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Dolly Alderton, *Sunday Times*

ELIZABETH  
GILBERT



CITY OF  
GIRLS

THE *SUNDAY TIMES* BESTSELLER

'Transcendent ... A love letter to love'  
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BLOOMSBURY

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‘When Elizabeth Gilbert set out to write *City of Girls*, her goal was to tell a story of female promiscuity that didn’t end in death or misfortune – a direct and delicious rebuttal to the tragic, sexist fates of the Emma Bovarys and Anna Kareninas of the canon.

The result is a wildly entertaining summertime romp’ *i*

‘Embraces the power of a woman breaking from a traditional path, and the wisdom of taking true, two-handed joy in the pleasures that life offers up ... An unbeatable beach read, loaded with humor and insight’ *Newsday*

**ELIZABETH GILBERT** is the number one bestselling author of *Eat Pray Love*, which has sold over 15 million copies worldwide and been translated into over forty-six languages, and several other international bestselling books of fiction and non-fiction. Her story collection *Pilgrims* was a finalist for the PEN/Hemingway award; *The Last American Man* was a finalist for both the National Book Award and the National Book Critics Circle Award. Her follow-up memoir to *Eat Pray Love*, *Committed*, became an instant number one *New York Times* bestseller. She has published two novels, *Stern Men* and *The Signature of All Things*, which was longlisted for the Baileys Women's Prize for Fiction and shortlisted for the Wellcome Book Prize. She lives in New Jersey.

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*Big Magic*

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GILBERT

CITY OF  
GIRLS

B L O O M S B U R Y P U B L I S H I N G  
L O N D O N • O X F O R D • N E W Y O R K • N E W D E L H I • S Y D N E Y

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For Margaret Cordi—  
my eyes, my ears, my beloved friend





You will do foolish things,  
but do them with enthusiasm.

—COLETTE



## NEW YORK CITY, APRIL 2010

I received a letter from his daughter the other day.

Angela.

I'd thought about Angela many times over the years, but this was only our third interaction.

The first was when I'd made her wedding dress, back in 1971.

The second was when she'd written to tell me that her father had died. That was in 1977.

Now she was writing to let me know that her mother had just passed away. I'm not sure how Angela expected me to receive this news. She might have guessed it would throw me for a loop. That said, I don't suspect malice on her part. Angela is not constructed that way. She's a good person. More important, an interesting one.

I was awfully surprised, though, to hear that Angela's mother had lasted this long. I'd assumed the woman had died ages ago. God knows everyone else has. (But why should anyone's longevity surprise me, when I myself have clung to existence like a barnacle to a boat bottom? I can't be the only ancient woman still tottering around New York City, absolutely refusing to abandon either her life or her real estate.)

It was the last line of Angela's letter, though, that impacted me the most.

“Vivian,” Angela wrote, “given that my mother has passed away, I wonder if you might now feel comfortable telling me what you were to my father?”

Well, then.

What was I to her father?

Only he could have answered that question. And since he never chose to discuss me with his daughter, it’s not my place to tell Angela what I was to him.

I can, however, tell her what he was to me.

## ONE

In the summer of 1940, when I was nineteen years old and an idiot, my parents sent me to live with my Aunt Peg, who owned a theater company in New York City.

I had recently been excused from Vassar College, on account of never having attended classes and thereby failing every single one of my freshman exams. I was not quite as dumb as my grades made me look, but apparently it really doesn't help if you don't study. Looking back on it now, I cannot fully recall what I'd been doing with my time during those many hours that I ought to have spent in class, but—knowing me—I suppose I was terribly preoccupied with my appearance. (I do remember that I was trying to master a “reverse roll” that year—a hairstyling technique that, while infinitely important to me and also quite challenging, was *not very Vassar*.)

I'd never found my place at Vassar, although there were places to be found there. All different types of girls and cliques existed at the school, but none of them stirred my curiosity, nor did I see myself reflected in any of them. There were political revolutionaries at Vassar that year wearing their serious black trousers and discussing their opinions on international foment, but I wasn't interested in international foment. (I'm still not. Although I did take

notice of the black trousers, which I found intriguingly chic—but only if the pockets didn't bulge.) And there were girls at Vassar who were bold academic explorers, destined to become doctors and lawyers long before many women did that sort of thing. I should have been interested in them, but I wasn't. (I couldn't tell any of them apart, for one thing. They all wore the same shapeless wool skirts that looked as though they'd been constructed out of old sweaters, and that just made my spirits low.)

It's not like Vassar was *completely* devoid of glamour. There were some sentimental, doe-eyed medievalists who were quite pretty, and some artistic girls with long and self-important hair, and some highbred socialite types with profiles like Italian greyhounds—but I didn't befriend any of them. Maybe it's because I sensed that everybody at this school was smarter than me. (This was not entirely youthful paranoia; I uphold to this day that everybody there *was* smarter than me.)

To be honest, I didn't understand what I was doing at college, aside from fulfilling a destiny whose purpose nobody had bothered explaining to me. From earliest childhood, I'd been told that I would attend Vassar, but nobody had told me why. What was it all *for*? What was I meant to get out of it, exactly? And why was I living in this cabbagey little dormitory room with an earnest future social reformer?

I was so fed up with learning by that time, anyhow. I'd already studied for years at the Emma Willard School for Girls in Troy, New York, with its brilliant, all-female faculty of Seven Sisters graduates—and wasn't that enough? I'd been at boarding school since I was twelve years old, and maybe I felt that I had done my time. How many more books does a person need to read in order to prove that she can read a

book? I already knew who Charlemagne was, so leave me alone, is how I saw it.

Also, not long into my doomed freshman year at Vassar, I had discovered a bar in Poughkeepsie that offered cheap beer and live jazz deep into the night. I'd figured out a way to sneak off campus to patronize this bar (my cunning escape plan involving an unlocked lavatory window and a hidden bicycle—believe me, I was the bane of the house warden), thereby making it difficult for me to absorb Latin conjugations first thing in the morning because I was usually hungover.

There were other obstacles, as well.

I had all those cigarettes to smoke, for instance.

In short: I was busy.

Therefore, out of a class of 362 bright young Vassar women, I ended up ranked at 361—a fact that caused my father to remark in horror, “Dear God, what was that *other* girl doing?” (Contracting polio as it turned out, the poor thing.) So Vassar sent me home—fair enough—and kindly requested that I not return.

My mother had no idea what to do with me. We didn't have the closest relationship even under the best of circumstances. She was a keen horsewoman, and given that I was neither a horse nor fascinated by horses, we'd never had much to talk about. Now I'd embarrassed her so severely with my failure that she could scarcely stand the sight of me. In contrast to me, my mother had performed quite well at Vassar College, thank you very much. (Class of 1915. History and French.) Her legacy—as well as her generous yearly donations—had secured my admission to that hallowed institution, and now look at me. Whenever she passed me in the hallways of our house, she would nod at me like a career diplomat. Polite, but chilly.



