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Above Average in New York City

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Salem State University

The Graduate School Department of English

Above Average in New York City

A Manuscript Capstone in English

By [REDACTED]

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Degree of Master of Arts

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Above Average in New York City

by



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Collegienne

Histories of the women's movement may sometimes overlook the forerunners of modern dance, women like Ruth St. Denis, who founded the Denishawn dance theater with her husband and partner, Ted Shawn. At UNH, my feminist role models could be found in the dance studios of New Hampshire Hall, a historic stone building that bordered the parking lot of Snively Arena, where the Wildcats dominated Hockey East. As fans packed the lot on game nights and Women's Studies majors led marches to Take Back the Night, I sought wisdom from professors Jean Brown, Jean Mattox, and Gay Nardone.

It was Jean Brown who encouraged me to go to New York, or at least, did not advise against it. Sitting on the bench in the smaller studio—silent, as usual, Jean saying more with her eyes than her words—she told me that if I went, it should be without expectations. Jean's choreography was as empowering as her advice. There were lots of low lifts and supported falls, touching that made my boyfriend befuddled. "What is that about, being a lesbian?" he asked. "Sisterhood!" I said. One of Jean's dances featured six of the tallest people in the dance program. We wore green unitards for this Dance of the Giants. She had placed a projector in the orchestra pit to display a huge shadow of our beany bodies on a screen behind us. One sequence of choreography had us walking backwards in a line, exaggerating each step by lifting a bent leg in front and then bringing it around to arabesque before stretching to full extension and placing it on the floor, three feet behind. Jean didn't go for chit chat in the studio. Instead, she taught us barrel rolls.

In the spring before I went to New York, she had brought our modern company of five dancers to Brown University for the regional Adjudication, a showcase of college dance

companies. We were all tired from classes and rehearsals, but Jean kept us working in a cafeteria for hours before the afternoon previews. Our pastoral dance, which was set to new age music by Philip Glass, was selected to open the show. We wore silky pantaloons like Doris Humphrey had in a photograph in Jean's book. Our switch kicks—one leg then the other, landing and kicking front and back like a rocking horse, signified our joy in the harvest.

After the Spring Dance Concert, we all came together at Jean's farm for a walk in the woods and dinner in the colonial dining room with her husband, Tom. The wine flowed freely and we got a bit sauced, while Tom looked on with amusement. I saw Jean once more, in New York. She had come to watch Mary's performance, in a penthouse theater near (or maybe in--memory fails) Dance Theater Workshop. Arriving early, we walked out to the rooftop terrace to gaze at the sunset skyline, an orange backdrop against the dark silhouettes of water tanks above the buildings. I was devastated to hear later in the year that Jean had passed away during an operation, not long after Tom had died, at age 54.

The jazz company, under choreographer Jean Mattox, was a much less introspective group. This Jean was statuesque, her white hair styled in a shoulder-length page-boy as she pounded a handheld drum with a soft mallet. Jean had danced on Broadway in shows choreographed by her husband or ex-husband Matt Mattox, and was raising their sons in Durham, alone. She was refined, and taught us Fosse and the fugue, as in the movie Chicago. I was dazzled, and auditioned for the jazz company in my freshman year, to be cast in a group number, the finale to A Chorus Line: One! Singular sensation... Jean had instructed us to purchase the flashiest leotards we could find, but without discretionary funds or a car, I ended

up with a lackluster light blue, stretchy cotton bodysuit. I can still remember her erudite disappointment, like, really?

Jean lived in an apartment on Main St. in Durham, above a brief stretch of establishments including Wildcat Pizza, five bars, and the Art Corner, where I shrinkwrapped posters on foam core and pounded cloth onto wooden frames, pilfering jelly beans from the jars at the front of the store. After work one day, I returned to my car in the parking lot behind the buildings and saw Jean sitting on a wooden landing of the stairs that led to their apartment, her eyes closed and her chin raised to the sun. She was a vision. I shouldn't have stared.

