Midweek

Before leaving the apartment, Hilda stands in front of her bedroom window and writes, “Stayed up until 4am with my art. My walls are close, and the more I create the more they converge. Lunch now with Brian.” She tucks the notebook into her bag.

Her room is small, and the apartment cramped, but not as bad as could be expected from Manhattan. It’s littered with books, books of poetry and essays and strange fiction, and clothes and rolls of fabric and bags of scrap fabric from Parsons and the sewing machine, covered with the pins, and then there are the photos, the dozens of photos hung on the wall and the stacks of photo paper and dark-room experiments. The shoes run out from under the bed and congeal in the corner of her closet—a mess of scuffed skating shoes and chunky boots and impractical platforms. The windowsill, looking out at the brick and window patchwork of the nearest apartment building, is lined with potted plants and rocks and cigarette butts and half drunken cups of tea.

Hilda leaves the apartment, as usual, haphazardly. She adds another layer, a striped trench coat, to her long, sheer pink skirt and a cut T-shirt with a tombstone graphic on it, and walks down the hallway, past her roommates, sticking her ear phones in as she goes. Her roommate, Wally, is blowing leaves around in his room with a fan, but she doesn’t think much of it. She likes the way the red and orange leaves flutter around, the look of concentration on Wally’s face. In the next room, Gerard is lying in bed with two of his closest friends, mostly naked, snoozing to mellow electronic music, pale light streaming in through the slanted blinds that no one had enough energy to close. Hilda slips out of the apartment and twirls down the six winding flights of stairs.

3rd street, between Avenues B and C, is too far from any relevant Subway station to get anywhere on time, but Hilda isn’t thinking about how she is keeping Brian waiting, how she is always keeping people waiting. She is thinking about the life-force of the city, the only energy she can detect these days. The city moves and swells, glimmers in the sun and dances after dark, the trains carry her through it all, with the strangers, with the people who are strangers but look like they could be friends, and with the strangers who are silent but look like they are begging to be asked about their story, about where they came from, and what they are doing here.

Hilda reaches her favorite subway station, the F train on Second Ave, and descends down, pleased by the dark and the anonymity of it, the fact that people will look at her, her thin, wiry body, her unusual freckled face, her bruised legs sticking out of pink gauze, underwear visible, her thin tattooed arms and wrists, and maybe consider her for a moment, consider where she is off to and what tethers her to the earth, but then they will bustle on and no more energy or concern will attached to Hilda as she drifts through the subway station and rumbles uptown.

She never likes traveling uptown, though. Downtown, and the Lower East Side, and Alphabet city, and sometimes Brooklyn, are what make up Hilda’s whole universe. It is the only place worth being, these days, she has decided. Midtown is intoxicated, drenched with the feelings of New York that Hilda wishes to escape. The commuters from the suburbs, from the suburb that she grew up in, flow in through midtown and disperse into office buildings by 9am, but the feeling of impermanence persists. At least people downtown enjoy the night together. They watch it get dark and huddle together around coffee tables, get high and talk about movies, about music, and they sway together until it is time to find a bar that will keep them from their beds. This world is the only one Hilda can imagine herself living in. She is an art student, her friends are art students, and they deem that the only things worthy in life are those that provoke, that challenge.

Riding uptown, Hilda draws out her notebook and writes, “Gave that homeless poet man a dollar. Still need to read his work. He is always there, outside my subway, never takes the subway. A life without subway.” She pauses for a moment and finally scribbles, “Injustice.”

Hilda gets off at Bryant Park, grudgingly, as it is her least favorite view of the city, and walks to Grand Central, smoking two cigarettes on the way. The tourists are nauseating, as are the trees in the park, the people holding hands and taking pictures and eating sandwiches, the people asking her to take flyers. She focuses on reaching Brian, who will now have been waiting for 15 minutes. He is her only brother, and works at a midsize real estate law firm as a paralegal. She finally spots him on the designated corner outside of the train station and he grins and waves. He is tall, like Hilda, but with a tidy blond buzzcut and a professional ensemble consisting of dress pants, a light blue shirt, and a thin red tie.

On the corner, in the middle of the crowds and the smell of street nuts and pretzels, they hug, pat each other on the back, and then stand next to each other, unsure of what to do next. After a moment of awkwardness, Brian speaks. “Want to walk over to that Indian buffet we went to with Dad?” he asks.