My father didn't know what to do with me, either, though he was busy running his hematite mine and didn't overly concern himself with the problem of his daughter. I had disappointed him, true, but he had bigger worries. He was an industrialist and an isolationist, and the escalating war in Europe was spooking him about the future of his business. So I suppose he was distracted with all that.

As for my older brother, Walter, he was off doing great things at Princeton, and giving no thought to me, other than to disapprove of my irresponsible behavior. Walter had never done an irresponsible thing in his life. He'd been so respected by his peers back in boarding school that his nickname had been—and I am not making this up—*the Ambassador*. He was now studying engineering because he wanted to build infrastructure that would help people around the world. (Add it to my catalogue of sins that I, by contrast, was not quite sure I even knew what the word “infrastructure” meant.) Although Walter and I were close in age—separated by a mere two years—we had not been playmates since we were quite little. My brother had put away his childish things when he was about nine years old, and among those childish things was me. I wasn't part of his life, and I knew it.

My own friends were moving forward with their lives, too. They were heading off to college, work, marriage, and adulthood—all subjects that I had no interest in or understanding of. So there was nobody around to care about me or entertain me. I was bored and listless. My boredom felt like hunger pains. I spent the first two weeks of June hitting a tennis ball against the side of our garage while whistling “Little Brown Jug” again and again, until finally my parents got sick of me and shipped me off to live with my aunt in the city, and honestly, who could blame them?

Sure, they might have worried that New York would turn me into a communist or a dope fiend, but anything had to be better than listening to your daughter bounce a tennis ball against a wall for the rest of eternity.

So that's how I came to the city, Angela, and that's where it all began.

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They sent me to New York on the train—and what a terrific train it was, too. The Empire State Express, straight out of Utica. A gleaming, chrome, delinquent-daughter delivery device. I said my polite farewells to Mother and Dad, and handed my baggage over to a Red Cap, which made me feel important. I sat in the diner car for the whole ride, sipping malted milk, eating pears in syrup, smoking cigarettes, and paging through magazines. I knew I was being banished, but still . . . *in style!*

Trains were so much better back then, Angela.

I promise that I will try my best in these pages not to go on and on about how much better everything was back in my day. I always hated hearing old people yammering on like this when I was young. (*Nobody cares! Nobody cares about your Golden Age, you blathering goat!*) And I do want to assure you: I'm aware that many things were *not* better in the 1940s. Underarm deodorants and air-conditioning were woefully inadequate, for instance, so everybody stank like crazy, especially in the summer, and also we had Hitler. But trains were unquestionably better back then. When was the last time *you* got to enjoy a malted milk and a cigarette on a train?

I boarded the train wearing a chipper little blue rayon dress with a skylark print, yellow tracteries around the neckline, a moderately slim skirt, and deep pockets set in at the hips. I remember this dress so vividly because, first of all, I never forget what anyone is wearing, *ever*, and also I'd sewn the thing myself. A fine job I'd done with it, too. The swing of it—hitting just at midcalf—was flirty and effective. I remember having stitched extra shoulder pads into that dress, in the desperate hope of resembling Joan Crawford—though I'm not sure the effect worked. With my modest cloche hat and my borrowed-from-Mother plain blue handbag (filled with cosmetics, cigarettes, and not much else), I looked less like a screen siren and mostly like what I actually was: a nineteen-year-old virgin, on her way to visit a relative.

Accompanying this nineteen-year-old virgin to New York City were two large suitcases—one filled with my clothes, all folded neatly in tissue, and the other packed with fabrics, trimmings, and sewing supplies, so that I could make more clothes. Also joining me was a sturdy crate containing my sewing machine—a heavy and unwieldy beast, awkward to transport. But it was my demented, beautiful soul-twin, without which I could not live.

So along with me it came.

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That sewing machine—and everything that it subsequently brought to my life—was all thanks to Grandmother Morris, so let's talk about her for just a moment.

You may read the word "grandmother," Angela, and perhaps your mind summons up some image of a sweet little old lady with white hair. That wasn't my grandmother. My

grandmother was a tall, passionate, aging coquette with dyed mahogany hair who moved through life in a plume of perfume and gossip, and who dressed like a circus show.

She was the most colorful woman in the world—and I mean that in all definitions of the word “colorful.” Grandmother wore crushed velvet gowns in elaborate colors—colors that she did not call pink, or burgundy, or blue, like the rest of the imagination-impooverished public, but instead referred to as “ashes of rose” or “cordovan” or “della Robbia.” She had pierced ears, which most respectable ladies did not have back then, and she owned several plush jewelry boxes filled with an endless tumble of cheap and expensive chains and earrings and bracelets. She had a motoring costume for her afternoon drives in the country, and her hats were so big they required their own seats at the theater. She enjoyed kittens and mail-order cosmetics; she thrilled over tabloid accounts of sensational murders; and she was known to write romantic verse. But more than anything else, my grandmother loved *drama*. She went to see every play and performance that came through town, and also adored the moving pictures. I was often her date, as she and I possessed exactly the same taste. (Grandmother Morris and I both gravitated toward stories where innocent girls in airy gowns were abducted by dangerous men with sinister hats, and then rescued by other men with proud chins.)

Obviously, I loved her.

The rest of the family, though, didn't. My grandmother embarrassed everyone but me. She especially embarrassed her daughter-in-law (my mother), who was *not* a frivolous person, and who never stopped wincing at Grandmother Morris, whom she once referred to as “that swoony perpetual adolescent.”

Mother, needless to say, was not known to write romantic verse.

But it was Grandmother Morris who taught me how to sew.

My grandmother was a master seamstress. (She'd been taught by *her* grandmother, who had managed to rise from Welsh immigrant maidservant to affluent American lady of means in just one generation, thanks in no small part to her cleverness with a needle.) My grandmother wanted me to be a master at sewing, too. So when we weren't eating taffy together at the picture shows, or reading magazine articles aloud to each other about the white slave trade, we were sewing. And that was serious business. Grandmother Morris wasn't afraid to demand excellence from me. She would sew ten stitches on a garment, and then make me sew the next ten—and if mine weren't as perfect as hers, she would rip mine out and make me do it again. She steered me through the handling of such impossible materials as netting and lace, until I wasn't intimidated by any fabric anymore, no matter how temperamental. And structure! And padding! And tailoring! By the time I was twelve, I could sew a corset for you (whalebones and all) just as handily as you please—even though nobody but Grandmother Morris had needed a whalebone corset since about 1910.

Stern as she could be at the sewing machine, I did not chafe under her rule. Her criticisms stung but did not ache. I was fascinated enough by clothing to want to learn, and I knew that she only wished to foster my aptitude.

Her praise was rare, but it fed my fingers. I grew deft.

When I was thirteen, Grandmother Morris bought me the sewing machine that would someday accompany me to New York City by train. It was a sleek, black Singer 201 and it was murderously powerful (you could sew *leather* with it;

I could have upholstered a Bugatti with that thing!). To this day, I've never been given a better gift. I took the Singer with me to boarding school, where it gave me enormous power within that community of privileged girls who all wanted to dress well, but who did not necessarily have the skills to do so. Once word got out around school that I could sew anything—and truly, I could—the other girls at Emma Willard were always knocking at my door, begging me to let out their waists for them, or to fix a seam, or to take their older sister's formal dress from last season and make it fit them right now. I spent those years bent over that Singer like a machine gunner, and it was worth it. I became popular—which is the only thing that matters, really, at boarding school. Or anywhere.

