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Finalist - Ode to Manhattan

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Ode to Manhattan

Anna Kaul

Part One

The room was hazy, filled with smoke and unrealized potential. We sat on stained couches, our panting voices writing what we believed prophecy. Earmarked Jack Kerouac meticulously strewn across mismatched wooden tables. Bob Dylan records scattered next to a turntable with a broken needle. Torn Salvador Dalí posters adorning nearly white walls. We believed it poetry.

“Quit it,” my roommate giggled, her voice playful as she clung to a half-smoked cigarette, her nails painted dark blue—*not black*, she insisted—carefully chipped.

I rolled my eyes, my own cigarette down to its final breath. Lately it had always been like this with her.

She laughed as her boyfriend continued to kiss her neck.

“Get a room,” I joked, sort of.

“You’re no fun anymore,” she joked back, her pleading eyes burning against me, daring me to look back.

I put out my cigarette and continued reading. Our cramped apartment, small enough for two but too small for three, gave me no room to breathe. I was tired of swallowing haze. Her nearly black nails bothered me. Her insistence on smoking only Marlboro Reds infuriated me now. Suffocation supplied by six hundred square feet.

“Let’s quit smoking,” I said. “I mean it. For good.”

“Okay,” she said as she hurled her cigarette across the room with every bit of dramatic flair I’d expect from her.

Eyes still on my book, I snarled, “Pick it up. Or if you’re too lazy, I’m sure Brian will do it.”

At his name, Brian’s ears perked up. “Fetch,” I thought I said quietly.

“Oh get over yourself.” She heard me. “Ever since you’ve been reading so much you’ve gotten so fucking cynical.”

“Realistic—,” I corrected her.

“Annoying,” she snapped.

Finally, the sound of footsteps across cold concrete, intermittently muffled by ratty Persian rugs. “You’re fucking whipped dude,” I laughed as he retrieved my roommate’s unfinished cigarette.

“Jealous much?” She muttered, her voice like nails.

“Fine, I’m going out.”

I walked to the door, throwing on thrifted denim which I once thought was cool but now thought was cheap.

“Bye Brian,” but my eyes were fixed on my roommate who was waiting for him on her shabby throne. “Tell your *mother* not to wait up for me tonight.”

I grabbed my keys and opened the door, the slow but sudden squeal startling me. Brian’s voice, endearing, pitiful, was whispering into his girlfriend’s ear, “Why would I tell my mother...?” I could hear her eyes roll from all the way down the stairs.

Part Two

The brisk air felt positively sterile compared to our stuffy apartment. I felt the wind nip at my nose, but instead of hiding in my scratchy denim jacket, I let it bite me.

In college, I scoffed at the idea of a nine-to-five. Now, I questioned my own fragile ideals, wondering if a real job could offer me some semblance of stability. I'd been freelancing for blogs with names like *Maneater* and *Pussy Rant*. It doesn't matter because they're all pretty much the same. I wrote a few pieces until women realized that subscribing to *Strong & Sappho* or whatever it was called really did nothing to protect them from the weird man in the mail room who would not stop offering unsolicited back massages, no matter how many times he heard "me too." Readership plummeted, advertisers recognized their own misplaced confidence in the female agenda, and paychecks were snatched from my pocket before I could even think about replacing recycled jean jackets.

I told myself that this was okay. My roommate, in her nonchalant but well-intentioned way, told me too.

"Ava," she said. "This is exactly what you need. It couldn't have come at a better time, really." She paused, making herself excited now. "Take a few days and find yourself, I mean really find yourself." She ran her one free hand through recently dyed hair. "Honestly, I'm jealous."

At first, I ran with it. I wandered the streets of Manhattan like the authors I idolized, looking for my own inspiration in blowing winds and benevolent brownstones. I told myself that they, too, lived in smoky rooms and squalor until they were discovered by the laggard masses.

But now I scoffed at my roommate's advice, daring her to walk in my shoes to prove her pretended jealousy. I often felt loneliness creeping up behind me, tapping my shoulder and running to hide as soon as I turned around. Wandering was a waste

without someone to wander with. I could only talk to myself, and I had grown tired of talking back.

