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Breakfast at Tiffany's as a Canvas for Reinvention

On August 20th, 2001, *The New Yorker* published “The Runner,” the gripping tale of how “twenty-nine-year-old drifter, petty thief, and ex-con” James Hogue transforms himself into Alexi Santana, an alluring, “self-educated ranch hand who read[s] Plato under the stars” and gains acceptance into Princeton University. Addressing the fascination with Hogue’s story, David Samuels, the writer of the profile, notes, “Self-invention is the founding subject of American literature. We celebrate the self-made man, and honor the dream of transcending one’s origins; we are suckers for people who invent themselves from scratch.” This could not be more true. Consider F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby*, even now denoted the “Great American Novel,” as a first example. It tells the story of the common James Gatz turned the mesmerizing, all-known Jay Gatsby, chasing an impossible love in deep, New York extravagance. At its heart, the *Gatsby* is a fantasy, a tale of self-invention, and the allure of this type of story is why it endures as a masterpiece, charming and tragic, grandiose and eternal. Thirty years later, reinvention returns in another New York story—this time, *Breakfast at Tiffany's* by Truman Capote, through his heroine “Miss Holiday Golightly, Traveling” (3)—that deserves further recognition in this regard. Capote paints Holly as an undeniably complex character: a vagabond, an amalgamation of vastly different personas, grappling with her past and present, and just subsisting on New York’s ability mask and nurture wild things like herself. At times, she is idyllic, alluring and nonconformist, and at others she remains as damaged as the past she tries to escape. Holly’s multifaceted, transforming identity dominates in *Breakfast at Tiffany's*, allowing

her to serve as Capote's snapshot of a step along the journey of personal reinvention, forever unresolved and fundamentally motivated by a desire to escape.

Capote cleverly chooses his heroine's names in the novella and the personalities that go along with them, using them to highlight the difficult transformation from scarred child-wife Lulamae Barnes to the current standout, the iconic, but struggling Holly Golightly, traveling lightheartedly away from her past and masquerading on the edge of downfall. Capote immerses us in the novella with the narrator's classic opening line: "I am always drawn back to places where I have lived, the houses and their neighborhoods" (1). Here, he establishes the work's placement in the narrator's past and also suggests a general lens through which to examine the text, one that acknowledges both how people are always followed by their pasts, no matter how much they may attempt to escape, and the part that truth plays in Holly's forthcoming reinvention. However, Capote recognizes that there are two very different types of past. There are those that are ordinary and therefore to be transcended, as narrator dreams of doing in, as he details, this "place of my own, the first, [with]... my books... and jars of pencils to sharpen, everything I needed, so I felt, to become the writer I wanted to be" (1). There also exist pasts that are dysfunctional and horrific, that reside in the depths of the mind and are permanently emboldened in every thought—the inescapable ones that all so desire to escape. Note as well how Capote's decision to use a narrator to tell Holly's story, as opposed to having her tell it in the first person, amplifies the sense of mystery and invention about her. She is not confiding in us; rather, the narrator tries to decode her as he himself relates to the story. After moving into his first New York apartment, a rather meager "one room crowded with attic furniture" (1) characterized by "color[s] rather like tobacco-spit" (1)—in essence, one that most would

complain about, the narrator is, surprisingly, empowered; exactly what one would expect from an excited, bright-eyed hopeful traveling to a city of promise and opportunity. Of course, Capote's brilliance ever so subtly resides in the shadows; he introduces the mundane and expected just before the shining starlet, the one and only, arrives. In doing so, he creates the pedestal she will assume before she even makes her first appearance. "She" being the iconic New York character, of the type that is known around the city and that the city is known for: "Miss Holiday Golightly, Traveling" (3), as per the description pinned to her mailbox on a "curious card" (3). Even having not yet met her, the name already stands out to the narrator and constantly "nags [him] "like a tune" (3). Some days later, he finally sees Holly arrive, dressed chic in "a slim cool black dress, black sandals, a pearl choker" (3), with "an almost breakfast cereal air of health, a soap and lemon cleanness, a rough pink darkening in the cheeks" of "a face beyond childhood, yet this side of belonging to a woman" (3). She is trailed by a sleazy, lustful man, who pays for her and her friends' dinner with hopes to later enter her apartment. But, in a dangerous, yet undeniably practiced manner, Holly shuts the door in his face, with the excuse that he only gave her twenty-two cents for a trip to the powder room where she can usually make "fifty... [and] for cab fare too, that's another fifty" (6). This is Holly Golightly, a carefully fashioned character living fifty to fifty, man to man, at her finest. Notice how Capote again plays with contrast, placing the youthful, "healthy" figure of Holly just before this old, lusty guy. However, Capote throws us off the scent here, disguising in the language that Holly is in no way healthy, as we will come to see. The narrator's description reveals the crux of her persona, detailing how Holly, even in how she dresses, toes the fine line between childhood and adulthood under an aura of New York sophistication—as well as other lines too. Here, Holly puts the narrator off, but that