I should say that the other reason my grandmother taught me to sew was because I had an oddly shaped body. From earliest childhood, I'd always been too tall, too lanky. Adolescence came and went, and I only got taller. For years, I grew no bosom to speak of, and I had a torso that went on for days. My arms and legs were saplings. Nothing purchased at a store was ever going to fit right, so it would always be better for me to make my own clothes. And Grandmother Morris—bless her soul—taught me how to dress myself in a way that flattered my height instead of making me look like a stilt walker.

If it sounds like I'm being self-deprecating about my appearance, I'm not. I'm just relaying the facts of my figure: I was long and tall, that's all there was to it. And if it sounds like I'm about to tell you the story of an ugly duckling who goes to the city and finds out that she's pretty, after all—don't worry, this is not that story.

I was always pretty, Angela.

What's more, I always knew it.

My prettiness, to be sure, is why a handsome man in the diner car of the Empire State Express was staring at me as I sipped my malted milk and ate my pears in syrup.

Finally he came over and asked if he could light my cigarette for me. I agreed, and he sat down and commenced with flirting. I was thrilled by the attention but didn't know how to flirt back. So I responded to his advances by staring out the window and pretending to be deep in thought. I frowned slightly, hoping to look serious and dramatic, although I probably just looked nearsighted and confused.

This scene would have been even more awkward than it sounds, except that eventually I got distracted by my own reflection in the train window, and that kept me busy for a good long while. (Forgive me, Angela, but being captivated by your own appearance is part of what it means to be a young and pretty girl.) It turns out that even this handsome stranger was not nearly as interesting to me as the shape of my own eyebrows. It's not only that I was interested in how well I'd groomed them—though I was absolutely *riveted* by that subject—but it just so happens that I was trying that summer to learn how to raise one eyebrow at a time, like Vivien Leigh in *Gone with the Wind*. Practicing this effect took focus, as I'm sure you can imagine. So you can see how the time just flew by, as I lost track of myself in my reflection.

The next time I looked up, we had pulled into Grand Central Station already, and my new life was about to begin, and the handsome man was long gone.

But not to worry, Angela—there would be plenty more handsome men to come.

Oh! I should also tell you—in case you were wondering whatever became of her—that my Grandmother Morris had

died about a year before that train deposited me into New York City. She'd passed away in August of 1939, just a few weeks before I was meant to start school at Vassar. Her death had not been a surprise—she'd been in decline for years—but still, the loss of her (my best friend, my mentor, my confidante) devastated me to the core.

Do you know what, Angela? That devastation might've had something to do with why I performed so poorly at college my freshman year. Perhaps I had not been such a terrible student, after all. Perhaps I had merely been *sad*.

I am only realizing this possibility at this moment, as I write to you.

Oh, dear.

Sometimes it takes a very long while to figure things out.



## TWO

Anyway, I arrived in New York City safely—a girl so freshly hatched that there was practically yolk in my hair.

Aunt Peg was supposed to meet me at Grand Central. My parents had informed me of this fact as I'd gotten on the train in Utica that morning, but nobody had mentioned any particular plan. I'd not been told exactly *where* I was supposed to wait for her. Also, I'd been given no phone number to call in case of an emergency, and no address to go to should I find myself alone. I was just supposed to "meet Aunt Peg at Grand Central," and that was that.

Well, Grand Central Station was grand, just as advertised, but it was also a great place for not finding someone, so it's no surprise that I couldn't locate Aunt Peg when I arrived. I stood there on the platform for the longest time with my piles of luggage, watching the station teeming with souls, but nobody resembled Peg.

It's not that I didn't know what Peg looked like. I'd met my aunt a few times before then, even though she and my father weren't close. (This may be an understatement. My father didn't approve of his sister Peg any more than he'd approved of their mother. Whenever Peg's name came up at the dinner table, my father would snort through his nose and say, "Must be nice—gallivanting about the world, living

in the land of make-believe, and spending it by the hundreds!” And I would think: *That does sound nice. . . .*)

Peg had come to a few family Christmases when I was young—but not many, because she was always on the road with her theatrical touring company. My strongest memory of Peg was from when I’d come to New York City for a day trip at age eleven, accompanying my father on a business venture. Peg had taken me to skate in Central Park. She’d brought me to visit Santa Claus. (Although we both agreed I was *far* too old for Santa Claus, I would not have missed it for the world, and was secretly thrilled to meet him.) She and I had also eaten a smorgasbord lunch together. It was one of the more delightful days of my life. My father and I hadn’t stayed overnight in the city because Dad hated and distrusted New York, but it had been one glorious day, I can assure you. I thought my aunt was terrific. She had paid attention to me as a *person*, not a child, and that means everything to an eleven-year-old child who does not want to be seen as a child.

More recently, Aunt Peg had come back home to my hometown of Clinton in order to attend the funeral of Grandmother Morris, her mother. She’d sat next to me during the service and held my hand in her big, capable paw. This gesture had both comforted and surprised me (my family were not predisposed toward hand-holding, you may be shocked to learn). After the funeral, Peg had embraced me with the strength of a lumberman, and I’d dissolved into her arms, spewing out a Niagara of tears. She’d smelled of lavender soap, cigarettes, and gin. I’d clung to her like a tragic little koala. But I hadn’t been able to spend much time with her after the funeral. She needed to leave town right away, because she had a show to produce back in the city. I felt that I’d embarrassed myself by falling to bits in her arms, comforting though she had been.

I barely knew her, after all.

In fact, what follows is the sum total of everything I knew about my Aunt Peg, upon my arrival in New York City at the age of nineteen:

I knew that Peg owned a theater called the Lily Playhouse, located somewhere in midtown Manhattan.

I knew that she had not set out for a career in the theater, but had come by her work in a rather random way.

I knew that Peg had trained as a Red Cross nurse, curiously enough, and had been stationed in France during World War I.

I knew that, somewhere along the way, Peg had discovered that she was more talented at organizing entertainments for the injured soldiers than she was at tending to their wounds. She had a knack, she found, for turning out shows in field hospitals and barracks that were cheap, quick, gaudy, and comic. War is a dreadful business, but it teaches everyone *something*; this particular war taught my Aunt Peg how to put on a show.

I knew that Peg had stayed in London for a good long while after the war, working in the theater there. She was producing a revue in the West End when she met her future husband, Billy Buell—a handsome and dashing American military officer who had also decided to stay in London after the war to pursue a career in the theater. Like Peg, Billy came from “people.” Grandmother Morris used to describe the Buell family as “sickeningly wealthy.” (For years, I wondered what that term meant, exactly. My grandmother revered wealth; how much more of it would qualify as “sickening”? One day I finally asked her this question, and she answered, as if it explained everything: “They’re *Newport*,

darling.”) But Billy Buell, Newport though he may have been, was similar to Peg in that he shunned the cultured class into which he had been born. He preferred the grit and glitter of the theater world to the polish and repression of café society. Also, he was a playboy. He liked to “make fun,” Grandmother Morris said, which was her polite code for “drinking, spending money, and chasing women.”

