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“Poise and Privilege: American Dance Memoirs in the 21st century”

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Abstract

The present thesis focuses on the study of American ballet dancers' memoirs, with that of Barbara Bocher titled *The Cage* (2012) being at the center of our attention. Emphasis is placed on the examination of Bocher's life as regards her legacy in the world of ballet alongside the socio cultural reality of the years 1949-1954 as these are presented throughout the memoir. In addition, this thesis challenges the memoirist's objectivity and the clarity of the memories as they are inevitably filtered through personal emotions. Conclusions are drawn on the basis of the memoirist's limits as well as freedoms. Finally, a creative part follows, which portrays a fictional veteran ballerina who is the process of writing her own memoir in collaboration with a reporter, while an undeniable bond is created between them. This story is inspired by Bocher's own life story, her unfulfilled potential and the inner conflicts she had to come to terms with as well as the power which is to be found in the process of memoir writing.

keywords: Dance, New York City Ballet, the American Dream, Memory, Barbara Bocher, George Balanchine, Abuse, Poise, Privilege, Interiority, Paris Opera, Resilience.

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Introduction

The growth in size and volume of the life-writing sections in bookstores proves that indeed lots of people have fascinating life stories to write about and share with the public. As Vivian Gornick shares in her book *The Situation and The Story*: “Thirty years ago people who thought they had a story to tell sat down to write a novel. Today they sit down to write a memoir” (67). The constant presence of memoirs in the lists of bestselling books worldwide, proves that the public, in turn, consumes life narratives with an unquenchable thirst. As Mary Karr notices in her book *The Art of Memoir* “Memoir as a genre has entered its heyday, with a massive surge in readership the past twenty years or so” (8). This dissertation serves as an exploration of a specific niche of memoir writing that concentrates on the life of specific dancers. For this reason, *The Cage*, by the veteran American dancer Barbara Bocher, has been selected to serve as an example of how memory functions when the past or moments of the past are recollected in written form. Bocher’s memoir is analyzed here in an effort to examine how facts fuse with nostalgia and enthusiasm in the course of a person’s life and what aspects of one’s personality memoir writing helps one discover.

The term memoir itself derives from the French word for “memory”, therefore, as professor and author Thomas Couser states:

a memoir signals that it is based primarily on memory”(19). He also supports that “memoirs are non-fictional life narratives. They may focus either on the author, on someone else, or on the relation between them. They may try to narrate an entire life course or merely one of its temporal chapters and they may attempt to include more or fewer of the dimensions of the author’s life. (23-24)

In fact, what becomes clear here is that the purpose of the memoirist is what defines the style of this life-writing form, which may need to serve as a confession and seek forgiveness and redemption or an apology so that one’s decision is explained and justified. In addition, a memoir may be a testimony of the author’s story of surviving trauma, or it could work as a tool for self- healing, self-discovery and self-definition. Furthermore, a memoir may be intending to raise awareness about some overlooked issues that concern human society, or to make an event from the past known, or to promote the fame and reputation of a specific person (artist, writer, scientist, entertainer, athlete and other) or community group.

Along with the functional role and purpose of a memoir, Bill Roorbach in his book *Writing Life Stories* shares the following point as regards its writing: “The ambition of memoir isn’t often historical but *literary*. Information is almost never the first goal of memoir; expression often is. Beauty- of form, of language, of meaning- always takes precedence over mere accuracy, truth over mere facts” (13). This opinion focuses on the literary value of memoir writing and raises it close to good fiction while at the same time it places emphasis on the truthfulness of its facts, which is a basic prerequisite for the effective writing of a memoir.

As for the kind of a reading response a memoir can trigger, readers can empathize, find inspiration and solace either because they themselves may share similar experiences with the memoirist or because they desire to expand their experience by reading about someone else’s life, especially when they become aware of the fact that in front of them there is a story that actually took place and is not the product of a novelist’s imagination. It could also be said that, through a memoir, a reader can have a privileged perspective into another person’s inner thoughts and experiences, as they are the recipient of revelations that might only be made in intimate conversations. In memoirs not only the temporal and spatial framework within which the main character moves and acts are real, but also every name mentioned in it, even if, on some occasions, they had been changed, connects with an existing person. Therefore, “the memoirist has much less freedom in the creation of characters. More to the point, they have a responsibility toward their characters” and they are “limited in the use of allusion by their commitment to a degree of factual fidelity” (Couser 171-172). In other words, it goes without saying that in a memoir any lack of correspondence with real facts may have serious implications in how an event or a personality are understood and in how they impact on the reality they derive from. The author of a fake memoir may have to face serious repercussions, not only because they have exposed the people mentioned in their book, but also because they have misled the reader. This happened in the case of James Frey’s memoir titled *A Million Little Pieces* which was published in 2005. Upon revelation that facts described in his book were not true, he was publicly humiliated and lost his agent as well as a contract for future publishing. If he had claimed that his memoir was fictional, nobody would have been disturbed. Memoirs are obviously received differently by the public compared to fiction. With the examination of the differences between memoirs and novels being something that

moves beyond the scope of the current thesis, one thing is certain: readers come to memoirs with certain expectations that will allow them to learn something about or delve into the life events of a specific personality or group or historical period seen via the perspective of a specific person. Certainly, there is a thin line between fabrication and reality but in memoir writing their allegiance with the truth, no matter how much this is contested, constitutes an element of importance as it reaffirms their quality and substance.

According to Couser, life writing has been popular since antiquity, “in cultures that attribute importance to the individual self- or soul” (108). In fact, life writing has proved very popular in historically important times worldwide such as during national or social revolutions, during the early colonization years in the New World, the Civil War, in the form of letters, diaries, journals, narrations of captivity, conversion, slavery and more. Printing and advertising have also boosted memoir production and the public’s interest has helped it gain the popularity it has today, as Couser attests in his study. In the past, life-writing was common among women in the form of keeping a diary but, according to Couser “in contrast to men’s diaries, those of women often focused on domestic routines. They were rarely considered worthy of publication. The same was true of another private form of life writing: letters. Recently, however, the situation has changed dramatically. Diaries and correspondence are being reexamined, preserved, and published with new appreciation for their distinctive qualities and functions” (42). It was with the advent of the Women’s Liberation Movement, feminism and technological advances in the course of the twentieth century on both sides of the Atlantic that things started to change with regard to memoir writing.

Regarding the type of memoirs written by women which have outnumbered those written by men are those by ballet dancers. The first one is attributed to Marie Taglioni, an early nineteenth century European ballerina, who was the inventor of the very first type of pointes shoes and the very first dancer to perform with them. It is thanks to her memoirs that we have this information. In fact, there are seven original Notebooks in which the ballerina wrote her memoirs, under the title *The Souvenirs*, which was published much later, in 2017. Patricia Veroli, a member of the British-based Society for Dance Research, states in her 2018 article in the second issue of the thirty-sixth volume of the online journal of the Society: “Taglioni's Memoirs constitute one of the very few remaining documents in which pre-twentieth-century ballerinas have recorded

their thoughts. They are particularly valuable for the insights offered by Marie Taglioni into the crucial changes ballet style underwent in the early 1820s in Vienna” (Veroli). The fact that even though written in 1800s, Taglioni’s memoir was organized and published in 2017 reveals the growing popularity of dancing memoirs in the twenty-first century.

Since the writing of Taglioni’s original memoir, a great number of ballerinas, more or less famous, have written and published their own memoirs, which have been popular mostly among ballet students and within dancers’ circles. In particular in the USA, the New York City Ballet which was founded in 1948 by Lincoln Kirstein and George Balanchine (born Georgi Melitonovich Balanchivadze) is considered to be a milestone. This specific company not only held a central position in the ballet world, but also it was this company that introduced the professional ballet with the technique, attire, style and teaching system that we all know it today. Lots of dancers from this company have gone on to share their journey in dance with the public. Among the ones to have done so were the most distinguished ones in their era, for example Aleksandra Danilova, one of the founding members of the New York City Ballet published her memoir in 1986 under the title *Choura: The memoirs of Alexandra Danilova*. Such memoirs fall into the category of “somebody memoirs” due to the fame and vital role of these personas in the introduction and expansion of ballet in the USA. Yet, these memoirs appealed to a limited audience, comprised of junior dancers who wanted to find out details about the experiences of these prima ballerinas and ballet enthusiasts. Since the early twenty first century, ballet dance memoirs have started attracting the attention of the general audience, especially since the wider exposure of recognized dancers on TV shows, as is the case with Darcey Bussell, whose memoir, *Evolved*, combines the art of life-writing with the art of photography which is what has made it particularly popular. Equally popular are those memoirs written by dancers who did not achieve their dream career which fall under the “nobody memoir” category. One of the titles which is currently gaining popularity is Alice Robb’s memoir *Don’t think dear: On Loving and Leaving Ballet*, which is about her personal though fruitless struggle to succeed in dance. The reasons why this is gaining popularity could be that there are more unsuccessful dancers than there are successful ones, and memoirs, such as Robb’s, provide empathy and can inspire resilience in such an unofficial yet emotionally connected community.

As regards the study of ballet in the US, a lot of information comes from life writing material by dancers of previous generations. According to The Routledge Dance Studies Reader, Alexandra Carter states:

Due to the tardy acceptance of dance by the academy and the initial emphasis on the practice, rather than the theory, dance owes much of its scholarly heritage to those writing outside of a formal institutional context. As Cohen (Au and Peter 1989) notes, in the United States serious enthusiasts such as Kirstein on ballet, and Martin on modern dance turned their advocacy into print. *Dance Magazine* first appeared in 1927 and in 1936, Magriel published a bibliography of dancing... Societies were established to promote research in dance, such as the American Congress on Research in Dance in 1967 and the Society of Dance History Scholars in 1978 (Carter 2)

In addition, for the study of dance, it is the life writing material that has been left by dancers themselves which is of great importance. Specifically, Carter writes:

Autobiographies are valuable primary source material for what is revealed about authors, their personal relationships, their perceptions and views about the practical events in which they were involved and the prevailing climates of opinion within which they worked... Biographies may be classified as primary sources when written during their subjects lifetime, or immediately afterwards, and secondary when written much later (Carter 150)

By studying these, a reader can find answers to questions such as how it all started, how things evolved with regard to the financial, social and even political context each dancer emerged from and where things stand nowadays in relation to the specific dancer's reputation or impact on the dance community or society at large. For example, according to Protopopescu's *Dancing Past the Light: The life of Tanaquil LeClercq* there wasn't a fixed body type that a ballerina needed to have in order to get into a dance group or company until the famous choreographer George Balanchine started formulating certain standards. "Legs must be fairly long, bones small and well-formed, head rather small with Tanaquil Le Clercq being the prototype of what came to be called the Balanchine ballerina" (167). However, Balanchine's dance standards focus mainly on white female bodies by entirely overlooking female bodies of a racial or ethnic background which sheds light on the socio-cultural reality of the late 1940s in the U.S.

In addition, by studying late dancers' memoirs one may be surprised to discover certain other factors as is the case of their financial status. In fact, as Orel Protopopescu argues: "Dancers at all levels were worse off than unionized low-skilled construction workers in New York in 1947... Most ballet dancers earned less than unionized stagehands, even though they had a union of their own" (75). This reveals how difficult it was at that time for ballerina's to make ends meet despite that amount of hard work that went into perfecting their art.

One of the most highly regarded dance memoirs is the one by Maria Tallchief, titled *Maria Tallchief: America's Prima Ballerina* which was published in 1997. Tallchief, a dancer of Native (Osage) American background is considered to have been the first official American prima ballerina who danced ballet in the style it is known today after it was organized and taught in the USA by George Balanchine. Robert Gottlieb, former editor in *The New Yorker* and publisher of Knopf, wrote in his review about the specific publication: "She was a "ballerina" in the classic sense -- grand, glamorous, authoritative: a diva. The book itself, written with Larry Kaplan (and sadly under-illustrated), is an apt expression of her nature -- forceful, assertive, tough on herself as well as on others" (Gottlieb). Certainly, this observation encourages the reader when going through this specific memoir to look for information or articulate certain questions regarding the (in)visibility of dancers of an ethnic background in American society and the way they were treated by mostly white-controlled professional dance organizations.

All the examples brought forward highlight the multilayered quality of memoirs which may be focusing on a person but they actually highlight a number of other socio-cultural factors that surround this person's life, which allows readers to gain access to the prevalent ideologies, stereotypes or prejudices that marked the period that particular person lived.

The ballerina memoirs are important for one more reason: they offer the dancers themselves the opportunity to record their own achievements including references to their own collaborators and co-dancers, the techniques they resorted to and their level of expertise as well as their impact on their artistic community during their era of stardom. In particular, there are certain performances as evidenced in the memoirs, that have marked the development and longevity of the New York City Ballet. For example,

Jacques d'Amboise writes that "*Firebird* was the smash hit of the 1949 season...it was also my first performance in a world premiere" (90). For Tallchief he adds that "her eyes flashed red and gold...she dances an exquisite solo in a golden follow spot ... You didn't think small-time watching her. It was eons, a fairy tale, archetypal" (90-91). Also, via the memoirs available, readers can gain access to her appearance being compared to a mythical bird, as she "flew across the stage before landing, upside down, in Moncion's arms. Her performance, Balanchine told Maria's daughter decades later, had secured the company's future" (Protopopescu 100). Also, there are certain pieces of information, as is the case of certain ballet performances that have stopped being staged which is being conveyed to the reader via certain dance memoirs. For example, as Protopopescu reveals: "*The Triumph of Bacchus and Ariadne* is a period piece, no longer performed. In 1948 it felt like a Bacchanalian postwar celebration" (81). This particular observation not only sheds light on the richness of the ballet repertoire but also highlights the value of a dance memoir as a repository of ballet culture and knowledge passed down to the readers via its elaborate narratives.

Another thing that can be achieved through a dancer's memoir is to pay tribute to a persona who has been a source of admiration and inspiration. For example, one reads in Toni Bentley's memoir titled *Serenade: A Balanchine Story* the following: "the retirement of our most beloved remaining ballerinas, Patricia McBride and Suzanne Farrell, removed from our midst two last irreplaceable pillars ... These dancers were our examples, our solace, our reminders, our standards, each a source of radiance" (106). With this This statement one gains an insight into the status of the female ballet dancers in the early years of the New York City Ballet and the paths they paved with regard to its future development. As a result, readers get into the shoes of the dancers, as they have the opportunity to read details that focus not only on what takes place on stage but also on the challenges that the dancer have to face when it comes to the interpretation and delivery of a choreography. The dancers usually disappear or are overlooked because what seems to matter the most is the performance itself, not the hardships, the troubles- on stage and during rehearsals- and the body pain as well as the psychological pressure felt. All these can be revealed only when the dancers decide to write about their experiences and share them with the readers and the rest of their community.

On the basis of what has been written so far, it could be said that through the memoirs of ballet dancers one can reach certain conclusions regarding particular prominent ballet personalities, as is the case with the famous choreographer Jerome Robbins, whose name is mentioned in multiple memoirs all stressing and confirming specific aspects of his character: For example, d'Amboise mentions in *I was a Dancer* that "He was a tormented soul, gifted with wit- marbled with meanness" (337). Also, Jennifer Homans writes in *Apollo's Angels*: "How much was uncontrolled venting and how much part of Robbins's intense creative process?" (478). These two accounts do indeed show that memoir accounts can help readers gain a holistic overview of a dancer's character on the basis of how others perceive him/her. Moreover, these insights also reveal that being a dancer is not an ordinary task, but an exceptional and delicate vocation that places emphasis both on artistic skill and expression of feelings. All these points out that the life of a dancer is full of waves of excitement and adventures, which is put on paper upon the creation of such a memoir. Therefore, attention should be paid to how these dance memoirs are written. Bentley captures this process in her book by saying: "This book will be about this transcendence and about what lies behind that luscious maelstrom of movement, poured metaphor, blind yearnings, thwarted longings, and the many losses necessary to attain flight" (xxv). All is expressed with the unique poise that we can find in a dancer's voice. This is also evident in the following sentence with Bentley saying "Squeeze harder; pull up. Don't breathe. This is not a moment to be mortal. I am a Balanchine dancer" (xvi). It is in phrases of this kind that one can see into the dancers' inner world as well as into their mind and inner thoughts. The way the dancers' inner experiences are articulated in words is something to be elaborated on further down in this dissertation.

In particular, Chapter One deals with Barbara Bocher's memoir, *The Cage* (2012), which is the main primary source to be studied and analyzed here. Bocher narrates her own story and relives all the glory and the pain of her years in the spotlight, which she had kept silent for sixty whole years. With the assistance of her friend and co-dancer, Adam Darius, she focuses on specific moments of her life. Then, Chapter Two contains the creative part of this dissertation, which invites readers to focus on the craft of memoir writing via the construction of a fictional response to Bocher's original work. In fact, the memoir that is creatively composed here focuses on Henrietta Ray, Barbara Bocher's daughter as imagined, in order to illustrate and expose the painful process of

remembering certain facts from the past. The creative piece presented here is constructed as an interview with attention paid to the bond formed between the author and the interviewee during their collaboration.

Overall, memoirs prove to be a means of expression and communication with the contemporaries as well as past and future generations on the part of the memoirist as well as a rich source of information about history- shaping facts for researchers and readers. For the latter it is also an enjoyable read and an opportunity to mentally expand their own experience through the adventures of another person. It is a genre which is being enriched with authentic experiences constantly growing in popularity and importance on a personal and community level. The dance memoirs in particular constitute a treasure trove of information about art and culture where the human experience is entwined with its socio-historical reality. By shedding light on the stories of various artists that come from diverse backgrounds, these memoirs introduce readers to the multilayered world of artistic performance where the glamor of dance and the pain of personal sacrifice come together in full force.

Chapter One: Barbara Bocher: Recollections of an American dancer.

1.1 The Role of *The Cage*

In this chapter, the memoir titled *The Cage* is to be examined from multiple perspectives in accordance with certain theories regarding memoir writing and more specifically the study of dancers' memoirs. What this chapter attempts to highlight is first of all the powerful aspect of memory, which can shed light on someone's personal past and thus on a whole society of a particular era. Secondly, this chapter discusses the weakness of the human memory and how it is used as a valuable source for recording history despite its dubious nature.