My roommate used to stroll the streets of New York with me, and in those meandering moments we dreamt of far-away futures together. Our squalor felt like splendor with our art and our dreams enough to satiate us. As the years ticked by, as Brian crept in, I realized art was not enough to pay the water bill and dreams didn't make breakfast in the morning.

These thoughts always made the wind feel colder. Without knowing where I was walking, I ended up where I always did. I stopped in front of my favorite brownstone in the city. From the outside it was beautiful, flanked with lush green ivy that both blanketed and protected the profound wooden door. I slipped my hands into my pockets, scuttling across the street without taking even a moment to look for traffic. I was drawn to the door like a magnet drawn to cold metal.

I peeked into windows protected by black iron. The harsh glare made it hard to see what was inside, but I could make out a brown leather couch and white walls. An impressive fireplace with smoldering logs. A table with two tall candles. My hand nearing the doorknob. Fingers grazing icy brass and a heartbeat. A voice behind me.

“Beat it!” He yelled, his severe inflection pulling me from my trance. Fear flickered before my unblinking eyes. As I froze, I could hear only two sounds—the wind swirling and occasional gusts slapping the sides of my face. I didn't dare turn around.

“Beat it!” He yelled again, louder this time. He laughed, and I heard the sound of feet thumping cold concrete. I sighed and turned around. He had eyes that drooped nearly to his feet where his pants were ratty and torn. His sneakers had large holes

where naked toes jutted out, tapping to the beat of a song no one could hear. He wasn't talking to me, he was lost in a fantasy.

Knowing the man was not looking at me, I turned back without hesitation and opened the door.

Part Three

The rugs were pristine and Persian, placed methodically on polished hardwood floors. I listened carefully for any sign of movement, but I realized no one was home. I flounced about the brownstone like it was my very own, stopping every once in a while to gaze at framed photos of a family hung in places of prestige. The photos were all slightly faded, and newer ones hadn't taken their places. There was a girl with a smile and an older boy with a frown and two parents who didn't seem to know how to do either.

I wandered my way onto the second floor, taking the steps two at a time. It was Sunday morning, and the family was likely at church. As my foot graced that final step, I heard a jarring sound. It was strange but familiar, a sound I had heard so many times before. It was the sound of a tiny mockingbird. I saw the colorful little thing emerge from its nest in a tacky cuckoo clock. The clock was out of place amidst the fine furnishings. I watched as the bird darted in and out of its hiding place in order to croak the time. For a second, I forgot where I was and pitied the poor bird.

Ten chirps later, I walked into the first room on the left. An imposing bed stood in the middle of the room which was flanked on two sides by large windows. I walked over eight steps before I reached the bed and perched myself on its edge. Luxurious silk met my fingers as I laid and melted into plush linen. To the right, two large mahogany

doors led into a closet. I imagined the unsmiling wife pleading with her husband for “a walk-in, darling,” tapping her manicured nails impatiently against his yielding lapel.

I heard my jacket hit the woven rug with a thud, and I pulled on an Italian fur. For a moment, I looked in the mirror and I wondered if I had the owner’s eyes.

My watch read 10:34, and I knew I should leave before I was found. A guilty creature chanted in my head, its repetition numbing me, “You don’t belong here. You don’t belong here.” I shoved the voice aside as I walked into one more room, the room of a young girl.

I felt as though I stepped into a photo, a scene meticulously composed for the sake of some twisted nostalgia. No one had lived in this room in years. A leather jacket draped haphazardly on a floral chaise. Wallpapered walls were littered with concert posters and abstract drawings done in pen. In the corner, a couple of records stood slouched on an empty bookshelf filled with a smattering of used novels. Next to it was an imposing elaborate desk stacked high with earmarked papers. I picked them up and saw the handwriting of a young woman—only a teen—the papers soft in my calloused hands. Next to the stack sat the small pen which had drawn the art that adorned the walls. The pen had a golden clip and a silver case carved with distinctive patterns. As I stared at it, I saw the sun glisten off its nib, shining from a window near the bed. Before I could breathe, the pen was in my pocket.

I glanced at my watch, realizing that lost in my daydream I had also lost track of time. The family could be home at any second. I made my way toward the door, turning back toward the room once more. This was the room of a girl who didn’t belong. I turned off the light, and I ran down the haunting path out the door.