Upon their marriage, Billy and Peg Buell returned to America. Together, they created a theatrical touring company. They spent the better part of the 1920s on the road with a small cadre of troupers, barnstorming towns all across the country. Billy wrote and starred in the revues; Peg produced and directed them. The couple never had any highfalutin ambitions. They were just having a good time and avoiding more typical adult responsibilities. But despite all the effort they made not to be successful, success accidentally hunted them down and captured them anyhow.

In 1930—with the Depression deepening and the nation tremulous and afraid—my aunt and her husband accidentally created a hit. Billy wrote a play called *Her Jolly Affair*, which was so joyful and fun that people just ate it up. *Her Jolly Affair* was a musical farce about an aristocratic British heiress who falls in love with an American playboy (portrayed by Billy Buell, naturally). It was a light bit of fluff, like everything else they’d ever plunked down on the boards, but it was a riotous success. All across America, pleasure-starved mine workers and farmers shook out the last bits of loose change from their pockets in order to see *Her Jolly Affair*, making this simple, brainless play into a profitable triumph. The play picked up so much steam, in fact, and garnered such bountiful praise in the local papers, that in 1931, Billy and Peg brought it to New York City, where it ran for a year in a prominent Broadway theater.

In 1932, MGM made a movie version of *Her Jolly Affair*—which Billy wrote but did not star in. (William Powell did the acting job instead. Billy had decided by this point that a writer's life was easier than an actor's life. Writers get to set their own hours, they aren't at the mercy of an audience, and there's no director telling them what to do.) The success of *Her Jolly Affair* spawned a series of lucrative motion picture sequels (*Her Jolly Divorce*, *Her Jolly Baby*, *Her Jolly Safari*), which Hollywood churned out for a few years like sausages from a hopper. The whole *Jolly* enterprise made quite a pile of money for Billy and Peg, but it also signaled the end of their marriage. Having fallen in love with Hollywood, Billy never came back. As for Peg, she decided to close the touring company and use her half of the *Jolly* royalties to buy herself a big, old, run-down New York City theater of her very own: the Lily Playhouse.

All this happened around 1935.

Billy and Peg never officially divorced. And while there didn't seem to be any bad blood between them, after 1935 you couldn't exactly call them "married," either. They didn't share a home or a work life, and at Peg's insistence, they no longer shared a financial life—which meant that all that shimmering Newport money was now out of reach for my aunt. (Grandmother Morris didn't know why Peg was willing to walk away from Billy's fortune, other than to say about her daughter, with open disappointment, "Peg never cared about money, I'm afraid.") My grandmother speculated that Peg and Billy never legally divorced because they were "too bohemian" to concern themselves with such matters. Or maybe they still loved each other. Except theirs was the sort of love that best thrives when a husband and wife are separated by the distance of an entire continent. ("Don't laugh," my grandmother said. "A lot of marriages would work better that way.")

All I know is that Uncle Billy was out of the picture for the entirety of my young life—at first because he was touring, and later because he had settled in California. He was so much out of the picture, in fact, that I'd never even met him. To me, Billy Buell was a myth, composed of stories and photos. And what glamorous stories and photos they were! Grandmother Morris and I frequently saw Billy's picture in the Hollywood tabloid magazines, or read about him in Walter Winchell's and Louella Parsons's gossip columns. We were *ecstatic*, for instance, when we found out he'd been a guest at Jeanette MacDonald and Gene Raymond's wedding! There was a picture of him at the wedding reception right there in *Variety*, standing just behind luminous Jeanette MacDonald in her blush-pink wedding gown. In the photo, Billy was talking to Ginger Rogers and her then husband, Lew Ayres. My grandmother had pointed out Billy to me and said, "There he is, conquering his way across the country, as usual. And look at the way Ginger is grinning at him! If I were Lew Ayres, I'd keep an eye on that wife of mine."

I'd peered closely at the photo, using my grandmother's jeweled magnifying lens. I'd seen a handsome blond man in a tuxedo jacket, whose hand was resting on Ginger Rogers's forearm, while she, indeed, sparkled up at him with delight. He looked more like a movie star than the actual movie stars who were flanking him.

It was amazing to me that this person was married to my Aunt Peg.

Peg was wonderful, to be sure, but she was so *homely*.

What on earth had he ever seen in her?

I couldn't find Peg anywhere.

Enough time had passed that I now officially gave up the hope of being met on the train platform. I stashed away

my baggage with a Red Cap and wandered through the rushing crush of humanity that was Grand Central, trying to find my aunt amid the confluence. You might think I would've been more disquieted at finding myself all alone in New York City with no plan and no chaperone, but for some reason I wasn't. I was sure it would all end up all right. (Maybe this is a hallmark of privilege: certain well-bred young ladies simply cannot *conceive* of the possibility that somebody will not be along shortly to rescue them.)

Finally I gave up my wandering and sat down on a prominently placed bench near the main lobby of the station, to await my salvation.

And, lo, eventually I was found.

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My rescuer turned out to be a short, silver-haired woman in a modest gray suit, who approached me the way a Saint Bernard approaches a stranded skier—with dedicated focus and serious intent to save a life.

“Modest” is actually not a strong enough word to describe the suit that this woman was wearing. It was a double-breasted and square little cinderblock of an item—the kind of garment that is intentionally made to fool the world into thinking that women do not possess breasts, waists, or hips. It looked to me like a British import. It was a fright. The woman also wore chunky, low-heeled black oxfords and an old-fashioned boiled-wool green hat, of the type favored by women who run orphanages. I knew her sort from boarding school: she looked like a spinster who drank Ovaltine for dinner and gargled with salt water for vitality.

She was plain from end to end, and furthermore she was plain *on purpose*.

This brick of a matron approached me with much clarity of mission, frowning, holding in her hands a disconcertingly

large picture in an ornate silver frame. She peered at the picture in her hands, and then at me.

“Are you Vivian Morris?” she asked. Her crisp accent betrayed the truth that the double-breasted suit was not the only severe British import in town.

I allowed that I was.

“You’ve grown,” she said.

I was puzzled: Did I know this woman? Had I met her when I was younger?

Seeing my confusion, the stranger showed me the framed picture in her hands. Bafflingly, this item turned out to be a portrait of my own family, from about four years prior. It was a photo we’d taken in a proper studio, when my mother had decided that we needed to be, in her words, “officially documented, for once.” There were my parents, enduring the indignity of being photographed by a tradesman. There was my thoughtful-looking brother, Walter, with his hand on my mother’s shoulder. There was a ganglier and younger version of myself, wearing a sailor dress that was far too girlish for my age.