When Bocher was asked to comment on the writing of her memoir, she said: "Adam asked me what I had been doing since 1950. My reply was that I would need to write a book to tell him. He replied, 'then do so!' As I followed his choreographic instructions in 1949, so do I now follow his literary instructions in 2011. This is a project I could not have begun, let alone keep on writing without his guidance ... He also helped me overcome the depression I would inevitably undergo when reliving certain dreaded now safely set down and expunged within these pages" (95). These words come from Barbara Bocher's memoir, titled *The Cage*, which marks her own journey in the world of ballet, between the late forties and early fifties in the U.S. Therefore, the young ballerina's photo on the cover of her memoir belongs to her.

However, on the book cover her own name appears alongside Adam Darius' name, who was her co-dancer in the past, now serves as her co-author in her current endeavor. As Bocher admits, "It was he alone who prompted me, without pause; it was he who urged me, without respite, to share, in this book, my long hidden years of pain and glory" (97). Darius did not simply assist her in writing her book but he helped her bring her story on the surface. The way the two names are printed on the memoir cover, almost in parallel to one another, reveals their supportive connection with Darius in particular offering Bocher the safety and space she needs in order to express herself. Bocher describes this joined effort along these lines: "Was it chance, accident or some kind of cosmic destiny when I reconnected with my dear Adam Darius who, with his formidable willpower, never stopped convincing, persuading and encouraging me that it was my moral duty to preserve a period of history, of which I had been as integral part. That would otherwise be as buried as the crumbled walls of Pompeii?" (249).

With her words Bocher highlights the level of trust that is needed among the collaboration of the co-authors of a memoir and their moral responsibility towards the preservation of truth which is directly connected with the main subject's personal opinion. Bocher and Darius' collaboration for the production of her memoir serves three basic criteria: to reveal some unprecedented achievements and gem facts from her career that have marked the history of ballet, to provide inner healing for a ballerina's soul which has been more tormented than her body, and to reveal incidents of abuse in the world of dance, which she has personally experienced, which could possibly raise awareness and trigger improvements in this field. Bocher describes the process of bringing all these pieces of information to the attention of her readers in her memoir as follows: "As the floodgates of memory are unlocked, what I had been subjected to was beyond the boundaries of abuse; it had skirted the borders of torture. As such, it would have been a dereliction of duty for me to further ignore it. And that, at the other end of the time capsule, age 77, I cannot and will not do!" (27). As for Darius' point of view when it comes to the writing and production of the specific book, he states in the Foreword: "For the sake of unquenchable truth, this courageous autobiography had to be written, a staggering morality tale for today's equally obsessive dancing youth" (13). It could also be added that as Darius' was also a dancer in the same company, the encouragement he offered to Bocher for the narration of her story, could be taken to be a proof of the truthful foundations and the sincere intentions behind the specific memoir. In other words, as this is a "somebody memoir", collaborations with famous personas are mentioned and relationships with them are exposed and scrutinized. Darius, by allowing certain facts to be revealed, enables certain insights to be provided into the kind of relationships that himself and Bocher forged or were confronted with during their dance experience at the New York City Ballet. Also, the support he offers to Bocher's memoir writing highlights the amount of trust and confidence the two of them shared.

Bocher's memoir could either be treated as a book that conveys to the readers the story of a specific person or it could be considered alongside the memoirs that other dancers who worked in the same company as Bocher did, have written. The guidance that the dancers received in the early years of its foundation by George Balanchine, their choreographer, together with the pioneering role the specific company played as regards the style of ballet introduced to the US, had a major impact on the development

of their celebrity status and reputation. Regarding Suzanne Farrel, a dancer in the New York City Ballet and Balanchine's trainee, one can find in her own memoir, *Holding On to the Air*, the following as far as Balanchine's innovations in teaching dance are concerned: "Dancing Balanchine gave the dancers a chance to rise above mere obedience" (296), to which she later adds: "He taught class for everyone and believed in self-discovery ... I had not realized until now just how much latitude and responsibility he offered" (298). In these quotes, Farrel explains how with Balanchine's teachings, emphasis was placed on the personality of each dancer, and how his or her own contributions to the choreography were taken under consideration, which subverted the customary obedience and step execution that was expected by dancers until then. Therefore, the best ones from Balanchine's company gained personal fame and recognition. After his death the New York City Ballet company together with its members has kept on evolving through time. However, back in the 1950s and 1960s, which is the period that Bocher examines in her memoir, everything was still fresh and under the control and the guiding vision of the Ballet original founders. That is the reason why the specific memoir constitutes a valuable resource: alongside Bocher's personal story, the company's own story also unfolds.

Specifically, each memoir of the early New York City Ballet community reflects this particular atmosphere of ambition, reward, innovation and unprecedented achievement, while marking each dancer's active contribution to the company's development alongside their complicated relationships, personal drama and mistakes. In addition, the socio – political reality within which all these events took place should be considered. For example, in 1962, not discouraged by the Cuban missile crisis, the New York City Ballet went on a tour to the Soviet Union. The uneasiness of the time inevitably marked that visit as evidenced in Farrell's memoir:

This was Balanchine's first visit to his native land in thirty-eight years; he had emigrated just before Stalin consolidated his power... and now he was returning with an American passport and his American family, the New York City Ballet... Though the world was focused on the daring exchanges between Kennedy and Khrushchev, and Balanchine was well aware of the gravity of the situation, the company in general kept up such an appearance of outer calm that most of us remained, as usual, more concerned about our careers than our lives. (Farrell 68)

This remark reveals the company's strong will and self-discipline at a time of dire political challenges and risks.

In the case of Bocher's memoir, it should be viewed not only as a personal account but also as a document that records the strengths and weaknesses of a dancing community. Characteristically, Bocher states: "I remember the day quite well when Vera Zorina, Mme Danilova, Maria Tallchief and Tanaquil LeClercq were all in class together" (39). This comment does reveal how everyone regarded herself/ himself in relation to the other dancers: as a member of a group of diverse beliefs, ideologies and perspectives. As for the writing style Bocher adopts while writing her memoir, it does shed light on each character's unconventional life, dreams, inspiration, achievements and passions. So, her memoir does not simply serve as an account of events but as a narrative that emerges from a plot that is driven by the perplexing and full of unexpected twists life of the characters who appear in it. This explains the intensity of the scenes she creates as shown in the following example. In particular, she writes: "As swirling patterns, the memories of my dancing days keep returning, one recollection in particular, as an audacious gatecrasher who adamantly refuses to leave. At first, I try to resist the oppressive image, but it has a mind of its own and persists. Then, my private time capsule begins to dissolve, though until now hermetically sealed from the awareness of all my family members, both past and present" (17). In her writing, she brings together nostalgic emotions, images, metaphors and personification, as well as a musical rhythm, qualities that enhance the experience she is trying to convey to her readers. Even though the storyline is straightforward, Bocher's memoir encourages the readers to feel what she feels so that an intimate connection with her experience is forged.

1.2 The Voice, the Poise and the Storyline

Someone could say that this memoir is about an American girl, born in Anadarko, Oklahoma, who, at the age of twelve watched a ballet performance and felt the excitement of ballet take over. All she did later, with the support of her parents was to pursue her dream in New York, where still in her early teens, she reached unimaginable success and faced lots of difficulties, before leaving the world of dance for good at the age of eighteen in order to get married. With almost sixty years having gone by since Bocher's first encounter with the world of dance, she takes in her memoir a

retrospective glance in her attempt to share with the readers her hardships and glories her pain and success since her acceptance as a student dancer in the School of American Ballet. Writing now from the standpoint of maturity, she refers with clarity to certain incidents in her ballet life, as is the case of her encounter with Jerome Robbins who at some point tried to talk her out of giving interviews. Actually, she writes: “Now, in 2012, firmly into the next century, I can look back with unobstructed clarity and see that Robbins, unpopular with the media at that time... had become resentful of the attention I was eliciting” (191-192). This is the voice of a person who knows better now than back then when she could not understand why certain incidents occurred. Another example relates to a nostalgic comment she makes about youth: “Ah, the passion of youth and its attendant vigor, muses the now great-grandmother thinking back!”(136). The specific phrase emanates not only her nostalgia but also her sadness about the kind of abilities she once had but she has now lost.

Regarding the tone of the voice that narrates the story in Bocher’s memoir, it does sound distinctive from the beginning. Bocher, in her opening pages, begins with reference made to an oceanic sensory image: “The perpetual California summer of 2011 diffuses its intense oceanic light as I stroll along the beach with its toppling remnants of a child’s sand castle” (17). She continues by including the sense of hearing as she refers to “a faint melody from deep beneath the sea” (17). Then she moves ahead with the presentation of her own memories by resorting to lyrical tone that aims at transferring her emotions to the reader. According to Karr: “The writer doesn’t choose these styles so much as he’s born to them, based on who he is and how he experienced the past ... Voice isn’t just a manner of talking. It’s an operative mindset and way of perceiving that naturally stems from feeling oneself alive inside the past” (36). Considering this, the romanticized perspective through which Bocher looks at her own past makes sense, as this is suitable for a former dancer for whom her past glory and youth now need to be preserved.

Bocher’s voice has one more characteristic, that of poise, which could be described as a type of pride, composure, self-control and exquisite manners, which match the way a ballerina dances. Bocher obviously not only danced with poise but also with her head up high in her every moment of her ballerina life. All these highlight the qualities of her memoir writing being infused with personal emotion and subjective experience rather than being a distanced and objective account of the past.

From the very beginning of her memoir, she glosses up her own image by immediately connecting herself to her resilient ancestors, glamorous relatives and other famous people, in her effort to declare and subtly hint at her roots: “my ancestors had fled the Roman Catholic persecution of Protestants in both Scotland and France ... Years later, when I had crushing hurdles to overcome, my mother would reinforce my will by reminding me that I had risen from the ashes of durable colonial stock” (28). This statement in which she connects her own strength and resilience with that of her ancestors is a great example of her inner poise and it explains how from a very young age the idea that she was destined for success was instilled in her, thus, as a self-fulfilling prophecy, she made it happen. She continues her story by adding the following remarks: “I had a celebrity relative who was adored by some of the most recognizable women ... Fast-forwarding a decade when I joined the New York City Ballet, he unfailingly gave me encouragement, sending flowers every time I danced a soloist role in New York. He would sit in the same seat in the first row on the aisle at the City Center, and when escorting Greta Garbo, would enter through a side entrance just after the house lights dimmed” (28-29). Upon arrival to England for a tour with the company in 1950, Bocher’s poise caught the attention of the reporters: “the morning after our arrival on July 5th, 1950, my picture was on the front page of the London Evening News with the caption, Barbara is a Girl with Poise by Gwen Robyns” (103-104). Also, a little later upon describing the tour in Spain, she says: “The next day in the Barcelona newspaper there was a headline in Spanish *Balanchine, Maria y Barbara!*” (137). At this point, Bocher shares a headline which is still making her proud as her name was distinguished among the other members of the company, elevated and put right next to the two great artists who were much more experienced than she was in the world of dance. One of her dance partners, Jacques D’Amboise verifies Barbara’s distinct poise and manners in his own memoir during their dinners out: “Barbara would order one sensible dish, then politely converse and wait for me to finish stuffing myself , planning to get a spoonful of one of my desserts” (149). Her poise, also, becomes apparent in the following instance, where Bocher writes: “I was choking back tears but would not give him the satisfaction of caving in!” (25). Here Bocher refers to her confrontation with Robbins. Even though she was only a young teenager, she had mastered the art of poise in every aspect of her life. This becomes evident further down in the way Bocher describes her connection with other dancers in the New York Ballet Company.

As an extension of her elegance and inner poise and, at the same time, in combination with her humble manners towards those who are her seniors in terms of experience and expertise, Bocher succumbs to her admiration for another ballerina who was older and more prominent than herself. Specifically, when Bocher describes her first encounter with Aleksandra Danilova (born Aleksandra Dionisyevna Danilova) she says: “The great ballerina, Mme Aleksandra Danilova, danced the Glove Seller in *Gaite Parisienne*... it was lively, vivid and flirtatious with Massine’s choreography executed, not as steps, but as an outburst of *joie de vivre*... I sat there spellbound at the sight and sound of magic” (32). Reading her memoir, one is drawn to the multitude of pages which she devotes writing about her Danilova, who is constantly present throughout the whole memoir, always referred to with absolute respect, total admiration and utter adoration. Bocher not only admires but also embraces Danilova’s dancing style. Here is how Bocher describes the impact Danilova had on her: “If Mme Danilova had not answered my letter (which I safeguarded no less than the Constitution), my life would have moved in a totally different direction ... On the basis of that letter alone, Mom and I went to New York ... Monday, the next day, was the big day itself when we would go to the School of American Ballet on Madison Avenue and 59th Street” (33). In her memoir, Bocher goes on to give her reader additional details about the specific encounter with Danilova which occurred in the context of a particular ballet class with Balanchine. Bocher writes:

One particular class about to be given by Mr B specially resonates in my memory... making a dramatic and last minute entrance was the ballerina assoluta of our time, the woman whose dancing first awakened me to the celestial beauty of ballet and whose response to my letter altered forever the course of my young life ... On or off stage, she personified and exuded the word star ... I was standing near enough to the great ballerina to inhale the fragrance of her heavenly perfume and couldn’t help but keep my eye on her spellbinding movements at the barre. There was a majestic and even imperious aura about Mme Danilova that I had never before seen, to such a degree, in a studio. She was, it could be said, a czarina in exile, an empress without a crown (76)

What follows up from this encounter is a brief dialogue between Bocher the young student dancer as shown in the previous excerpt and Danilova, the experienced and successful ballet star. “in trepidation I went up to her, then managed to say, ‘my name

is Barbara Bocher and I would like to thank you for answering my letter from Oklahoma City” (76). The two instances cited here reveal how innocence, fascination and gratitude are combined together marking young Bocher’s early steps in the antagonistic world of the New York Ballet company. The 77-year-old now Bocher sheds a retrospective glance at her early steps as well as her own personal effort to pave her path in the ballet world without being favored by anyone when she remarks the following: “As circumstances decreed, I never did have the opportunity of a further conversation or any contact with Mme Danilova” (77). The reader understands that Danilova’s brief appearance in Bocher’s life did not affect her in any negative way, but, indirectly, it served as a continuous source of inspiration, helping Bocher cultivate her own ballet technique and style. However, with all these pieces of information being recorded in a memoir, one cannot help but wonder about their validity. After all, Couser notes that: “calling a narrative about yourself a memoir usually signals that it is based primarily on memory, a... highly selective faculty” (19). Perhaps this can explain why such a brief encounter takes up so much length in Bocher’s narration, as her memory “chooses” to focus on this brief incident and expand on it in her story. According to Karr: “Of course the minute you write about one thing instead of another, you’ve begun to leave stuff out, which you could argue is falsifying. What was major to you might have been a blip on someone else’s radar” (25). Therefore, one could argue that by giving so much emphasis on just a momentary encounter Bocher is distorting the actual fact. However, as Karr supports, this is one of the liberties of a memoirist and this is a commonly used practice. In other words, it is considered to be natural, almost expected in memoirs, that all the facts and observations that are communicated to the readers derive from the memoirist’s own subjective perspective.

It could also be said that Bocher is aware of the uncertainty that a reader may experience as regards the validity of her story, so she resorts to the elaboration on certain crucial parts so that she can justify her points and perspective. To be precise, she particularly pays attention to her own teenage and her family’s ambition as a main force behind her major decisions in an effort to make her story believable. Ambition, as she claims, was passed down from her ancestors from Europe: “Fleeing to the New World in the hope of savoring religious freedom” (28) and to her own parents, Virginia Ayres Moore and Leonard S. Bocher, who were ready to make great sacrifices so as to give their daughter the help she needed to achieve greatness: “Mother returned to New York

with me while my father, of necessity, stayed behind in Oklahoma City to maintain the family business ... what belief he had in me and what generosity of spirit to willingly relinquish, not just his daughter, but his wife, leaving himself to cope with his own ongoing aloneness” (42).

In fact, Moore instilled ambition in her daughter’s heart early on. As Bocher remarks in her memoir: “ Mom was determined to make me look like the little golden girl, Shirley Temple, and why not? She was adorable and talented; a good little actress and she could sing and dance. She was every one’s little darling in the movies, not only in America, but all over the world” (29). This mentality of wild ambition during the early post-war years, more specifically between the 1940s and early 1950s, reflects the powerful resurfacing of the American Dream. According to Jennifer Murtoff’s article, which is based on James Truslow Adams’ views, the American Dream is defined: “not as a dream of motor cars and high wages merely, but a dream of a social order in which each man and each woman shall be able to attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable, and be recognized by others for what they are, regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of birth or position” (Murtoff). Thus, Bocher’s mother, Moore dreamed that her young daughter could become successful and doors could open for her despite her humble origins.

Similar stories of ambition have been shared by other dancers of that era as well, as is for example in the case of Susanne Farrell’s memoir. In it, the following statement about a dancer with her sister and their mother leaving their home city in order to chase their dancing dream in New York in 1960, says: “with only the prospect of a phone call and a lot of naïve hope, we decided to move” (37). This remark reveals the dancers’ calculated risks and their family sacrifices in the context of their dream realization. This is also the case with Bocher’s story, do reinforce the validity of this aspect of Bocher’s story, being a testimony of her own and her family’s efforts with regard to her ballet dream, which also reinforces the validity of her narrative.

