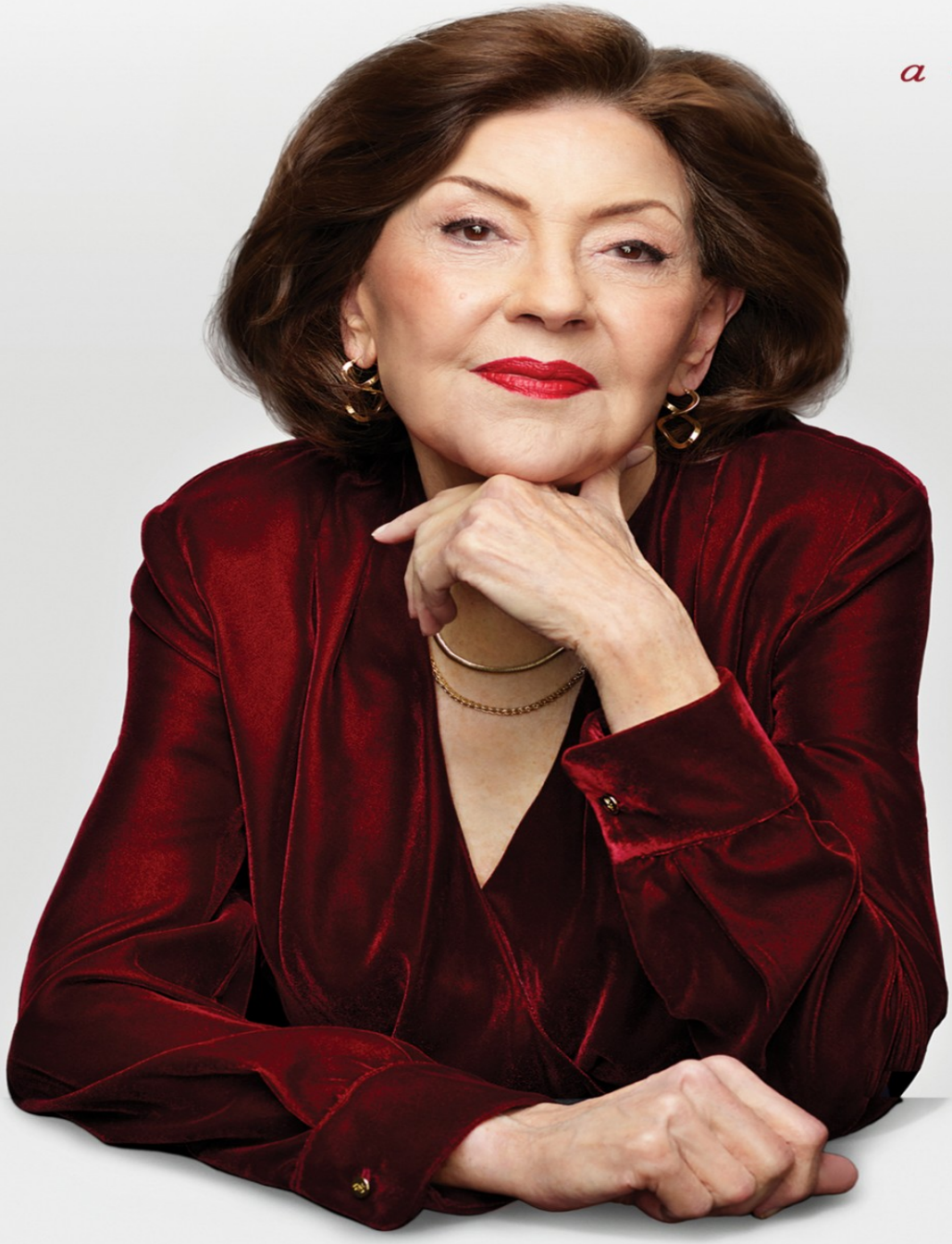
KELLY BISHOP

The Third Gilmore Girl

a memoir



FOREWORD BY AMY SHERMAN-PALLADINO

The Third Gilmore Girl

KELLY BISHOP

with Lindsay Harrison

Gallery Books

New York London Toronto Sydney New Delhi

To Lee Leonard,
who knew me better than anyone else on earth
and loved me anyway

Foreword

by Amy Sherman-Palladino

"I'll know her when she walks in."