By then, we'd learned about the cancer in her hip, the pain visible when she sometimes stopped suddenly during class or rehearsal. For her farewell performance, Jean choreographed a ballroom duet. During the Spring Dance Concert, she received not one, but two standing ovations from a capacity crowd in the 800-seat Paul Arts Center—at the start of her performance when she glided from the wings in a floor-length, ivory sequined gown, and at the end when she and her tuxedoed partner took their bows. When it was time for hospice, she moved in with Jean and Tom Brown, who had installed a bed in their living room.

Gay was hired to teach jazz after Jean Mattox died, and blew in with the energy and body of Wonder Woman. Drawing on her experience as a showgirl in Las Vegas and a Radio City Rockette, Gay choreographed exuberant numbers, with small groups of dancers moving on and off the stage. For a tap number in the spring dance concert, she choreographed a dueling time step to be performed by myself and a friend who later went to clown school with the Ringling Brothers circus. In my "post-grad" year, she was kind enough to choreograph a lyrical jazz solo that took advantage of my long limbs and tender spirit. On alternating nights, another dancer,

Lisa, performed the same number, in the same costume, tailored for each of us. Lisa's body type was opposite mine, a petit bombshell. There was positive feedback for both of us, but the dueling dance drama ultimately led to an award announced on closing night, with all thirty-something members of the ballet, modern, and jazz companies gathered on stage. I have a recollection that the curtain was closed. I smiled bravely when Lisa's name was called, clapped loudest as my throat clenched and tears stung my eyes. Needing Gay's reassurance that I could make it in New York if I went, because that was the plan, I practically barged into the teachers' dressing lounge, twice in one week. "Yeah, you could make it," she said as she fastened her bra, "if you get your act together." She had a point, but it would take me many years to understand what to do about it.

Demi-carattere

Ten minutes before closing, four Italian men with pasty grey complexions came into the restaurant. Lorenzo, one of the two brothers who owned it, served Sambuca in skinny glasses with two coffee beans each. Hoping for a decent tip, I let one of the gents hold my hand while he told a story that required multiple prompts from the others. Was it worth it, I wondered as I tucked three bucks into my apron.

“Hey, do you want to come over to my place and call a cab?” asked Ella, the other waitress on the shift. I hesitated, acutely aware of how open a person needs to be when creating a new life, calculating the cost of a cab as a percentage of my tips.

“Um, sure,” I answered, opting for a safe ride back to the parlor of my brownstone. Ella’s asymmetrical haircut made me nostalgic for my college “do,” which had grown out to medium bland. We walked across a dark street to the building where she lived with her new husband, Hamid.

“So, what’s it like being married to a foreigner?” I asked, revealing my parochial upbringing.

“Well, it’s not a bed of roses,” she confided. “Hamid really wants to go back to Iran, but I’m afraid to.”

“Oh? Why’s that?”

“Because I might not be able to come back!” She opened the door to their one-bedroom apartment and flicked on the light. I remarked on unusual features like the TV chained above

the door. Ella pulled a couple of beers from the fridge and popped the lids. "I wonder when we'll find out who shot J.R."

"Oh—I don't know. I haven't watched for a while. Thanks." I took a swig.

"So how's your place?" she asked.

"It's good—I have a couple of roommates who are never there. Two guys. One's a med student. The other is at Brooklyn College."

She swallowed a gulp. "Are they gay?"

"Huh? I don't know." It hadn't occurred to me, and was immaterial. Being a theater minor, some of my best friends were gay.

"Because you have to be really careful, especially if you're sharing the kitchen and bathroom. You've heard of AIDS, haven't you?"

I was aware that Ryan White, a sweet boy, had gotten it through a blood transfusion.

"Just be sure to wipe down the counter when you're cooking, and definitely wipe the toilet seat before you sit down."

At the brownstone, I dashed upstairs and peeked around the corner of the guys' living room to find a queen bed. In the bathroom, I washed the torn plastic seat and decided to ask Mrs. Their for a new one.

Pages 32-34 redacted

Film Noir

In *Variety*, I found an ad for Barnum & Bailey Ringling Brothers Circus. They were at the Meadowlands in New Jersey, looking for dancers and showgirls. I remembered a friend from college, a tap dancer with whom I'd shared a duet during the Spring Dance concert, who'd gone on to their clown school in Florida. In the quiet parlor of my brownstone, I pledged to get myself to the Meadowlands and audition, if only to connect with someone I knew from before my life in New York.