Regarding her encounter with her idol, Bocher does not hesitate to add the following words to her memoir about Danilova: “Mme Danilova, though I know that you believe a curtsy to the knee should be reserved exclusively for only God and the Czar, permit me the liberty of such a deep curtsy to you as well. For you were, I am ever and gratefully aware, the radiant lodestar of my young life” (77). By reading this,

one would certainly question Bocher's intentions. However, with Mme Danilova having passed in 1997, one could claim that these words still highlight what a poised teenager Bocher was, while, at the same time, one could comment on how these words effectively reveal a young ballerina's infatuation with her idol. In the case of a memoir, this is exactly where its fictionalizing ability lies, when the gaps between past and present are filled up by the narrator's own retrospective comments. Indicatively, Bocher's humbleness and respect is not limited to her references to Danilova. In fact, Bocher has devoted a great part of her book to paying tribute to dozens of important people she admired, or with whom she has collaborated, and in five cases she has titled her chapters after certain individuals as shown here: "Dancing for Jerome Robbins", "Dancing for Balanchine and Stravinsky", "Dancing for Leonard Bernstein", as well as "Dancing for Frederic Ashton", and "Swan Lake and Benny Goodman". Also, upon a visit to Paris, she has a touching and classy way of paying tribute to Marie Taglioni, a ballerina of international acclaim: "suddenly I found myself on the rue Le Peletier, the same street that had once been the site of the previous Paris Opera... Among the pantheon of superb dancers who had skimmed across the stage was Marie Taglioni, the supreme sylphide of the Romantic Ballet's diaphanous blue moonlight. As I began to drift backwards into that far-distant era, my mind's eye paused to imagine those gutted gates of greatness" (155). Bocher's retrospective style of writing becomes evident here as well as her nostalgic remarks about Taglioni. The presentation of real facts via a lens of recollection comments highlights a memoir's allegiance with fiction. The same style of writing is employed when Bocher expresses her admiration about Balanchine, the choreographer and founder of the New York City Ballet, whose teaching seems to have been the guiding force in her life ever since:

Quick like lighting, you are the music, you must be the music he would say. When coaching us, Mr B would say, try hard as you can, then try little bit more. That message has come home to me again and again as I have lived my life. It seems that sometimes you are required to give your all, and then just a little bit more, to survive the treacherous slopes that sooner or later most of us will encounter (40, 62)

In all these remarks, one can see how fascination and admiration fuse with retrospection and how memoir writing can bridge temporally distant incidents even though these are retrieved from memory which at times affects the accuracy of their reminiscence.

Talking about temporal contingency as an element of memoir writing, Bocher through her narration invites readers to immerse into her reality and see it through her own eyes. In each one of the scenes she recalls, she succeeds in highlighting an array of details as shown here when she accounts for her encounter with Balanchine in the course of her ballet class with Pierre Vladimirov: “As soon as I saw him I felt weak and full of apprehension ... All the time I could feel Mr. B’s all-seeing eyes on me and in spite of wanting to note his expression as a telltale sign of my future, I ordered myself to avert his gaze. Don’t look at him, I commanded myself. Just dance! ... Float, soar, elevate, even elevate, just surrender to the out-of-this-world music and to the eyes of Mr B, whose on the spot choices could determine one’s life course ... The rest of the class went by in a blur. I could think of nothing but the remote possibility that I might, God willing, be the chosen one!” (56). Here we have an extract overflowing with youthful excitement, with the unbridled ambition of a teenager due to her burning desire to receive the recognition she craves for. Bocher’s narration enlivens the whole scene in front of the reader’s eyes: “When the class concluded... I started to leave for the dressing room and there was Mr B blocking the narrow doorway! He reached out to me, took my hand, looked penetratingly into my eyes and said ‘Barbara, do you want to dance for me?’ Beaming, no, radiant, no, incandescent, I replied, ‘Yes’ and he responded in his Russian/ American English ‘Good, you will be member of the company’ and walked away” (56). When reading Bocher’s account, one is left to wonder whether what is described did really happen or is what Bocher wanted to happen. Then the reader takes a look at the photographs attached on the last pages of the memoir, which is a valid document of Bocher’s career and collaborations and the reader assumes that no matter how embellished her personal account might be either intentionally or unintentionally due to the unavoidably biased subjective perspective, things make sense in the way they are narrated.

Also, Bocher wanting to persuade her readers about the validity of her comments presents another scene which took place four years later, in which again she interacts with Balanchine. Here, he repeats the same invitation to her, however, this time the context differs and their interaction takes on a whole different meaning: “‘Mr B’ I managed to eject these three terminal syllables, and then with a supreme effort, poured out the plans for my impending departure and marriage ... I just stood there, my stomach churning ... ‘Do not leave,’ he repeated. ‘Barbara’ I heard his once thrilling

words again, ‘would you like to dance for me?’ I stared at him with a vacancy born of shock ... And there I was, facing George Balanchine, the man for whom I was more than ready to sacrifice my young life. Defeated in his effort to make me change my mind, Mr B reluctantly gave me a big hug and said, ‘If you must go, be a missionary for ballet!’ (243-244). It is interesting that Bocher resorts to the repetition of the same phrases in the presentation of Balanchine’s profile in her effort to share with the readers another aspect of her own life story. The contrast created here between the two characters sheds different light on the various shades of emotion displayed here. The reader can suspect that it is possible that Balanchine did not necessarily use these exact words in order to invite her into his company. In this case, it could be said that Bocher is using one of the memoirists’ liberties which according to Karr, is acceptable as she states in her book *The Art of Memoir*: “Re-creating dialogue, I’ve often said, ‘the conversation went something like this’, but most readers presume as much- the subjective nature eschews the standards of history, I think” (24). We assume that Balanchine whether with these or with similar words must have invited Bocher to his company twice, to which her response differs dramatically.

Specifically, the two conversations between Bocher and Balanchine, bring readers in confrontation with the former’s rise and disillusionment in the world of dance. The first stage includes her acceptance to the New York City Ballet company, described as follows: “I had every confidence that under his protective wings, I would be safe, nurtured, and would, one day, reach my full potential...When Mr B chose me to dance in the premiere of his new ballet, *Capriccio Brillante*...I was elated” (19-20). This is soon followed by an additional remark: “It was always apparent that George Balanchine was led by higher forces that were not of this pedestrian world. He was, undeniably, a genius, a channel for higher creative currents that funneled through him to his acolyte dancers” (40). These two statements provide insights into Balanchine’s status in the world of dance, his legendary reputation and the appeal he had on the young dancers who were very keen on being trained by him. In fact, any other ballet instructor was considered to be inferior and a second option to young ballerinas. According to Protopopescu, even Balanchine’s prima ballerina, Maria Tallchief, not having been taught exclusively by Balanchine, was feeling inadequate in comparison to the other dancers in the company: “Not being originally trained by Balanchine, Tallchief was the one who had felt, at first, deficient” (72). Considering the glory which Balanchine’s

name carried, Bocher's enthusiasm makes sense to the readers while the observations that she carries forward enable readers to see all these dance personalities through her own eyes as well as gain access to their inner thoughts and experiences.

As regards the second stage, Barbara goes on to show how her life at the time revolved solely around dance: "There was no time for social events or anything except ballet, ballet and more ballet, an overdose to be sure, and though addictive, not lethal. Just as maidens whose hearts were ripped out in sacrifices on the top of the Pyramid of the Sun, we also were sacrificial, but self- sacrificial, giving our hearts not to appease the path of the sun in ancient Mexico, but to please George Balanchine. We also bled ... and we willingly, no, joyfully underwent that ritual for as long as we could do justice to the master's vision ... we strove to overcome the body's limitations, for he wanted us to expand the capabilities of the fragile human frame ... We were all willing to work until we dropped" (59-60). In the excerpt provided here, readers can closely follow Bocher's hard work, her tough schedule as well as her professionalism and commitment to her art. Her adoration towards Balanchine is clear in her willingness to sacrifice anything that would prevent her from fulfilling his vision.

However, through her memoir narration Bocher guides readers through a number of incidents that reveal her fluctuating emotions and major disappointments as these derived from her interaction with the ballet world, as is the case with the following incident: "I could see Mr B surveying the scene as if he were watching an in-flight movie, content to leave me at the mercy of an attack This absence of action from my revered Mr Balanchine was the first cracked pane in my stained glass window view of him" (150-151). As it seems, Bocher felt unsafe in Balanchine's company when she was left at the mercy of Jerome Robbins' abusive behavior:

I made the difficult decision to take the bull by the horns and report what was happening to Mr B himself. Only a quiet desperation could have pushed me to take such a drastic step. Bracing myself, I approached Mr B ... With tears welling up in my eyes ... I told him that I didn't know how much longer I could take Robbin's bullying treatment of me. Do not worry Barbara he advised. You remind me of old girlfriend ... Now the burden was even heavier, for I felt embarrassed that I had interrupted the normally unimpeded flow of Mr B's cascading thoughts. Why did I have to muddy his pure and crystalline stream of images? (72)

All the incidents mentioned here fueled Bocher's doubts about Balanchine even more. This is also evidenced here:

I began to ask myself the most dislodging questions. Had I become a supplicant kneeling at the feet of a human being I perceived as a deity? Why was I for so long so blinded to his acute shortcomings? ... today I am left with the unbalancing thought that the worship of Balanchine had unhealthy repercussions. Of course, I could have just left the company, but that was easier said than done, for I was caught like a fox in a trap, by my own dancing passion and until then impenetrable belief that George Balanchine was a demigod. You served a god; you didn't question one (153)

It is interesting how Bocher captures in her narrative all her emotional upheavals. The kind of language she uses, even though it is descriptive at times, does attempt to offer readers a vivid and animating account of her emotional transformation as well as disappointment about the overall situation she had found herself in due to Balanchine's inconsistency towards her:

I had committed my life to him believing wholeheartedly that he would oversee my career with care and undiminished interest. But that belief was a pipe dream. I was an instrument, nothing more... a hint of doubt as to his lack of concern for me began to infiltrate my mind. Did he have any future plans for me, or was I to be used up, then given the heave-ho when perhaps chronically injured or too old to dance? (174)

She expected Balanchine to guarantee a future for her, which he did not. It is interesting how the memoir delves into such depths of emotion in order to convey to readers Bocher's array of feelings. Moreover, this intensifies the blurriness that is also triggered between the events Bocher refers to and her inner thoughts.

This disheartening feeling is projected when Bocher mentions in her memoir how Balanchine was losing interest in his wife at the time, and prima ballerina of the company that of Maria Tallchief: "There was Maria, fast becoming a rubbed-out chalk pavement drawing" (213) and "While married to Maria, it was evident he became drawn to the budding talent of Tanaquil LeClercq" (267). The comments Bocher raises here indirectly reveal her own disappointment triggered by Balanchine's behavior towards her which pushed her away from the company and the world of dance. Certainly, these kind of emotions are juxtaposed in Bocher's memoir with her accounts of her early huge success when she was still very young. She attributes this to her inner

talent as well as to her mindset: “My parents had taught me to believe that I could climb every rung of ambition’s ladder if I worked ceaselessly, cultivated whatever inborn talent I had at birth, and trained without respite ... The fearless confidence of youth was mine. My goal was not for stardom, fame or fortune, but to be able to dance as a true ballerina on the major stages of the world” (19). It should be noted that Bocher’s success was also covered by the press of that era all around the world, starting from her first tour in Europe, which is also a proof of the soundness of her story. She describes her arrival to London as follows:

As we stepped onto British soil, hordes of reporters rushed towards the plane from seemingly nowhere, flash bulbs popping without respite, I assumed the press was rushing towards George Balanchine and Maria Tallchief ... but, no, they whizzed right past them ... I couldn’t believe what was happening; they were all asking for Miss Bocher ... aware of the baby ballerina in their midst, as I was labeled, they rushed towards me for pictures and interviews ... I was on a conveyor belt of continuous publicity with no immediate end in sight. There were also trips to Historic Court for photo shoots, and a feature in *Debutante Magazine*, all sandwiched in between some very intensive rehearsals ... I was fast becoming, among the girls in the company, the girl you love to hate (102-104)

In addition to the information mentioned here, Bocher’s publicity continued in 1952 when she also appeared “on the cover of the *New York Post* ... and had been named Young Dancer of the Month ... in *Dance Magazine*” (191). Through the embellishment of her memoir writing with references to the press, Bocher attempts to reinforce the authenticity of her remarks and life experience. This is further highlighted with her references to incidents of envy as the one mentioned here that took place in the elegant Theatre des Champs-Elysees in Paris a few minutes before getting to the stage to dance her part. She was still in the bathroom on the fifth floor but to her surprise the bathroom door would not open:

I took hold of the antique brass doorknob and to my utter dismay, it wouldn’t turn! I tried again but the heavy wooden door wouldn’t budge. An instant panic set in as I pulled, pushed, rattled, twisted and yanked at the door handle! ... I climbed up on the grimy and ancient porcelain sink, hoping it wouldn’t fall off the wall, then put my head through the transom while repeatedly shouting Help, help, help! No one was in

the hall so my urgent calls went unheeded...I shouted again and again and kept pounding on the door as forcefully as I could. Again, there was no response ... I was running out of time by the second! I knew I had to, at whatever cost, make that entrance... There was only one option left. I shuddered and took a deep breath, willing myself not to look down... with this do or die decision, I placed one pink satin pointe shoe firmly on the granite ledge (162)

Here we have the beginning of what Bocher describes as being a traumatic experience, when upon finding herself locked inside the bathroom of the theater she made a desperate decision to free herself.

The scene which Bocher presents here adds another layer to what the readers have already read. The accumulation of a variety of moments that derive from her own personal efforts and public engagements enable the readers transition from Bocher's private to public life, inner emotions and external confrontations. By moving in space and time, the memoir does manage to engage the readers deeply. Also, in this way, the narration appears natural, unpolished and, therefore, more authentic.

It is worth noticing the following incident that Bocher presents her readers with: "With a quick swing out the window, I was standing on the narrow ledge, simultaneously clinging to the wall of the building ... my peripheral vision took in the people five-stories below, looking no larger than ants" (162). A feeling of vertigo seizes the reader as the scene progresses, without its description being embellished with any adjectives. Actually, it constitutes a plain retelling of the incident narrated, without resorting to the use of any additional adjectives but just to the tone generated by the narration itself:

I inched my way along the ledge, my hands hanging on to the walls of the building, until I reached the next window...Holding on for dear life to the window frame, I balanced on one foot and kicked the window open... I quickly jumped through it on to a desk and saw that I was in some sort of office. Running faster than I have ever run in my life before or since, I flew down five flights of stairs sliding down the handrail for several flights before arriving in the wings just as the second movement was beginning... I arrived in the nick of time to take my partner's hand (161-163)

In this breathtaking scene, which is described so vividly, Bocher makes the reader realize how traumatic an experience like the one accounted for here has been to her to

be consigned to oblivion. Also, the ending of it, in which she just rushes to her position and then dances in the performance like nothing had happened instead of openly expressing any complaint, is the ultimate example of a dancer's readiness to hide all pain, maintain both the outer and inner poise in her attempt to serve the high ideal of dance, so that the performance is rescued and of course the choreographer honored.

In the events presented here, Bocher hints at those who had sabotaged her, which is verified by the fact that this girl was ready to dance Bocher's part if she were not to return: "She was in costume and had been holding Bobby's hand, ready to dance my part ... I registered the peculiar expression on Vida's face. Obviously, she knew I wasn't in the wings where I should have been, and contending with the missing costume and now absent dancer, she was at her wit's end... I will say that the look of astonishment was quickly replaced by one of resignation, of one who very reluctantly accepts last-second defeat at what was thought to be a foolproof scheme" (163). However, Bocher not only didn't accuse that woman openly, but she even hid the whole fact from everyone: "Until writing this book, I have never told a living soul how I got out of that bathroom, nor have I ever accused anyone of locking me in" (164). Barbara chose to suffer silently and put on a brave face until she could deal with the toxicity of the environment no more. The comment she makes upon narrating this high-adrenaline adventure says it all: "Why was I so willing to risk my life, no, forfeit it, rather than disappoint George Balanchine?" (164), as a disillusioned lady she now doubts whether the struggle was worth it, which could also be perceived as a warning sign to the reader, that such sacrifices are not worth it after all and having gone through this, she does not recommend another dancer to fall into such a trap of blindly adoring a choreographer. The fact that Bocher is judgmental and still fearful of the risky decision she made back then just for the sake of saving a performance, instead of boasting about it, makes it seem true to the reader. It seems like a big enough shock to justify her lack of enthusiasm for the dancing community and her disillusionment regarding dance in general. Even though she has no witnesses and no tangible proof of this hazardous endeavor, her attitude towards it and the feeling this description conveys to the readers together with her future choices make it seem believable enough.

Throughout the memoir, one gets to see Bocher's dance experience from different points of view. All of them together enhance the multifacetedness of the narrative as well as the multiple contrasts that its effectiveness derives from. The

highs and lows of a dancer's life are discussed in Darius' book *A Nomadic Life*, an extract of which is also included in *The Cage*:

Why, one may well ask, does an artist pursue a life certain to cause himself both mental and physical pain; ... Perhaps it is because the artist will do anything to reaffirm the fact that once he lived, however brief his tenure. To freeze existence, to be glory's slave he will stop at nothing; to imprint his soul upon the sea-swept sands of time he will suffer all indignities. But if and when his efforts have been honoured by his fellow men, his joy is boundless, his past suffering a mere chimera (254)

According to Darius who, as a dancer, could probably also know this at first hand, a dancer will suffer a great amount of trouble in order to have a share of that highly addictive blinding glory. However, he clarifies: "But to dance within the confines of a cage, that is a structure that impedes the soul in its evolving journey" (254). It is interesting how the specific phrase responds and intertextually connects with the title of Bocher's memoir, that of *The Cage*, as well as with one of the most well-known and controversial ballets by Jerome Robbins, with the same title in which Bocher participated. However, all these connections are particularly significant as they invite readers to focus on specific aspects of Bocher's dance experience that bring to the fore the mentally, physically and emotionally intense experience of dancing. Bocher writes about in her memoir the following: "I dreaded every Robbins rehearsal with stomach-churning fear" (23). Therefore, her memoir title triggers certain symbolic connotations showing how her dancing career despite being a dream come true initially, ended up being her cage, her own personal prison. Both the intertextual and symbolic technique that her memoir resorts to reveal the ability that this kind of writing has to shed light on the dark side of a career in dance.