That's what I kept saying.

It was the fall of 1999. I had just had a pilot script picked up by the WB network, with its dancing frog mascot and executive offices in a trailer that could be hooked up to a car and towed away at any second. At the time, they were specializing in shows for the young —*Dawson's Creek, Felicity, Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, etc. My script was called "The Gilmore Girls." (The original title had a "the" in it. The network had a heart attack. No one would watch something called *The Gilmore Girls*. Too girly. Men won't think there's sex. Boys won't think anyone gets punched. They insisted we change the name. They did some "testing," and the brilliant decision was to drop the "the.")

Now, my show had a lead in her thirties, which was a thousand in WB world. I knew if this was going to work, the family unit had to work. It had to resonate with everyone. Each piece of casting was crucial. It was out of the WB's comfort zone. So, I assembled a murderers' row of actors. Lauren Graham was our Lorelai Gilmore. Ed Herrmann was her father, Richard Gilmore. Alexis Bledel was Lorelai's daughter, Rory. One vital piece left...

Emily Gilmore, the moneyed matriarch of the Gilmore clan. I know exactly who she's supposed to be in my head. I see it. I see her swagger. Her icy stare. Her cutting humor. Her elegance. Her deep hurt and vulnerability, which she covers with sarcasm and Chanel suits. It's as clear as day in my brain. All I have to do is find the actress to play her.

Gilmore Girls is my very first hour-long show. No one thinks I know what the hell I'm doing. We've been seeing every actress over fifty in (what felt like) the entire world. Wonderful actresses with wonderful credits come in and read for us. And after each one leaves, my director and my producing partner, sitting on either side of me, look at each other hopefully. "Well, she was good. Bring her back?" And the angel of death sitting in the middle says, "No. That's not Emily." Now, I have to say, I sympathize with them. We've been sitting in this grim room for weeks. We feel like we might die in here. My producing partner starts to get annoyed. "All these good actors come in, and you just keep saying no. What the hell are you looking for?" I shrug like the dick I am. "I'll know her when she walks in."

Three days later, more women. More good auditions. More good credits. There are now whispers behind my back. Huddling in corners. I feel a *Lord of the Flies* moment heading my way. They are conspiring to kill me. I get it. I might help them. This is driving me insane as well. We sit down and prepare ourselves for another round of "Nope. Not the one." The door opens—

And then she walked in.

Kelly Bishop, formerly known as Carole Bishop, stormed the barricades. (By the way, ask her why she changed her first name to Kelly from Carole *after* she won the Tony. She's told me the story at least twice. I still don't understand it.) Kelly was regal, with a whiskey voice and perfect comic timing. She sat down, crossed her fabulous dancer's legs, and opened her mouth. Three words in—I knew it. This was Emily. There were no second choices. I would not die today.

So, *Gilmore Girls* became *Gilmore Girls*. Without Kelly it never would've worked. Without Kelly I never would've been able to have a room completely dedicated to hats in the middle of New York City.

If she hadn't walked in...

Show business is very weird. You work extremely closely with people for years, the show goes down, and you never speak to them again. All the promises of regular dinners, and cocktails, and anniversaries to be celebrated disappear. The whole show becomes a memory. A fever dream where you were younger, and thinner, with tons of friends to sing "Happy Birthday" to you and you thought that moment was never going to end. Showbiz friends are not necessarily friend-friends. But, from the moment she walked into

that drab, sad room smelling of bad coffee and desperation, Kelly Bishop has been a fixture in my life. I did another show with her after *Gilmore—Bunheads* (which I wrote for her in spite of the fact that she was not available due to being on Broadway. I ignored that. It's Kelly or no one). She was on *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel* (a few times—not enough, but you try getting her out of Jersey). She will be in my next show. And my next. She will be in anything I do for as long as I have a coherent thought in my head. But, even more important, she will be my bawdy pal, my Joe Allen's drinking buddy, my favorite broad in the world, for the rest of my life.