Part Four

She sat in the back of an empty restaurant at a corner table next to a bright window, which she must have requested. She always made a scene at restaurants, demanding the table “close to the window,” “nowhere near the kitchen or the bathroom, please,” “away from that family—they’re so noisy! rude! irritating!” Her snobbery preceded her in the handful of Manhattan eateries she frequented.

The one she chose today was eerily familiar, though I had never been before. It had a name like The Library or The Study or something, but it didn’t really matter because they were all the same anyways. Large curtains draped tastefully around windows that showcased well-kept streets. Dark mahogany bars were topped with thin-stemmed wine glasses, gripped by young women who sat next to lawyers and bankers twice their age.

“Your father sends his regards,” she said as I sat down. I pulled the crisp napkin off its white china bed and set it in my lap, just as my mother taught me years ago.

“I’m not surprised,” I replied. “What is it this time? Did China call? Pressing tennis match with the President? Too much bourbon last night?”

“You look skinny. Are you smoking again?”

“Does it matter?”

Her slender fingers reached for her water glass. Changing her mind, she leaned back, drumming the table with manicured nails. “Cigarettes are filthy.” She finally took a sip from her glass. “It stays in your lungs, so suffocating. I don’t know how you stand it.”

I leaned back as well, looking out the window as a group of young girls in matching plaid skirts strolled across the street, clutching tall stacks of books. My hand moved instinctively to my pocket, where I twisted cool metal between my fingers. I felt

my own arms get heavy as I remembered carrying Thoreau, Fitzgerald, Brontë, across crowded Midtown streets, laughing with my best friend as we dodged taxis. I remembered sitting in delis talking about A.J., the cute upperclassmen we braided our hair for. I remembered sitting alone in a large house, writing, but mostly waiting for my parents to return.

“How is Hannah? You two used to have so much fun at Columbia together, and now you hardly talk about her. She had such promise...So creative.”

“She’s fine,” I retorted. “Annoying.” I changed my mind. “Her boyfriend is always there just following her around the apartment now.”

“You always did want a dog.”

“I did have a dog, Mom. You gave him to my cousin when he peed on your rug.”

“Well maybe her boyfriend—what’s his name?—Brian? Okay, so maybe Brian will pee on your rug.”

I let out a small laugh and sighed. I had been working up the nerve to tell my mother that I’d seen my father at a bar in the Lower East Side holding the hand of a girl I used to know in high school. The words were prying at my lips, attempting their escape, when I saw the light flooding from the window reflect off my mother’s diamond ring. I thought about how cruel life was for a woman.

“Mom, I think I need to move. I mean it. I’m ready for a change.”

“Honey, you’re always welcome with us. Your room is still there, exactly how you left it. You never come around anymore, but if you did you might decide you actually like it there.”

“No no, you know I couldn’t do that. Out of Manhattan, out of New York. San Francisco, Portland maybe. Philly. I don’t know. Away from here, away from all the noise.”

“Don’t be silly, Ava. You—we are New Yorkers. Now what do you want, the salmon?”

Part Five

The Village was full of coffee shops. This one was Australian, or at least it pretended to be. The appropriate number of succulents hung from braided twine providing just enough color against minimalist-chic white walls. A snobby barista poured overpriced lattes into the hands of yuppie children. I blended in.

There was a policy here—no wifi on weekends—made to foster community or cure its patrons of their reliance on technology or something like that. But when I looked around, the only eyes I saw were ones glued to their iPhones.

It had been one month since the pen found its way to me. It filled in Friday crosswords in the *The Times*, scribbling out the letters it misplaced to create a melancholic mosaic. It wrote my number on the skinny, pale hand of a boy I met at a punk concert. It struck out superfluous words in unedited poetry. Sometimes the pen felt heavy in my pocket, but in my hand, it was positively buoyant. When the pen was in my hand, I could forget how I’d gotten it.