But first, I needed to get my hair cut. A lot was riding on this—a new look, a new attitude. The teenage manager at the Italian restaurant where I worked had recommended Astor Place in the Village. She herself had long hair, but said Astor Place was known for good, cheap haircuts and a funky atmosphere. I took the subway and located the salon, a whizzy blister of activity behind panes of glass, sat down in the chair and mutely watched a stylist chop off my shoulder-length hair and neatly shave the base of my skull. In shock, I stumbled out of the seat, dug eighteen dollars from my pocket—a full night's tips—and left in despair. At a street vendor's table, I dug a few more bucks out and bought a scarf, then coiled it around my long neck, the chill already seeping into my shoulders. What had I done? The audition was in two days!

Ella sidled up to me when I walked into the restaurant. "Hey, you got your hair cut. Did you mean to go that short?"

I said nothing, just pushed through the swinging door to the kitchen.

"It looks fine, really," she said, hustling behind me. I wouldn't lie to you."

I didn't know what to believe. Maybe the teenage manager's tip wasn't as well-meaning as it seemed. I looked at Ella's midwestern face and wondered whether I could trust the only friend I had made in a month in New York. People back home had warned me not to make eye contact, never mind friends. In dance classes, the atmosphere was almost icy, competition heightened by the desperation of living hand to mouth. My stomach rumbled. I scooped up some ziti and sauce, which was all we were allowed to eat, and stood in front of some boxes containing table linens.

The kitchen door swung open and the manager charged in with a tray of salts and peppers. Ella moved closer to me and accidentally stepped on my foot. I stumbled into an open box of linens, dropping the ziti with red sauce on myself as well as the whites.

"Oh, my God!" Ella cried. "I'm so sorry!"

I didn't feel well. Light headed. My throat was starting to ache.

"Looks like you've had a day," the manager said, smirking. She put the tray down and smoothed her long ponytail. "You oughtta go home," she said to both of us. "Light crowd."

"Come on," Ella said, and dragged me toward the basement door. "I've got a sweatshirt in the basement you can wear while we throw that in the wash." I gripped the railing and descended the wooden stairs behind her. Next to the washer and dryer stood a table covered with tubes of paint, a jar of brushes, small canvasses.

"Whose are these?" I asked. "Lorenzo's?"

"No, mine." Ella said. "Lorenzo lets me paint down here while I do the laundry." She pulled a sweatshirt from a backpack stored beneath the table.

"Your laundry?" I was confused.

“No, the restaurant’s,” she said.

“Oh. Do they pay you for that?”

“Nah, I get my space.”

“Christ, Ella. They ought to pay you for that, don’t you think?” I was angry at the establishment, shorn beyond my dreams, covered in red sauce.

She shook me off, her asymmetrical haircut bouncing on one side, making me nostalgic for my college “do.” I flipped through her paintings of cornfields inside geometric lines. These are good. You’re really good!”

“Oh, yeah, that’s what they all say,” She brushed me off.

“No, seriously.”

“Stop it,” she said, uncomfortable.

I held my tongue. What did I know about the art world? In my socio-economic bracket, college was supposed to be about getting an education that led to a job, and here I was, a professional waitress. I had limited funds in the bank. If I couldn’t make something happen, soon—get discovered at the next audition—I was probably not going to make it long term in New York. I pulled the sweatshirt over my head and faced the possibility that dancing as an art form could soon be relegated to a hobby, as Ella’s passion for painting had.

The bus left Port Authority for the Holland Tunnel and exited the New Jersey expressway at the Meadowlands, where the landscape was freakishly barren, parking lot extending to the horizon. I wandered into the cavernous building with other bus riders who might have been going to work as ticket takers and janitors. In the hallway, circus workers were

assembling props. "Excuse me? Have you seen the clowns?" I asked a worker who was wearing overalls with the Barnum & Bailey logo on the chest. "I'm looking for a friend--Shelley Burne?"