attitude was not what lured him to her apartment in the first place. Holly is glamorous, as seen in yet another instance of her “forgetting” her key and smooth-talking her landlord in her “silly-young and self-amused” (3) for entrance—clearly just a call for attention, a show. And yet, she can also be practical, as she is in calling the narrator “Fred,” her brother’s name, to diffuse the sexual tension when she must escape up the fire escape into his bedroom in nothing but a gown. Here, a pattern arises: Holly constantly gives out roles for her male acquaintances to play—“serve me a drink, lend me your key, answer to the name of Fred,” she commands enticingly—increasing her allure by creating a game, of sorts, and also allowing her to pull all of the strings, in control. She is androgynous as well, with the “ragbag colors of her boy’s hair, tawny streaks, strands of albino-blond and yellow” (3) that stand out to the narrator along with her “chic thinness” (3) and more feminine “rough pink darkening in the cheeks” (3). In that respect, she challenges conventional societal standards for a woman’s beauty while still coming across as elegant, slick, and attractive, both in physical appearance and personality. Clearly, Holly is something of a tragic, complex figure, with many different layers—and that is what creates a mystery around her, making her such an effective inventress. Holly’s recklessness does particularly stand out, what with the Russian roulette she plays each night with powder room men who, when she snubs them, take “several steps back... body hunched and lowering” (3) at her door, nearly ready to “charge it, crash it down” (3). Most, if not all adult women would recognize the danger of this situation and do their best to change it or to avoid it altogether, but Holly—she lives off of the uncertainty, the thrill. This is her personality, and the name “Holiday Golightly”—the very manifestation of frivolity with a hint of mystery—is so very fitting. There may even be a side to her that enjoys this—the control, the mystery, the *game* that comes with

these relationships and that her persona so desperately craves. In them, she is desired, but never has to do anything about it—until, of course, the point when one goes wrong and the bullet fires. These encounters suggest that same uncertainty, that danger, in referencing the fleeting period associated with holiday happiness and security, along with the carelessness that comes with “going lightly.” Holly refuses to acknowledge danger and avoids the reality of life, even if that means purposefully putting herself in peril. Note as well how these are perils that she can get out of at once, suggesting the need to be able to rescue herself from situations with men that historically, she couldn’t, while also reiterating her desire for complete control. The fervor with which she leads this lifestyle, unwilling to change, suggests that there must be a difficult reason behind this, and there is. Holly is, like James Hogue, a runner from her past. Consider, though, that the nature of Hogue’s past—what he runs from—is entirely different from Holly’s. Hogue grows up unsatisfied, shifting in and out of prison and moving from one odd job to the next, and escapes as the highly successful, intelligent Princeton athlete Alexi Santana, a character that balances “out the parts of Hogue that were unstable and weak and most in need of protection” (New Yorker). Conversely, Holly’s irrepressible, captivating spirit and carefree, dangerous manner belie a very difficult, troubled upbringing, filled with family and personal trauma, and this exactly why she reinvents herself so thoroughly. That is where we can again distinguish Holly from Hogue; his deception, on the other hand, reveals a need to belong: to a college, a team, an eating club, an aristocracy, a *family*—to something stable, that which he never had in the past. Holly’s intentions reveal the opposite; she has no desire to belong to anything at all. To get to the root as to why that is, we must examine Holly’s past more closely. As we later learn from Doc Golightly, the husband Holly abandons, Holly was Lulamae Barnes, a “child-wife