Her story is wild. Her career is vast. I've been pestering her to write her memoirs forever. Thank God she finally listened.

Ladies and Gentlemen, may I present—Carole Bishop!

Sorry. *Kelly*. Crap. Why did you change your name again?

Who cares? I love you.

Amy

Chapter One

Looking back, it still fascinates me how a single, seemingly ordinary phone call changed my life. It wasn't accompanied by a heavenly chord from a choir of angels, or a sudden beam of sunlight bursting through the overcast sky into my apartment window, not so much as a twinge of awareness on my part that something huge was happening, just a call from my old friend Tony Stevens.

It was 1974, a typical cold, bleak January day in New York City. I'd been working as a chorus dancer in New York and around the country since 1962. I was very good at it, and while the money wasn't great, shows had come along steadily enough that, unlike so many of my fellow dancers, I'd never had to supplement my income with side jobs as a waitress or a cashier or an office temp.

I'd been in love with the joy and the freedom of dancing since I was eight years old. Now I was just weeks away from my thirtieth birthday, and the average shelf life of a chorus dancer was right around thirty-five years. I was yearning to make the transition into acting, into principal roles playing actual characters with actual names—actresses, after all, could keep working as long as their health held out and someone was writing parts for them. I'd given myself a two-year deadline to start turning down chorus work and either broaden my skills as a performer or say goodbye to show business and move on to something else. And with my marriage disintegrating at the same time, I was ready to move pretty much anywhere except where I'd already been, when I picked up the phone and heard Tony's voice.

"Michon Peacock and I have an idea I'd like to run by you," he said. Tony and Michon were Broadway dancers. I'd worked with Michon and liked her, and I knew Tony very

well. He was a terrific human being and a terrific dancer who'd also done some choreography, a fun, funny, energetic guy who loved being around other really good dancers. Whatever idea those two had come up with, I was already interested.

Broadway was struggling in 1974. Shows were becoming more and more expensive to produce, many of them flopped, and backers were looking elsewhere for places to invest their money. As a result, a lot of wonderful dancers were out of work through no fault of their own. Tony and Michon had been talking about that, and about the fact that whether a show was succeeding or failing, Broadway producers were the ones who historically called all the shots, made all the money, and got all the credit, while we dancers were, to quote Tony, "the blue-collar workers of the performing arts." The question was what, if anything, could be done to shake things up, level the playing field a little, and maybe even get some control of our lives.

"So what Michon and I would like to do," he told me, "is gather a group of gifted, experienced Broadway dancers and see if we could organize some kind of company in which everyone gets a chance to explore their other interests in the business—writing, directing, set design, costume design, whatever completes the sentence, 'I've been dancing for years, but I've always been curious about exploring (fill in the blank).' We'd love for you to be a part of that group, just to get together, throw some ideas around, and see what comes of it. What do you think?"

Thinking wasn't necessary. "Tell me when and where, and count me in."

Tony had already secured access to a dance studio called the Nickolaus Exercise Center on East Twenty-Third Street, so we'd be meeting there, and he'd call me back with a date and time.

Still no choir of angels, no ethereal beam of sunlight pouring through my apartment window, just the thought that it was nice to have something potentially productive to look forward to and distract me from being unemployed and headed for a divorce that should probably have happened months, maybe even years ago.

Tony called back a couple of days later. The meeting was set for Saturday, January 26, at 11:00 p.m.—a few of the nineteen dancers who were coming were doing shows, and they

couldn't be there until after their shows let out.

I was writing it in my calendar when he casually added, "By the way, Michael Bennett heard about this, so he'll be there too, just as an observer."

Oh God.

Michael Bennett was well on his way to becoming a Broadway legend as a writer, director, dancer, and choreographer. He was brilliant. We liked each other, and we admired each other's talent. We'd also butted heads over the years. In my opinion, Michael was a master manipulator, someone who could instinctively spot and play on people's vulnerabilities and get them to do whatever he wanted. I sensed that from the moment I met him, I saw it in action, and I wasn't having it. He resented me for that, but I think he kind of begrudgingly respected me for it too, and appreciated the challenge.