“I’m Olive Thompson,” announced the woman, in a voice that indicated she was accustomed to making announcements. “I’m your aunt’s secretary. She was unable to come. There was an emergency today at the theater. A small fire. She sent me to find you. My apologies for making you wait. I was here several hours ago, but as my only means of identifying you was this photo, it took me some time to locate you. As you can see.”

I wanted to laugh then and I want to laugh now, just remembering it. The idea of this flinty middle-aged woman wandering around Grand Central Station with a giant photograph in a silver frame—a frame that looked as though it had been ripped in haste off a rich person’s wall (which it had been)—and staring at every face, trying to match the



person before her to a portrait of a girl taken four years earlier, was wickedly funny to me. How had I missed her?

Olive Thompson did not seem to think this was funny, though.

I would soon discover that this was typical.

“Your bags,” she said. “Collect them. Then we’ll taxi over to the Lily. The late show has already begun. Hurry up now. Make no flimflam about it.”

I walked behind her obediently—a baby duck following a mama duck.

I made no flimflam about it.

I thought to myself, “*A small fire?*”—but I did not have the courage to ask.

## THREE

A person only gets to move to New York City for the first time in her life *once*, Angela, and it's a pretty big deal.

Perhaps this idea doesn't hold any romance for you, since you are a born New Yorker. Maybe you take this splendid city of ours for granted. Or maybe you love it more than I do, in your own unimaginably intimate way. Without a doubt, you were lucky to be raised here. But you never got to *move* here—and for that, I am sorry for you. You missed one of life's great experiences.

New York City in 1940!

There will never be another New York like that one. I'm not defaming all the New Yorks that came before 1940, or all the New Yorks that came after 1940. They all have their importance. But this is a city that gets born anew in the fresh eyes of every young person who arrives here for the first time. So *that city, that place*—newly created for my eyes only—will never exist again. It is preserved forever in my memory like an orchid trapped in a paperweight. That city will always be my perfect New York.

You can have your perfect New York, and other people can have theirs—but that one will always be mine.

It wasn't a long ride from Grand Central to the Lily Playhouse—we just cut straight across town—but our taxi took us through the heart of Manhattan, and that's always the best way for a newcomer to feel the muscle of New York. I was all a-tingle to be in the city and I wanted to look at everything at once. But then I remembered my manners and tried for a spell to make conversation with Olive. Olive, however, wasn't the sort of person who seemed to feel that the air needed to be constantly filled up with words, and her peculiar answers only brought me more questions—questions that I sensed she would be unwilling to further discuss.

“How long have you worked for my aunt?” I asked her.

“Since Moses was in nappies.”

I pondered that for a bit. “And what are your duties at the theater?”

“To catch things that are falling through midair, right before they hit the ground and shatter.”

We drove on for a while in silence, and I let *that* sink in.

I tried one more time: “What sort of show is playing at the theater tonight?”

“It's a musical. It's called *Life with Mother*.”

“Oh! I've heard of it.”

“No, you haven't. You're thinking of *Life with Father*. That was a play on Broadway last year. Ours is called *Life with Mother*. And ours is a musical.”

I wondered: *Is that legal?* Can you just take a title of a major Broadway hit like that, change a single word, and make it your own? (The answer to that question—at least in 1940, at the Lily Playhouse—was: sure.)

I asked, “But what if people buy tickets to your show by mistake, thinking that they're going to see *Life with Father*?”

Olive, flatly: “Yes. Wouldn’t that be unfortunate.”

I was starting to feel young and stupid and annoying, so I stopped talking. For the rest of the taxi ride, I got to just look out the window. It was plenty entertaining to watch the city go by. There were glories to see in all directions. It was late in the evening in midtown Manhattan on a fine summer night, so nothing can be better than that. It had just rained. The sky was purple and dramatic. I saw glimpses of mirrored skyscrapers, neon signs, and shining wet streets. People sprinted, bolted, strolled, and stumbled down the sidewalks. As we passed through Times Square, mountains of artificial lights spewed out their lava of white-hot news and instant advertising. Arcades and taxi-dance halls and movie palaces and cafeterias and theaters flashed by, bewitching my eyes.

We turned onto Forty-first Street, between Eighth and Ninth Avenues. This was not a beautiful street back then, and it still isn’t beautiful today. At that time, it was mostly a tangle of fire escapes for the more important buildings that faced Fortieth and Forty-second Streets. But there in the middle of that unlovely block was the Lily Playhouse, my Aunt Peg’s theater—all lit up with a billboard that read *Life with Mother*.

I can still see it in my mind today. The Lily was a great big lump of a thing, crafted in a style that I know now is Art Nouveau, but which I recognized then only as *heavy duty*. And boy howdy, did that lobby go out of its way to prove to you that you’d arrived somewhere important. It was all gravity and darkness—rich woodwork, carved ceiling panels, bloodred ceramic tiles, and serious old Tiffany light fixtures. All over the walls were tobacco-stained paintings of bare-breasted nymphs cavorting with gangs of satyrs—and it sure looked like one of those nymphs was about to get

herself in trouble in the family way, if she wasn't careful. Other murals showed muscular men with heroic calves wrestling with sea monsters in a manner that looked more erotic than violent. (You got the sense that the muscular men didn't *want* to win the battle, if you see my point.) Still other murals showed dryads struggling their way out of trees, tits first, while naiads splashed about in a river nearby, throwing water on each other's naked torsos in a spirit that was very much *whoopee!* Thickly carved vines of grapes and wisteria (and lilies, of course!) climbed up every column. The effect was quite bordello. I loved it.

"I'll take you straight to the show," Olive said, checking her watch, "which is nearly over, thank God."

She pushed open the big doors that led into the playhouse itself. I'm sorry to report that Olive Thompson entered her place of work with the demeanor of one who might rather not *touch* anything within it, but I myself was dazzled. The interior of the theater was really something quite stunning—a huge, golden-lit, fading old jewel box of a place. I took it all in—the sagging stage, the bad sight lines, the hefty crimson curtains, the cramped orchestra pit, the overgilded ceiling, the menacingly glittery chandelier that you could not look at without thinking, "Now, what if that thing should fall down . . . ?"

It was all grandiose, it was all crumbling. The Lily reminded me of Grandmother Morris—not only because my grandmother had loved gawdy old playhouses like this, but also because my grandmother had *looked* like this: old, overdone, and proud, and decked to the nines in out-of-date velvet.

We stood against the back wall, although there were plenty of seats to be had. In fact, there were not many more people in the audience than onstage, it appeared. I was not

the only one who noticed this fact. Olive took a quick head count, wrote the number in a small notebook which she had pulled out of her pocket, and sighed.

As for what was going on up there on the stage, it was dizzying. This, indeed, had to be the end of the show, because there was a *lot* happening at once. At the back of the stage there was a kick line of about a dozen dancers—girls and boys—grinning madly as they flung their limbs up toward the dusty heavens. At center stage, a good-looking young man and a spirited young woman were tap-dancing as though to save their lives, while singing at full bellow about how everything was going to be just fine from now on, my baby, because you and me are in *love!* On the left side of the stage was to be found a phalanx of showgirls, whose costumes and movements kept them just on the correct side of moral permissibility, but whose contribution to the story—whatever that story may have been—was unclear. Their task seemed to be to stand with their arms outstretched, slowly turning, so that you could take in the full Amazonian qualities of their figures from every angle, at your leisure. On the other side of the stage, a man dressed as a hobo was juggling bowling pins.