"Shelley. Don't think she's on this tour. Good clown, though. You come a long way to see her?"

"Uh, no, actually, I'm here for the dance audition." I turned my foot out to fourth position, but he wasn't looking at my feet. He was staring at my bare neck. On my svelte, 5' 10" frame, the haircut looked androgynous, and Barnum & Bailey showgirls were anything but.

"Do you know where it is?" I asked directly. "The audition?"

"Through there," he pointed. "Good luck."

In the main hall, with its three rings, a small group had clustered in the stands. A man was handing out paperwork and said that none of us would be chosen that day. Instead, the audition would be videotaped and stored in a vault in Washington, D.C. He explained that when the circus had an opening, it would contact performers. I was greatly relieved, as this removed the immediate threat of rejection and all the feelings that came with it. Plus, I liked the idea of a video in a vault, as if it validated my existence in New York. We learned a simple routine of walk, walk, walk, then put on big feather headdresses that only served to highlight my lack of locks. I played to an imaginary balcony. It matters not, I told myself; the important thing is that I am here, and will be forever on videotape.

On the bus ride back to Manhattan, raindrops pealed down the window pane like they had on the day of my audition at Alvin Ailey. My mood sunk with them as I realized I had to get serious; go to more auditions, take more classes, and even then, there were no guarantees that I would be the one chosen among the thousands of wannabes in New York that year.

Pages 40-59 redacted

The Calling

*Even after I had a story to tell from New York, the calling remained. When my sons were young and sleep deprivation had shaken sanity, I came back to life dreaming of choreography for women of three generations, set to Joni Mitchell's *The Circle Game*. We're captive on a carousel of life. In my suburban living room, I taught this choreography to a girl of 17 and her 80-something grandmother. I would be the middle generation. The dance featured a long moment when the grandmother walked slowly across the stage, as if forgetting her place before rejoining us with swings and circles. We performed this dance at a local festival called *Women in the Arts*, and I was surprised by the emotional response it received.*

Another time, I taught an after-school dance class at my son's charter school. One girl, a brunette, was from another planet socially, but when she danced, she gained an inner focus that I recognized. On the afternoon we shared snippets from improvisations, most of the girls did cute moves they'd seen on Disney channel. They watched, hushed, as the brown-haired girl entered her sculptural meditation, embodying Hanya Holm's words: "You are your own master and student. There is no value in copying what someone else has done."

*More recently, I took a tap class with seven other middle-aged ladies. We hung on to a metal bar that we'd dragged to the center of the studio and shuffled around it, a travelling oval of ball changes. After we put the bar away, the choreography was focused on direction, forming lines and rotating them like the Rockettes. It was a tradition for the group to open and close the annual recital for young dancers who also studied at the school, called *Dance Dimensions*. In an effort to stay out of the way while the kids changed costumes, I sat outside on the steps and realized I was too old for this, having come full circle.*

I had only told my mother about the recital. At 75 years of age, she drove an hour down the highway to sit on a metal folding chair among the other parents in the audience. We ladies tapped in and out of our positions like the USC marching band, and I looked out to the day-lit auditorium to see her beaming face. "I'm so glad I made the trip," she said, "to see you dance like that!" Later, in the privacy of my home, I popped a DVD recording of the show into my laptop and closed one eye, fearing the worst. As usual, I was a head taller than the rest, with a little too much chutspah to stay within the lines.

Resolution

On New Year's Eve, the decibels from Times Square pressed against the wall of windows at Charley O's Restaurant. I wanted desperately to go out there, to lose myself in revelry, but the shift manager was firm about corporate policy. Should anything happen to me, like being stabbed or trampled, the restaurant would be liable. The most he would allow me to do was to stand in Shubert Alley, which I did. At the end of the night, I regretted my plan to visit Meg and Scott in Brooklyn. Meg was sick with a cold, but I'd been so desperate for company that I'd invited myself anyway. With the metropolitan area in gridlock, it was nearly 3:00 a.m. by the time the cab pulled up to their building. Meg answered the intercom and opened the door wearing fuzzy pink slippers that matched her pajamas. Even sick, she looked great.