Michael and I first met in 1967, when I auditioned for a chorus job in a show he was choreographing, a first-class production called *Promises, Promises*—music by Burt Bacharach, lyrics by Hal David, book by Neil Simon, starring a fantastic singer/actor named Jerry Orbach. Michael had already established himself as a respected Broadway dancer and choreographer in the 1960s, and I was excited to be introduced to him. He was nearly a year older than I was; maybe five foot eight; with dark hair and a sexy, impish face; very flirtatious, with a twinkle in his eye. I remember thinking, *I want to work for this guy*, and I was excited when the call came that I got the job.

Promises, Promises had its Broadway opening at the Shubert Theatre on December 1, 1968. It was hard work, I loved it, and Michael and I were getting along glitch-free—until one day, a few weeks into the run, during what's called a "clean-up rehearsal" (when you've been doing the same show for a while, eight times a week, repeating the same steps over and over, you can tend to get a little sloppy, sloughing off a step here and a step there to make it easier on yourself). Michael and his assistant, a lovely guy named Bob Avian, were standing at the lip of the stage, watching us do a dance number called "Turkey Lurkey Time" that ended the first act, when I saw Michael look at me, lean over and say something to Bob, and then point at me and laugh.

I immediately stopped dancing, while the other dancers and the pianist kept going, and planted myself at a dead standstill, staring at Michael. He noticed and stared back at me, confused.

"Is there a problem?" I asked him.

He was caught off guard, clearly not accustomed to being confronted. He mumbled some version of "What?" In the meantime, the dancing and the music had gradually trailed off until the only sound on the stage was me, demanding an answer from Michael Bennett to my perfectly reasonable question.

"You're standing there six feet in front of me, you whisper something to Bob and point at me, and then you laugh. You have a correction to give me? Give it. You want to tell me I'm doing something wrong? I'm all ears. But don't point at me and laugh and expect me not to mind."

He was visibly embarrassed. So was Bob. Neither of them said a word; they just stared down at the floor, so the other dancers and I picked up where we left off, and the rehearsal resumed. Michael and I ended the day as if nothing had happened, but that brief little face-off set the tone for the relationship between us.

Testy as that moment was, it never stopped the two of us from deeply respecting each other's work. He even hired me when he was choreographing the *Milliken Breakfast Show*, an annual two-week event held at the Waldorf Astoria on Park Avenue. Every spring since 1956 the Milliken manufacturing company had been staging musicals for its buyers to launch a new season. They spared no expense, sometimes spending more than the cost of a Broadway show and hiring major stars like Ginger Rogers, Ann Miller, Tommy Tune, and Donald O'Connor. It was a very big deal, very prestigious, paid very well, and Michael did an extraordinary job. It was the first time I noticed a new quirk of his during rehearsals—he'd walk up behind a dancer, get very close, and lean in to quietly say something in their ear. One afternoon it was my turn. He walked up behind me, leaned in, murmured, "Talent turns me on," and walked away. I'm not sure what response he was going for, but all he got from me was a subtle eye roll and a casual "Okay, thanks."

And now he was coming to Tony and Michon's gathering, "just as an observer." I didn't buy that for one second. Michael never "just observed." If he weren't intending to be God by the time we were through, he couldn't be bothered.

I actually considered not going. But then I thought, *You know what? You're in a good place; you're getting a handle on your life; you're a fool if you let Michael Bennett stand in your way*. Besides, I'd made a commitment to an old friend, and I wasn't about to let him down.

Saturday, January 26, 1974, 11:00 p.m. The Nickolaus Exercise Center. We unemployed dancers did some warming-up exercises while we waited for the working dancers to arrive. They eventually filtered into the room, along with Michael Bennett, who settled in on the floor with a reel-to-reel tape recorder. People he'd worked with a lot, like Donna McKechnie and Priscilla Lopez, who loved and were devoted to him, quickly gathered around, and before long a large circle of about twenty-five or thirty of us had formed. I headed straight for the opposite side of it, the six o'clock position to Michael's twelve, and nestled in among another group of friends, all of us feeling the curious excitement that was building in the room. None of us had a clue where, if anywhere, this gathering might lead, but I was already glad I hadn't given in to my impulse to back out and stay home.

