editor at Burberry Publishing Press. She is twenty-three, and Charlotte says that Alex is an *Annunciation Triptych* like me. I suppose our parents would be thrilled to know that their children are so highly regarded and esteemed by her philosophy. “Where have you been, Adrienne?” Her voice takes on a stern note.

I treasure my sister, but she’s the kind of person to assume I’ll become a commie if she finds out I went to one feminist meeting. And then she’ll run straight to my parents and tell them everything, which would spell the end of my enrollment at NYU. So, I come up with a lie on the

spot and since it's a Wednesday I say, "To be honest, I didn't want to tell you, but since it's so late, I'll just come clean." I let her hang for a moment. "I was at confession."

Immediately, Alex recoils, not at all expecting that response. "Confession? For what?"

I shrug and ruminates. "I don't know. . .because it felt right. . .with all the stress of my exams coming up, I wanted to find peace and comfort with God." Even I'm impressed with my lie. "I feel like my going to Father Timothy will help me more than my usual daily prayers can." I do not pray daily if I can help it, but she doesn't know that. "Do you know what I mean?"

My lie is enough to placate her because she says, "I sure do! You know, right before my interview with Burberry, I went to confession because I felt like I was sinning being a woman and wanting to work."

I couldn't help myself. "How did that go?"

"Father told me I would only be sinning if I developed higher aspirations than my station and denied myself the opportunity to someday fulfill my wifely duties."

"I see." According to Charlotte's weird philosophy, I wonder if my sister actually knows what she wants or if she's just been told what she wants and convinced herself that it was true.

"So, what did Father tell you? Did God give him wisdom?"

I nod. "He sure did. He said that I should not worry so much because if I work hard enough, then I'll be able to prove to my professors that my work is just as good as my peers' work."

"Aren't you one of the only girls in your classes, though?"

"Yeah, why?"

Alex giggles and tries to cover her mouth, "I mean, that's quite a lofty piece of advice, isn't it?" So much for sibling support.

“I don’t think so, besides, I’m probably just exaggerating what I was told.” Hopefully, she’ll let this go. “But I have class tomorrow morning, so I’m going to head to bed and say my prayers before it gets too late. Goodnight.” I give a wave as I go towards my room.

“Goodnight!”

When I get inside my room, I close the door and quietly lock it. Standing still, I survey my bedroom. My bed dwarfs the area—it is still unmade from this morning; a wild mass of a deep blue cottoned comforter strangling pale pink sheets. The pillows watch from the top, making bets on which will win the fight. On the windowsill, four candles with blackened wicks seem to reminisce the flames of last night. My planner sits on the nightstand, perched by the lamp, and next to it is my rosary. I have a calendar that hangs by the door, with dates meticulously scribed upon the paper. Various X’s cross out several rows of boxes. I like to make sure I stay organized. On the walls, I’ve taped several different magazine clippings of my favorite bands and films. Springing from the violet shag carpet on my floor, I land in the bed and let out a deep breath I didn’t realize I was holding.

Sure, there are few things I lie about, but I realize that after tonight, I’m definitely going to be lying about so much more now.