

PART II

Chapter 4
"Look at all the people!"

January 1976

The Short-Line bus picked up speed on the descending curve leading to the entrance of the Lincoln Tunnel. From a window seat in the back of the bus, I looked up from my reading. Glancing out at the winter grayness, I could see the New York City skyline emerging from the other side of the Hudson River. People entering New York for the first time are awed by this magnificent sight. The rest of us take it for granted. I dug my makeup case and mirror out of my dance bag to do a "quickie" freshening up job on my face. Looking back at me from my pocket mirror was a face molded with tension, and my eyes reflected my fear of rejection. I was nervous and wanted to run away from the ordeal that was ahead of me.

Earlier that morning in a fit of anger and panic, I'd told my husband, "I don't want to make this trip into the city for this stupid audition. I already did the fuckin' show! Why do I have to audition now?"

"Michael wants everyone to audition. That's that. He's the boss," he informed me in a superior tone of voice (a tone which always triggered me into rebellion).

"Yeah, well how come you don't have to?" I called from the living room.

"Michael knows my work. Anyway, I'm going to be stage managing and understudying."

"You know I'm not so sure I'd take the job if he did give it to me," I said frantically pulling hot curlers out of my hair as I paced between the living room and kitchen.

"Will you cut the shit and calm down, you do this to yourself

every time you have an audition. Now get in here and eat.”

“I can’t! I’m too nervous. I’ll throw up.”

“Get in here and eat these eggs before they get cold. Move it or you’ll miss the bus.”

“Who cares? I don’t even want to go. The nerve of that son of a bitchin’ little twerp, makin’ me audition. Up his, I’m not goin’! Who does he think he is?”

“Only the producer, director, and choreographer of the show, that’s who,” Andy said smugly.

My excessive fear of the competitive aspect of auditioning had me fighting every step of the way. In my panic, I was lashing out, suddenly afraid I wouldn’t qualify.

“Where’s my boot?” I shouted as I searched under the couch.

“I didn’t wear them last. Get in here and eat these fucking eggs before I shove them down your throat!”

“Great!” I limped into the kitchen wearing one brown leather boot (half of the pair I had inherited from doing the show) and slammed my body into the chair. “Now I can’t find my other boot.”

“What do you need boots for? I thought you weren’t going.” When he didn’t get a reaction out of me, he added, “I’m sure Michael’s gonna be heartbroken if you don’t show up. He might even kill himself.”

“Cute Papa, real cute,” I groaned. I was beginning to relax.

“Jamie, did you see mommy’s other boot?” I asked.

“Nope,” he answered in his high-pitched voice.

“Here’s your coffee, Babe. You look good,” Andy was back to pampering me in a loving attempt at boosting my confidence.

“Yeah, great ...I look like a tired old bitch.”

“Will you cut it out? You look good. You look rested.”

“That’s something to be thankful for. Candice slept all night, I think. Were you up with her?”

"Nope, she finally slept," he said.

"Ma, you look fritty," Jamie smiled.

"Thank you, sweetheart." I leaned over and kissed his cheek.

"I don't need this job. I have you and the babies. It will only be a hassle to go back to work."

"Bullshit, you're happy when you're working. It's good for you."

"I suppose, but do you honestly think I should have to audition?"

"Well, I'm not the director, but I'm sure Michael has his reasons."

"I guess so." I resigned myself. "Shit!!"

As the bus pulled into the Port Authority building, I put my makeup away and buttoned up my coat. It was early January and bitter cold. It was one of those rare days in New York City when the air smells fresh and clean. Leaving the bus terminal, I pulled up the collar on my black seal coat, an ancient thrift shop special. It was not terribly attractive, but it was unbelievably warm. Adjusting the shoulder strap on my dance bag, I prepared to face the windy, freezing, four-block walk to the Shubert Theater. In my nervousness I'd forgotten about the three-block underpass in the subway, which would have kept me from the cold a little bit longer. Passing 42nd Street and 8th Avenue, I had to run the gauntlet past the junkie brigade.

"Hey, you a foxy lookin' mama," said a guy in a short leather jacket who was bouncing around with his hands in his pockets to keep from freezing to death.

"You have any sisters for me?" called out another. "I love red-heads."

As I passed them I nodded my head and said, "Have a good day, gents." This amused them and they all began to laugh.

"Good day to you too, Red," I heard a voice shout out as I crossed 43rd Street, just beating the traffic light.

My nose hairs were beginning to freeze, so I started to jog. As I clutched my coat tightly to my body, to keep the wind out, I thought about my little exchange with those dudes back on the corner. No real threat if you don't act timid or smart-ass. To some people, encounters like that one, on the streets of New York, can be a frightening experience. I smiled at the people passing by thinking, "This is my hometown."