Michael kicked things off with a speech about dancers' lives being so interesting and worth telling that we might even be able to make a show out of this. Whether that happened or not, it was imperative that we be wide open and honest with one another. He followed that up by asking us to go around the circle: "Say your name, your real name if it's different, where you were born, and when." Then he added, "Although you girls don't have to give your ages."

I couldn't let that pass without speaking up. "Wait a minute, Michael," I said, "you just told us how important it is that we all be open and honest tonight, and then you follow it up with the women not having to give our ages. So which is it?" Even in 1974, it got on my nerves that the female singers in shows were referred to as "women," while we dancers were "girls."

Point taken. He changed the instruction to: "Okay, *everyone* say their birth name, birthplace, and their birth date and year."

And for the most part, we all did. A couple of the women were a year or two older than they'd always claimed to be, but in a dancer's life, a year or two can really make a difference.

Once that preliminary roll call was over, the meeting gradually evolved into one of the most unforgettable nights of my life. We'd all worked together over the years, we were comfortable with one another, and God knows we had a whole lot in common. We just started talking. Our dreams beyond being dancers led into how we became interested in

dancing in the first place. Our families. Our childhoods. Our joys. Our heartbreaks. Our private fears and insecurities. Growing up abused and neglected and abandoned. Tragedies. Loss. Divorces. What we liked about ourselves. What we wanted to change about ourselves. No subject was off-limits, and there was no judgment or criticism in that room, just tears and laughter and learning a lot about friends and colleagues we'd been sure we already knew.

The story that moved me the most that night came from Nicholas Dante, a beautiful Puerto Rican dancer and writer who grew up in Spanish Harlem. He'd always been insecure about his sexuality, which ultimately led him to become a drag queen in a touring company of female impersonators called the Jewel Box Revue. He kept that part of his life from his parents, until one night when the revue was about to go on tour and they showed up at the venue where the revue was appearing. Nicholas came onstage "dressed as Anna May Wong," I think he told us, and was horrified to see his parents sitting in the audience, gaping back at him. By the time he got to the end of the story, when his father turned to some other drag queen in the revue and said, "Take good care of my son," Nicholas was weeping, and so was everyone else in the room.

That first tape session was so compelling, and so moving, that I was completely unaware of how many hours had passed, until I heard church bells ringing somewhere in the distance and realized that somehow, impossibly, it was morning out there. When we finally wandered out into bright sunlight to head home, we were all in a state of what I can only describe as wonder and fulfillment. It felt incredible.

A few weeks later there was a second session, also on tape, mostly the same people, along with a handful of other dancers who hadn't been available for the first session. We practically raced into that room and threw ourselves on the floor, excited and eager to get started. Oddly, we found ourselves slogging back out of there three or four hours later, with a whole new understanding of the word "anticlimactic." It seemed as if none of us had anything more to add after the almost spiritual magic of that first session. The newcomers were coming in cold and didn't seem to have given the concept a lot of thought, if any. The organic spontaneity and flow of the first session didn't exist, and the conversation never got off the ground. It was very disappointing, but disappointment wasn't exactly unfamiliar to any of us, and learning to move on was simply an inevitable part of the business.

(To the best of my knowledge, by the way, tapes of those sessions have never been released in their entirety, and the reel-to-reel tapes themselves have been preserved among Michael Bennett's papers at Yale's Beinecke library in New Haven, Connecticut.)