Even for a finale, it went on for an awfully long time. The orchestra banged forth, the kick line pounded away, the happy and breathless couple couldn't believe how *terrific* their lives were about to get, the showgirls slowly displayed their figures, the juggler sweated and hurled—until suddenly, with a crash of every instrument at once, and a swirl of spotlights, and wild flinging up of everyone's arms in the air at the same time, it ended!

Applause.

Not thunderous applause. More like a light drizzle of applause.

Olive didn't clap. I clapped politely, though my clapping sounded lonely there at the back of the hall. The applause didn't last long. The performers had to exit the stage in semisilence, which is never good. The audience filed past us dutifully, like workers heading home for the day—which is exactly what they were.

“Do you think they liked it?” I asked Olive.

“Who?”

“The audience.”

“The *audience*?” Olive blinked, as though it had never occurred to her to wonder what an audience thought of a show. After a bit of consideration, she said, “You must understand, Vivian, that our audiences are neither full of excitement when they arrive at the Lily, nor overwhelmed with elation when they leave.”

From the way she said this, it sounded as though she approved of the arrangement, or at least had accepted it.

“Come,” she said. “Your aunt will be backstage.”

So backstage we went—straight into the busy, wanton clamor that always erupts in the wings at the end of a show. Everyone moving, everyone yelling, everyone smoking, everyone undressing. The dancers were lighting cigarettes for each other, and the showgirls were removing their head-dresses. A few men in overalls were shuffling props around, but not in any way that would cause them to break a sweat. There was a lot of loud, overripe laughter, but that's not because anything was particularly funny; it's just because these were show-business people, and that's how they always are.

And there was my Aunt Peg, so tall and sturdy, clipboard in hand. Her chestnut-and-gray hair was cut in an ill-considered short style that made her look somewhat like

Eleanor Roosevelt, but with a better chin. Peg was wearing a long, salmon-colored twill skirt and what could have been a man's oxford shirt. She also wore tall blue knee socks and beige moccasins. If that sounds like an unfashionable combination, it was. It was unfashionable then, it would be unfashionable today, and it will remain unfashionable until the sun explodes. Nobody has ever looked good in a salmon-colored twill skirt, a blue oxford shirt, knee socks, and moccasins.

Her frumpy look was only thrown into starker relief by the fact that she was talking to two of the ravishingly beautiful showgirls from the play. Their stage makeup gave them a look of otherworldly glamour, and their hair was piled in glossy coils on the tops of their heads. They were wearing pink silk dressing gowns over their costumes, and they were the most overtly sexual visions of womanhood I had ever seen. One of the showgirls was a blonde—a *platinum*, actually—with a figure that would've made Jean Harlow gnash her teeth in jealous despair. The other was a sultry brunette whose exceptional beauty I'd noticed earlier, from the back of the theater. (Though I should not get any special credit for noticing how stunning this particular woman was; a Martian could have noticed it . . . *from Mars*.)

"Vivvie!" Peg shouted, and her grin lit up my world. "You made it, kiddo!"

*Kiddo!*

Nobody had ever called me kiddo, and for some reason it made me want to run into her arms and cry. It was also so encouraging to be told that I had *made it*—as though I'd accomplished something! In truth, I'd accomplished nothing more impressive than first getting kicked out of school, and then getting kicked out of my parents' house, and finally getting lost in Grand Central Station. But her delight



in seeing me was a balm. I felt so welcome. Not only welcome, but *wanted*.

"You've already met Olive, our resident zookeeper," Peg said. "And this is Gladys, our dance captain—"

The platinum-haired girl grinned, snapped her gum at me, and said, "Howyadoin?"

"—and this is Celia Ray, one of our showgirls."

Celia extended her sylphlike arm and said in a low voice, "A pleasure. Charmed to meet you."

Celia's voice was incredible. It wasn't just the thick New York accent; it was the deep gravelly tone. She was a showgirl with the voice of Lucky Luciano.

"Have you eaten?" Peg asked me. "Are you starved?"

"No," I said. "Not *starved*, I wouldn't say. But I haven't had proper dinner."

"We'll go out, then. Let's go have a few gallons of drinks and catch up."

Olive interjected, "Vivian's luggage hasn't been brought upstairs yet, Peg. Her suitcases are still in the lobby. She's had a long day, and she'll want to freshen up. What's more, we should give notes to the cast."

"The boys can bring her things upstairs," Peg said. "She looks fresh enough to me. And the cast doesn't need notes."

"The cast always needs notes."

"Tomorrow we can fix it" was Peg's vague answer, which seemed to satisfy Olive not at all. "I don't want to talk about business just now. I could *murder* a meal, and what's worse I have a powerful thirst. Let's just go out, can't we?"

By now, it sounded like Peg was begging for Olive's permission.

"Not tonight, Peg," said Olive firmly. "It's been too long a day. The girl needs to rest and settle in. Bernadette left a meat loaf upstairs. I can make sandwiches."

Peg looked a little deflated, but cheered up again within the next minute.

“Upstairs, then!” she said. “Come, Vivvie! Let’s go!”

Here’s something I learned over time about my aunt: whenever she said “Let’s go!” she meant that whoever was in earshot was also invited. Peg always moved in a crowd, and she wasn’t picky about who was in the crowd, either.

So that’s why our gathering that night—held upstairs, in the living quarters of the Lily Playhouse—included not only me and Aunt Peg and her secretary, Olive, but also Gladys and Celia, the showgirls. A last-minute addition was a fey young man whom Peg collared as he was heading toward the stage door. I recognized him as a dancer in the show. Once I got up close to him, I could see that he looked about fourteen years old, and he also looked as if he could use a meal.

“Roland, join us upstairs for dinner,” Peg said.

He hesitated. “Aw, that’s all right, Peg.”

“Don’t worry, hon, we’ve got plenty of food. Bernadette made a big pile of meat loaf. There’s enough for everyone.”

When Olive looked as though she were going to protest something, Peg shushed her: “Oh, Olive, don’t play the governess. I can share my dinner with Roland here. He needs to put on some weight, and I need to lose some, so it works out. Anyway, we’re semisolvent right now. We can afford to feed a few more mouths.”

We headed to the back of the theater, where a wide staircase led to the upstairs of the Lily. As we climbed the stairs, I could not stop staring at those two showgirls. Celia and Gladys. I’d never seen such beauties. I’d been around theater girls back at boarding school, but this was different. The theater girls at Emma Willard tended to be the sort of

females who never washed their hair, and always wore thick black leotards, and every single one of them thought she was Medea, at all times. I simply couldn't bear them. But Gladys and Celia—this was a different category. This was a different *species*. I was mesmerized by their glamour, their accents, their makeup, the swing of their silk-wrapped rear ends. And as for Roland, he moved his body just the same way. He, too, was a fluid, swinging creature. How fast they all talked! And how alluringly they threw out abbreviated hints of gossip, like bits of bright confetti.