1.3 Addressing Sensitive Issues: the Challenges of Subjectivity

Bocher does not hesitate to delve much more deeply into the physical and mental pressure she experienced as a dancer in an effort to expose that part of her vulnerable self. In particular, she writes about her training with Jerome Robbins:

He demanded that we rehearse on pointe with every new version... The movements he required us to do were clearly destructive to our feet, with repeated stabbing of

our toes into the floor, harder and harder, it was never forceful enough. If his aim was to cripple us, in that area he was en route to arrival, for he was turning our feet into pounding hammers. With each successive attempt to do his frenzied bidding, flashes of pain began to shoot up through my feet into my very teeth. I hoped I would faint to escape the by now intolerable pain (21)

To this observation, Bocher also adds: “he was screeching at me that I had to learn everyone’s part, to understudy every role and be prepared to dance in any part he told me if he wished to switch me around. I knew what his game was; not only to crush me emotionally, but also physically” (25). Then Bocher shares the following description with the reader:

With some effort, I put my foot on the high barre next to the window to stretch, thinking it might somewhat alleviate the physical pain. Only then did I notice five spots of dark red blood where each of my toes had been through the pink satin pointe slippers. I put my head on the knee of my extended leg and started to cry without respite, by then feeling the sharp stabs of pain from my lacerated toes ... I remained at the barre, girding myself for the jabs of pain shooting through my body (26)

Reading all these details, one cannot help but wonder to whether what Bocher reveals is the outcome of real or of an exaggerated emotion. Memoir writing often confronts readers with this kind of a dilemma, of remaining truthful to the experience of the writer or sentimentalizing about it. However, from the very beginning of her narration, Bocher declares that what she writes about in her memoir is a personal account, based on her own memory, that of an elderly woman, who is about to narrate a “pain-filled recollection” (17). She never claims that the incidents brought forward are absolutely and objectively truthful. Thus, by stressing the subjectivity of her perspective, and by explaining the decade-long suppression of her emotions, she, in a way, admits that sentimentality is something to be expected throughout her memoir. This is not necessarily a minus, but rather something anticipated in memoirs. According to Karr, as she states in her book *The Art of Memoir* “The best memoirists stress the subjective nature of reportage. Doubt and wonder come to stand as part of the story” (14), to which statement she adds a couple of pages later : “That’s partly why memoir is in its ascendancy- not because it’s not corrupt, but because the best ones openly confess the nature of their corruption ... a writer constantly reminds the reader that he’s not

watching crisp external events played from a digital archive. It's the speaker's truth alone. In this way, the form constantly disavows the rigors of objective truth" (16). These excerpts reinforce the idea that sentimentality in memoirs is inevitable, therefore Bocher's suspected inaccuracies in what was exactly said back then and be justified.

However, the oscillation between truth and sentimentalism paves the path for certain other revelations to be made by the part of the writer. Bocher does not hesitate to speak openly about her premature retirement from dance due to Jerome's behavior towards her. She clearly states her reasons both for not speaking openly about her torment back then, and for choosing to make her voice heard in 2012, long after her own retirement as well as Robbins' death in 1998:

Nowadays what I endured would be called victimization at the workplace, or, far worse, child abuse. Then it had no such label and was conveniently swept under the carpet, for the abuser, Jerome Robbins, invariably had the Midas touch. No one was to question a man who, despite his steamrolling methods, invariably turned every theatrical brass to gold (19)

Her decision to expose her dysfunctional collaboration with Robbins as evidenced in the excerpt above, long after his death can erase any suspicions that this part of her memoir is vengeful or her intention is to harm someone professionally. Her only desire is to contribute to the exposure of abuse in the world of American ballet in the twentieth century so that old traumas are healed.

In fact, regarding more recent memoirs, the New York City ballet society of the twenty-first century is portrayed as far more open and receptive to the articulation of such experiences. As it is documented in the 39-year-old Georgina Pazcoguin's memoir titled *Swan Dive*, which was first published in 2021 for example, she does not hesitate to talk openly about the assault she suffered even more directly than Bocher, but she again did it after she, too, had relatively prematurely retired from the company and the abuser was no more in power. In Pazcoguin's book, the tormentor is Balanchine's successor, Peter Martins "former dancer who turned artistic director" and "retired amid an investigation into sexual harassment and verbal and physical abuse (which he denied)" (11). Compared to Barbara Bocher, Pazcoguin resorts to the use of a different kind of language, as is the case with "body shaming" when she says: "Throughout the years, I've built up a solid shield against the relentless body shaming that occurs on

company time” (157), to which she adds: “I think about the abuse we have faced as a company under Peter’s reign” (203). The articulation of such an experience becomes even more delicate when one realizes Pazcoguin’s Asian American background. In her memoir she writes: “Yes, casting minorities for the B cast and Eurocentric races for the A cast was blatantly racist and wrong” (198). The opening of a memoir to such experiences highlights the multiple challenges that a dancer faces especially when other factors come on the surface such as those of gender, race, ethnicity and class.

However, she too admits that while still being a ballerina in Peter’s company she never hoped to be heard. “ But I knew voicing my displeasure about being harassed onstage would be viewed as ungrateful” (173). In addition, she writes: “At the New York City Ballet on any given day (at least under Peter), a woman might receive the fat-shaming talk of her life... or be criticized to a level of humiliation in front of everyone and be expected to be smiling and dancing for her life just moments later” (240). All these bring to the readers’ attention how much still needs to be changed in the world of dance.

It should be noted that due to the openness of memoirs like Pazcoguin’s, one can come to realize how much must have been overlooked and silenced in the past. In Bocher’s case, whose dance career started in the 1950s, there are several examples of her own physical and emotional abuse as caused by Robbins, scattered across in numerous pages in her memoir always coming to her mind and surfacing in her narration. Yet, the examples of abuse she mentions aiming at highlighting the plethora of abusive incidents her memory has retained, which she does not want to let be forgotten. Even though Bocher never openly spoke about her dancing career and trauma since leaving the New York City Ballet, it seems that over the six decades that followed, she never got rid of the trauma that stayed vivid in her mind. That has been true until the writing of this memoir: “having sifted through the memories of two centuries, I have now succeeded in dispersing those gnawing ghosts ... Free, unfettered and aloft, I awake each day to the early morning rays of a new and sapphire dawn, ready and eager to love with my entire being” (251). It could be inferred that due to sharing all these intense feelings with her readers in the pages of her memoir she can now put these feelings behind her. But can healing be actually achieved through the exposure of such intimate details to the public? Karr poses such a question regarding any memoirist, which she also answers herself: “Why is she driven to tell the tale? Usually, it’s to go

back and recover some lost aspect of the past so it can be integrated into current identity” (92). In Bocher’s case, it could be said that until her final performance, her career included showing the most glamorous aspect of dance to the public. What she does now through her memoir is to communicate with her audience once again, but this time she adds the backstage pain to the glory. In this way, she reconnects with her old identity and she finally explains openly her reasons for leaving the stage. As Karr states, with regard to the healing effect the writing of one’s own memoir has: “It’s through shame and silence that a perpetrator seeks to capture someone else’s soul, sentencing her to lifetime collusion with him ... Publishing the book was a way to reclaim ‘what was left of me’ (168). According to this statement, the louder one’s voicing of the pain they have been forced to endure, the more effective the healing effect the memoir writing can have. This explains the reasons behind Bocher’s confessions to the open via the publication of her memoir.

1.4 Privileges and Tributes

Apart from the traumas that this memoir exposes, it also serves as a stepping stone for Bocher to show her gratitude for the privileges she has enjoyed as a ballet dancer in the past and to pay her respects to all those artists she has worked with who contributed to the formation of her dance selfhood.

As a result, despite the hardness of certain experiences, she considers herself to have enjoyed certain privileges throughout her dancing years. Interesting is the distinction between what should be considered a privilege from a reader’s point of view and what she herself considers a privilege as this becomes evident in her memoir narrative.

Having been born with a musical ear and such great innate ability to dance the extremely demanding technique of ballet is something beautiful as much as rare and it is a natural privilege for one to have. However, it is interesting how Bocher refers to this because she attributes most of her success to her hard work. In other words, she acknowledges the privileges she has earned and not a privilege inherited or innately grown with her. This shows her modesty and kindness, as she uses the word “privilege” in her writing only when she refers to her collaborations with important people of the

artistic world, which shows her immense respect towards them and humbleness as regards her dance origins.

For example, she recalls the costumes she had to wear by the early modernist artist Marc Chagall: “I had the privilege of wearing the famous hand-painted Chagall horse head over my own head. Yes, I thought of it as a privilege as it topped my baggy, gray cotton body suit. Thus outfitted, instead of complaining that I could hardly see or breathe in that stifling equine costume, I thought of the horse head as a kind of weighted halo painted by the superb artist that Marc Chagall undisputedly was” (65). Also, she pays homage to the great composer Igor Stravinsky whose music has guided her in one of the choreographies she had to present at the time she collaborated with Balanchine: “When he conducted, he cast a spell on one and all, the musicians, the dancers and the audience themselves. I was privileged to dance so many times under his baton, including the lead in his ballet *Card Game*... To think that I had been spiritually and musically linked with such an artist whose career goes back a full century, ten tumultuous decades of life and art, that incredible time span boggles my mind” (67). Additionally, Bocher refers to all the tours she participated in all around the world. This, for a young teenager who did not come from a rich family in the early 1950s was unthinkable. Back then only few people travelled and there were no exchange study programs to subsidize teenagers’ trips abroad. Also, transportation was not so advanced as is today but still, the New York City Ballet company was entitled to travel in the most luxurious way: “Lincoln Kirstein, as always, provided the very best he could for all of us, chartering British Overseas Airways’ newest plane, the *Stratocruiser*. It was to travel at the then unheard-of altitude of 14,000 feet” (98). It could be said that touring with the company was also a privilege that Bocher earned to make up for a privilege she lacked, her non-wealthy roots. Through her narration, Bocher introduces her readers to the great theaters around Europe, as is the case presented here: “In that unforgettable summer of 1950, it was thrilling for me to be able to dance at the historic Royal Opera House, Covent Garden, the stage that the impassioned Anna Pavlova and the mystical Vaslav Nijinsky had both emblazoned ... History vibrated in that building, freezing a pantheon of unsurpassable artists at their very summit ... What an honor to be invited to dance there!” (105). Additionally, she shares details about the stage, the backstage and the after-show floods of adoration by the ballet fanatics, that only a star dancer would be able to know and experience first-hand: “The stage at Covent Garden had a

rake, that is, it slanted toward the audience” (105). She continues her narration by adding the following: “The applause was tumultuous. We were a success! London balletgoers flooded the street outside the stage door waiting for autographs ... Many of us received fan mail ... I answered every one of mine” (109). It should be noted that Bocher takes the readers even to the glamorous parties and meetings she had with the European aristocracy of those years: “One unforgettable Sunday afternoon, we were entertained at Lord and Lady Mountbatten’s country estate, Broadlands, at Romsey in Hampshire. Lord Mountbatten was the great-grandson of Queen Victoria, the history books showing a photograph of him sitting on her lap in 1901 ... Both Lord and Lady Mountbatten were faultless hosts, pleased to show us the rolling and verdant green hills of their estate” (113-114). The immensity of the privilege that Bocher and the other members of the company had been exposed to becomes clear here. In a different memoir by Jacques d’Amboise, it is the following insight that is revealed: “England in 1950 was still recovering from the devastation of war. Blackened shells of bombed-out buildings pockmarked the country ... Back home, I ate meat all the time, relishing my bacon in the morning. In London there was no meat. A stagehand, overhearing me complain, whispered that there was a place near the theater, called Nick’s run by a Greek, where you could get meat” (97). The situation is described as very tough and in a country where basic goods, such as food, is so scarce, it is indeed a privilege to be a touring dancer invited to such high class events.

Further insights are offered as is the company’s days in Rome Bocher writes about it:

The American Ambassador to Italy, Clare Boothe Luce, along with her husband, Henry Luce, then publisher of Time, Fortune and Life magazines, gave an afternoon reception for the company in the gardens of their luxurious villa outside Rome ... In the midst of the bubbly French champagne being poured, there were striking ice sculptures containing carved watermelons and cantaloupes, a half-century before it became de rigeour for designer chefs to sculpt flowers made out of tropical fruit. For those with more substantial appetites, there were seafood platters on solid silver antique trays. I noticed particularly the Roquefort cheese containers carved out of bark-covered slices of trees. This was a drinks party fit for a Roman empress of which, in the mid-twentieth century, Clare Boothe Luce was the contemporary equivalent (222-223)

The contrast between scarcity of food for the citizens and the lavishness of the parties that the members of the New York City Ballet were invited to adds extra volume to the privileges they could enjoy thanks to their position.

Impressive is Barbara's narration of dancing in the legendary Gran Teatro de Liceo, in Barcelona, which after a few decades, more precisely in 1994 "had burned to the ground, the latest of Europe's historical opera houses to be reduced to a mass of ashes" (140). What Bocher attempts via such descriptions is to bring these great theater experiences back to life even to the smallest and shiniest detail so that she transfers to her readers in an animating manner her reminiscences about the thrill of performing on such stages: "Decorated with gilded gold and red velvet seats ... Enormous chandeliers hung from the ceiling and I was told that the acoustics left nothing to be desired ... When the overture began with the familiar strains of Tchaikovsky's elegiac score, it was as if a spell had been cast on the proceedings" (138-139). What this remark brings to the attention of the readers is the back stage reality which also can be evidenced here: "After a worrying pause, there was a unanimous standing ovation with thundering shouts of 'Bravo'! ... All of the dancers were profoundly moved, sensing prophetically that such an occasion would not again be repeated. Yes, that Spanish night of pure bewitchment was the most perfect ballet performance of my life" (139-140). The way Bocher openly shares these memories with the reader makes them sympathize with her and her achievements. Thinking about the value of all of these moments shared, one comes to the realization that memoir writing is not only about a character's inner but outer reality as well. The change of perspective that these insights offer shed light on the social privilege one can have by being a successful ballerina and it makes the reader wonder if the negative aspects of the world of dance should be endured by a dancer for the sake of such great opportunities.

Apart from the information the memoir offers about access to lavish parties and the glamorous performances, it is the point of view that it opens up to with regard to world history that matters. A good example of this could be the reference to the fearful atmosphere in Eastern Germany as the New York City Ballet company visited it during a tour, for which Bocher devotes a whole chapter titled "In the shadow of the third Reich". In this chapter, through Bocher's perspective, the readers can experience the shocking contrast between the brightly lit Western sector of Berlin and the disheartening hardship which was still all over the Eastern sector of Berlin, even seven years after the

ending of the war. Bocher recounts her experience in the Eastern Sector of the city as follows: “Women and children were scooping up bricks from the bombed out rubble, to clear up the streets or to try and sell them, I didn’t know. Street after street had been leveled. There were some corner grocery stores with only potatoes and cabbages for sale. It was bleak, dismal and depressing” (183). Bocher, as evidenced here catches herself feeling severely affected by the atmosphere in a very negative way: “I was also unsettled by the thought that any German I met, over the age of 24, could have herded Jews, homosexuals and political dissidents into the hissing gas chambers” (183). Bocher seems to have been caught up in the fear of that moment which she conveys to her readers in a vivid manner here. She also describes the company’s departure from Eastern Berlin as shown in the following lines: “Getting on the train in Berlin to get to the airport for the flight back to New York, we noticed immediately that the shades on all the windows were securely drawn. Guards with holstered guns soon arrived, not only to collect our passports, but also to warn us not to raise the shades and look out” (183-184). By sharing her feelings, with the readers, Bocher manages to combine in her narrative her own personal history with all other major historical events. The ability of the memoir to combine her own personal story with the socio-cultural and political reality that envelops her proves that no one, regardless of their vocation, can be unaffected by the social and political background and its consequences.

Another relevant example comes from the company’s second tour in Trieste, for which Bocher dedicates a full chapter titled “On the Brink of War in Trieste” in which she describes the experience of being a touring performer in a city under the political tension in 1952: “The New York City Ballet ended its tour in Trieste, arriving just as rival political factions were staking their claims to its leadership. Namely the Allied Forces, the Italians and the Yugoslavs. People were told to stay off the streets, a nine o’clock curfew going into immediate force” (224). The political uncertainty deriving from these observations is reinforced with a much more personal remark: “I accelerated my walk into a run, for at 10:30 p.m. the curfew deadline had long been passed, leaving me the only one on the darkened streets. Every massive shadowy shape struck me as a tank ready to go into action. Is that what they were and, if so, were there soldiers manning them, I asked myself in muted panic?” (225). This serves as an effective example of Bocher’s ability to fuse external events with her own personal experience

in an effort to transfer to the readers a well-rounded reality where the public and private life often clashed and collided.

Jacques d'Amboise, Bocher's friend and fellow dancer, records in his own memoir the same tour in Trieste with the Cold War being at its peak: "Posted on the bulletin board backstage at the theater, we'd find a notice, 'Riots planned for tomorrow. Get to the theater early before matinee'" (150). Not only do the recent historical events affect Bocher's emotions, but the cruelty of history also blends with what she witnesses as is the unfair treatment by Robbins of a fellow dancer, Frank Moncion. He conveys the specific event in the same chapter:

so what that the critics were happy? Frank and I weren't! All I could think of were the ballet world's despots and dictators. Frank had been subjected to a form of sophisticated torture. Where was Mr Kirstein? Paddling in his private lake of doom? Where was Mr Balanchine? Lost in the translation of his choreographic overflow? Seven years earlier, Italy's most ignominious tyrant, Benito Mussolini, and his mistress, Clara Petacci, were shot then hung upside down at an Esso gas station in Milan ... Well, I thought, justice had at least caught up with political villains if not artistic ones. I tried to separate the monsters of the war newsreels ... parading around with their Heil Hitler salutes, and the repellent behavior going on literally under my nose ... A despot is a despot whether wearing sneakers, pointe shoes or jackboots (177)

What we see here is an intense inner turmoil as the political background blends with the troubles in Bocher's professional collaborations as well as with her personal feelings into a nightmare which tortures her internally. This aspect of Bocher's writing can be said to illustrate Karr's theory of "Interiority". According to Karr, "Interiority moves us through the magic realms of time and truth, hope and fantasy, memory, feelings, ideas, worries ... Whenever a writer gets reflective about how she feels or complains or celebrates or plots or judges, she moves inside herself to where things matter and mean" (91). In other words, Bocher here manages to articulate some feelings and illustrate them through images, which enables the readers to engage emotionally with her story due to the sensory impressions and the complex emotions these images carry forward. In addition, Karr uses a quote by Russian-American novelist, Nabokov, to describe the effect of interiority to the reader on which she also adds: "I see the

awakening of consciousness as a series of spaced flashes, with the intervals between them gradually diminishing until bright blocks of perception are formed, affording memory a slippery hold. As you watch the narrator feel around the edges of consciousness for its ‘slippery hold’- probing for what really went down- you enter a singular set of psychic perceptions” (92). In particular, by drawing a parallel between her choreographer, Robbins, and the menacing political reality around her, Bocher often resorts to exaggeration, in order to show how she felt both about the political and her professional situation back then.

1.5 Carnality through Souvenirs

Bocher’s memories, as they are presented to the readers after having carefully been taken out of her heart’s treasure trove, bring to the attention of the readers her collection of reminiscences as these derive from her dancing career.