from Tulip, Texas” (17) married at age fourteen and shouldering incredible responsibility as mother of Doc’s previous four children. On top of this, Lulamae was a victim of abuse, as is clear from a discussion on her past lovers in which Holly almost casually says, “not counting anything that happened before I was thirteen because, after all, that just *doesn’t* count” (19). Even here, she avoids the truth behind the statement, unable to accept the pain of her past even when she confides about it. She deflates it, making it sound like two kids counting something as if they are playing a game, minimizing its impact and damage on her and reducing the abuse to nothing more than a common childhood instance—exactly what it is not. Understandably, just as the crow who Doc tames and teaches to say the name “Lulamae” goes “wild and [flies] away” (16), Lulamae herself does the same. Leaving behind her family life and complicated history, she travels first to Hollywood and then to New York, assuming the role of Holiday Golightly, a new person, intent on pursuing the dreams she read about in magazines—just like the narrator. First, Capote associates the Southern name “Lulamae” with the invisible cage of Holly’s marriage, her childhood and her past. The name itself is normal, beautiful and lilting, and easily rolls off the tongue; it reflects how, in image, Lulamae seemed to have the iconic loving, wholesome family, preserved in “the brittle, cracked, blurred snapshot” (16) that Doc grasps so dearly. To Holly, however, the label “Lulamae Barnes” represents the other, darker aspect of the story: the little-discussed trauma of child marriage and sexual abuse and the unimaginable pain and loss of innocence that go along with them. This darling name, so Southern and nice to the ear, is actually, and to Capote’s credit, a thinly-veiled, ugly reminder of the past Holly would do well to leave behind, but cannot.

First escaping to Hollywood, “Holiday Golightly, Traveling” picks up tips on how to be someone else. O.J. Berman, an agent who first noticed Holly in Santa Anita and has since known her for several years, “modeled her along the Margaret Sullavan type” (7) when first transforming her into a starlet. “It took us a year to smooth out that accent” (7), he recalls fondly. “How we did it finally, we gave her French lessons: after she could imitate French, it wasn't so long she could imitate English” (7). It is clear that Holly still holds on dearly to her broken French and to this part of her past, in Hollywood. In later conversations, set in New York, she frequently pulls out phrases like “quel rat” (2) and “lapping up the vino” (4), randomly inserting them into her statements. Holly affects the French accent and lighthearted manner to mask her terrible past. Notice that both examples highlighted in the previous sentence were distractors, thrown in just to avoid further discussing men, a scarred topic. To the ignorant, though, she is seductive, the quintessence of desire. And, emboldened by the big city and the promise of social aristocracy, Holly soon becomes twice the enchantress Sullavan was. Instead of becoming an actress, the socially acceptable profession of reinvention for women, Holly sees an opportunity to push away her pain forever with this new art of imitation, applying it to her personal life. *Then*, the real Holiday Golightly is born, an enigmatic character with a notorious reputation, still marked by inklings of her past. Of course, placing Holly in the hands of Berman, another scarred, seasoned figure, introduces the idea of someone else helping her to reinvent, just as Wolfsheim had done with Gatsby; Hogue, on the other hand, is totally on his own. Even with this attractive new persona in mind, a potential fiancé, and a movie role, Holly runs again and escapes this time to New York. Here, we can again contrast her journey of reinvention with James Hogue's; he runs because he is discovered. As fake as Holly is, she is what she is—a “real

phony” (7)—whereas Hogue really does want to belong; he seeks an acceptance, an approval, an aristocracy that was previously just out of reach. Capote makes it clear that Holly would never settle down in Hollywood, where she will be forever relegated and controlled by the O.J. Bermans of the world. No matter what great kindness he may treat Holly with, she will never respond to Berman or anyone, for that matter, as a teacher or caregiver, at this point in her life. After all, she has just emerged from an environment in which she was “taken care of” by being forced into teen marriage as, quite sadly, a respite from a childhood filled with abuse. This has turned her into a free, but damaged spirit, as she emphatically tells Doc as reason for leaving him—and (at least trying with) her past as well—for a second time. “Never love a wild thing” (17), Holly advises. You “can’t give your heart to a wild thing: the more you do, the stronger they get... [and] you’ll end up looking at the sky” (17). The only older man she can stand is Sally Tomato, a gangster and drug lord (and ironically, the most notorious of the three), but only in a cage—in controlled visits to Sing Sing prison, where he is held. There, he is harmless, in fact, useful, with the money he provides her. Given her past, Holly cannot belong to anything stable, where she is taken care of; in that respect, she most definitely lives up to her own label of a “free spirit.” Internally, though, she does not understand this—after all, she is a “real phony”—and still, in some respects, explores the prospect of belonging. It may be why she loves Sally Tomato and Sing Sing in New York: at least those people belong. They are in a cage, yes, but cared for. Holly is fascinated by that—paradoxically, by what she can never have and could never stand. In the context of Holly’s troubled past, though, and given her situation in Hollywood, running to New York and writing her own script for life, no matter how flawed it may be, is the only logical option to her; she cannot bring herself to trust another anymore. Although she does regain

control in essentially restarting her life and serving as her own creator and caretaker, Holly is, by design, inventing someone who can never be reached by anyone. Regardless of whether she is ready for that lonely prospect or not, shielding herself from the danger of the world is now in her own hands.