"She just gets by on her looks!" Gladys was saying, about some girl or another.

"Not even on her looks!" Roland added. "Just on her legs!"

"Well, that ain't enough!" said Gladys.

"For one more season it is," said Celia. "*Maybe.*"

"That boyfriend of hers don't help matters."

"*That* lamebrain!"

"He keeps lapping up that champagne, though."

"She should up and tell him!"

"He's not exactly panting for it!"

"How long can a girl make a living as a movie usher?"

"Walking around with that nice-looking diamond, though."

"She should try to think more reasonable."

"She should get herself a butter-and-egg man."

Who were these *people* that were being talked about? What was this *life* that was being suggested? And who was this poor girl being discussed in the stairwell? How was she ever going to advance past being a mere movie usher, if she didn't start thinking more *reasonable*? Who'd given her the diamond? Who was paying for all the champagne that was being lapped up? I *cared* about all these

things! These things mattered! And what in the world was a butter-and-egg man?

I'd never been more desperate to know how a story ended, and this story didn't even have a plot—it just had unnamed characters, hints of wild action, and a sense of looming crisis. My heart was racing with excitement—and yours would have been, too, if you were a frivolous nineteen-year-old girl like me, who'd never had a serious thought in her life.

We reached a dimly lit landing, and Peg unlocked a door and let us all in.

“Welcome home, kiddo,” Peg said.

“Home” in my Aunt Peg's world consisted of the third and fourth floors of the Lily Playhouse. These were the living quarters. The second floor of the building—as I would find out later—was office space. The ground floor, of course, was the theater itself, which I've already described for you. But the third and fourth floors were *home*, and now we had arrived.

Peg did not have a talent for interior design, I could instantly see. Her taste (if you could call it that) ran toward heavy, outdated antiques, and mismatched chairs, and a lot of apparent confusion about what belonged where. I could see that Peg had the same sort of dark, unhappy paintings on her walls as my parents had (inherited from the same relatives, no doubt). It was all faded prints of horses and portraits of crusty old Quakers. There was a fair amount of familiar-looking old silver and china spread around the place as well—candlesticks and tea sets, and such—and some of it looked valuable, but who knew? None of it look used or loved. (There were ashtrays on every surface, though, and those certainly looked used and loved.)

I don't want to say that the place was a hovel. It wasn't dirty; it just wasn't *arranged*. I caught a glance of a formal dining room—or, rather, what might have been a formal dining room in anyone else's home, except that a Ping-Pong table had been placed right in the middle of the room. Even more curiously, the Ping-Pong table was directly situated beneath a low-hanging chandelier, which must have made it difficult to play a game.

We landed in a generously sized living room—a big enough space that it could be overstuffed with furniture while also containing a grand piano, which was jammed unceremoniously against the wall.

“Who needs something from the bottle-and-jug department?” asked Peg, heading to a bar in the corner. “Martinis? Anyone? Everyone?”

The resounding answer seemed to be: *Yes! Everyone!*

Well, almost everyone. Olive declined a drink and frowned as Peg poured the martinis. It looked as though Olive were calculating the price of each cocktail down to the halfpenny—which she probably was doing.

My aunt handed me my martini as casually as if she and I had been drinking together for ages. This was a delight. I felt quite adult. My parents drank (of course they drank; they were WASPs) but they never drank with me. I'd always had to execute my drinking on the sly. Not anymore, it seemed.

*Cheers!*

“Let me show you to your rooms,” Olive said.

Peg's secretary led me down a rabbit warren and opened one of the doors. She told me, “This is your Uncle Billy's apartment. Peg would like you to stay here for now.”

I was surprised. “Uncle Billy has an apartment here?”

Olive sighed. "It is a sign of your aunt's enduring affection for her husband that she keeps these rooms for him, should he need a place to stay while passing through."

I don't think it was my imagination that Olive said the words "enduring affection" much the same way someone else might say "stubborn rash."

Well, thank you, Aunt Peg, because Billy's apartment was wonderful. It didn't have the clutter of the other rooms I'd seen—not at all. No, this place had *style*. There was a small sitting room with a fireplace and a fine, black-lacquered desk, upon which sat a typewriter. Then there was the bedroom, with its windows facing Forty-first Street, and its handsome double bed made of chrome and dark wood. On the floor was an immaculate white rug. I had never before stood on a white rug. Just off the bedroom was a good-sized dressing room with a large chrome mirror on the wall, and a glossy wardrobe containing not one item of clothing whatsoever. In the corner of the dressing room was a small sink. The place was spotless.

"You don't have your own bath, unfortunately," said Olive, as the men in overalls were depositing my trunks and sewing machine in the dressing room. "There is a common bath across the hall. You'll be sharing that with Celia, as she is staying at the Lily, just for now. Mr. Herbert and Benjamin live in the other wing. They share their own bath."

I didn't know who Mr. Herbert and Benjamin were, but I figured I'd soon enough be finding out.

"Billy won't be needing his apartment, Olive?"

"I sincerely doubt it."

"Are you very sure? If he should ever need these rooms, of course, I can go somewhere else. What I'm saying is that I don't need anything so nice as all this. . . ."

I was lying. I needed and wanted this little apartment with all my heart, and had already laid claim to it in my imagination. This is where I would become a person of significance, I decided.

“Your uncle hasn’t been to New York City in over four years, Vivian,” Olive said, eyeballing me in that way she had—that unsettling way of making you feel as though she were watching your thoughts like a newsreel. “I trust that you can bunk down here with a certain sense of security.”

Oh, bliss!

I unpacked a few essentials, splashed some water on my face, powdered my nose, and combed my hair. Then it was back to the clutter and chatter of the big, overstuffed living room. Back to Peg’s world, with all its novelty and noise.

Olive went to the kitchen and brought out a small meat loaf, served on a plate of dismal lettuce. Just as she had intuited earlier, this was not going to be enough of a meal for everyone in the room. Shortly, however, she reappeared with some cold cuts and bread. She also scared up half a chicken carcass, a plate of pickles, and some containers of cold Chinese food. I noticed that somebody had opened a window and turned on a small fan, which helped to eliminate the stuffy summer heat not in the least.

“You kids eat,” Peg said. “Take all you need.”

Gladys and Roland lit into the meat loaf like a couple of farmhands. I helped myself to some of the chop suey. Celia didn’t eat anything, but sat quietly on one of the couches, handling her martini glass and cigarette with more panache than anything I’d ever seen.

“How was the beginning of the show tonight?” Olive asked. “I only caught the end.”

“Well, it fell short of *King Lear*,” said Peg. “But only just.”

Olive's frown deepened. "Why? What happened?"

"Nothing happened per se," said Peg. "It's just a lackluster show, but it's nothing to lose sleep over. It's always been lackluster. Nobody in the audience seemed unduly harmed by it. They all left the theater with the use of their legs. Anyway, we're changing the show next week, so it doesn't matter."

"And the box office receipts? For the early show?"

