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## Falling in Love with New York, Spring 1961

During spring break, Mom and I drove to New York in our new white Plymouth station wagon with futuristic fins. As we drove into the city, I saw the New York skyline for the first time, and it took my breath away. I was awed by the skyscrapers shooting into the sky. Each building had thousands of windows with thousands of people behind them, like bees in a beehive, and all these people had different stories, different lives, and different dreams.

As we entered midtown Manhattan, I was thrilled by the sight of dozens of theatres, one after the next, running north and south, east and west. Some were big theatres like the Metropolitan Opera House and City Center. Others were mid-sized theatres for Broadway shows, and others were small theatres for cabaret. Five years earlier, when I began taking the train to Philadelphia, I had memorized the names of the theatres, the plays, and the stars that I saw on three sheets, the vertical posters in train stations that

advertised Broadway shows. Now I was seeing the actual theatres, and inside the theatres were the biggest stars on Broadway: Mary Martin, Chita Rivera, Gwen Verdon, and Diahann Carroll. I could feel the heartbeat of the professional world, and I liked its quicker pace.

In midtown Manhattan, Mom and I found the Metropolitan Opera Ballet School, which was located in the Metropolitan Opera House, a grand old building that occupied an entire block from Thirty-Eighth Street to Thirty-Ninth Street, from Seventh Avenue to Broadway. The stage door was on Thirty-Ninth Street, and as Mom and I entered, I could feel the ghosts of the great singers and dancers who had performed in the theatre, whose souls were still there because they couldn't bear to leave. The doorman was a friendly old man, straight out of Central Casting, and there was an old elevator that ran with a lever that moved like a windshield wiper, from left to right. The further right it went, the faster the speed of the elevator. The elevator lumbered up to the top floor, where there was a large dance studio overlooking the city. The studio, like the rest of the theatre, reverberated with history. I felt as if I had walked into a Degas painting, and I luxuriated in the feeling of stepping back in time.

Mrs. Craske was teaching class, but, as a teacher for me, she had two strikes against her. First, she had a gentle, nurturing personality rather than a theatrical presence like Mr. Jamieson, and I preferred the more theatrical personality. Second, she taught the Cecchetti method, not Russian technique. But before Mom and I left the building, I asked the doorman to let me look at the stage.

The Metropolitan Opera House had the biggest stage I had ever seen. I couldn't imagine how many grand jetés it would take to get from one side of the stage to the other. Or how many miles it was from the stage floor to the ceiling. From the edge of the wings, I walked center stage, a distance of more than fifty feet, and looked out into the maroon and gold Edwardian auditorium that was shaped like a golden horseshoe on five levels. Hanging from the ceiling, high above the five levels of seats, was a sunburst chandelier. The auditorium seated over three thousand people, and almost a quarter of the seats were in elegant boxes with room to move the chairs around for a better view. I knew that kings and queens, movie stars and captains of

industry sat in those seats, and I vowed that someday I would dance on this stage and hear the applause of those three thousand people. My trip to the Metropolitan Opera would have been worth it just to walk onto the stage.

Mom and I had dinner at the Automat, which I adored. Opposite the entrance was a cafeteria line with salads, meats, potatoes, and vegetables. I loved being able to choose exactly what I wanted—mashed potatoes and green beans. On the two side walls were cubbyholes with glass fronts. Inside the cubbyholes were rolls, pastries, and pies. I put a few nickels in the slot by one cubbyhole, lifted the glass panel, and took out a slice of lemon meringue pie, which was immediately replaced with another slice by a hand on the other side of the cubbyhole. Built into the walls were metal machines that dispensed coffee and hot chocolate. I watched a man place a cup under a faucet, insert two nickels into a slot, and swivel a metal lever. Coffee poured out of the faucet into the cup just until the cup was full. There were separate machines for black coffee, regular coffee, light coffee, and hot chocolate, so people didn't even have to add milk.

In contrast to the Metropolitan Opera House, which pulsed with history, the atmosphere at the School of American Ballet was one of cool efficiency. I took two classes at SAB and preferred the class of Anatole Oboukhoff, a short man with a large presence. Mr. Oboukhoff gave a good class, and I could see that the girls would be excellent competition, but Mr. Oboukhoff didn't seem to find much joy in the performance of his students. I didn't think I would look forward to seeing him the way I looked forward to seeing Mr. Jamieson, and I had learned at the Philadelphia Dance Academy how important it was to find a teacher who inspired me.

That night, as Mom and I drove back to Wilmington, I concluded that our trip had been productive. I hadn't found my inspirational teacher, but I had fallen in love with New York. I could see myself living and dancing in this magical city. New York had all of the energy and diversity of the dancers I saw on stage and television. I loved seeing people from many different cultures, like the Orthodox Jews in the diamond district and the French, Chinese, and Greeks in ethnic restaurants. I liked hearing many different languages in the streets. I was dazzled by the bright lights of Broadway, and I knew I wanted to live in a city that pulses with life twenty-four hours a day.

It may seem strange that we were only a few miles from Juilliard (which was then on 122nd Street) and never went to see the campus, but I wasn't looking for a campus. I had seen what I needed to see when I watched the class with Mrs. Craske. I had learned that I wanted to be a piano major at Juilliard and study ballet at a company school.