"I'm so sorry!" I blurted. "Have you been waiting up?"

"Oh, no!" She placed a hand in front of her yawn, her painted nails a shade darker than her outfit. "Scott has a big paper due this week, so we fell asleep after the ball dropped. Come in! Do you want some champagne? We saved some for you."

In the living room, I collapsed against their pillowed couch. This was what I wanted—not Broadway, not chasing a boyfriend literally up a mountain—just the security of a home with tab curtains on the windows and a partner asleep in the next room. I drank the champagne in one gulp and poured myself some more.

"So how was Christmas?" Meg asked. "Did you see Jason?"

"Jason who!"

"Oh, that doesn't sound good," she coughed. "Did you guys break up?"

"I guess so." The drink and her concern unleashed my long-stuffed emotion. I downed a second flute and fell back against the couch, trying to stifle my tears, my sadness compounded by embarrassment. After all, Meg and Scott were his friends, and they didn't need to play psychiatrist on New Year's Eve, especially past bedtime when Meg was sick.

"Hey, don't cry." Scott appeared in green scrubs and gave me a box of tissues.

"I'm sorry, I shouldn't be here," I said quietly. "You guys don't need this."

"It's okay. Listen, why don't you get comfortable—you can sleep on the couch."

"Yeah, let's all go to sleep," Meg said. "We'll all feel better in the morning."

I tossed and turned on the too-short couch, my ankles and feet aching as gravity pulled the muscles. I rose three hours later with a pounding headache, washed the cotton out of my mouth, and went into the kitchen to leave a thank-you note. On the subway home, I reminded myself that art only happens in the absence of distraction. I needed to concentrate on the gift I'd been given, a chance to dance in New York.

Let the Dance Begin

Marcia, the artistic director, seemed unsure about her choreography during the first few rehearsals. Inside the storefront studio, she'd play the Jethro Tull intro over and over, giving us challenging fouettes and then asking for extended holds in unstable positions. Six-year-old Daniel pestered his mother for attention while Robert admired his calves in the mirror. Jessie had come the first time, but missed the second and third rehearsals, leaving me without a buddy in the corps. She was working on her own choreography, and we both understood the tacit agreement that one's own work takes precedence.

"Bonjour!" I heard her lovely accent when I entered the studio for the fourth rehearsal.

"Oh, hey—you're here!" I dropped my bag and joined her at the barre. Instead of her striped legwarmers, she wore a tie-dye skirt and ribbons at the ends of her braided pigtails. Jessie was a few inches shorter than I was, and could get away with the girlish outfit.

"Oui, Marcia's not too pleased with me," she confided. "So, are you coming to see my show? I'd hate to have an empty house."

I yanked on my purple leg warmers, the epitome of my differentiating style. "Don't worry, I wouldn't miss it!"

"Girls, when you're done arranging your social lives, would you please assume your positions?" Marcia called.

"AAAAAAAAAaaaaaaaaaaaaAAAAAAAA!" Daniel screamed as he streaked across the floor.

"Daniel! Daniel! Damn it, Robert, would you help him get his Pan suit on?"

Robert, shirtless and in his white tights, lifted the boy so upside down so that his legs kicked at the ceilings.

Later, I sensed that Freddie, the Jamaican cook, was checking me out.

“Order!” I yelled.

“Where are you from?” he asked, pulling my slip off the wheel.

“New England. What about you? Do you live in the city?”

“In the Village,” he grinned.

“Greenwich Village? Oh!” I seized the opportunity. “Would you like to see some modern dance? A friend of mine is performing Thursday night.”

“Thursday... Yaman, let's go.”

I pulled out my pad and pencil and wrote down his address.

It was snowing when I trekked to his apartment, wondering, was this a date? In a navy blue hallway with purple painted doors, Freddie opened the door looking buff in tight jeans. His leather belt had studs all over it, like a bulldog collar.

“Nice belt.”

“Yaman, glad you like it.” He swiveled his hips. “I have a collar, too.”

“Oh, you have a dog?”