Specifically, attention in her memoir is paid to various objects Bocher had received, such as gifts from close collaborators or professionals, or bought herself. For example, she mentions in her memoir a book titled *Dance to the Piper*, the autobiographical book by Agnes de Mille, a renowned choreographer of those years, which was given to her by De Mille herself after watching Bocher’s excellent rehearsal. The book has the inscription of the author herself: “*To Barbara Bocher With high hopes! Agnes de Mille*” (48). This confirms how much Bocher was appreciated by those around her. She goes on to mention another gift, which she received after she performed in her first demi-soloist part in one of Balanchine’s ballets. It was a small posy of pink roses from one of her teachers, Muriel Stuart, which Bocher appreciated immensely: “I kept the faded and withered petals with me at my dressing table for all of the years I danced with the company. They were a reminder of Miss Stuart, the person who believed in me ... She was later to present me with her defining book, *The Classic Ballet*, with the inscription: *Darling Barbara, A lovely person and a most gifted dancer. My love and interest always, Muriel Stuart, 1952*” (62). There is a third book-souvenir from Barbara’s dancing years, which is also mentioned in this memoir, which she bought for herself in one of the airport stopovers while she was on tour. It was a book on philosophy and she has chosen a line by Immanuel Kant to share with the readers: “‘People should always be treated as valuable, as an end in themselves, and not be used in order to achieve something else’ Well, Herr Kant obviously had not been a dancer in a major ballet

company where the reverse philosophy prevailed” (156). Her comment reveals her disappointment in the company she had dedicated her life to. This is further reinforced by the following reference with Bocher sharing one more souvenir from her dancing years with the readers, that of a dress, which she bought as a gift to herself for her eighteenth birthday. This purchase coincided with a tour in California: “I couldn’t resist buying a stylish cashmere dress that I wore until it was threadbare. Only when it literally fell apart some ten years later did I discard it and even then reluctantly. How attached we can get to mere pieces of fabric. For they whisper to us of memorable and special occasions” (206). Her last comment is something readers can identify with, as there are objects which are often attributed specific qualities because they are connected to an extraordinary event in our lives.

These special recollections are highlighted by a few additional recollections with Bocher touching upon the company’s days in Zurich, from where she bought an orange bikini to join the other dancers for a swim in the lake, where she learnt how to swim for the first time: “When I was a child of the age when most children learn to swim, my mother was afraid to let me go to a public pool for the fear of polio was always a threat ... Rather than be left out of the fun ... I decided to just watch what they were doing, stroke by stroke and do that, and I, too, would be swimming as they were...I got up my nerve and splashed into the freezing cold lake ... I was buoyant ... I was swimming!” (178). Souvenirs not only transport us back to those places and days of their acquisition, but also they work as valid evidence which prove that we have indeed been there, should memories seem implausible, more like a product of our imagination.

A little later, Bocher mentions a “stylish black silk umbrella with sterling silver tips, which I still carry today” (221). Never having shared anything about her dancing days to her children and grandchildren, it seems very likely that they have seen her carry this umbrella without paying extra attention to it, all the while the secret origin of it remaining only between Barbara and the umbrella. The same could be true as far as another gift is concerned, this time “a shimmering gold pendant of a music treble clef with a vivid turquoise set in the center” (225) given to her by a special friend, Herbie Bliss and his partner. Bocher is emotionally attached to it as she admits: “each time I have worn that gift, and it has adorned my throat for fifty-eight years on almost every major social occasion, I feel the vibrations of Herbie and Bobby’s long ago love” (225).

Moreover, a much bigger souvenir-gift which remains in good condition up to 2012, the year when Bocher wrote her memoir, and is a great reminder of her ballet career, is a painting, which has outlived its creator and has actually been the object that encouraged her to get in touch with Adam Darius after almost six decades:

In 1950, there was a young and gifted art student, Lester Chase ... He was a friend of Adam's ... He had already done a large oil painting of Adam, looking soulfully towards some far horizon. Lester wanted to do a portrait of me, which he did and then exhibited ... to the prestigious Portraits Incorporated in New York ... He later gave my parents the portrait where it proudly hung in their living room until they passed away....That painting now adorns my own home, with its happy vibration, but also a reminder that time tramples all underfoot. Several years ago, Lester Chase died ... A woman named Anne Phipps ... began collecting what she could find of his past body of works ... In her ceaseless quest to locate Lester's lost paintings, Anne discovered that he had painted me as well... she found out my address and telephone number, mentioning this to Adam with whom she was in regular overseas contact ... Adam then wrote to me, a surprise to say the least, out of the blue! So was life's jumbled jigsaw puzzle reassembled (94-95)

As shown here, objects tend to live much longer than the moments and people they are connected with, a fact which is reaffirmed by the story of this painting. Portraying Bocher as a teenager, this work of art provides an immediate connection with the past.

By sharing the stories of these souvenirs with the readers, Bocher provides them with a sense of immediacy and sensorial accessibility to the stories each one of these souvenir-objects represent. As Mary Karr defines: "Getting sophisticated about carnal writing means selecting sensual data- items. Odors, sounds- to recount details based on their psychological effects on a reader" (72). Karr goes on to also pass some type of judgement on the carnality of writing and defend it with the following statement: "Of course, physical details, however convincing, actually prove zip in terms of truth. Surely I misremember all kinds of stuff ... But I think in this case the specific memory even if wrong is permissible because readers understand the flaws of memory and allow for them" (75). These two remarks emphasize the conceptual and tactile impact Bocher's memoir has on the readers whose engagement with the stories narrated is far more relatable and interesting than a mere factual narration.

1.6 Socio-Cultural Elements

Along with the information Bocher shares in her memoir, there are some socio-cultural elements that occasionally stand out in her narration, which reveal the values and the unwritten rules of the American post-war society.

It is worth, in the course of this analysis, to shed light on certain events as these enable the reader of the memoir to build up their contextual knowledge which reinforces the appreciation and understanding of Bocher's dance story. For example, when she describes in her memoir the ballet by Robbins which was titled "The Cage" she says: "In those days when the word abortion couldn't even be mentioned in a movie, what we were doing on stage was, in my estimation, pornography on pointe" (21). To support her opinion of this particular ballet, she adds that it was reputedly controversial as a ballet all around the world and even restricted in some theaters, for example: "Word had reached Holland that *The Cage* was 'pornographic' and 'shameless'... There were concerted efforts to exclude the ballet from the repertoire, and pressure was brought to bear. But Robbins held firm ... A compromise was reached and *The Cage* was allowed a single performance at the prestigious Opera House in The Hague" (180). She also adds: "The London audience ... found *The Cage* vile and pollutive" (181). What we can see here is that the American ballet attempts to move beyond certain restrictions, as is the case of censorship when it comes to the promotion of revolutionary choreographies, for which neither Europe, nor America was ready yet, as conservative ideas still prevailed not only in the context of artistic expression but also in the circulation of sensitive social issues.

The same rule of silence was in effect regarding mental health issues. The suicide of the principal dancer, Joseph Duell, in 1986, shows that such matters were still a taboo, as was every human weakness and sensitivity: "Never endingly self-dissecting, prone to dungeon-deep depression, not overcome by even psychiatric help, the 29-year-old soloist, as a last resort, had gone to Mr Balanchine for advice. The advice, as I knew from personal experience, was made light of, brushed under the carpet; not to worry, just get on with it" (154). Here we have one more example, in which Bocher refers to in her memoir, that took place during her dancing years (1949-1954) but was never revealed. In such cases, her point of view is somehow torn between what she had experienced back then and what she thinks of these incidents right now. However, this is, according to Mary Karr, one of the liberties which memoirists commonly use:

“moving back and forth through time when appropriate and giving info you didn’t have at the time, which breaks point of view” (24). This happens because the memoir is written long after the actual events presented here. Therefore, the incidents commented on by Bocher in her memoir are conveyed to the readers via her own perspective, which opens them up to multiple interpretations. At the same time, certain other details come on the surface which lead readers to an enhanced understanding of all the original events accounted for here.

Turning back to the socio-cultural framework of Bocher’s storyline, one can understand that even when it comes to the appreciation of certain personalities, as is the case of Jerome Robbins, one should be open to different perspectives and points of view. As regards Robbins, he appears to be himself a victim of certain societal taboos as he had trouble with his religion beliefs, his homosexuality and his political beliefs : “Jerome Robbins was a man always at war with himself, a civil war in which there could be no winner ... he also had an ongoing and bitter battle with his father, with his Judaism, with his homosexuality and then later with the guilt of having demolished lives in the wake of his infamous Washington DC testimony” (25). We conclude that Robbins is just an example of a person who was a homosexual and a communist supporter at a time when Cold War in the US was going through its most intense phase. When Robbins was threatened to have his sexuality exposed, in order to save face, he chose to betray his communist acquaintances, which backfired.

More information about this can be found in Tanaquil LeClercq’s memoir as worded by Protopopescu: “In the 1950s, homosexuality was a crime in England and the United States, punishable by prison time. Mass firings of homosexuals in the U.S. government had coincided, not accidentally, with the communist witch hunt by right-wing members of the Congress...in May 1953 Robbins submitted to FBI interrogation. He named eight people, who soon lost their jobs. They, along with many others never forgave him, nor could he forgive himself” (151-152). So, we realize that in those years in America, one could not talk about their political ideas freely even more so about their sexuality, if these two factors deviated from what was acceptable. The existence of such a climate can be understood if one more example is brought to the attention of the readers, as presented in Bocher’s memoir, with regard to a male ballet dancer, who would deliberately present Bocher as his girlfriend in order to pass as a straight man and hide his homosexuality: “As for Brendan’s father, there for his colleagues and

associates to see was his ballet dancing son, escorting a very presentable young lady to the Athletic Club. So, if any of their family friends were mentally casting aspersions on their son's sexuality, no, they were completely wrong, for there I was, proof positive that their Fordham University law student boy was as heterosexual as they come" (186). This example verifies the suppressive atmosphere that existed in the 1950s America, with regard to the expression of sexuality and a person's acceptance of their own sexual self. This becomes evident via Bocher's remarks when she touches upon her own marriage to her husband at the age of eighteen. Being completely inexperienced in erotic relationships, she could be easily impressed: "At every opera house there would always be a letter waiting for me from the young minister to be ... Flattered by all the attention from him, I answered his every communication. He was persistent and I, in my emotional apartness ... was ready to be caught" (224). To which can be added: "Since I was raised a Christian, I was to remain a virgin, saving myself for my husband. It was considered in those mid-1950s that any girl who slept with a man before marriage was immoral and never the kind of girl a man would marry!" (245). Here Bocher shares the rules she lived by, while commenting on their strict enforcement and impact on her. Instead of idealizing those values, as one would expect, she surprises the readers by claiming these ideas as rather old fashioned and outdated.

Another thing worth mentioning in this memoir is Bocher's bond with her mother. It goes without saying that behind a successful teenager lie the support, the faith and the sacrifices of a benefactor, a sponsor or a parent, without whom no steps towards success could have been taken: "Little ballet girls ... are led by their one-tracked mothers, some of whom have crossed oceans, trekked across Siberian mountain ranges, and counted pennies to help their daughters become ballerinas" (35). In Bocher's case, the encouragement to take steps into the artistic world came early from her parents, especially from her mother, who is portrayed as her greatest supporter. Contrary to other characters in her memoir, Bocher's mother is only rarely quoted, mostly paraphrased. She is presented as a powerful source of encouragement for Bocher who played a major role in her development and success. Thus, it is almost heartbreaking when Bocher reveals that her mother chose to keep a distance from her after she stopped dancing. From the events accounted, readers understand that Moore had invested so much into her daughter's career that when she decided to give it up, while at the peak of it, in order

to get married her response was intense. Bocher provides readers access to the following remarks by quoting her mother's own words:

You are not getting married! You have worked too hard to give up your ballet to become a housewife ... Mother never approved of my getting married at 18, nor of my choice of a husband and, most of all, to my relinquishing a career that, literally was built on coagulated blood, jabs of recurring pain and a measureless degree of passion. To my everlasting regret, my decision caused a permanent rupture in our relationship that lasted for the rest of our lifetime (237-238)

Here, except for a brief dialogue between the mother and the daughter, readers have no information of any effort of mutual understanding. At this point, the readers have every right to wonder whether a dancing career was after all young Bocher's or her mother's dream, because the former had the strength to let it go, while the latter did not. Either way, the result seems to be equally hurtful for both of them. With Bocher moving between direct and indirect speech, she attempts to enliven the whole scene in front of her readers' eyes in an effort to show them, via the use of different points of view, how her decisions may have been perceived. In this way, she lets her readers extract their own conclusions and assess each character's perspective without any remark coming from her directly. So, the memoir serves as the terrain within which characters, manners and behaviors are presented. Even though everything stems from Bocher's memory such a presentation of events and people creates a feel of objectivity and impartiality.

Consequently, Bocher's memoir provides a dance-related account of the American Dream. Anyone, regardless of their origin and financial power, can become what they aspire and deserve based on their talent and hard work. But young Bocher's example proves that due to unforeseeable factors, even though achievable, success does not necessarily last forever, nor is it a guarantee for happiness. Young Bocher remained throughout her dance career and life profoundly connected to her initial identity, the shy, sensitive and pious girl from Oklahoma. Still, it was painful to let go of her success and stardom: "All my adult life I have had a fear, no, a phobia, of saying goodbye" (244). To which she adds: "all said and done... would I, if offered a second chance at life, choose to dance again? ... Dear reader, dear with me, for I fear in all truthfulness, the answer has to be, and is, an echoing yes" (254). With these

words, Bocher finishes her memoir, leaving the reader moved at Bocher's larger than life resilience, spirit, spontaneity and love for ballet.

On the basis of all the above, Bocher's memoir comes to an end after successfully marking Bocher's passage through the history of dance and after exposing the two sides of the American Dream: its effectiveness together with its illusive aspect regarding what happens after achieving success. The readers are attracted to Bocher's narration due to the amount of information and detail she offers, while, at the same time, they remain disillusioned about the world of dance if viewed within the context of the American Dream. Still, the spirit of Bocher's resilience stays with the readers longer than their disappointment with the competitiveness and antagonism of the dance reality.. Therefore, the empowering aspect of Bocher's confessions in this memoir is the acknowledgement of their impact on the readers' perception and insights into the world of dance. What becomes clear here is that these confessions are neither minor nor insignificant. As for their inclusion in a memoir, it reveals the significant role this type of writing plays in an effort to bridge the gap between past and present as well as authentic experience and memory synthesis. It is the creation of such a network of factual and elaborated on details that highlights the importance of memoirs in the process of both self and reality meaning-making.

1.7 Conclusion

Regarding how a memoir can captivate the readers, Karr shares her own theory: "However you charm people in the world, you should do so on the page... Whatever people like about you in the world will manifest itself on the page. What drives them crazy will keep you humble. You'll need both sides of yourself- the beautiful and the beastly- to hold a reader's attention" (37). Whether Bocher followed this or not, her memoir manages to keep the readers' attention throughout her whole narration and communicate with them on a profound level.

As far as the amount of truth which is carried in *The Cage* is concerned, a great percentage of it, which is proven by photographs shared in the book combined with information by the New York City Ballet archives about Bocher's participation in the famous ballets mentioned, is undeniable. Whether the reader doubts some other parts of it, matters less than the fact that the voice which speaks in this memoir reports

something which seems to be true to the narrator. As Karr admits: “But how dare I speak of truth in memoir, when it’s common knowledge that the subjective, egoistic perception is a priori warped by falsehood- perhaps mildly so in self-serving desires, or wildly so in hardwired paranoia?” (48). This shows that memoir and subjectivity go together. According to critic, journalist, essayist and memoirist Vivian Gornick, in her book titled *The situation and the story*:

But memoir is neither testament nor fable nor analytic transcription. A memoir is a work of sustained narrative prose controlled by an idea of the self under obligation to lift from the raw material of life a tale that will shape experience, transform event, deliver wisdom. Truth in a memoir is achieved not through a recital of actual events; it is achieved when the reader comes to believe that the writer is working hard to engage with the experience at hand. What happens to the writer is not what matters; what matters is the large sense that the writer is able to *make* of what happened (68-69)

Gornick’s words lift the memoir higher in the art scale by shedding light on the delicate and complicated a process it requires in order to be produced.

Bocher’s memoir carries a distinct identity compared to the dancers’ memoirs within the group where it belongs: it is a proven “somebody” memoir, as mentioned prior, as such great levels of competence in ballet and instant recognition both by important choreographers and by the press is not commonly encountered. However, Bocher’s departure from the world of dance, being as abrupt as her early success, definitely arouses questions within the readers and at the same time it creates an inner conflict within the memoirist. Bocher is not only trying to explain to the reader what happened, but she is also in a constant effort to also explain to herself why she made certain choices. Therefore, it can be concluded that in *The Cage* self-awareness exists up to a point but there is definitely some percentage still left to self-discovery by Bocher. As Gornick states by using a quote by Rousseau:

When Rousseau observes. “I have nothing but myself to write about, and this self that I have, I hardly know of what it consists” he is saying to the reader “I will go in search of it in your presence. I will set down on the page a tale of experience just as I think it occurred, and together we’ll see what it exemplifies, both of us discovering

as I write this self I am in search of” And that was the beginning of memoir as we know it (69)

Here, Gornick supports the self-discovering aspect of a memoir which also links it to its healing ability.

The fictionality and sentimentality which are also found in *The Cage*, in Bocher’s effort to respond to these questions, though not the most trustworthy elements in terms of truth, endow the narration with vividness and opportunities for the reader to connect and identify with her. Furthermore, the way historical elements of the late 1940s and early 1950s are used to form the background of Bocher’s story gives it a multifacetedness and depth which examination reveals interesting information and insights about the era, its atmosphere and its people in various parts of the world. That specific era is rich in historical and socio-cultural events which shaped the future and upon completing Bocher’s memoir it feels interesting to discover that the world of dance was also writing history at that time and molding the ballet norms for the future generations.

Also, by mentioning all the people she has collaborated with in *The Cage*, Bocher exposes important issues that need to be solved within the dancing community. Also, at the same time she honors and recognizes the support she has received through certain important collaborations. In this way, she honors both the other contributors as well as herself through them, and, despite her long absence, she manages to write her way back among them on and on the stage where a sense of belonging is to be fulfilled.