Hollywood becomes New York, and the fully-fledged “Holiday Golightly, Traveling” comes into her own—or so it seems. Like “Alexi Santana,” “Holiday Golightly” is an attractive, alluring, and unusual name, one that immediately jumps out and sparks wonder, and this is no accident. In her new skin, Holly is known throughout the city for her almost foolish independence, childish exploits with men, extravagant, somewhat Gatsby-like parties, and overall spontaneity—only such a larger-than-life character would have such a larger-than-life name. However, in comparison to Gatsby, Holly is different, and on a much smaller scale; she poses, much more engaged with her guests, unlike the mysterious, aloof figure Gatsby is at his own parties. With Holly, Capote recognizes how in part, names define us, and how in order to change one’s identity, one must at least first change her name. Therefore, they are the key to the door that opens up the process of reinvention, and that is the reason for the change from Lulamae. However, Capote is clever in that these names—both the past, Lulamae, and the present, Holiday—reflect the heroine’s changes in personality: from innocence and Southern history to fleeting extravagance and avoidance. Capote does also recognize, though, that Holly’s internal persona is much more complicated and intertwined than two entirely separate names may suggest. In a conversation with the narrator, Holly notes, “I’ll never get used to anything. Anybody that does, they might as well be dead” (4). It is here that we see Holly’s continued “rebellion against the *given* in life, the useful and prudential” (79), as critic Ihab Hassan notes,

and it is clear that the reason for this dissent is Holly's difficult past. Lulamae Barnes did have a stability in her life, or something that she was "used" to, but it was unbearable: scarring abuse, a confusing, forced, societal "love," and Doc's intolerable, watchful eye, suffocating to a free spirit. That type of past is inescapable, even having reinvented a name and changed general behavior, and Holly will always be drawn back to that pain. This is why Holly plays Russian roulette each night with dangerous men for money instead of seeking a traditional, stable job, and why she seeks companionship in Sally Tomato each week and defends him even after both she and he are caught and brought into the justice system. Holly actively seeks out the unfamiliar, the dangerous, even in her new identity, because that is all that she has known; she will never be able to escape Lulamae. This is Capote's sad truth of reinvention, and the two names—Lulamae and Holiday—reflect that. Notice the way that they rhyme, constantly and forever intertwined. This is no accident—it is Capote's way of suggesting that Holly, as is evident from her behavior, will never be able to escape one identity or the other completely. The past, the pain—it follows her and all humans forever. The process of reinvention is possible, Capote argues, but only outwardly, with the changing of our appearances and names. Internally, reinvention is infinitely more difficult, Capote implies, and that is the hard truth. We are "always drawn back to the places we have lived" (1), to the horrors and delights of our pasts.

Capote purposefully crafts Holly's cat as a nameless figure, a vagabond belonging nowhere, drawing attention to its role as Holly's kindred spirit. The cat helps further expose Holly's inability to shed her carefully curated, flawed persona and live in acceptance of her past, while also further reinforcing how the reinvention process will never end for "real phonies" like Holly. Over the course of her friendship with the narrator, Holly's constant companion is her