He held his tongue as if I was really that naïve. On the way to Jessie's performance, Freddie wanted to wander through Washington Square Park. I hadn't been this far south in a while, and never at night. People moved like bees around virtual hives of transactions. “Is tonight ‘some other time’?” he asked, lighting a pipe. I shrugged. Why not? We encountered a

long line outside the theater door, which surprised me, given Jessie's comment about playing to an empty house. We streamed in with the tide and found seats on packed bleachers.

Jessie entered stage left on her hands and knees, dressed as Raggedy Ann, beside a cute male dancer dressed as Raggedy Andy. The music was playful, and the dance, lustfully floppy as they tumbled through positions both innocent and racy. Freddie loved it, and wanted to meet Jessie after, but the crush of people milling about forced us out the door.

The Prospect Heights Community Center, a former elementary school, housed a gymnasium with a stage at one end. I arrived to find Robert mopping the mylar and a janitor setting up rows of folding chairs. In the far corner of the gymnasium, Marcia was running some phrases with Jessie. I located the ladies' room with its miniature sink and put on my costume, a green and brown spandex unitard with triangular petals for a skirt.

When the curtains parted and little Daniel leaped across the stage, the audience of about fifty family and friends gasped with delight. Marcia pressed the button to play the Jethro Tull intro, and we struck our statuesque positions. Fueled by adrenaline, Jessie and I fed off each other's moves, our turns and leaps landing in unison. It wasn't a real theater—the lights were never dimmed so I could see the confused mouths on some of the faces in the audience, but the energy we produced was enough to bring them to their feet at the end. Behind the closed curtain, Marcia gave me twenty bucks, and I became a professional dancer.

The Sunset Point Retirement Home was even less of a theater than the Prospect Heights Community Center. Overexposed in my nymphy costume beneath the fluorescent lights, I stood

rigidly waiting for my cue. The unfocused energy that defined our performance completely dispersed at the end with a smattering of applause. After Marcia had given us each another \$20, I walked with Jessie to the subway at Grand Army Plaza. In just a few weeks, the Brooklyn Dance Theater would be in residence at the Apple Corps Theater in Chelsea. We traded concerns about how far it was from the tight dance she had done as a rag doll.

“It was so original,” I gushed.

“Merci! Did I tell you it was picked up?”

“Picked up?” I echoed. What do you mean?”

“Oui, the Canadian Conservatory is going to take it on the road.”

“So, what—you’re going on tour?”

She paused. “Well, my funding is for nine months, which can double to eighteen, and then I’ll go back to Canada and perform on the road.”

“Do they actually pay your rent, so you don’t have to work?”

“Oui, it’s pretty good, eh?”

“Tres bien!” I ventured, blown away.

“So, what do you think of our Brooklyn Dance Theater?” she asked.

“I guess it’s a place to start...but to be honest, it’s not as good as the dancing I was doing at home.”

“Oh?” she smiled, inviting details.

“Yeah; it’s funny. I thought I was nowhere, but now, I see it was all right.”

Jesse was quiet for a moment. “It’s hard for me, too. In Canada, I was a big fish in a small pond, eh? And here, I’m part of the corps—for a mad choreographer!”

I laughed because we had this in common, despite the difference in our journeys. She had already made it, had performed her own work in front of a wildly appreciative audience. Financially secure, she could devote herself to art. And she knew where she was going, which produced a carefree spirit which was as infectious as it was unattainable for me.

On the night of our dress rehearsal at the Apple Core Theater, the company, such as it was, finished the warm-up on stage and was applying makeup in the Green Room when Jessie arrived. Marcia made a beeline to confront her. I overheard the word “unprofessional” across the room, her son threw a handful of goldfish at his father. “That’s it!” Robert snapped at the boy. “If you don’t behave, we’re not going to the zoo!”

I left the room to wander through the black velvet wings that fell gracefully to the floor. At center stage, I closed my eyes and sensed the cool darkness above the empty seats, smelled the musky odor of the theater. I moved slowly, gaining momentum to swing and turn—when Daniel ran onstage with his arms outstretched and crashed into my legs.