Chapter Two: Creative Writing

2.1 Writing *The Memoir*

After reading *The Cage* by Barbara Bocher and Adam Darius I was left deeply touched and highly motivated to delve into the mechanics of the writing of a dance memoir writing. Being familiar with the demands of dance as an extremely delicate form of performing art, I carefully focused on Bocher's narrative and its insights into her determination and professionalism, her enviable early collaboration with George Balanchine, her talent and level of excellence. Additionally, through the experiences her memoir brought forward, I was able to share with her various moments of innocence and enthusiasm as these derived from what looked like a promising career. While reading *The Cage*, I almost identified with Bocher: I was with her during her travels, her dance rehearsals, her moments of success and sorrow. In other words, I felt being drawn into her world. Therefore, the abrupt ending of her career took me by surprise: this is the feeling that I have decided to elaborate on and explore via the creative writing response this chapter will attempt to offer to her memoir narrative.

While I was pondering on the kind of text I could creatively compose as a follow-up to Bocher's memoir, I caught myself wanting to provide some type of justice for the dancer I ended up admiring after having read her dance life story. This is how I came up with the conceptualization of Henrietta Ray, a daughter that I imagined Bocher could have and who would have reached her late forties by now. I imagined Henrietta Ray to have been born with an equally great talent in dance and who, unlike her mother would be able to explore fully her dance potential. Henrietta Ray is approached in my creative story as an extension of Bocher and, at the same time, as a troubled individual who is carrying forward her mother's unfulfilled desires and disappointments. But with respect to my personal background in dance, which includes encounters with dancers from low to very high levels of recognition, I wanted to shed light on a certain fact which impressed me as well as derived from the various stories I had heard and experiences the dancers themselves had shared with me: that even the coveted lives of the most successful dancers are imperfect. Henrietta Ray walks the path that Bocher has not taken and has come full circle in her dancing career. However, she has made her own

mistakes which she herself has had to confront, with dancing having an expiration date for her as well.

Along with my interest in dancers' lives, I have also felt attracted to the process of writing a memoir. Having read dozens of memoirs by various artists, a great part of which were dancers' memoirs, I caught myself playing a mental game of constantly imagining what a persona I could be so that I could write my own fictional dance memoir. I also considered how demanding and soul draining must have been for a dancer to remember and share both spectacular and painful memories and how melancholic to know that their days of success lie in the past. This has made me recall my own dance days as well as feelings of pride, excitement, loss, success and failure. These are the kinds of feelings I have wanted to bring to the readers' attention through my creative narrative with Henrietta Ray.

Additionally, my fascination with memoirs has also made me appreciate how experiences are perceived through the eyes of a reporter who is the first person to hear about another person's life stories or through the mental processes of an author who synthesizes the material to go into a book production. I also imagined the inevitable bonding that must be created between interviewers and interviewees or authors and fictional creations, due to the intimacy of the details shared. Therefore, apart from Henrietta Ray there is one more character, Jason, whose ambition is in its bloom. He feels fully powered thus, he takes calculated risks, professionally and emotionally. At the same time, his ambition draws him close to Henrietta and eventually he falls in love with her.

Christina is another character that I have conceptualized in an effort to encapsulate all those dancers who have repeatedly taken chances but they missed out on success, which has inevitably harmed their self-image and confidence as well as their artistic profile. In an effort to empathize with them, I have created Christina, who is the exact opposite of Henrietta in terms of the lifestyle they have led, but they are both unhappy, self-destructive in their behavior and weak. Moreover, they are passionate in multiple ways and resilient. Finally, David is the other character I have conceptualized who, in the creative writing composed, develops a special bond with Christina; he is a photographer and she is his model. With all these characters, I aim at shedding light on different aspects of the human character so as to enable readers to come to terms with

the characters inner emotions and dilemmas. Characterization constitutes an important element in memoir writing because someone's choices are mostly dependent upon their character and this is how a life story is carved.

Regarding the perspective through which things are observed and experienced throughout *The Memoir*, I chose to explore the story through Jason's and Christina's perspectives, which appear alternately because I felt that these are the most multidimensional characters in the creative story proposed in the current chapter because of the inner conflicts that cloud their judgement. As a result, this enables me to explore both the strengths and the weaknesses of these two characters which adds a layer of credibility to the narrative. It should be added here that the believability of character building in a memoir is considered to be vital to its relatability, the empathy it can evoke to the readers which contribute to the popularity of a particular memoir.

The Memoir is divided into nine sections in which we have Jason's and Christina's perspectives alternately. In this way, I have tried to develop the main characters and their stories developing in parallel stories in greater detail and depth. The first section is the only one where readers see a brief interaction between Christina and Jason before their perspectives diverge, which indicates that their lives are at the same time heading to different directions as regards their personal and professional choices. In most sections, readers can follow Henrietta's narration about her life and career and Jason's secretly, yet uncontrollably yet, growing feelings for her. In the in-between sections, *The Memoir* explores and elaborates on Christina's reaction after having been "abandoned" by Jason, with light being shed on her inner conflicts and her gradually developing, albeit newly discovered, resilience.

As for setting, I have chosen to locate *The Memoir* in New York for two reasons: First of all, because of the New York City Ballet, where everything started, and because of all the dance facilities and opportunities which can be found there. Secondly, New York is an artistically vibrant and diverse city with a number of neighborhoods, as is Greenwich Village that serve as the residential area of lots of artists and as a meeting place of free spirited and eccentric personalities. I have been discussing about New York with locals for many years and I have watched interviews and documentaries in addition to following interior house tours that have helped me familiarize with its socio-cultural reality. In particular, what seems to be valued in a New York apartment is

minimalism and functionality, which is interpreted differently by each character according to their own preferences and level of eccentricity.

The writing of the creative writing piece contained in this chapter has been a learning experience for me. Despite my well prepared ideas, the story flowed with the characters gradually leading me to all parts of the narrative. This has been a combination of conscious work regarding the points to be elaborated on and messages to be conveyed and at the same time unconscious work as regards the emotions and ideas this narrative unintentionally triggers. Unquestionably, the writing of *The Memoir* has been an experience of self-exploration, which has helped me acknowledge the impact of an individual's choices in combination with certain facts beyond their control that determine their life story.

2.2 The Memoir

2.2.1 To Greenwich Village

The alarm clock sounded exhilarated when it went off singing out the first hints of the early Spring sunrise. With his eyes refusing to cooperate, Jason stretched his arm searching for it in the messy pile of clothes by the bed. His head was turning and he could still smell Christina on his skin. The alarm clock stroke again, five past six. Jason finally grabbed it and pressed the snooze button reluctant to tune in with reality. He rubbed his eyes and felt the faint new light caress his sweaty forehead. Christina would never learn to close the shutters. She was that serious about catching the daily sunrise, which to her was something unmissable or cruel divine wrath would strike otherwise. Maybe this was some type of pointless self-affirmation, being the champion in her own morning game, or maybe it was plain insomnia hitting her all over again.

The coffee machine alarm clock followed and it was the seductive aroma that grabbed him by the nose and got him up despite his numb morning limbs and his foggy brain. Tobacco joined the heavy morning aura. It was Christina who was puffing with fervor while gazing at the rising sun, cozying up in Jason's casual t-shirt inside the fluffy couch in the hall, coffee mug in hand. "So, you didn't leave for the office yet?" he asked. "It's my day off." She said while exhaling a cloud of smoke against him before a giggle. "Oh, Chrissy, why the hell do you have to do this?" he said and turned his head away from the smoke. "Because, baby, you have to wake up. It's interview day with miss diva of the dancefloor." She said and her big blue eyes flickered. "Oh, crap". Skipping the caffeine introduction to the brand new day, he grabbed his towel and rushed to the shower, out of which he came in his musky aftershave, his light blue shirt and the brand new designer blue jeans.

"Had you really forgotten about it?" Christina smiled and corrected it: "Did I make you forget about it?" Jason unplugged his laptop and packed it in its special case. "Proud of it?" he asked without taking his eyes off his stuff. "A nine to five is not everyone's shit, but you don't get it." He added. "Aha and the next best thing is a twenty-four seven

sleepover in an old whore's house" Christina exploded, her eyes pinkish-red, her teeth sharper than usual. "Now you are being rude." He said in a calm tone, wondering if he'd grown to be that good at self-control, if he simply couldn't bother, or if last night's alcohol still had a hold on him. "It's not me, it's the rumors" she responded while lighting her second cigarette. "I need this job." Jason said and put on his glasses. "You call this a job! Spending days and nights in her house!" Frustrated, Christina stubbed out her barely used cigarette and turned her back to him. In a hurry, Jason put on his brown leather shoes with the matching jacket and exited their downtown apartment, his laptop case in hand before shutting the heavy door behind.

Now he really had to run. He needed about two hours by train to reach the Greenwich Village and, according to the global satellites, it would be another twenty minute walk to Henrietta's house. He took a look at his watch. Even with the most decent of efforts, he'd still be late. He swore he'd never again drink, well, at least on a night before an important meeting, but he already knew it was something beyond his control, so he buried his face inside his hands like despair always demanded, as though this was the holy rite to invite a magical solution. This time, though, it only worked as a reminder that he hadn't shaved properly. Frustrated, he hailed a cab, a real New York cab, promising himself never to reveal this to Christina, as they both knew he'd never do such a sacrifice for her sake. But what Christina just couldn't understand was the honor of being the chosen one to collaborate with Henrietta. This memoir would be his big break. Which meant prestige, fame, cash, a new car, a downtown apartment and his luxurious dream trips a bit closer. The greatest destinations would soon be ordinary bookings for his book presentation and stamps on his passport.

He opened the door and slid on the glossy leather seats. "To Greenwich Village" he said to the driver and rested his head on the cold misty window. The engine was now on and all he could feel was dozens of hammers banging against his sculpt. He'd better have some coffee immediately; or alcohol. Either would balance his inner mess. He turned his gaze outside, where the New York City streets once again sighed under the countless cars which buzzed and rumbled around, all in their typical fury to seize the day. Jason tried to comb his curls with his fingers and then he wiped the outer side of his glasses on his trousers. He cast a glance at the vanishing skyscrapers, which sometimes gave space to the sky and the newly born sun, glowing like the innocent face of a child unaware of what life was about to bring.

He wondered what Henrietta might be up to that very moment and whether she also had a coffee addiction, or any other addiction and whether she craved breakfast bagels like ordinary people did; because he somehow doubted that she was fully human. Her photos in magazines clearly illustrated her as an otherworldly beautiful feline and he'd found out that the mysterious red hot lips he'd seen on that billboard commercial the other day, which played hide and seek with some fresh juicy rose buds, belonged to her. Those lips looked so delicious; juicy like a pair of sweet ripe cherries and they were painted red like the unquestionable innocence of nature and at the same time as the root of all sins. When she called him on the phone for that job offer, her voice sounded firm like a business woman's yet with a sensual, almost seductive touch. He wouldn't say no; no one would say no to Henrietta and he'd bet she knew it.

Since receiving that collaboration offer, Jason had in fact spent days on end studying her, watching her fly or curl in every video of hers he could get his hands on; at times she'd even burn like a flame on the dancefloor and Jason had almost become a spy and a stalker in an effort to understand what to expect from an interview with her. He'd also read past interviews of hers in which some poor colleagues of his gave it their best in asking and asking endless lists of questions, demanding to know details, yet contrary to what had proven to be the gold recipe with so many others, Henrietta somehow always remained evasive. Still, no one could know for sure whether she and Alexei had ever really been together or whether they were ever really apart, or why those young men and women were exiting her house in the early hours and if they were lovers why they couldn't stay until daylight and if they were not, then why they were spotted wiping tears, driving off frustrated and with the spark of a sizzling love in their eyes reflected on the side mirrors. He'd have to dig deeper than the story she might have prepared for him.

The cab swerved to bring him back to reality as it entered a serene neighborhood, passed by a cute round flowerbed as it drove along a narrow street and stopped in front of a well maintained two floor house with a staircase elegantly decorated with the pink cherry blossom petals scattered all over it, leading up to a brown wooden door. From behind the cab window, it all looked like illustrations on the glossy pages of a children's book. Beautiful as well as still and motionless. This was Henrietta Ray's home. There was a pink bicycle outside with a girly floral design on the miniature straw basket in front. Jason wondered if it was hers or if being girly was long behind her. Actually, she

was supposed to be in her late forties but again there were rumors that pictured her as a much older lady hiding her real age and if these were true, then either Henrietta had found the most gifted cosmetic surgeon or the absolute youth elixir, because in all her recent live appearances she looked nothing but purely and inherently young.

Jason checked his watch and breathed a sigh of relief. He was just in time. He paid the driver, then he closed the door of the cab and took a deep breath before climbing the petal washed stairs making a silent promise to be professional around her. It felt like a rather fragile promise. As decisively as he could, he rang the bell. A second later, the door creaked wide open.

“Good morning, Jason.” Henrietta spoke in a warm voice, equally decisive to that one on the phone only that now it sounded clearer; louder; overflowing with excitement. She smiled, her bright eyes stretched to the sides, just like the corners of her mouth, revealing a shiny row of teeth, shiny pearls on a string, standing harmoniously next to each other. Her lips were once again painted red making Jason wonder if she ever removed that lipstick, before falling asleep or before sharing a kiss or if it never bothered any partner, because kissing Henrietta must be a marvel on its own and maybe the stain on their lips was desirable as a valid proof of it, like a batch of honor. Her skin was fair and her raven hair made a vivid contrast while at the same time framing her body all the way to her pelvic bones. Still slim, like those days of her dance queendom and it felt almost certain that more glory was awaiting her on the corner. Jason thought it might after all be possible that the bike belonged to her, judging from the girly caramel pudding dress that reached down to her knees. A perfect match for those strange, velvet pointe style shoes with the puffy ribbons that curled around her still sculpted legs; lean and still strong and lethal as her vibe.

“Nice to see you too, Mrs. Ray” He responded hoping he hadn’t been looking at her for too long. She smiled again, this time glancing at him through the corners of her eyes, as though entertained by his self-consciousness, before turning around to guide him inside her apartment. She led the way through a short, narrow corridor which ended up in a spacious living room with big square windows that let the morning light in, through some creamy peach lacy curtains, making the pure sunlight look fancier through colored filters. The pistachio green armchairs together with the matching couch made a cozy corner by the fireplace in which there was a massive candle sputtering, while the crystal

chandelier hung silently above in the midst of it all, observing carefully, though currently muted; There was a special glow around its crystals, which spread and covered everything underneath it, endowing any object with magical properties, or so would one expect of everything surrounding Henrietta.

Jason caught a subtle floral aura, which made him wonder if there were rose petals scattered around in rooms to which he had no access, or if there were vases with freshly cut roses somewhere in the living room or maybe a secret door leading to a rose garden because the roses were definitely all over the place; blooming out of sight and undercover.

“Have a seat, Jason. ” Henrietta said and rushed to another room out of which she came quickly holding a cup of steaming hot apple cider. Notes of caramel, cinnamon and vanilla slowly took over Jason’s nostrils, temporarily overpowering the roses. She approached and handed him one of the two glasses while keeping the other for herself, holding it with both hands so as to feel its warmth while sinking down into one of the vintage armchairs having her dress curl up, revealing a rose tattoo on her left thigh. Jason missed a beat at the sight of it and in fear, he shut the roses completely off his mind as they seemed to be powerful enough to mess with his brain and prick his heart.

“What made you decide to write your memoir?” He asked while turning his laptop on. “Well, I am no more a dancer or a choreographer, Jason. I somehow needed to make it last forever and then finally leave it behind, if you know what I mean.” she said and her voice slightly cracked as her eyes filled with tears which she fought with all her might to hold back. She looked up to have them spread around her eyeballs but never beyond their limits. “Of course, it’s the natural course of this path” she added. “I see.” He said. “And why all this hurry?” he asked. “I’ll be in Europe soon” she said and before he had the chance to ask her reasons she rushed to say, “For love, Jason, why else?”

Jason’s eyes dropped to the floor, which was covered with that thin, elegant carpet in the shade of teal with hints of light blue and blending stripes of green and brown, similar to the stem of a rose which carried those pricks that had just pierced his heart. “a valid enough reason” he uttered. Of course, a woman like Henrietta would never run out of love, and it suddenly dawned on him that probably it was love itself that could find no meaning away from Henrietta, rather than the other way around.

His eyes, still planted on the floor, followed the domino of the tile structure all the way to the other side of the living room until they bumped into a dark red sofa which lay in the corner old, abandoned and alone, lying in the shade, where the sunbeams would never manage to reach it and the chandelier light only arrived a little later and in small supply. His eyes full of question marks turned to meet Henrietta's and then back to the pitiful couch's exhausted soul.

"I know, it's a misfit..." she said and looked away as she grabbed her packet of cigarettes. She pulled one out in slow motion and lit it with a silver lighter which she held with enviable tenderness in her perfectly manicured delicate fingers decorated with those dazzling iridescent stones and the intricate silver details. She pulled the smoke in until faint dimples appeared on her peachy cheeks and for a moment she kept it in, making him wonder if she'd changed her mind and if she'd again hold back on things, including the cigarette smoke. Just like everything about her, her smoke too, must be unlike the ordinary ones, but something rather pleasant instead, carrying glitter or scented spices. She finally blew it out away from him and maybe for the first time he despised being respected and if the only thing he could have of Henrietta were the smoke she exhaled on his face, then he'd welcome it and even cherish it. "... but this one has history" she added. "I have no room to fit it in." She said and looked at it with the intimacy she'd show towards an old buddy with whom she's been on adventures on the high seas and wildest of jungles, through hostile deserts, hopeless storms and the darkest of nights. "But I can't let it go" she said and in a nostalgic smile she forgave its oddness and simply kept on loving it while turning her back to it, secure that it wouldn't be offended for being left neglected in the corner.

"Shall we start with the history of it?" Jason asked and took the laptop off its case. He placed it on his knees before turning it on and almost blushed when he saw Christina's photo on the screen. He quickly opened a blank file which he let fill up the whole screen and hide Christina away. She shouldn't be there; this place was out of her reach and clean of her control. "Ok, I am ready" Henrietta responded and crossed her fingers like in prayer, bowing to the sacredness that only memories could carry.