“red tiger-striped tom” (4). “It’s a little inconvenient, his not having a name” (9), Holly muses, “but I haven’t any right to give him one: he’ll have to wait until he belongs to somebody... We don’t belong to each other... he’s an independent, and so am I” (9). Stray cats are survivors: they slink around, fending for themselves, avoiding danger—just as Holly does. And, like this ugly, homeless cat she “just sort of took up by the river one day” (9), Holly’s own “existence is thoroughly improvised... and like a wild thing she [and her cat] liv[e] in the open sky” (Hassan 80). Both of them are “independents,” as Holly calls it: they care for themselves seemingly well on the outside, but internally, they reside in “an empty place; so vague... a country where the thunder goes and things disappear” (17). Holly refuses to settle into an apartment while truly owning her cat; it is hers, but it has no name. This is a most unusual relationship; in essence, Holly has invented her own ideal house pet, a microcosm of herself and her problems. She has forced her cat into this mold under the pretense of love, all to again retain a sense of control over her own situation and fight her loneliness. If nurtured, as domestic cats should be, the creatures will cherish the love of a family, as pets typically do. Holly, though, cannot bring herself to settle for that “normal” life, again because of her scarred definition of a family dynamic and the insecurities that come along with it—those which keep fueling Holly’s reinvention. The difference between Holly and her cat—two vagabonds—really lies in how the cat has no choice in reinventing itself and assuming an untraditional, nameless role, but Holly does; she actually controls both of their outcomes. A pattern arises here: Holly defines the role of the cat in their relationship, much as she does with the men she strings along, and with the narrator, of course. The cat reveals just how deep Holly’s insecurity runs and the horrors of her past that she needs to leave; it has gotten to the point where she seeks submission from not only the people around her,

but also animals. This creates a dramatic irony and adds the necessary tragic undertone. We as readers understand the root of Holly's desire to reinvent—her troubled past and the associated mental turmoil—but Holly herself is completely unaware of this underlying factor and believes strongly in her feelings, and in her new identity. As O.J. Berman puts it, Holly “isn't a phony because she's a real phony. She believes all this crap she believes. You can't talk her out of it” (7). Her nonconformity, and her unwillingness to belong anywhere, as revealed by her nameless cat, is “one of the sources of her vitality” (Hassan 79). It is what distinguishes her from Alexi Santana, of whom a reporter states, “We know you don't know who your undergraduate is, but he's a phony” (7); the only thing James Hogue believes in projecting a certain persona, carefully calculated to impress others. And, it is what distinguishes her from the post-war phonies that are so despised by J.D. Salinger's Holden Caulfield for their insincerity and hypocrisy. Holly Golightly, who (like Caulfield) would “rather have cancer than a dishonest heart” (19), truly believes in her ability to “travel” indefinitely, untied to anything. “She wants to be no other than herself” (Hassan 80), as exemplified by how she seeks refuge in the Tiffany's store, the one place her persona's illusion feels safe, to battle off the “mean reds.” She, of course, does not realize—or refuses to accept, in the very depths of her heart—how her past and current personal uncertainty follow her around and prevent her from completely reinventing, settling down, and starting a family with her tomcat. The mean reds may not even be because of being trapped, but because she is, deep down, trying to belong. Herein lies a paradox: Capote places Holly exactly in the middle, reinventing but still battling her past, while also calling her the oxymoron a “real phony.” This calls into question whether he believes the idea of self-invention really is valid or not. To resolve this, we can look to the close of the novella. About to jump bail and leave for

Brazil, Holly cruelly and prematurely abandons her cat, but immediately realizes that the two really “did belong to each other”—that they were kindred spirits. As the cat is nowhere to be found, Holly faces another loss, saying, “I’m very scared, Buster. Yes, at last. Because it could go on forever. Not knowing what’s yours until you’ve thrown it away” (25). At last, Holly feels raw emotion. The terrible pain that comes with loss consumes her—she *feels* her past—and yet, she leaves anyway, resigning the narrator to look for what is hers. She repeats the pattern of James Hogue—that all self-inventors follow, albeit for different reasons—she runs. She runs from her pain, from her past, and from the immense guilt that she would feel abandoning the cat she loved, and she escapes, this time to Brazil, ready to resume the role of the inventress and “begin again,” or so she thinks. *That* reinforces Capote’s position: that for lopsided romantics like Holly, the process will never end until there is a conscious break in behavior, and Holly owns up to and faces her past, and this is confirmed in the very last parts of the story. Even though “Holly’s incorrigible tomcat finds at last a home with potted palms and lace curtains, a home and a name, [presumably] for Holly the narrator can only pray that she may be granted, sometime, somewhere, the grace of knowledge and repose” (Hassan 81). Capote leaves Holly in almost the exact same position in which she starts; she goes from ravishing in a “slim cool black dress” (3) in New York to escaping, again in a “slim black dress” (24), to Brazil, and Buenos Aires, and Africa, and whatever next. Based on precedent, Holly Golightly will most definitely take on another name and identity at some point in her life, whether it is when her affair with Brazil’s Señor fizzles out, or after some later adventure. Her go-to solution when faced with adversity is always to reinvent, and she may be able to at least superficially do so, but she will never be able to escape her experiences, her *past*, how she desires. Here, Capote essentially

resigns Holly to her fate. As long as her insecurities dominate, Holly's reinvention will always be half-hearted, doomed for failure. So, she will begin again, and the cycle will continue in futility.