“Yeah, that sounds good,” Hilda shrugs. It doesn’t matter to her, and now that she is here, with Brian, she realizes they haven’t seen each other in a month. They live in the same city and they haven’t seen each other in a month. What will they talk about now, she wonders. They start out on the few block walk to the Indian restaurant on 3rd and 46th. Hilda frowns, knowing that Midtown is a lousy place for lunch, especially on a weekday, but she doesn’t say anything.

“Do you have class today?” Brian asks, trying to find a safe subject. It’s a Tuesday, class seems like a good option.

“Yeah.” Hilda responds dispassionately. “I have three hour of printmaking tonight. I was working on my clothing construction midterm this morning. Sorry I was late.”

“Sewing, huh? Can you make me a coat like this for me?” He pokes Hilda’s coat sleeve, the wooly combination of blue and yellow and black stripes.

“I didn’t make this,” she says. “But I made the skirt.” The skirt is clearly see-through and the weather is cold. Goosebumps upon exposed skin. Brian chuckles at the thought of his sister concocting the garment, of deciding to wear it on a freezing cold day, of her wearing it to class, on the subway.

They arrive at the restaurant. It is dimly lit, with embroidered tablecloths and rich red walls. The buffet is crowded, mostly with people in suits, and the pair is squeezed into a small table along the wall.

They look at each other, now, head on, and take each other in. Hilda looks tired, her hair is in a messy, low knot and her face is pale and dark at the same time. Brian looks tired too, but in a neater way.

“So what have you been up to, besides class,” Brian asks.

Hilda does not know how to answer. She goes to class, goes to the studio to do her work, goes to work. Her days are always full. She is a hostess at a vegetarian restaurant on the Lower East Side, and she likes it a lot—she likes her gay coworker Emilio and the music they play in the staff room, she likes coming home with leftover cornbread for her roommates, and she likes the feeling of practicing to be an adult. Her life is not happy, because how can anyone ever be satisfied in this city, but she makes her art and she spends time with her friends and smokes weed in her apartment and this is what her peers are also doing and that feels good. She feels most alive late at night, almost morning, when she is in the middle of a drawing and her room suddenly doesn’t feel confining—it feels nurturing, and her hand spins wildly on the paper, her mind is dark, the music loud and raucous, and she sees something happening, even though her art is not fine, it feels like the only important thing. But she couldn’t tell any of this to Brian. No, she couldn’t. That would require too much backtracking into how she came to choose what is good and what she learned here in the city. Just like he showed her his favorite bands six years ago as an introduction to adolescence, Hilda would have to show him her favorite books and photos and art in order for him to understand. It is all history, the history of the city and the artists that came before. The ones who came here poor and lonely and created their work in the Village, in the Chelsea Hotel, anywhere they could. Hilda could not explain this to Brian right now, not as he took his lunch break from his law firm where he reads and rereads documents to report back to his higher ups. She knows he might be right, in some ways, but right now she could not compute the distance between them. She reports, instead, that she has been working at the vegetarian restaurant and drinking less.

There is silence. Brian eats his lamb vindaloo and saag paneer. Hilda tears tiny pieces of naan bread and puts them on her tongue one at a time, letting them dissolve into nothingness.

Another question. “How is Geranium? Have you talked to her recently?” Brian asks.

“Yeah, she’s ok. She sends me her photos every once in awhile. I have some of them on my wall. I’ll see her when we go home for Thanksgiving, I guess.”

Brian’s mouth is full, but he nods. He does not know what to say. Hilda and Geranium do not operate within his rules. Brian wakes up early, walks 20 blocks to work, gets an iced coffee on the way, and sits at his desk until five. This is sometimes interrupted by a lunch outside of the office, with his Dad or a co-worker, or Hilda, when they manage to make a plan. He feels like shaking Hilda, telling her to quit this childish act of dancing around with her art and her crazy outfits. Of stomping around New York in thick heeled boots or capes or kimonos or whatever Hilda is wearing that week. He doesn’t understand an obsession with being seen, not just as yourself but as a specific installment of yourself, and then showing the world.

“That’s good. I’m excited to go home for Thanksgiving too,” he says.

They finish lunch, and Brian pays. They walk the few short blocks back to Grand Central, chatting about their mom and dad and mutual friends from home. Hilda talks about the pies she is going to make on Thanksgiving, and Brian tells her that he can’t wait to try them.

At the station, Brian has to hurry back upstairs to work, and he gives Hilda another hug. Hilda pulls out her notebook and starts the walk to her beloved subway, to her subway that will ferry her to her downtown haven, and her attention is focused only on her words on the page and the small stretch of sidewalk in front of her. She will write all the way home.