2.2.2 Imperfect

Something was completely off. She really had woken up without a good-morning kiss for the thirtieth day in a row. Once again, he'd left without a goodbye and had not even bothered to steal a sip out of her coffee mug nor a puff of her cigarette and boy, she hated keeping it all for herself. The shared puff was what made the cigarette light as the morning dew on the spring blossoms and balanced like the sky on the thin horizon; It was the shared lips that gave it its sensual beat and a sense of worthiness to the moment, which now lay behind, untouched; wasted. She rushed to check her phone. He should already have apologized for his misbehavior. A few months ago, he would have. What hurt the most was that it didn't feel like a casual omission, but rather like a conscious decision.

With the dead phone on her numb hand, Christina remained frozen like an ice sculpture ready to melt in the absolute superiority of the aggressive sunlight entering from the window. She realized she was still wearing his t-shirt, with the smell of his skin together with hers on it, blended together and woven among its threads. His favorite t-shirt, with the band they'd always loved printed in the middle. It felt like part of his body; part of himself. She had never expected that there would come a day when this would start losing its warmth and become just another piece of fabric which she was selfishly still holding on to, even though it was rather worn out; its threads weaker than the passage of time; its colour faded away with only some shadows left behind. It wasn't her color any longer, nor was it her style.

It was during that band's concert when she'd met him for the first time. Another one of those gatherings of the burning souls that their youthful bodies are too small to contain, their deafening cheers too quiet to express and their raged hands that pop up in the air way too slow to catch. Not really a ballerina's thing, but that day there was little room for grace. Christina had just been dismissed from the kingdom of the New York City Ballet, kicked off her cloud, out of heaven and straight into her personal Inferno of regrets and self-loathing. That night there would be no Stravinsky, only metal, horrific sounds to match her inner scream. Though she had sacrificed her formative years in bloody pointes in steamy hot smelly rehearsal rooms, now she'd have to live as if this had never happened. Never again would she see the hidden side of the stage, nor her

name in a cast. She had lost her dreams, her joy and worst of all, her identity, for who would she be now, if not “the dancer”?

The concert interval demanded passing by the merchandise section and there was this guy, trying on this very t-shirt, buttery soft as it was melting on his smooth skin. She’d noticed the cute freckles on his cheeks contrasting the daunting tattoo on his arm and her eyes couldn’t pass that by. He spoke to her and said his name was Jason. For the first time she realized that such a guy was all she needed to escape her own personal drama and if possible, forget her life as she’d known it.

He’d looked at her like she was the strangest creature he had seen. He wanted to know what might a delicate “mademoiselle” be searching for in a crowd of freaks. He said he loved her eyes, those “precious gemstones”. “I am a dancer” she said as this was the only thing she’d ever known of herself. Right then and there he held her hand and kneeled in a deep curtsey as though he was joking. But part of him wasn’t and she just knew that despite his hardcore armor, he was one of those inspired by the muses, lost in their own rebellion and she fell hard because being a muse was what she’d always longed to be and being close to a rebel was the perfect excuse to unravel a latent wild side starving somewhere inside, and poking the walls of her soul, begging for release.

.He never asked if she was single. She would never talk to him about David anyway. When it comes to a guy like Jason whose momentum can stir a blaze inside, you just say yes and ghost every David in your life, only for the chance to see the beauty of your inner demons reflected in Jason’s tiny hazel eyes.

What started as a small hole in her heart, soon turned into an abysmal void at the study of Jason’s doomed manuscripts as well as in the magical touch of his hands, his hell of an embrace, his blatant failures and wild dreams. Who else if not the wizard of the words could arouse her spirit, awaken all her self- destructive passions, her weaknesses, her most disturbing fears and all those unexpected releases of the most poisonous of emotions, her nice side could never have expected.

Alcohol proved to be easy to get used to; exciting to abuse, especially if shared with a lover. Soon, Christina caught herself craving it as much as she’d been craving her own success in all her years of vanity. She caught herself ready to trade her life for that undeniable power that was hidden inside every bottle of whiskey. Similarly, she’d give it all up for a dose of that exhilarating affirmation to be found in all those reflected

fragments of herself, as flawless as they looked on any cold mirror around; divine as they shone back from the desperate eyes of a lover.

Her mother had found out about her failure in dance first; then about Jason. And then she simply vanished; too busy with the family grocery business, too disappointed in Christina. She'd once again called to inform her that she'd have to get a nine to five job, that's what the unsuccessful dancers had better do in an ultimate attempt to be useful and to make up for the hollow promise they once gave their parents that they'd make it in the relentless world of ballet. Judgement day had dawned; time to ditch the pointes and walk in normal shoes; time to go back to being mortal.

Clean of addictions, with the glow of healthy choices and the blurriness of conventionality: devoted, that's what she was now, to a nine-to-five secretarial job, where things were elegantly repetitious and invariably beige; the colour which would never appear on a dance costume, yet everyone in the office worshipped, which she'd come to embrace too in the name of a salary. Christina had even admitted that a nine-to-five was a lovely thing to have; warm like a bowl of soup on a cold winter evening and relaxing like a puffy armchair with a matching footstool. She'd even come to respect it; but never to love it. After all, love could never be forced out of anyone in this world and this was both the biggest triumph and tragedy of all time.

But Jason hated it. True to his unofficial but nonetheless unshakable vow to keep pursuing his wildest dreams, he kept on writing like a maniac every waking hour and every second that found him blissfully alive. He'd kept on drinking, as though alcohol was the magic potion that could save him from reality. And maybe it was, since Christina's compromise and her constant sobriety was a complete turnoff; a real betrayal deriving from a wrinkling soul and an encaged mind.

Christina made another failed attempt to find solace inside Jason's old t-shirt as she noticed the sun escalating higher and higher. She sighed. It was ridiculous. What on earth had made her assume that Jason had any sort of attachment to this t-shirt and that by letting her have it, he'd agreed to always and forever being hers? Never before had she questioned choosing him over David but at that moment it was unavoidable. David would have behaved better that morning. David would have dumped that glamorous bitch of a dancer to make love to her under the golden rays of daylight. David would

have a serious job and wouldn't need to borrow money from her. David wouldn't be in Henrietta Ray's house now.

He already owed her his share of two months' rent when Henrietta Ray called him herself in her elegant manner and sensual voice to ask him to collaborate. Christina was there to see his eyes shine like enviable jewels. He almost jumped to the ceiling out of excitement and his lips wouldn't stop shaping the word "yes". His humble magazine articles had not been overlooked. After an hour of excited talk, they closed the deal and his lips remained stuck in the "yes" mode. Christina had been left standing, hating that woman who'd made him happy with a few husky words over the phone. She hated that woman for achieving what for her had proven to be impossible; she hated her for having completed a career on the dancefloor, long enough to fill up a whole book, and worthy of sharing with the crowds, while she had somehow only found blocks on this path.

After that damned phone call, horrified, Christina saw him study everything there was in reference to Henrietta Ray and keeping notes of all the highlights in an expensive notebook dressed in a dark and fair leather cover. She saw his eyes flicker while watching her videos. She was appalled to see him blush whenever that name came up and lately it was rather being mentioned way too often. She grew monstrously furious to hear him support Henrietta against those rumors that wanted her arrogant and rude. She knew that Jason had a thing for dancers; and she knew that no dancer would resist him.

Christina tried to push this away but it really kept dripping its way inside her mind. Jason, the untamed and unchained rebel had been turning into a puppy for Henrietta Ray and this covered all the spectrum of emotions from disgust to debilitation.

Christina herself remembered catching glimpses of some of her videos. Henrietta had seemed to be from a different planet, where the bodies were created fluid and the smiles unaffected by pain. What mirror had persuaded her of her worth and how dare she occupy all this space with all this superfluous poise!

She took off the t-shirt, then she let it fall on the cold tiled floor behind her and she stood in nothing but her black lacy underwear and her lingering outrageous perfume. With slow, heavy steps she trudged to the mirror in their bedroom. In the reflecting image she tried hard to find traces of the ambitious ballerina she remembered being, but this too, like all her struggles for success had proved futile, because, lately, most

mirrors had turned mean, having a miserable face stare back at her; an undesirable pair of breasts and badly shaped legs to accompany them. Everything had been looking faulty; hateful enough; deserving of punishment.

Christina looked at her body in the mirror which hung on the wall of the empty bedroom as it stood quiet not knowing whether it should be excited about an upcoming shower of self-worship compliments or whether it should hold on tight and endure another crucifixion in the form of her typical self-punishing rage. Her blue eyes took an ice-cold shade of hatred giving a sign it was the latter.

Her pale breasts almost wilted in terror as they sensed it was measurement time and who knew if that day they'd fit in Christina's expectations. Her emaciated waist got tied up in a knot hating this game of blame and her humbled hips, in the absence of Jason's loving hand, pulled back in defence. Christina tried to twist and shake them mimicking Henrietta's ruthlessness. It felt impossible, like a foreign accent she'd never acquire.

She held the tape measure in her hands ready for her typical cruel ritual. Then, surprising her very own self, she changed her mind and threw it away. Then, she dove in the lonely bed in burning hot pitiful tears emerging from the depths of her soul, soaking up the creased bedsheets. "Not today" her banging heart informed her frozen body and it relaxed and finally breathed. It took a while before she was ready to wipe the last of the teardrops and get up in well balanced steps. Then, she followed Jason's example so she put on her designer jeans, her plain light blue t-shirt, her casual sneakers and simply left the apartment in a desperate search of a more loving mirror as a fix for her day.

She was about to enter the elevator and head for the ground floor when she looked back in sudden rage and rushed back into the apartment.

2.2.3 Henrietta: the dancer

“What’s so special about this couch?” Jason asked and already started typing, his eyes fixed on the screen, his ears ready for every tiny detail.

“So, this couch has a name. He is Giovanni, named with all my love and respect after the only tutor and mentor I have ever known, Giovanni Esposito. He discovered me in a school dance performance and offered me a scholarship for a year. Right afterwards he invited me to join his professional team and I accepted with cheers and a fancy party” Henrietta said leaving Jason startled, finding it hard to suppress the urge to greet it with the expectation of a response from it.

“Ever since my first class with Esposito, I knew I never wanted to have a tutor that wouldn’t pronounce my name with his charming Italian gargling r sound. He formed that dancing group right after an accident that forced him to resign from the stage, so you should try to imagine the frustration, the surplus energy and the momentum that he refused to lose.” Henrietta continued. “He had devoted all his life creating perfection and that’s exactly what he demanded of all his dancers: those extra-terrestrial shapes and poses, the fluidity of water in every move, the mentality and the hard work of a champion. Not everyone could handle it I have to admit.” Henrietta almost chuckled. “He was tough, but a school on his own.” She added.

“Once in a blue moon one might probably have Giovanni congratulate them on their progress in an indeed minimalistic way, consisting of just a short syllable like ‘yes’, which was extremely sought after and upon hearing it, one might be on cloud nine for quite a while. If I close my eyes I can still remember how every inch on his face contributed to producing the “yes” sound and how his hair glowed and danced around his face, like the lion’s mane in the soft breeze as it relishes his power over the vastness of its kingdom.” Henrietta paused and smiled in nostalgia.

“I craved his guidance, Jason; I craved his wisdom. I’m so grateful I had it fill up my early stages. I spoke to him after classes about anything that was bothering me, mostly about those weaknesses of our fragile bodies that are just so difficult to harness and he was always there to listen and preach with all the pride of his remaining glory.” She continued. He knew my weaknesses and stronger parts. He knew I had a mind like his:

not passive like a mainstream dancer; I was creative; I was passionate. He cast me in modern style more than his classical masterpieces, and you know, I was in heaven. A step ahead in the history of movement as we blended pointes and tutus with neon colors and frantic energy in movement. He formed a school of his own, he was a genius.” She said.

“He often said we need the aggressiveness of a tiger and just attack the dancefloor; we had to own it; rule it; grab the audience’s attention by the face and force them to listen to the message of our dance . He spoke about being ruthless in life and on stage, like the famous daredevils we all admired. We often chatted about the legendary dancers of the previous decades who were forever more special, more gifted, more hard-working and glamorous than us. We referred to them with nicknames like they were our long-distance friends, members of our clique and we practiced on the mentality that we were on our way to collaborating with them, or maybe even beating in a future contest and boy it worked.” Henrietta smiled. “I have to tell you, Jason, there indeed came a day when I beat my own idol, Roxane Smirnoff, in an international contest in Berlin, but that was much later when both she and I had started attending ballroom contests.” Henrietta paused and Jason could feel her body emitting immense heat, as one does the moment of their own personal coronation, upon accepting the crown of excellence and the scepter of dominance.

“How did you feel when Giovanni...” Jason whispered hesitating to say it out loud. “Don’t” she interrupted him. “Don’t say it, please, because Giovanni belongs to those souls that are deafening loud like the thunder and massive like a mountain in their eternal youth and they can never be truly gone, contrary to some who have never really existed on any map and are only drifted around like twigs in a stream, he has been the stream, the river and the current all by himself.” She declared. “Roxane is also... away, Jason, right after a dreamy performance in Florence. Her heart must have been so content, you know, that it took a peaceful break off this world. Just like that, she turned immortal, like all the real legends.” Henrietta said and turned her face away. Don’t you feel the sting of guilt, Jason? Like it was your fault, even though it was no one’s. But maybe you wish it were your fault; this way you’d have some power over fate, after all.” She said, her voice cracked.

“So, tell me, how is the couch connected?” Jason asked. “So, this buddy became mine as soon as I received my first salary. And it has been with me in every single place where I have lived, in every studio I have rented. The couch knows all my secrets, it has embraced all the people I’ve loved, those cushions have wept all the tears I’ve ever shed.” She said, her eyes turned pink, her lips forcing a smile. She presented the couch as if it were its turn to speak and Jason swore it cracked a tiny smile somewhere there between the weathered cushions.

“At the time I first got this buddy, I was living in my first rented home, which consisted of a single empty room, in a shared flat in a scary neighborhood in this chaos of a city. To be precise, it was located in the northern part of Brooklyn, and though obviously I’d go for Brooklyn again and again, back then it was giving me the creeps. Oh, how little did it resemble my family home in the suburbs. I grew up in a cottage with garden, two dogs and a flowerbed in all the pastel shades. My dad was a clergy and my mum a housewife...” Henrietta hesitated, then added: “... with a ballet background on the greatest of stages all around the world.” Henrietta smiled in pride. “How could this be?” Jason asked. “I’ll tell you all about it soon, Jason. But for now, I’ll share how at eighteen, upon joining Giovanni’s professional team, I moved out of my family home and shared a flat with two other girls-flat mates that I found through a newspaper ad. Lonely as it initially felt, when this red fluffy Giovanni came home, it all turned cozy, his soft cotton back pillows adding elegance to the room, the perfectly tailored skirts and the sturdy padded arms embracing my exhausted body at nights. The sponges inside are still going strong and the wooden frame has not betrayed me in all these years.” She said.

Jason was dying to ask for sincere and honest clarifications about this last part: the years. How many exactly had passed by since that coming of age, and how heavy a time load was Henrietta carrying on her shoulders; but despite the reporter in him, he didn’t speak this time, unsure of whether his hesitation was due to respect, mere recession or simply because Henrietta didn’t seem to be carrying any other load except for that absolute elegance in her every move and pure beauty in every centimeter of her physical as well as in her spiritual existence, which occupied her apartment and stretched beyond, connecting with the secret forces of the Universe.

“ The first few days, I had no one to talk to but my Giovanni, so, every night I hugged its cushions goodnight and then I whispered out my soul to him, and right before my flat mates would think I was going insane, I went ahead and adopted a cat to keep me company instead, you know, as a proof of my sanity. Not that I had something to prove but they both loved the cat. She was a cute tortie that I adopted from a shelter, her soul’s still playing on this couch and cuddling in my arms in the evenings. I called her Gill and the most magnificent thing she did was to bring me closer to my flat mates. We groomed her together, she was our mascot, the little princess of our apartment and these girls became my new sisters, my support system in the relentlessly competitive dance world. Dancers love cats, you know, ever since the legendary Tanaquil LeClerc first adopted one. Tamed but still a carnivore feline.”

“Where are those flat mates now?.” Jason asked. “I wish I knew, Jason, but I know nothing, as with so many people I have once loved and then as roads diverged, so did our life paths and until now they’ve never crossed again. Please don’t tell me to reach for them in the modern communication modes, because I have finally learned to let things be and give the necessary goodbyes. Don’t count Giovanni in this; that couch is way too hard to let go of. “ She added and wiped a rolling tear.

I remember their names. Lynne and Emma. Both were working in the bistro right across the street, with the delicious French croissants and the peanut butter cookies, unfortunately too costly and too buttery for daily consumption back then. We’d trained ourselves to treasure their luscious smell, without touching them. I have memories of us sitting around the shaky kitchen table and sharing stale coffee in cheap mugs sharing crackers that we despised, as well as our dreams and worries, mostly our insecurities, which were bigger than us, yet, in a magical way they almost diminished when we bound our powers and fought against them in unity. We were looking forward to leaving that place and becoming successful and moving to exclusive neighborhoods as though happiness was to be found at the end of a long cobbled driveway, where the marble statues shine and the dogs roam in endless private yards rather than our messy narrow halls; where happiness would fall heavy upon us and stick on our skin forever like those glittery sprays one can never wash off.” Henrietta laughed. “How naïve of us”. She added and her face puckered at the bitter taste left behind.

“Look at me now, Jason, living in an exclusive neighborhood yet missing every bit of that claustrophobic place, and believe me, there’s nothing I wouldn’t give to be eighteen again and go back to that despicable apartment and sit next to those girls and once again wipe each other’s tears with our bare hands, then curse and plot revenge against anyone who dared hurt us, using language that would get us kicked out of any decent place but soothing to our restless youthful souls.” She said and a tear escaped down her cheek, which she quickly wiped with her bare delicate fingers.

“At nights we had marathon chats until our eyelids grew weary and shut, while we were listening to practically anything, from the melodies I danced, to their favorite enraged lyrics bursting out of the stereo. Strange how these proved to be the perfect lullaby at night and the perfect wake-up call the next morning.” Henrietta’s eyes met Jason’s and he immediately had to look away and speak, eager to fill up all the uncomfortable silence with impenetrable shields of words. “Enraged lyrics don’t seem to be right up your street.” He commented and suppressed the rest of the things he wanted to say like “who dared hurt you?” and “what were these marathon chats about?”, certain that she would share it all one revelation at a time. Henrietta remained silent for a moment. “We all have a darker side, don’t we? And we need to find a safe haven for it and provide room for it to breathe.” She said and suddenly, the darkest of roses bloomed through her eyes and they were glossy and fragrant yet thorny and untamable. As soon as she blinked, they were gone, making Jason wonder if he’d just seen her bare soul flicker in her eyes, if he’d ever be honored enough to see it again and if he’d ever actually have a clear image of the darkness mentioned, if he’d get to know the lengths and depths it could reach and how it connected with reality.