A classic inventress, Holly Golightly takes full advantage of masks and facades to keep up her enchanting, mysterious persona and hide the reality that exists just under its surface, only visible in the few moments where the masks come off. These disguises are essential to her process of self-invention, as they enable her to avoid all of her insecurities; therefore, Holly would not be able to exist as a reinvention without them. From the very first, striking description of Holly, as told by the narrator, the reader is made aware of the "pair of dark glasses [that] blo[t] out her eyes" (3) and the slim black dress that accompanies them, an image made iconic by the film adaptation of the novella with Audrey Hepburn as Holly. And yet for Hepburn, their effect is chic and glamour, quite different from the role they play in the novel. In it, Holly was "never without those dark glasses" (3), the narrator observes; from the very start, she hides the windows to her soul behind a wall, at all times, it seems, and dresses in all black, although "always well-groomed" (3) and the picture of sophistication. However, this "uniform" of sorts is essential to Holly Golightly, allowing her to "get in character," or really immerse herself in her new self-invention, each morning, and enter the facade in which she hides from her past, from her old persona. There is one instance where this facade breaks, and *really* breaks down. When Lulamae left home at age fourteen and transformed into Hollywood and New York Holly Golightly, she left behind her dear brother Fred, perhaps the one person who "let [her] hug him on a cold night" (4)—the one person she truly cared for, worried about, and loved to her heart's fullest. This too, is paradoxical, inconsistent: the one person to whom she belongs is a soldier, stationed hundreds,

if not thousands of miles away. Truly “belonging” to someone in a situation like this becomes infinitely more difficult, as distance has the power to render the connection a simply hopeless attachment. Naturally, the guilt of leaving Fred plagues Holly, adding to her already loaded, terribly difficult past and also to her motivation to brilliantly reinvent herself and escape. When Holly receives notice that Fred has died in the war, reality swoops in (quite literally, as the ongoing war is barely mentioned in the novella until this point) and Holly breaks down, the one time we see her do so in the novella. Her apartment had been “tremendously wrecked” (18). The narrator describes incredulously, “At last the Christmas tree had been dismantled, very literally: its brown dry branches sprawled in a welter of torn-up books, broken lamps and phonograph records. Even the icebox had been emptied, its contents tossed around the room: raw eggs were sliding down the walls and in the midst of the debris Holly's no-name cat was calmly licking a puddle of milk” (18)—the very picture of chaos, with a drop of calm from the cat. The narrator slowly notices “Holly's dark glasses... lying on the floor, the lenses already shattered, the frames cracked in half” (18). In that very sentence, the illusion has shattered and Holly is a Lulamae Barnes again, grieving the loss of the brother she left behind. The pain, the chaos behind the character emerges, and her starlet persona temporarily disintegrates—“all through the warm months [Holly] hibernated like a winter animal who did not know spring had come and gone. Her hair darkened, she put on weight... she became rather careless about her clothes...” (18)—only to be pulled out with a new, doomed romance with a billionaire named José. Holly's masks are many: the dark glasses, the “Halloween masks...” (13) she wore with the narrator “all the way home” (13) after an exhilarating little theft, and the lipstick she painstakingly applies to prepare herself to read José's engagement breaking—dream shattering—letter,

slipping into the skin of someone other than herself to deflect the pain of rightful rejection. These masks and facades are what create the grandeur and reputation of “Miss Holiday Golightly, Travelling.” With them, Holly is at her best self, the happiest she can be, and without them, she remains destroyed. Clearly, masks are crucial to Holly Golightly as a living, breathing self-invention; after all, they are one of the only ways for Holly to escape herself and pretend to be another, avoiding what’s at hand. Part of the thrill of self-reinvention as well is simply wearing these masks and living freely, stealing something or the other here or there, but doing all of this “alert to the possibility that at any moment [the] mask might slip,” as David Samuels says of Alexi Santana. That is the adventure, the mystery, that Holly chases, and that Capote recognizes and builds into the novella. And, most cleverly, by building in that one standout instance with Fred where the glasses come off and Holly is bare, Capote really draws attention to their importance for Holly and for explaining the other motivation for self-invention as well—the sheer, human thrill.