Fighting the monsoon wind tunneling through Shubert Alley, I entered the mirrored stage door of the Shubert Theater. The doorman was seated behind a partition to the right of the door. A mirror was situated on a wall between two rooms, so he could see who was entering. Wishing that I looked and felt better, I glanced into the little mirror. My face was red and splotchy from the cold.

"Downstairs?" I asked the doorman.

"Right, honey. How are the babies?" He inquired.

Surprised that he remembered me, I said, "They're doin' great, I'll have to bring them by sometime."

Descending the gray winding staircase to the basement, I stopped at the first landing, by force of habit, to check the bulletin board. As I took a drink of water from the cooler at the bottom of the stairs, memories flooded my mind. I'd really loved those weeks that I'd worked here. My thoughts were distracted as a parade of women with cold red faces, bundled in winter clothes, began passing me on the staircase. I decided to sign in first, then change into my rehearsal clothes. In the basement underpass to stage right I stopped at the wardrobe room to see if anyone was in, but it was still too early. I felt so awkward in this place that had been like home to me just a brief time ago. I continued my excursion down through the basement and up the stairs to stage right. After signing in on a large yellow notepad, I was given a three by five-inch orange index card to fill out. It had a number printed on the right-hand corner, my number, 61. There were already that many women here, and I'd made it a point of arriving more than a half hour before the ten o'clock call. I took my card and returned to the basement to change. While I slipped into my burgundy colored leotards and sheer "suntan" support panty hose, my mind was temporarily distracted

from instinctively sizing up the competition. The grim room outside the orchestra pit seemed lifeless, even though it was filled with an array of semi-nude women. The hominess of my theatre family was missing. I looked at the old arm chairs seated about the room, accompanied by a table covered with a red and white checkered tablecloth, a Mr. Coffee machine, and a small ancient-looking refrigerator. It was a futile attempt to make a "Green Room," a place of relaxation, conversation, and getting together, out of this gray cellar. I was seized with a pang of heartache and the need to share the fact that I belonged here. I wanted to shout out that I'd already been a part of the experience that they were all hoping for. Containing myself, I gave my mirror image the once over and smiled as my confidence surged over how well I looked for being a mommy. I worked my way through the rapidly increasing crowd of women to the stage level in search of Baayork. Passing another busty redhead, a tough, brassier version of myself, I overheard her sizing up the competition with a couple of her friends.

"Ahh, she's not so hot, she's got no tits."

To which her friend replied, "Yeah, but I bet she can dance her ass off. The flat chested ones always can, ya know. I think they break down the tissue from all those ballet classes."

I laughed out loud at the remark, and was immediately shot a pursed-lipped, raised eyebrow, look of disdain from the twosome.

I continued my search for Baayork in the quickly crowding backstage area. Peering through a path of carefully styled hair, I finally connected with Baay. Her animated face was framed between a sleek blonde Dutch-boy cut and a dark afro, her backdrop was one of rusty red frizz and strawberry blonde curls; she looked like the center of an abstract flower. Pushing past the hair spray scented heads, we greeted each other with a hug.

"Hi, Mama! How ya doin'? How's my baby?"

"She's a little butter-ball." She didn't give me a chance to go on, as she continued,

"How's Andy, Jamie, and Ronkie? I haven't seen you guys in so long, I've been so busy."

"We're all fine."

Slumping my shoulders forward and briskly clipping my words, I whispered, “What the fuck am I doing here?”

“Michael insisted that everyone audition.” She tightened her lips into a straight line and popped her eyes wide in an apologetic gesture. She read me well and knew the day ahead was going to be one of relentless insecurity. Following her motherly instincts, she began shoving me toward a mirror that was rigged up in the corner and commanded me, “Take that little suburban housewife topknot out of your hair right now and make pigtails ...right now!” She waved the pointed index finger of her right hand at me, while her left hand rested, posed on her hip.

“You’re kiddin’. I’ll feel like a jerk!”

“So, you’ll feel like a jerk, but you’ll get the job.”

“But everyone will know which part I want.”

“Who gives a shit, as long as Michael knows the part you want!” Baayork left me standing in the dimly lit corner crowded with women, each awaiting their turn by the eight-by-ten-inch mirror. Upon leaving me she warned, “Get bouncy, and get rid of this negativity.”

Self-consciously, I began brushing out my hair, parted it down the center, and styled it into two ponytails (one above each ear). When my turn at the mirror arrived, I shook my head from side to side checking out the bounce of my “cute” hairstyle.

“I feel like a horse’s ass,” I mumbled to myself. Walking back to the stage area, I realized I was carrying myself as though I was wearing a “Vegas” style head-dress. This stiff-necked image caused me to break out laughing and relaxed me just in time. Baayork had turned around and was watching me through the crowd. She was preoccupied with one of the stage managers but gave me a smile and waved an O.K. sign. I still felt like a horse’s ass.