All of which led to... nothing. For more than a month. I had kind of given up, although there was nothing definitive to give up *on*, when I got a call that Michael Bennett wanted to do a five-week workshop, based on the tapes of those sessions. Apparently he'd listened to them over and over again and started thinking that we'd spent all those hours essentially "auditioning our lives" for him. Out of that came his unformed concept of putting a stage show together based on dancers' experiences and their audition processes. Once the idea had taken enough shape for him to articulate it, he called Joseph Papp, founder of the New York Shakespeare Festival and a huge theatrical producer and director. By then, Michael had already won two Tony Awards, so Papp was more than happy to take Michael's call. Once Michael had described the Broadway talent he'd assembled for that first tape session and the concept that had evolved from it, Papp was intrigued by Michael's idea and gave him enough workshop time to see if he could organize those random puzzle pieces into a viable project.

With the prestige and gravitas of Joseph Papp's support in his hip pocket, Michael was able to round up a world-class team to give that viable project its best chance. Nicholas Dante and playwright/author James Kirkwood Jr. to put together a story from the interviews. Bob Avian, who'd worked with Michael on the European tour of *West Side Story*, to help with the choreography. And Academy Award–winning composer Marvin Hamlisch to write the score with lyricist Ed Kleban for a show that many, many months later would be given the working title *A Chorus Line*.

I remember the first time I heard that name. I asked Michael, "Why not just *Chorus Line*?"

"Because," he patiently replied, with a subtext of *duh*, "when an alphabetical list of Broadway shows is published in newspapers and trade magazines, *A Chorus Line* will come first."

I would never have thought of that. Occasional clashes aside, the man really was a genius at what he did, and we were lucky that Michael "Just an Observer" Bennett had decided to get involved.

The group of twenty-five or so dancers who had attended that marathon tape session was reduced to a dozen of us or so for the first workshop. It was an exhilarating five weeks. The material was still in an extremely rough-draft stage, but it was impossible not to get excited about the potential of *A Chorus Line*.

So when Michael announced after that first workshop that he had to shut down the project until he could raise some money to keep it going, it was like having the rug pulled out from under me, in more ways than one.

I related to the need to raise money all too well. My marriage was limping toward the finish line, and my soon-to-be-ex-husband, a compulsive gambler—and not a good one—had cleaned me out. All I had left to my name was two weeks of unemployment, which would have been more than enough if my cats, my German shepherd, and I hadn't become so attached to little luxuries like eating and having a rented roof over our heads. I literally couldn't afford to sit by the phone with my fingers crossed, waiting for Michael to call and say that the show was funded and it was time to get back to work. I was frightened, and I had to do something, sooner rather than later, like it or not.

Many months earlier I'd been asked to audition for the national tour of a show called *Irene*. Debbie Reynolds was playing the title role, and they'd be touring the major markets around the country—San Francisco, Chicago, Boston, et cetera—after rehearsing in Los Angeles. I went to see the show and the part I'd be auditioning for, one of Irene's two best friends. To be honest, it seemed like an old, tired musical to me, something I would undoubtedly hate doing, and I passed on even auditioning or giving it another thought.

Then, not long after the workshop ended, the *Irene* team called again. This time they wanted me to audition for that same role in a second touring company of *Irene*, now starring Jane Powell instead of Debbie Reynolds and playing in lesser markets like Denver, Houston, Flint, et cetera. My first thought was *Oh God, please, no*, immediately followed by my second thought: *It's the dead of winter. Nothing's happening in New York City. No shows, no auditions, no nothing, and you're flat broke. You have no business saying no to the possibility of a paycheck right now, so pull on your big-girl pants and deal with it*.

So off I trudged to an audition in a cold, barren rehearsal hall. There were only two other dancers in the waiting room. Obviously there wasn't a real stampede going on for the opportunity to play this role. I was pleasantly surprised, though, to see the wonderfully talented Peter Gennaro there, replacing Gower Champion as the choreographer of this *Irene* tour. I went in, did some dancing, struggled through a few bars of a song despite my lack of singing talent, went through the motions of whatever they asked me to do, and sure enough, they offered me the job. I was dreading it, but I was also relieved to know I'd be making a touring wage of, I think, $550 a week and wouldn't have to sell everything I owned to feed my pets and myself after all.