However, perhaps the greatest mask of all in *Breakfast at Tiffany’s* is New York City itself. There’s the obvious reason for this: that Tiffany’s was an iconic New York store, and Holly’s chosen disguise and safe place throughout the novella and the inspiration for the title as well. Above all, Holly notes, “I want to still be me when I wake up one fine morning and have breakfast at Tiffany’s” (9), the store that for her represents an opulence of wealth and considerable comfort she never had growing up. Tiffany’s is the store that for Holly takes care of the mean reds, and “nothing very bad could happen to you there, not with those kind men in their nice suits, and that lovely smell of silver and alligator wallets” (9) that, even though she’ll never get to experience in her own hands, is still calming. Tiffany’s is where Holly Golightly can exist

without any concerns that the pains of Lulamae will reappear, and, for that reason, it is a special refuge in New York and in the broader context of Holly's reinvention. Note, however, how Tiffany's sits in the middle of a city that, while glamorous and exciting, ultimately offers its residents nothing like the comfort and security that Holly craves; it can only sustain the invention. Only in New York would her persona go unnoticed for its falseness, and even be widely accepted, allowed to throw fabulous parties, string along oodles of men, keep up a reputation as a starlet, jump bail, and then leave and be forgotten almost immediately by the vast majority of the city. New York serves as a mask itself, allowing people like Holly to disappear in crowds or come out in the front of them as "TOMATO'S TOMATO." The city, too, is a kindred spirit; it's Holly herself who says, "they must see this, these lights, the river—I love New York, even though it isn't mine, the way something has to be, a tree or a street or a house, something, anyway, that belongs to me because I belong to it" (19). Holly Golightly, a character who thrives off of reckless independence and belongs to absolutely no one at any given time, not even her dear cat, is at home in this city that, like her, stands out and serves many diverse stories, but is haunted by a dark history. It is no coincidence that both *The Great Gatsby* and *Breakfast at Tiffany's*, famed personal invention stories, take place in New York. The city significantly raises the level of these works just with its magic, acceptance, complex history, and feel. It is, to this day, the only classically perfect backdrop for reinvention.

Undoubtedly, Capote's personal reinvention—young, sensitive boy from rural Alabama turned backstabbing, proudly gay New York icon, educated by experience alone—served as the basis for Holly's. Both of their journeys remain unresolved, with the same sense of trauma and melancholy residing just underneath the flashy exteriors. The root of Capote's insecurity lay in

his unstable childhood—in “the mother who left him in Monroeville when he was about 4” (Fleming). Memories of her locking him in their hotel room on the many nights when she went out continued to haunt him; he recalled, “I pounded and pounded on the door to get out, pounding and yelling and screaming... That did something to me. I have a terror of being locked in a room — of being abandoned; I have a great fear of being abandoned by some particular friend or lover” (Fleming). With that immense weight always on his shoulders, Capote grew up. For most of his childhood, he was, to others, a “slender, pretty, high-voiced boy, a spiritual orphan” (Fleming) who turned to reading and writing for solace. Internally, though, Capote felt “so different from everyone, so much more intelligent and sensitive... having 50 perceptions a minute to everyone else's five” (Fleming). Always knowing who he was, Capote was openly homosexual from the very start. “I didn't look like anybody else and I wasn't like anybody else” (Fleming), he said. “People start out by being put off by something that's different, but [I] very easily disarmed them. Seduction—that's what I do! It was: You think I'm different, well, I'll show you how different I really am. So it was layers of this thing building, this persona, and didn't even realize I was doing it. I was totally self-created” (Fleming). In a childhood already marked by constant change, Capote was again uprooted, this time to New York, to live with his mother and her new husband. Like Holly, his heroine, in New York, Capote really came into this charismatic, unapologetic character he created for himself, one that at a glance seemed miles away from any trauma of his past. He knew at once who his reinvention would be, musing (and Capote's notorious conceit shows through here), “I was a very special person and I had to have a very special life. I was not meant to work in an office or something, though I would have been successful at whatever I did. But I always knew that I wanted to be a writer and that I wanted to

