

The Barbizon Hotel,  
December 28, 1980;  
Christine Lusky, a tenant  
for four years and a  
member of the executive  
committee of the Barbizon  
Tenants Association,  
leaves the hotel.





# aid in Manhattan

For girls seeking fame or fortune in the Big Apple, New York's women-only dormitories were a home away from home.

Eighty years on, they're making a comeback.  
*Colleen Clark* checks in



LEFT The author at Sacred Heart, her girls-only home for a week. BELOW Grace Kelly and fashion designer Betsy Johnson (bottom, centre) were residents of similar dorms.

When I quit my job and moved to New York City I knew things wouldn't be easy. Like an honest friend who tells it like it is, the city bluntly confirmed those fears within minutes of my arrival when I spied a crew of paramedics wheeling a dead body down the street from my new home. And people still considered my living situation charmed.

They were right. For the equivalent of what some New Yorkers pay just to park their car, I was renting a 2 x 2.5 metre room in a good friend's apartment. Sure, it was small. Sure, the up-and-coming Brooklyn neighbourhood where it was located occasionally had me quickening my step during my walk from the subway. But I came home to a familiar face, and more importantly, I was paying affordable rent.

Most newcomers don't land quite so softly. In a city where rent for a studio apartment averages a whopping US\$2000 a month, finding a place to live can seem an insurmountable task and some have been known to turn around and fly right back home. Those on a budget – or without trust funds – take chances on unknown neighbourhoods or share apartments with strangers found via websites like Craigslist. My sister ended up living with two swingers, one who suffered rage blackouts and threatened to kill her. During successive apartment searches, I was shown places carpeted in broken glass, rooms where I nearly crashed through rotted floorboards and buildings that already had more than enough occupants in the form of rodents and roaches.

After three years and two moves within the city, I'm now settled in the sunny comfort of a cosy (and affordable) Brooklyn home. But the thought of those early days still puts me in a cold sweat. So when I read the following real estate listing, my curiosity was piqued: "Furnished one-bedroom apartment near the Meatpacking District with maid service, wi-fi and two meals per day, all utilities included. \$960 per month." The catch? No boys allowed. The room was in one of a handful of women-only residences in New York, relics of a time when it was thought that ladies needed some protection from the temptations of this big, bad metropolis.

Now, people in New York often give up things like wardrobes, windows and sanity in their pursuit of affordable housing. Could I give up men? For an address in one of the city's most desirable neighbourhoods and a few hundred extra bucks a month in my pocket, the answer was yes. At least I *thought* I could do it. Having figured that girls-only living was worth at



least a test-drive, I left my Brooklyn pad, abandoned my beau and took the first step towards a spell of all-lady living.

Female-only residences came into vogue during the roaring '20s, when young girls flooded the city in search of stardom, glamorous careers and big-city boyfriends (not so different from today, really). Buildings like the famous Barbizon Hotel for Women assured parents that their daughters were "living in a place where men couldn't get at them and deceive them", as famous resident Sylvia Plath wrote in *The Bell Jar*.

Some had a practical purpose: heirs to the Macy's fortune built The Webster for low-income working women who staffed nearby department stores and fashion houses. Other residences, like the Barbizon, cultivated a more sensational image, courting aspiring models and starlets with glossy brochures of sundecks and swimming pools, solariums and recital rooms. Playboys and millionaires would hang out in the neighbourhood, hoping to woo its stylish denizens. Little girls from Oregon to Alabama daydreamed about becoming a Barbizon Girl.

The glamour began to fade in the 1960s and '70s when women's lib made these gilded convents and their curfews seem *démodé*. Many residences went the way of the Barbizon, whose rooms were converted into million-dollar condos. (A few former occupants still live there at bargain-basement rents.) Today, only a handful of these buildings squire a new generation through the bewildering process of starting a life in the Big Apple.

I've always had a soft spot for old New York. As I read the list of famous names who launched their careers while living in the city's all-female dorms, I warmed to the prospect of joining their ranks. Who wouldn't want to say that they'd followed in the literal footsteps of women like Plath, Grace Kelly, Joan Crawford and Ali MacGraw? So it was with visions of white kidskin gloves



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP Other women who kept to themselves at Barbizon Hotel For Women include Ali MacGraw, Gene Tierney and Joan Crawford.

and pillbox hats that I teetered down the footpath to Sacred Heart Residence, a small establishment run by an order of Catholic nuns on the edge of Chelsea, near the white-hot nightlife and fashion hub that is the Meatpacking District. The understated elegance of the façade – a dignified four-storey townhouse – was more than I could have hoped for. I walked up and rang the bell.

The scent that greeted me when Sister Olga opened the door replaced my retro daydreams with reality: it was a combination of mothballs and mustiness, fading wallpaper and vinyl flooring. My room was a windowless, spartan cell with a single bed covered in a polyester floral spread. Hanging above was an image of Joseph of Arimathea bleeding from an open wound. Yikes.

My disappointment was salvaged only by the prospect of a free meal. But that didn't last long; the three casserole dishes on the counter of the subterranean wood-paneled dining room held what my mum calls "joyless food", the kind of perfectly edible utilitarian fare that fills the stomach but dulls the tastebuds. Two other women – an older Brazilian here on a month-long holiday and a young Japanese student – sat silently at opposite tables. I joined the solemn party, pushing around a plate of canned corn and spiral ham with pineapple, before giving up, cranky and defeated.

I knew I was being a baby. But it had been a long week and the thought of having left the snug confines of my Brooklyn apartment for the oppressive gloom of this one weighed more heavily than it should. Then I remembered: Manhattan! Parties! People! I had a fashion event to cover uptown, so I decided

to clear my head, leave early and take advantage of my great location.