A friend offered to take my two cats to live with her until I came home, and I took my German shepherd, Venus, with me. I admit it, given a choice, with a handful of exceptions, I tend to prefer the company of animals to the company of people. Animals are honest—there's not a hint of pretense about them, they just unapologetically are who they are, and their capacity to love and be loved outshines ours by about a million. Venus was the most perfect travel buddy I could have asked for, with the effortless power to transform even the barest, bleakest hotel room into "home" when I was on the road.

We rehearsed in Los Angeles, and then we were off to Denver for two weeks of previews. Venus and I got there at about 6:00 p.m. It was dark. It was freezing cold. And it was Christmas Eve. I grew up in Denver, so I wasn't surprised to find that almost everything was closed, giving the city a certain ghost town atmosphere. I managed to find a little bodega near the hotel and pick up a couple of days' worth of food for Venus and me before we settled into our room. We ate some dinner and took a walk past several blocks of perfunctory holiday decorations. I kept wanting to feel some sense of "home," but I didn't. I kept wanting to feel some sense of hope and satisfaction that at least I was finally working again, but I didn't. Instead, I can still feel a deep, hollow place in the pit of my stomach when I think back to what I'm sure was the most depressing Christmas Eve, possibly even the most depressing night, of my thirty-year life.

The rest of the cast and crew arrived the day after Christmas, we rehearsed, and we performed previews to appreciative audiences. I never fell in love with my character, or with the show itself, but playing Irene's funny sidekick wasn't awful. What was awful was that during those two weeks in Denver, I started hearing rumors, something about Michael Bennett putting together a workshop in New York that might turn into

rehearsals for a new show. *Oh my God*, I thought, *he found the money for* A Chorus Line*, they're going ahead with it, and I'm being left behind on the road, under contract to a show I couldn't care less about*.

Devastating as the idea of that apparent probability was, I mentally propped myself up as best I could. After all, this *Irene* job came along just when I needed it. I took it because I had to. I had no right to complain. In fact, I had to be grateful for it, and trust that for some reason I was exactly where I was supposed to be. I had no business feeling sorry for myself. I had to suck it up and say thank you. I had those talks with myself so often that they almost became a mantra, and they helped. Sometimes. Other times, not so much.

The rumors about *A Chorus Line* were getting more and more intense, and harder and harder to ignore, by the time we moved on to Houston. I admit I was preoccupied with them, to the point where I thought I was imagining things when Venus and I got back from a postshow walk one night and the hotel clerk handed me a note on my way past the front desk.

It simply read, "Call Michael Bennett."

My heart was pounding when I dialed the phone in my room, trying unsuccessfully not to get my hopes up.

Michael answered quickly and, as always, got right to the point. "Where are you?"

"Houston," I said.

"What are you doing in Houston?"

"*Irene*."

There was an audible groan in his response to that, quickly followed by "How long is your contract?"

I hated saying it. "Six months." Getting out of tour contracts back then was hard to do, not to mention expensive—you had to reimburse the production company your whole salary for the length of your contract. If you signed on to a tour, you'd better mean it.

He asked where we were going next.

"Flint, Michigan."

He groaned again. Then, after a brief silence, he offered a desperately needed sliver of hope when he added, "Okay, let me see what I can do."

It wasn't something I could count on, but it meant I hadn't been forgotten about after all. I'm sure Venus wondered what prompted me to dance her around our hotel room that night.

Poor Flint, Michigan. It was economically depressed in the mid-1970s, and I knew exactly how it felt. All of us in the company found it hard to keep our spirits up. It helped, though, that we seemed to be showing our audiences a good time.

We were at the end of our first week in Flint when I found another message waiting for me at the hotel: "Call Howard Feuer." Howard was the producer of *Irene*, a nice young guy I liked.

The minute I got to my room, I grabbed the phone and called Michael instead.

"I just got a message to call Howard Feuer. What's going on?"

"I think I got you out of it."

In the time it took me to realize that yes, I'd heard him correctly, he went on to say, "You know, I don't mind what it's going to cost to buy you out of that show. What I do mind is that now I owe Howard Feuer a favor."

I explained to him that I was dead broke when I got the *Irene* offer, and *A Chorus Line* was no guarantee, so I'd just done what I had to do.