I could tell it had been taken care of, polished and filled with fresh ink. I wondered why, when everything else in the room was so stagnant. But the pen was alive and it breathed words and confidence into me. I saw in its shining metal the reflection of its former owner. I wondered who she was now and if she was proud of herself. I

wondered why she abandoned the instrument that helped her fill earmarked pages and blank canvases. Now, with a proper owner again, the glowing silver floated and danced with me across notebooks that had for so long sat empty on my bedside table. Knowing I had given the pen new life, releasing it from its inhibiting cocoon, how I'd gotten it didn't seem so wrong.

I always scoffed at the idea of a higher power, but if one such deity did exist I was holding it in my lowly little hand. To it I sacrificed my time and energy and in return it bestowed upon me its ambition, which had been hiding in a version of a younger me. Ambition restored, words flowed from its gentle nib like a nightingale's song.

From his tower on Madison Avenue he looked over the city that was his. The livelihoods of thousands felt good in his large and greedy hands. When he looked over the city he knew he owned, he felt powerful.

I wrote until my hand cramped, the pen reminding me it was ready to rest. I scribbled the final sentences, an ending to a story not yet known.

As he sat in his emerald castle, he imagined the day his empire would come crashing down. He would return home, far from the now empty offices, knowing he had only three more lives in his possession. He would grasp to those lives, determined to hang on until they were on the edge of suffocation. But when he would walk up creaky steps and listen for any acknowledgement of his own importance, he would hear only the sound of a cuckoo bird, laughing at him.

When my pen left the paper, I could hear the pages hiss. I stared at the words, hardly believing they were my own. Although I never mentioned his name, my father lingered in every sentence, his severe countenance glaring behind every word.

I folded the pages, using my nails to make two crisp creases. I had a choice. The story could hide in my room and gather dust, a prisoner of its own writer. But the other choice would mean a return to a destiny I never wanted. Would he be disappointed in me, I wondered, or would he be proud? I took a deep breath and realized it didn't matter.

Part Six

“Double Americano, no room.”

“Got it. You look familiar—have you been here before?” In his eyes a smile, hopeful.

“Honestly, I don't know.”

I sat down at the crowded café, slouching at a table big enough for one person or maybe two lovers. It was my third coffee today, but I was on deadline.

That deadline brought power and with that power followed dread. When I looked down at the pen, now accustomed to my grip, I realized that with this story I was gripping the fate of three lives that were not my own. As I scratched edits into marked up pages, every part of me was screaming to let go, but I held tightly to that cooling silver.

I made my way home, the heels of my boots hitting the pavement with crashing thuds. I descended the steps into the subway two at a time, my shoulders brushing against people I'd never meet. But for a few moments in the stillness before the whir of the train and the sound of opening doors we weren't strangers, we were the audience of a violinist playing “La Vie en rose.” The sorrowful song made me think of my mother's red lipstick and floral perfume.

I found myself worrying about my mother again. I tried to tell myself it was because I was afraid of seeing her upset, but I knew the truth. I was afraid of her being upset with me. I had been practicing the words I would use, repeating them on the subway, in the shower, and through sleepless nights. During one of my rehearsals a man looked at me with bewildered eyes, thinking I was talking to him before he realized I was lost in a nightmare.

“Ava, it’s going to be fine. Can you please stop going on about it?” I knew I had been annoying Hannah, but I couldn’t stop thinking about it.

“Honestly, you’re like the most eloquent person I know.” Hannah glared at Brian, while I nodded in mock appreciation.

“Why don’t you write it?” Hannah questioned. I thought I heard her voice stained with resentment. “Seems like all you do is write lately. So just write it down.”

I toyed with that idea once in a while and secreted it away when I got too close. I couldn’t write it, I decided, because written words were permanent but mothers were not.

But the words didn’t feel quite right when they tripped over themselves and stumbled out of my mouth. I croaked the truth, “Dad is cheating on you,” but they felt like wisps of smoke that my mother would swat away before she offered her reprimand.

These same words looked better on paper. My dutiful pen wrote the words in gentle, not quite black, but blue, ink. I placed a stamp on the outside of an unassuming white envelope and wrote an address I knew by memory. I took a sip from my coffee and leaned back, letting my gaze fall out the open window. I decided deadlines come whether you’re ready or not.

Part Seven

“Ava, we need to talk,” she said, her voice still sharp but with a hint of tenderness.