On opening night, Jessie arrived in time for the warm-up, and during the performance we tried to recapture the magic, but our timing was off. During the strange holds, my standing leg felt the pain of Daniel’s collision the night before. As Marcia danced her part with Robert, I scanned the tepid faces of the audience. The theater was half empty. There was no curtain call.

Dinny was waiting for me afterward in the foyer. “Darling, you’re exquisite,” he said with a peck on my cheek.

“Oh, stop.” I said.

“Okay then.” He lowered his voice. “Are you in pain?”

“How could you tell?”

“Let me put it this way.” he whispered. “I’ve seen worse. You should be proud. Now let’s get out of here.”

There were four more shows in the two-week “season,” and the audience dwindled with each one. Meg and Scott came one night, and insisted on taking me out to dinner at a Chinese restaurant on the block, where they talked about their plans for the summer. The semester would be over soon, and they were looking forward to reading books on Footbridge Beach. Unfailingly upbeat, they praised my performance and asked about my plans. I didn’t know, and felt unglued. The Village Voice’s brief review had called the show “familial.” I was actually relieved that so little attention had been paid to it. On the other hand, it gave me a decent credit, a story to tell my star-struck friends and relatives in New Hampshire.

I did the reverse-commute once more to attend the cast party at Marcia’s house, hoping that Jessie would be there. She was the only one I would miss. Robert answered the doorbell in his usual Shakespearean style, his movements comically large. Besides being Marcia’s husband and lead dancer, he was a carpenter who immediately took me on a tour of their renovated brownstone. The kitchen featured a center island, new appliances, and the same coral paint used in the studio. Marcia was surrounded by adoring neighbors who clutched oversize wine goblets.

Robert pointed out the crown molding and bathroom fixtures, a world of grace and whimsy that made me long for material comfort. I was the epitome of a starving artist, and when we sat down to dinner, relished every bite. Jessie rang the doorbell at dessert, and rushed about the table to greet everyone. When Daniel asked if he could show me his room, I followed him back upstairs, relieved to be away from the awkward gathering, happy to give him some

attention. I read him a story, and when he fell asleep, wandered back downstairs. Robert and Marcia were putting leftovers in the fridge, and Jessie had already left. The ride back to 96th St. was exhausting as I thought about starting over again.

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Turnout

Snow that had fallen the day before, providing a brief respite from the noise and grime, was already charred at the curb. The sidewalk was slick as I gingerly walked to the grocery on Broadway, struggling with others to move between the narrow aisles in our bulky winter coats. Back at 99th and Amsterdam, someone had spilled a bottle of sticky booze on the steps. I tried to avoid the puddles as I climbed the stairs, holding my bag of soup and salad greens. At the fifth floor, I kicked open the door to find my three male roommates in a huddle.

“What did he look like?” Trey asked.

“Freak had a ski mask on!”

“And a knife? How long was it?” Jed asked.

“Jesus, Jed, what are you, getting off on this? I was mugged!”

I opened the door and went in.

“Oh, no, man. That sucks. Switch blade or hunting knife?”

“Oh my God.” I uttered, surprised by the terror in this wake-up call. New York had earned its reputation as a dangerous place, especially with so many desperate people living on the streets. I was often scared to walk at night, or ride the subway. Everyone at work was talking about the spike in crime—a nurse had screamed for help on a roof.

“Are you all right?” I asked Toby, reflecting on the question for myself.

“Yeah. But he got my wallet.”

Jed focused on this new detail. “Your wallet, man...how much was in it?”

“Is Daisy here?” I asked.

“Haven’t seen her,” Trey reported, heading to his room as if the change in dynamic had released him from an obligation.

“She’s gone,” Toby said.

“What?” I panicked.

“Went home for a visit and got engaged. Don’t know if she’ll be back.”

I went into my room and collapsed on the bed. I knew this day was coming, but the revolving door of people in my life was starting to hurt. I never saw Mary, who was either grooming horses in Westchester or doing edgy work downtown. Meg and Scott had their school and life. Dinny lived in New Jersey. Freddie, to be honest, was not my type. Ella, who I’d met at the Italian restaurant in Brooklyn, was lost perhaps for good. Jessie was my bright hope for a friend, and she was already looking at her future in Canada.