"The less we speak of such matters the better," said Peg.

"But what was the take, Peg?"

"Don't ask questions that you don't want to know the answers to, Olive."

"Well, I will *need* to know. We can't keep having crowds like tonight."

"Oh, how I love that you call it a crowd! By actual count, there were forty-seven people at the early show this evening."

"Peg! That's not *enough!*"

"Don't grieve, Olive. Things always get slower in the summer, remember. Anyway, we get the audiences we get. If we wanted to draw larger crowds, we would put on baseball games instead of plays. Or we would invest in air-conditioning. Let's just turn our attention now toward getting the South Seas act ready for next week. We can get the dancers rehearsing tomorrow morning, and they can be up and running by Tuesday."

"Not tomorrow morning," said Olive. "I've rented the stage out to a children's dance class."

"Good for you. Resourceful as ever, old girl. Tomorrow afternoon, then."

"Not tomorrow afternoon. I've rented the stage out for a swimming class."

This caught Peg up short. "A *swimming* class? Come again?"



“It’s a program that the city is offering. They’ll be teaching children from the neighborhood how to swim.”

“To *swim*? Will they be flooding our stage, Olive?”

“Of course not. It’s called dry swimming. They teach the classes without water.”

“Do you mean to tell me that they will teach swimming as a *theoretical concept*?”

“More or less so. Just the basics. They use chairs. The city is paying for it.”

“How about this, Olive. How about you tell Gladys when you *haven’t* rented our stage out to a children’s dance class, or to a dry swimming school, and then she can call a rehearsal to begin working on the dances for the South Seas act?”

“Monday afternoon,” said Olive.

“Monday afternoon, Gladys!” Peg called over to the show-girl. “Did you hear that? Can you gather everyone together for Monday afternoon?”

“I don’t like rehearsing in the mornings, anyhow,” said Gladys, although I wasn’t sure this constituted a firm reply.

“It shouldn’t be hard, Gladdie,” said Peg. “It’s just a scratch revue. Throw something together, the way you do.”

“I want to be in the South Seas show!” said Roland.

“Everyone wants to be in the South Seas show,” said Peg. “The kids love performing in these exotic international dramas, Vivvie. They love the costumes. This year alone, we’ve had an Indian show, a Chinese maiden story, and a Spanish dancer story. We tried an Eskimo romance last year, but it was no good. The costumes weren’t very becoming, to say the least. Fur, you know. Heavy. And the songs were not our best. We ended up rhyming ‘nice’ with ‘ice’ so many times, it made your head ache.”

“You can play one of the hula girls in the South Seas show, Roland!” Gladys said, and laughed.

"I sure am pretty enough for it!" he said, and struck a pose.

"You sure are," agreed Gladys. "And you're so tiny, one of these days you're just gonna float away. I always gotta be careful not to put you right next to me on the stage. Standing next to you, I look like a great big cow."

"That could be because you've gained weight lately, Gladys," observed Olive. "You need to monitor what you eat, or soon you won't fit into your costumes at all."

"What a person eats doesn't have *anything* to do with her figure!" Gladys protested, as she reached for another piece of meat loaf. "I read it in a magazine. What matters is how much *coffee* you drink."

"You drink too much *booze*," Roland cried out. "You can't hold your liquor!"

"I surely cannot hold my liquor!" Gladys agreed. "Everybody knows *that* about me. But I'll tell you another thing—I wouldn't have as big a sex life as I have, if I could hold my liquor!"

"Boot me your lipstick, Celia," said Gladys to the other showgirl, who silently pulled out a tube from the pocket of her silk robe and handed it over. Gladys painted her lips with the most violent shade of red I'd ever seen, and then kissed Roland hard on both his cheeks, leaving big, bright imprints.

"There, Roland. Now you *are* the prettiest girl in the room!"

Roland didn't appear to mind the teasing. He had a face just like a porcelain doll, and to my expert eye, it looked as though he tweezed his brows. I was shocked that he didn't even *try* to act male. When he spoke, he waved his hands around like a debutante. He didn't even wipe off the lipstick from his cheeks! It's almost as though he *wanted* to look

like a female! (Forgive my naïveté, Angela, but I hadn't been around a lot of homosexuals at that point in my life. Not male ones, anyhow. Now lesbians, on the other hand—*those* I'd seen. I did spend a year at Vassar, after all. Even I wasn't *that* oblivious.)

Peg turned her attention to me. "Now! Vivian Louise Morris! What do you want to do with yourself while you're here in New York City?"

What did I want to do with myself? I wanted to do *this*! I wanted to drink martinis with showgirls, and listen to Broadway business talk, and eavesdrop on the gossip of boys who looked like girls! I wanted to hear about people's big sex lives!

But I couldn't say any of that. So what I said, brilliantly, was: "I'd like to look around a bit! Take things in!"

Everyone was looking at me now. Waiting for something more, maybe? Waiting for *what*?

"I don't know my way around New York City, is my primary obstacle," I said, sounding like an ass.

Aunt Peg responded to this inanity by grabbing a paper napkin off the table, and sketching upon it a quick map of Manhattan. I do wish I had managed to preserve that map, Angela. It was the most charming map of the city I would ever see: a big crooked carrot of an island, with a dark rectangle in the middle representing Central Park; vague wavy lines representing the Hudson and East Rivers; a dollar sign down at the bottom of the island, representing Wall Street; a musical note up at the top of the island, representing Harlem, and a bright star right in the middle, representing right where we were: Times Square. Center of the world! Bingo!

"There," she said. "Now you know your way around. You can't get lost here, kiddo. Just follow the street signs. It's all numbered, couldn't be easier. Just remember:

Manhattan is an island. People forget that. Walk far enough in any direction, and you'll run into water. If you hit a river, turn around and go in the other direction. You'll learn your way around. Dumber people than you have figured out this city."

"Even Gladys figured it out," said Roland.

"Watch it, sunshine," said Gladys. "I was *born* here."

"Thank you!" I said, pocketing the napkin. "And if you need anything done around the theater, I would be happy to help out."

"You'd like to help?" Peg seemed surprised to hear it. Clearly, she had not expected much of me. Christ, what had my parents told her? "You can help Olive in the office, if you go for that sort of thing. Office work, and such."

Olive blanched at this suggestion, and I'm afraid I might have done the same. I didn't want to work for Olive any more than she wanted me working for her.

"Or you can work in the box office," Peg went on. "You can sell tickets. You're not musical, are you? I'd be surprised if you were. Nobody in our family is musical."

"I can sew," I said.

I must've said it quietly, because nobody seemed to register that I'd spoken.

Olive said, "Peg, why don't you have Vivian enroll at the Katharine Gibbs School, where she can learn how to type?"

Peg, Gladys, and Celia all groaned as one.

"Olive is always trying to get us girls to enroll at Katharine Gibbs so we can learn how to type," Gladys explained. She shuddered in dramatic horror, as though learning how to type were something akin to busting up rocks in a prisoner-of-war camp.

"Katharine Gibbs turns out employable young women," Olive said. "A young woman ought to be employable."