be rich and famous.” Along with the “vaulting ambition,” Capote did have real talent as a writer, and he pursued it relentlessly. Unconventionally, Capote forewent college and worked from the ground up at *The New Yorker*, going from sorting cartoons to publishing short stories and book chapter excerpts. “With literary success came social celebrity” (“About the Author”), and the boy from rural Alabama seemed lives away as the new Truman Capote dominated society pages and dined with “Agnelli and Vanderbilt and Guinness and Guest, and Paley” (Fleming), all while exploring his sexual boundaries in an unapologetic manner, well ahead of his time. There, though, at Capote’s most personal, is where his past follows him just as Holly’s does. Consistently, Capote “falls in love with square men with crew cuts and ties, married men, often churchgoing, often with children; he falls in love, too—cut of an odd mixture of apology and jealousy—with their wives and children, so that he inherits not only lover but the family he feels he never had” (Fleming). It was in his sexuality, what made him who he truly was, where his past traumas came to haunt him; for Holly, it was in her free, unrestrainable, naive spirit—who *she* was, at her core. Note as well how Capote, no matter how openly homosexual he was, and no matter how much of a celebrated figure he became, would forever be at unrest because of the simple fact that homosexuality remained unacceptable for his entire lifetime. His reinvention never comes to fruition, just like Holly’s—both cannot escape the struggles of their pasts and the pressures of society. For a time, however, Capote did find acceptance and adoration among the many celebrities he knew in New York. Marginalized, yes, but the talk of the town—and even then, it is clear how his past comes to haunt him. At one point, he throws the iconic Black and White Ball with the promise of an unforgettable, extravagant night with a wild, exclusive guest list (Trebay). However, Capote’s underlying motives for hosting the event probably stem back to

letting others feel what it was like not to be invited, to be marginalized—only as someone who was marginalized could understand. Many speculated that it was Capote's high-society lifestyle, in his attendance at the best parties and clubs, in his partaking in the endless gossip cycles and backstabbing of his fellow elite, and his admiration of his iconic muses, that inspired *Breakfast at Tiffany's*. Without a doubt, however, the core story of Holly's reinvention comes from Capote's personal life. While Holly may refuse to accept, acknowledge, or analyze her demons, the traumas that fuel her character, it is the fact that Capote recognized how his own abandonment followed him, how his own past led to his specific persona, that allowed him to create, to *know*, such a masterpiece of an inventress. Capote was uncannily self-aware. He wrote what he knew best: reinvention. That is the charm of his work, and the reason why the story perseveres in text and film. *Breakfast at Tiffany's* is as much the tale of the reinvention of Capote's iconic character as it is of the reinvention of Capote himself.

Holly Golightly's iconic, stubbornly irrepressible, ever-transforming spirit marks every page of *Breakfast at Tiffany's*, transforming her into Capote's model for personal reinvention, a never-ending journey driven by a desire to escape the horrors of one's past. Capote's lilting Southern tongue wonderfully augments and distinguishes the story's simultaneous charm and tragic feel, which is rooted in the nature of reinvention. However, his Holly is of course not the only American heroine to embody that process; reinvention is the broader theme of all of American literature. It takes over J.D Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*, this time masquerading in the author's own catharsis; Salinger deals with the tormenting trauma of his war experiences by writing Holden Caulfield, a numb, depressed, and larger-than-life persona as at odds with life as Salinger is. We see it with Huck Finn, who exists under the guise of freedom from all of his

dilemmas as soon as he reaches Jackson Island, ready to refashion himself and become anew. Self-invention is a constant motif in that book, as Huck makes up no fewer than a dozen identities along the way. Reinvention appears again, this time outside of America's bounds, as Joan Foster, who flees her unhappiness and lives an inreality as Louisa K. Delacourt, a gothic romance novelist, in *Lady Oracle*, a novel by Canadian writer Margaret Atwood. Self-invention is a source of obsession and fascination for all humans, not just Americans, although maybe them slightly more so, and always will be—the rags-to-riches story will always have charm. Even the most successful strive to achieve more, to *be* more, to escape expectations and transcend what they are given. Can we ever be satisfied, ignorant and simply content with what we have? No, as the literature, and Capote in particular, would suggest. *That* is the great irony, the fatal flaw of the human race—we are always seeking to transcend, always chasing the new, in an endless cycle of futility. We, like Holly, refuse to accept the reality: that, no matter what new skin we take on, we will always be in the shadow of our pasts, of our creator, of the limits above—of what we will never understand.

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I have neither given nor received any unauthorized aid on this essay.

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