Pages 74-83 redacted

Road to Stardom

“Are you sure?” my mother asked, elated by the news.

“Yes, it’s time. I’m not getting any younger, and it’s not like I didn’t give it a shot. I mean, I did that off-Broadway thing.”

“That’s right! You should be proud of yourself! I’m proud of you.”

I rolled my eyes. “I know, Mom.”

“When are you thinking?”

“Well, I have to work this week, but I thought I’d call Meg and Scott to see when they’re driving back to Maine. The thing is, I’m not coming back to Rochester. I was thinking maybe Boston. It would mean starting over in another city—”

“Boston! That’s an excellent idea.”

“I’ll have to look for a place and, I guess, a ‘real’ job.” Fatigue settled like fog.

“My cousin’s husband owns a couple of apartments in Harvard Square that he rents out to students. Why don’t I call him and see if one is available?”

“Okay,” I said, “Harvard Square would be cool.”

I hung up and called Meg, who was charming and accommodating, as usual. The timing was actually perfect; Scott had to stay in Brooklyn for a clinical rotation, and she’d been planning to drive home by herself the following weekend. “You’ll keep me company!” she cooed.

From the living room window, I saw her pull onto 99th St., parking with one tire on the sidewalk. Unflappable, she stepped out in flip flops and a tank top, white sunglass frames like Marilyn Monroe.

Jed was in his room with the door closed, so I knocked to say goodbye. He gaped at me with his lost expression, red hair framing bloodshot eyes. "You're leaving? Now?" he asked, apparently not recalling the conversation we'd had the night before.

"Yup. It's time. Want to help me bring down some boxes?"

"Uh," Jed leaned against the wall in his worn plaid shirt. "Are you hiring me?"

"Fine," I said. "Ten bucks?"

"Deal."

He was more help than I expected, bringing all the boxes down the five flights while I packed them in Meg's car at the curb. Settling into the bucket seat, I made a silent promise not to comment on Meg's one-leg driving style as we barreled north through Spanish Harlem, into the Bronx and past Co-op City, the sign for Points North and New England. Somewhere on the ribbon of highway in Connecticut, I woke up, the blurry trees reminding me of how I felt before—bored, mainly, waiting for the next thing to happen, until I took action. I was too tired to be sad, too weak to be happy. But something like openness replaced my despair.

On the radio, supersonic crinkles and a boom signaled the beginning of "We are the World." I straightened up and stretched.

"I love this song," Meg announced, chewing a wad of pink gum a shade lighter than the polish on her fingertips.

“USA for Africa, right?” I hadn’t been listening to the radio very much, with all the news about violent crime in New York City.

“Yeah, Michael Jackson and Lionel Ritchie wrote it.” She turned the knob to full volume, and Ritchie sang in his storytelling way. “There comes a time...when we heed a certain call...”

I had no clearer roadmap than before, only the knowledge of which exits I had passed. For now, New York was done; the people, the parades, street views, and daily pulse that took my breath away. I wouldn’t be discovered, but maybe would do some summer stock. I wasn’t going to meet Madonna, let alone become her roommate.

Watching Meg pop her gum, I was wistful that this friendship, like so many I had made in New York, was temporary. The bond that had brought us together—her friendship with my former boyfriend, my need for a couch—was broken. “There’s a choice we’re making, we’re saving our own lives...” I took a deep breath. All I could do now was save myself. Meg elbowed my arm and crooned aloud. “It’s true we make a better day, just you and me.”

The sun was setting as we approached Boston, the blue glass panes of the John Hancock building reflecting an orange sky. On the Piscataqua River Bridge between Portsmouth and Kittery, I looked back at the white church spires on Bow St. Meg pulled off the highway in Kittery and barreled along bumpy pavement that became a dirt road. Ahead, a Victorian house had its porch light on. She stopped the car in a makeshift parking spot, and broke into a jog toward the house. I opened the door to a symphony of crickets, and stood still to gaze at the stars so visible in the dark night.