Piano recitals and competitions indicated that I might be the best pianist my age in Delaware, but Delaware was a small state, and I knew that only a few miles away, across the Pennsylvania state line, was Peter Serkin, the son of concert pianist Rudolf Serkin. I hadn't heard Peter play, but I had heard that he was following in his father's footsteps. I was sure that he practiced more than one hour a day and that his hands, unlike mine, would be big enough to reach a tenth. My competition for Juilliard would be pianists like him, not part-time pianists like me. Mom and I decided that I should take the dance audition at Juilliard as a backup.

When we drove back into Wilmington after two days in New York, the fourteen-story DuPont buildings looked puny compared to the skyscrapers of Manhattan. Wilmington seemed like a sleepy little hamlet of detached houses and picket fences. It had been a great place to grow up. Wilmington had given me nurturing teachers and scholarships for music, dance, and high school, but now I felt ready to be part of a bigger world.

That night, Mom and I filled out the application for Juilliard. We never discussed the possibility that Juilliard wouldn't want me, so by the end of April, I believed that I was poised to make my escape from the suburbs. In fact, our search for academic and ballet schools had just begun.

Juilliard had specific requirements for the piano audition: a work by Bach; a complete sonata by Haydn, Mozart, or Beethoven; a Romantic piece by Chopin, Mendelssohn, Schumann, Brahms, or Liszt; and a piece by a twentieth-century composer. My piano teacher, Miss Littell, decided what I would play. In all the years I studied piano, it never occurred to me to suggest a particular piece or even a particular composer. In piano, as in dance, my teacher spoke, and I obeyed.

For my Juilliard audition, Miss Littell chose a Bach prelude and fugue in C minor, which I thought was repetitive and bland; Beethoven's Sonata,

Opus 2, No. 2, which I liked because it began with a bang and had several different moods within its four movements; a piece by Chopin called “Three Ecossaises,” which was my favorite because it required speed and dexterity so that the notes sparkled like musical diamonds; and Aaron Copland’s “The Cat and the Mouse,” a modern piece which I actively disliked. Even the name of the Copland piece offended me because it sounded like the title of a nursery rhyme. This was the first modern piece I had ever played, and I tried to convince Miss Littell to find a twentieth-century composer who wrote in the Romantic style, but she was adamant that Juilliard required a twentieth-century piece because the jury wanted to hear something modern. I didn’t appreciate modern music or modern dance. I didn’t like dissonance, and I didn’t like anguished contractions. My sensibility was firmly rooted in the Romantic era. I liked the music of Beethoven, Brahms, Chopin, Tchaikovsky, Liszt, Schumann, and Schubert. I liked the Romantic ballets: *Giselle*, *Swan Lake*, *Coppélia*, and *Sleeping Beauty*.

As a dress rehearsal for my piano audition, Mom decided that I should give a recital at the Wilmington Music School on May 30th—two days before my auditions at Juilliard. I was surprised by the large audience, pleased that no one left at intermission, and satisfied with the way I played. Even “The Cat and the Mouse” was tolerable because the audience seemed to enjoy it. However, the most important thing I learned from the recital was that I didn’t have the temperament of a concert pianist. I didn’t like spending hours alone practicing the piano, and I didn’t enjoy the solo concert as much as I enjoyed dance performances in which I was part of a group.

Dancers spend their days leaping and spinning in the company of other dancers. Every morning in the dressing room, they share their hopes, fears, and dreams as they change into practice clothes for company class. They take class together, rehearse together, and perform together. Even a dancer who is rehearsing a solo usually has at least two other people in the room—the choreographer or ballet mistress and the accompanist. Professional ballet dancers are part of a large community. The company is their immediate family, and their community circles the globe. It is a community that lives in studios with mirrors on one wall, communicates in French, strives for perfection, and inspires other members with passion for the art. I liked

the physical feeling of dance and the exhilaration of conquering new steps and performing on stage, but part of my love for dance was a love of the community.

This revelation about my unsuitability for a career as a pianist didn't change my desire to be a piano major at Juilliard because Juilliard excelled in piano, and I wanted to study ballet at a company school with Russian teachers. However, I had learned that if anything precluded my having a career in dance, piano would not be my second choice. I would have to find something else.

My piano audition was scheduled for early morning and my dance audition for the afternoon, so Mom put me on a train for New York the preceding night. In my pocket was a check for one night's stay at the YWCA where Mom and I had stayed during spring break. I arrived at the Y with a small white suitcase that held my piano music and my outfits for both auditions. The young woman at the front desk looked horrified when I told her that I had a reservation and asked how old I was. I told her that I was fifteen, and she informed me that the Y didn't take girls under sixteen. "I've stayed here before," I said. "Besides, I have a reservation and a check from my mother." The young woman looked at my written confirmation and Mom's check for five dollars and twenty-cents made out to the YWCA. "Wait here," she said and disappeared. A few minutes later, she informed me that I could stay for one night only and that I couldn't return until I was sixteen. That was fine. All I needed was one night.

I filled out the registration card and reveled in the freedom of traveling alone. I knew that this night was the first of many nights in many hotels that I would experience as a professional dancer, and I could feel the world pulsing with adventure just outside the window. I wanted to run outside and drink in the city's atmosphere, but exploration would have to wait. This trip was about getting into Juilliard, and I wanted a full nine hours' sleep.

The next morning, I woke early, looked through my music, and warmed up my fingers by playing a few excerpts in the air. I walked up to Fifty-Seventh Street and ate a powdered whole-wheat donut and a hot chocolate