“Are you breaking up with me, Hannah?” I said, not wholly sarcastically. I had known this day was coming for a while.

She sighed. “I’m moving. Brian and I are moving in together.”

“Are you sure?” I replied. I started, “It’s pretty hard to find pet-friendly—” and then I stopped. In front of me stood my childhood friend, my roommate through the best years and the worst. I sighed as I stepped toward a dirty window and looked down at crowded streets.

“Hannah, are you sure?”

She held out a familiar pack of cigarettes with her hand that bore comfortably chipped nails. I shook my head.

“I’m sure. It’s time for a change, don’t you think?”

My head fell forward, the cool glass giving me comfort that our nonexistent air conditioning could not. Below me walked smiling people and frowning people. Some of them had mothers and I bet some didn’t anymore. Some had roommates and some had lovers. I let out a laugh, surprising even myself.

“You’re right, of course you’re right. We made a good run though, didn’t we?”

“No doubt.”

I nodded, hoping to cry but knowing there was no point. Every summer turns to fall eventually.

I turned around and looked at my friend and my roommate. There was nothing left to say to her or to this stuffy, suffocating apartment that would never be the same

without her. I threw on thrifted denim one last time and headed toward the door, my journey requiring fewer than eight steps.

“Where are you going to go, Ava?”

“Not sure.” But as my hand touched cool metal, I stopped and turned around. We walked to each other, pulled together like magnets. We embraced for what felt like a minute and an eternity all at once.

“I’ll miss you, Hannah.”

She smiled back, saying those words Hannah always knew to say.

“Write me.”

Part Eight

Another month passed, each day feeling more important as they drew me closer to new deadlines. I wandered down new streets and streets I had known since childhood. Echoes of my laughter bounced from the brownstones that had bestowed their inspiration. They seemed to bow to me, their dutiful trees billowing above me. The street beckoned me forward. Ivy borne of that familiar brownstone seemed to remove its grip from the harsh brick, digging its nails out of the grit to welcome me. It felt different today. The gentle breeze that fluttered around me was interrupted by a creaking gate.

Instinctively, I reached my hand toward my pocket to retrieve the key. I stopped myself, moving my hand instead to the mahogany door where I knocked two quick raps. I put my hands in new leather pockets, and I waited.

Finally, the door opened and I greeted her, a woman I had never met before. She smiled at me and said, “Ava. Welcome.” I returned this stranger’s grin, knowing the faded version of my own face was familiar to her.

“I’ll be right back,” she said as she gracefully crossed the hardwoods. I was reminded of Maria, my own childhood nanny. She read to me stories about dragons and princesses, best friends and mother birds. Maria left our family shortly after Arnold, my lost puppy.

As I waited, I glanced around the room which was eerily intact. I looked for cardboard boxes, but instead saw photos of a young family clinging to freshly painted walls. Above the family hung the photo of a couple, and I couldn’t tell if they were happy or resigned. Mostly though, I waited.

The sound of footsteps preceded her. Her stilettos echoed on perfectly polished floors, followed by a voice tinged with feigned disbelief. “Ava, what are you doing here?”

To a stranger she would have sounded surprised, but I knew better. She had known it would only be a matter of time until I showed up at the doorstep. My mother never got enough credit for her acuity, not even from her own daughter. I shook my head and tried to conceal a laugh as I realized my letter told her nothing she hadn’t already known.

For a few moments we stood in silence as I wondered what to say. When I practiced, I didn’t realize I would look into her eyes.

The jolting sound of a bird penetrated the suspended stillness. At the top of the stairs I saw a cuckoo clock, hanging slightly askew as if recently dusted. When I thought about the imprisoned little bird, I wondered if fresh air felt good in its lungs or if it wished it could stay in its nest and hide. Sometimes I couldn’t bring myself to look at it and other times I would watch, counting down the minutes until it would appear again. In those times, I thought it was my friend. In the other times, I thought it was me. The sound of its song was beaten into my memory, singing a melody never sweet but always

certain. When I was younger I often pitied the bird, but now I hoped that chirping would never end.

I turned back to my mother, and I knew she understood. With a shrug, I reached into my pocket and extended my hand. “I’m here to return my pen.”