Three vodka and sodas into the party, I started to shake my afternoon attitude. The whole situation seemed comical, really. There I was, standing in the shadow of a psychedelic Navajo pyramid, dwarfed by models in six-inch clogs and teeny-tiny shorts. Hours later, I'd be back in a land of courting parlours and curfews, a place where handsome men like the ones at this party would have to be left at the door.

**C**urfew! Oh shit! I flew out the door, hopped on the subway and ran five whole blocks in stilettos, just barely managing to slide through the door at 10:59pm, a single minute before Sacred Heart Residence locks up for the night (and when most normal New Yorkers are having their first cocktail). I skulked back to my room, cracked open the contraband beer I had smuggled in and emailed

my editor. "Didn't get the Rogan interview. I had to be home in time for curfew. No, I'm not kidding."

So Sacred Heart and I were off to a bad start. But as the days went by, I started to settle into its rhythms. I was surprised

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by the way my heart jumped when I received friendly "good mornings" from my fellow residents as we brushed our teeth, or when Fang Fang Tan, a 26-year-old Chinese PhD student, invited me to join her group's table at dinner.

Like Fang Fang, most of the women at Sacred Heart travelled from different parts of Asia and Latin America to study English and other disciplines in New York. Some nights they practised phrases via lists of silly questions.

"If you had unlimited money, what would you buy?"

"The Sphinx."

"All of Barney's."

"A husband!"

Boys. Somehow dinner talk always circled its way back to the absent sex. Fang Fang complained that the strict curfews at Sacred Heart – 11pm on weeknights and midnight on weekends – were limiting when it came to meeting men... and doing most other things. I couldn't agree more. One of the charms of New York is the way ordinary nights can unfold into epic adventures. You could start off quietly reading in a →

## Women have the option of entertaining dates in supervised common areas with low lighting called 'beau parlors'

coffee shop and end up at a loft party surrounded by fried chicken ice sculptures. Or having been at a business meeting that somehow ends at 3am, when you're dancing on a couch in a club next to P Diddy.

Many of the other women's-only residences did away with curfews a long time ago. The 300-plus residents at The Webster can come and go at any hour and head out in groups of as many as 20 to explore the town on any given night of the week. "We're quite a spectacle," says Jackie Todorovic, a 23-year-old advertising student from Perth. And apparently they can eclipse even the biggest tabloid train wrecks – like, say, Tila Tequila. "We were at a club, and about 20 Webster girls were dancing on the furniture. People stopped watching Tila to watch us."

At The Webster, as well as Sacred Heart, women have the option of entertaining dates in supervised common areas with low lighting called "beau parlors", that an old ad said would ensure "a high engagement rate among Websterites". Few women today make use of these rooms. "There's so much to do out there," reasons Todorovic, "it seems silly to bring guys here." And despite notorious stories of boyfriends stowed away in dumbwaiters or scaling walls to spend stolen time with their sweetheart, that kind of silly smuggling just isn't happening at Sacred Heart. Why bother risking a cheap living situation (violators can be thrown out on first offence) when you can easily throw curfew to the wind and do your courting behind the privacy of your beau's apartment door? (Sorry, Sister Olga!)

Spending a week with girls like Todorovic helped me to relive my first frenzied year in New York – that euphoric whirlwind of experience that seduces and leaves you panting for more. All the hassles of moving here such as signing over your savings for that first apartment, making friends and learning how to navigate a complicated new social terrain, are initiation rites that bind you to your fellow city dwellers. From my happily settled vantage point three years down the line, I'd do it all again in a heartbeat.

But it doesn't have to be so hard, and as antiquated as the concept of an all-female housing arrangement sounded at the beginning, I ended up wishing I had known about that option during my first year in New York. "I think we offer a really invaluable opportunity for women. You're here, you're safe, you're in a terrific part of the city and you've got a ready-made set of women to explore New York with," says Webster manager Maryann Lienhard.

She's right. For a young woman finding her feet in one of the world's largest, most chaotic, breathtaking cities, it's comforting to come home to a building full of diverse but like-minded women. It was enough to make me envy those who came before me, the ones who generations ago stood on the roofs of buildings like The Webster, watched the sun set behind the iconic spire of the Empire State Building and marvelled, "We live here. We live here!"

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Sacred Heart Residence in Manhattan's hip Meatpacking District where women can live from \$960 a month. FROM TOP The TV room; a spartan bedroom; the library.



## Ladies First

Female-only housing options vary widely throughout New York. If you're looking for an extended stay during an upcoming visit, here are a few of the best:

- **THE WEBSTER:** Its 373 single rooms in midtown start at US\$1060 per month, including cleaning service and two meals a day. Plus, there's a rose garden and rooftop terrace with great city views. See [websterapartments.org](http://websterapartments.org).
- **THE BRANDON RESIDENCE FOR WOMEN:** Has 124 single rooms on the Upper West Side, which start at US\$1023 per month, including two meals a day. It even has music practice spaces with pianos. See [thebrandon.org](http://thebrandon.org).
- **THE MARKLE EVANGELINE RESIDENCE FOR WOMEN:** These 32 shared and 153 single rooms in Greenwich Village start at \$980 (shared) and \$1335 (single) per month, including cleaning service and meals. See [themarkle.org](http://themarkle.org).
- **SACRED HEART RESIDENCE:** Located in Chelsea, the 28 single rooms are priced from \$960 per month, including cleaning service and meals. There are basic common rooms, one with a TV. See [sacredheartresidence.com](http://sacredheartresidence.com).