"You could have borrowed money from me and spared me all this," he shot back.

Not a chance. I'd been married to a gambling addict. I'd watched him get caught up in a vicious cycle of borrowing money to repay gambling debts until he owed pretty much everyone in town; he was financially drowning, and he was pulling me under with him. I knew more about debt than I ever wanted to know and, as I told Michael, "I don't borrow money. I have to earn it."

That settled, I hung up and returned Howard Feuer's call. Bless his heart, he'd been on the receiving end of Michael Bennett's powers of manipulation an hour or two earlier, and he almost sounded apologetic when he assured me, "I would never do anything to hurt your career."

And with that, the necessary arrangements were made, and it was farewell to Flint and good night, *Irene*. Venus and I gratefully went home to New York, and I returned to

work on what I'll always think of as the show that opened the door to the rest of my life.

Thanks to money from the Shakespeare Festival and an extraordinary patron of the arts named LuEsther Mertz, *A Chorus Line* was reenergized and in full swing when I reunited with my friends and castmates. Our second workshop turned very quickly into rehearsals, and I immersed myself in the transition from chorus dancer to a principal role—my first real, long-awaited acting role—of Sheila Bryant, one of the "chorus line" hopefuls vying for a job in an upcoming Broadway musical. Sheila was very much me, with a lot of added sassiness and tough-girl attitude, and I loved her.

Another personal statement about that transition happened the day that Michael interrupted a rehearsal to have us take paper and pens, sit in the Shakespeare Festival Public Theater seats, and spend a half hour or so writing our biographies for the playbill, something we chorus people were routinely asked to do. I sat there looking around at my sixteen castmates. Other than Priscilla Lopez ("Diana Morales"), Pam Blair ("Val"), and Donna McKechnie ("Cassie"), they were dancers who, like me, were experiencing their first principal role in a theatrical production.

Everyone else was writing away like crazy, while I sat there trying to imagine listing all my chorus jobs since 1962, when it suddenly hit me: none of that mattered. That was then, this was now. As of 1975, I wasn't a chorus dancer anymore. I was an actor, and it was time to own it. I picked up my pen and paper and completed the assignment in less than a minute.

Michael took one look at it and laughed. "That's Sheila Bryant right there," he said, and, to my absolute delight, he published it in the playbill exactly as I'd written it:

"Carole Bishop (Sheila) has survived in show business for twelve years."

Working on the Sheila Bryant character was a joy and a challenge. I knew I was one hell of a dancer. Now I had my heart set on becoming one hell of an actor. The last thing I wanted was for audiences who knew my work to walk out of the theater after the show saying things like "Oh, well, she tried" or the dreaded "She wasn't half bad."

In the original script of *A Chorus Line*, Sheila had a monologue, much of it taken from what I'd talked about in that first tape session. I worked for weeks and weeks on that monologue. It was beautifully written, and a lot of it was *me*. I wasn't about to short-change it, or myself. That opportunity I'd been praying for to really act was right in front of me. Blowing it wasn't an option.

Which made it all the more horrifying when Michael came up to me one day and broke some awful news: with Marvin Hamlisch and Ed Kleban involved, they were understandably adding songs to the show.

"So we're trimming your monologue a lot, turning it into a dialogue instead, and then Sheila's going to sing a song called 'At the Ballet.'"

I gaped at him while every drop of blood drained from my face. I came as close as I've ever come to begging as I reminded him, "Michael, you and I both know I don't have a good singing voice. You might want to rethink this...."

He gave me a minute to get my panic out of my system before he calmly added, "It's going to be a trio."

Oh. There would be other people singing with me. That was better. A little.

"Okay," I finally conceded, "I guess that will work."

And then, for the first time, I heard "At the Ballet."

Daddy always thought that he married beneath him....
When he proposed he informed my mother
He was probably her very last chance.
And though she was twenty-two...
She married him.

Life with my dad wasn't ever a picnic
More like a "Come as you are."
When I was five I remember my mother
Dug earrings out of the car.
I knew they weren't hers, but it wasn't
Something you'd want to discuss.
He wasn't warm.