“What was the best part of those years?” Jason asked prepared to capture this flicker in case it occurred again. “The dreams. Those we had of our future, bright as we desired it, those we brought to life on those uncomfortable and full of splinters stages, the dreams we passed on to the little ones who admired us... all those dreams that still feel so real.” Henrietta responded and looked towards the window like she needed air, as if the air would carry all those dreams back to her once precious feet and make them fly once more, right then and there and this could be Jason’s chance to make up for all of her dancing shows that he had missed and they would never happen again and even if Henrietta ever danced again, nothing would be the same. He hated himself for having missed out on her best years, for letting her rise to her peak without him suspecting her

existence, without their paths ever crossing. But even if he'd spent every waking moment watching her shows and observing her every breathing moment, still he had the suspicion that it would never be enough.

“Don’t you feel content that all these dreams are fulfilled now?” He asked and quit trying to force their past to blend as these thoughts were ridiculously desperate as reason had just decided. “All?” Henrietta laughed. “To fulfill all of your dreams, you need a thousand lifetimes, Jason. Like it or not, we’re all going to leave this life with unfulfilled dreams, dreams that fooled us and dreams that we almost caught but proved to be evasive like the playful sun beams.” She said and stood up. Then she headed towards the window and held the curtains open, letting the light embrace her. She almost absorbed it all and was ready to shine it back to those lucky ones that crossed her path.

“What was your first performance with Giovanni like?” Jason asked. “It was splendid! One of my favourite shows. Would you like to watch a part of it now to get an idea? I have it on my laptop.” She said and ran to fetch it, leaving him in the company of the quiet red couch and the typical scent of roses, which was getting milder and milder to his nose as he was naturally blending into it in a peaceful way, as delicate as the brand new petals of the rosebuds.

She was back in a flash holding a laptop which was on with the video already playing. Jason got shivers realizing that this woman in front of him was the senior Henrietta, introducing him to her twenty-year-old self, the one he longed to meet and feared he’d never in this life have the chance to. That moment he caught his heart beating for her and only her. He wondered what would happen if he turned brave or naïve enough to take a step closer to her. Perhaps, he was too foolish to ever assume that, between them, in front of the respectable Giovanni couch, there could also be something else; forbidden like everything worth desiring; incompatible like the most delicious of combinations.

“Here it goes.” She said with the enthusiasm of a teenager. The curtains were opening, revealing a bunch of bodies, made of a mysterious flexible material rather than human flesh and bones, with feathers on their feet and the glow of the sun on their faces. “This is me.” She pointed at a spinning dancer in the center of the stage through a beaming smile. He had already spotted her. He’d have recognized her among billions of dancers.

She was the one with the long mermaid hair, the most glamorous smile electrifying the performance with that unique vibrant energy. He knew he wasn't the only one who saw it in her, but rather one of the millions of people who had seen it in her, eternal fans who were looking forward to acquiring her book as well as haters who just couldn't deny her charisma. He wished that there was something about her that he'd be the only one to see and thus earn some type of privilege against all others. Unfortunately, it felt too late. She had been loved and her work had already undergone scrutiny, judgement and praise and he was forever stuck long behind endless lines of crowds. But at least that moment he was there with her and if this was their only chance to be alone then he'd treasure it forever.

"Look, this is Alexei, my dance partner and first husband." She said and Jason felt his blood simmering as he was looking at young Henrietta melting into extravagant shapes in the arms of that guy who, to his eyes, looked no better than a freak of nature, with the face of a monkey. "Did you see how he was standing behind me for that pose? That was when he brought his head a little closer and whispered to me 'I love you' for the first time. I was so shocked that I almost missed a step. I saved it quickly enough not even Giovanni could tell. But I'll replay it for you. Look his lips are moving. Did you notice that?" Henrietta was cheerful and forever youthful as she was chirping and tweeting while watching the video. She was travelling back in time, reliving the scene, once again dancing her youth away. This time no warmup was necessary; only her vigorous heart and her own touch of magic.

Jason didn't speak. He'd even forgotten when he had last spoken before getting busy treasuring Henrietta and hating Alexei.

"What's your favourite part of a being a performer?" Jason asked trying to bring her back to their interview. "The best part? Hm, I'd say the ending of a show, Jason, and I am sure you have no idea what happens when the dancers hit their final pose and the curtains fall." She said and her eyes sparkled. "I'd guess they prepare for their official bow." He said. "True, but there's a fragment of second before it, that's full of dirty sweaty hugging and kissing, and this Jason, is filled with pure bliss. Full of the endorphins of a successful show dancers squeezing and congratulating each other, laughing and crying because through this work they've grown to become a family, even an imperfect one at times; family, nonetheless. and the most surprising thing is that for

as long as this lasts, even haters take a break and they too, become vulnerable and even shed tears and they break free from their hateful armor turning simply human. And, you know, when reality sets in later, they all go back to themselves and keep on hating and keep on fearing, at least those moments they shared some love.” She said and her voice cracked once again. “If I have ever seen Giovanni lose himself and jump around joyful like a child, that was definitely on such a moment and that’s when you feel free of all the exhaustion and the doubt and the stress and it’s all been worth it; but then again, it’s the end of a show- a unique part of your life and two things are for sure: you won’t have it again and you’ll fucking miss it.” She said and looked at the paused video with emotion in her eyes. “On that particular night, as soon as the curtains hid us, I ran to Alexei and I asked him: ‘did you mean it?’” she smiled. “And what did he say?” Jason asked and wiped his forehead. “He said ‘yes’”. She replied and Jason’s hand slid below his forehead and pushed away his glasses and rubbed his eyes clear of the unbearable joy he’d just witnessed on screen.

“I expected you to focus on the applause and how it is said to nurture a performer to be honest.” Jason pointed out. “The applause, of course, that too.” Henrietta smiled. “Reporters always expect me to talk about it. “Overly hyped?” Jason had expected greater enthusiasm about it. “Yes and no. You see, there’s glory in it, the clapping shower coming to you from all around and up above; it could heal my wounded knees, it soothed my sore muscles, it widened my smile until I felt the sides of my mouth burn from the stretch, it got me taller; bigger. Giovanni was the one who literally danced to the rhythm of the clapping. There was a grandeur, some type of nobility about his bows. I remember his blonde mane waving free around his face. He was so happy to receive the applause and he deserved it all.” She said and imitating his speech and the movement in his arms she said “ first to the orchestra, then to the mezzanine and balcony. To the left boxes. To the right boxes. Thank you, thank you” she said and smiled to Jason in return to her self-consciousness. But oh well, audiences clap, Jason, and here comes the curtain call again and again, that’s what they do. But they won’t be there to catch you if you fall. They can forget you the very next instant when they return to their own personal troubles or when they fall in love with the next impressive performer. They love your perfection; you go perfect for their love. Fair enough, but one should never grow too attached, Jason.” Henrietta said leaving Jason speechless. “...nor with dance itself. At some point a dancer has to live without it. Well, except for

the great Pavlova who refused to do so. Did you know, Jason? She died while preparing to perform, ill though she was. Every self-respecting dancer knows her last words; ‘Get my swan costume ready.’ Henrietta paused.

Jason tilted his head down wondering if it was guilt that had weighed it. He’d been punishing Christina for giving up dance. If being left out of the dance community had made Christina less lovable, why wasn’t it the same with Henrietta to him? Why was Henrietta so perfect in her every tiny detail? He’d have to admit he’d been unfair to Christina. Maybe the best thing he could do for Christina would be to set her free and let her find someone who’d treasure her past glory as much as her current one and look at her like she is magic. He’d have to break up with her.

“What else do you love about being a performer?” Jason lifted his head back up and continued. Henrietta laughed. “Should I have made a list?” she chuckled and the sun shone brighter. “Because each part makes it what it is, and each carries passion and youthfulness and feelings and in the end, Jason, you even come to love the parts you used to hate, like the exhaustion and the pain. But I’ll tell you what else there is to love about being a dancer.” Henrietta took a big breath. “It’s the day of a big performance. It’s when you arrive at the theater but you know you are not going through the audience entrance, but the other one, meant for the professionals and that’s when you say, ‘I made it’. Then you head for the overcrowded and noisy dressing rooms with prompts, shoes and dresses thrown around and you almost feel like an air hostess as you are carrying a suitcase around, among the mess of stuff and real clouds of hairspray searching desperately for a free corner in front of the mirror to do the hair and makeup in time for your flight. There’s power in this energy, Jason, I can assure you, once you are ready, the bubble appears and all that is left for you to do is enter it. After that, nothing can go wrong. From that moment on, you are just your character and remember! You are muted. Using your real voice is out of the question and all you have is your attire, your body, your music and the story in your head. You look forward to telling it and there’s no holding back” She said in elegance and utter poise, which Jason guessed must have been woven underneath her skin like a satin lining so that she’d never ever be out of it.

“Alexei’s love declaration during the performance was not completely out of the blue. Things had been unfolding like out of my dreams; not my extravagant far-fetched

dreams about exotic sunsets and resting under the palm trees, but rather my military-disciplined dreams, since the rehearsal schedule was strict and we were not allowed days off. In this frantic pace, I had been dreaming of this love since the very first rehearsal I had with him and this couch only knows how our bodies communicated, in perfect synch, and it felt so natural, you know, like this was the purpose for which we were born, to dance and make love. It was a shock to hear the words, though his body had told me so, multiple times before. So, I decided to move in with him and it was hilarious how he had expected me to be carrying tons of tiny things but all I had was that couch, my cat and my dance attire. I only needed a small vehicle for everything. One of Alexei's friends had a second hand van and he helped me carry it all to his place which was a tiny apartment in the theater district in Manhattan. Our performance was taking place in "Julius", an off Broadway theater nearby and it was such a pleasure to be able to get out of my place and arrive there within minutes, without needing any means of transportation, so peacefully, so stress free. This too, felt natural; in alignment with all my desires at the time." She said and paused. Then she stood up and touched the peachy curtains softly as she peeked to the world outside.

"And what was the worst part of those years?" Jason asked. "Again, the dreams." She said and let the curtains fall back in to their place. "Because if back then I'd known that despite making it big, most dreams would never get a chance to come alive, I'd have worked with more joy than pressure. Dance is ageless, divine and eternal. We are not. We grow to play its game, we touch it for a second in time and then we have to let it go, or gravity will get us dragged behind it. Dance is like the most toxic of boyfriends one could ever have. Desirable, provocative, glamorous and seductive; It always gets us carried away with hollow promises of eternal glory, then it invites us to sacrifice all our youth to worship it, which we willingly do having given up all defenses. It wears out our bodies with its insane demands and then, suddenly, when we are old with not much left to offer and then it leaves us for the freshly trained generation, who will step on the path we hustled like crazy to forge, so they can get better, faster and more imaginative, and we never blame it on dance, we always blame each other for this insanity that we put ourselves through. And do you know what's even more crazy, Jason?" Her words kept on flowing like the water in a river, effortlessly and with their unique, steady beat.

“That even after all these life lessons and wisdom, if we could turn back time, we’d do it all over again and the only thing we’d change would be to start even younger and work even harder so that we’d have more youth to sacrifice, more time to waste on the glory that would cheat us with our consent, like the bet we love to lose, like the fairy dust that we’ll never catch yet we’ll always and forever crave. Dance was my drug and addiction, my passion and favorite of all the lovers and trust me, Jason, I’ve known quite some lovers in this pointless life.” She said and almost blushed like an innocent teenager just caught kissing her crush under the summer starry skies.

“I am ready to hear about them.” Jason said hoping he’d manage to get through it without blushing with envy for all those who’d had the privilege to be so close to Henrietta and share a bed and a morning breath with her.

2.2.4 Christina's riot

Resisting her initial urge to go about her day wandering around like a ghost in the city while cursing Henrietta out loud like crazy, Christina ran to Jason's bedside table. She pulled the top drawer open and searched among his stuff. Random notes, sharp pencils, broken pens, an icon, four New York breakfast teabags, two instant coffee packets and a pair of headphones. She searched for the second time through the mess and finally she found it: the brown zipper wallet. Jason always kept part of his savings in it. She held it as a trophy in her pale hands and opened it slowly with her skinny fingers, enjoying the pleasant, almost hedonic sound of the zipper as it revealed fifty, one hundred and fifty, four hundred and fifty dollars. Jason already owed her money anyway. It was time to do herself some justice and make the void of his expired love a little more bearable.

She put the money in her pocket and then she exited the apartment for the second time, letting the door shut behind her. Someone was getting out of the elevator so she rushed in it through the open door and in a few minutes she was outside the apartment block, crossing the busy street, allowing the noise around to cover the one in her head. Decisive, she hailed a cab, which was revenge in itself, as she'd never do such a thing for Jason. "Prospect Heights" she said to the driver as she sat on the glossy leather seat and her heart beat faster upon realizing what she was actually up to.

She took out her phone and checked her old messages. After some serious scrolling, David's last message appeared. He'd said: "Come over, and wake me up on Monday, baby." She'd answered: "I will, kisses" and then the only thing she remembered was that Jason happened and the rest was just a blur. That Monday was already two years behind but it was Monday again and she was sober and anyone would agree that Mondays are great for new beginnings, for catching up and for making up; for correcting deadly mistakes, because that's what choosing Jason was: her biggest and most regretful mistake. Maybe that's why Mondays kept reappearing in the calendar, for another chance to complete the pending tasks, which is exactly what she'd do. David used to love her and now it was his chance to love her again. Something inside her was

sure that he'd still have a soft spot for her. What she was longing for was to have him once again gaze into her eyes, as this seemed to be the quickest possible fix of the day.

She remembered posing for him millions of times in all the wonderful locations within reach, her favorite being a secret outing deep into the forests of Vermont, where they had arrived due to a lucky path they took by mistake. They instantly fell in love with the revitalizing aura of the gargling waterfall which was hidden behind massive trees and they got excited like the chattering birds above the icy-cold yet refreshing lake that was formed underneath it. It had been exciting to be posing by the water as well as on the other side of the forest, among the high trees where, but for the wind that carried the refreshing blend of earthy scents and messed the playful leaves at times, everything else seemed to be motionless; yet each time they returned, nothing was the same. Leaves fell and new ones took over, they grew, and they changed shapes and colors. The branches grew thicker and longer, the bark darker or sometimes absorbed in the company of moss, which spread and spread uncontrollably. There were times when thick, heavy snow hid it all under its magic and there were also days of color blast, when Christina's steps were buried under the newly grown wildflowers in the busy company of bees and the loving pairs of blue-winged butterflies, which only yesterday were modest caterpillars. One had no choice but to bow at the secret forces that work towards constant transformation at the weirdest of paces, hidden at the very core of each being, impressive and inexplicable to the human mind.

Together they had tried to accept their own seasons, too, which was not following their personal, ambitious plans. Christina had felt it in her almost visible, beautifully shaped bones that no matter how bad she persisted in her effort to bring the sunshine in her dancing career, nothing seemed to be working as she desired, filling her with a deep anxiety.

David, too, couldn't see the desired progress in his work and as far as Christina could remember, he only managed to make a living out of nightlife photography which was quite entertaining to capture images of lusciously decorated venues, exhilarated partygoers, tipsy teens and devoted clubbers, but it was never what an artist's dream was made of. Christina wondered where life might have led him by now and whether his massive love for art was finally reciprocated, or if just like her he'd chosen to hide under the safe umbrella of a nine to five.

She wondered why their love hadn't proven intense enough to make her stay and whether there was actually any love out there stronger than the passage of time and able to withstand the inner dark simmering forces of the human nature, or if the only real love was a fully imperfect one that would never ever force one to stay.

The taxi stopped and Christina got out without taking her eyes off her phone. She didn't need to, after all, she knew the place a little too well like the back pocket of her designer jeans. She was still looking at her phone screen while climbing the stairs and she only thought that regretting was an option right after ringing the bell. She froze as she saw the cute green door opening and having the familiar musky after shave fragrance welcome her once again. "Christina" David said with his forever deep, masculine voice.

There he was, standing speechless and handsome, his hair sparse and a little greyish, with his freshly shaved face looking somehow sharper and the muscles on his shoulders, as seen through his t-shirt, a little more inflated than she remembered them. Self-conscious, she looked up, away and then down to her own shoes where there was a small, dark coffee stain on the inner left side and had she noticed it earlier, she'd never ever have dared ring that bell. "I came to see you" she said. "I see" he said. She felt his eyes run over her from head to toe and back up then again back down, scanning her through.

"Can I come in?" she sounded like a kitty locked outside in a torrential rainy night, though it was a plain Monday morning and the sky was clear and Christina was not a cat; although nobody could be too sure about this. "Sure" he said and let her go first, then he followed before closing the door. Christina stepped inside, part of her in the confidence of the old familiarity and part of her in hesitation. She removed her shoes by the door, like the old days and her bare feet immediately took her through the narrow hall to the direction of the cozy living room, where she searched for the mini pellet stove and the fluffy couch which she remembered once hosted their love, innocent in the ignorance of her inner abyss.

There she found it all, neat and tidy, the pellet stove standing its place, despite being made redundant due to the late spring temperatures. The couch was also beside it, looking fluffy and inviting, with the silent tiny table in the middle of the room and the elegant bookcase right opposite, full of photo albums and manuals, by the square window.

Christina stood looking at the familiar living room not daring touch anything, for fear that things would disappear upon the slightest touch and, with her eyes holding the most flexible of muscles, she gathered the courage to look at the walls around. Yes, what used to be a display for her honour was now filled with landscapes and wild animals, African tribes celebrating and a famous person whose face she'd seen millions of times in magazines but whose name she couldn't recall. Had David really been to all these places! That was something new. She turned around and saw him still holding the door open and she wondered whether he'd changed his mind and he was about to ask her to leave and never bother him again, or whether he'd finally close the door and join her inside, like she was someone welcome; as though she belonged there, like she had never really left.

2.2.5 Henrietta the daughter

“Would you like to share your mother’s story? You mentioned that she was a great dancer. Do you think you took after her?” Jason asked, his fingers burning from the ceaseless typing. “Oh , Jason, yes. My mother. Actually, I’d like to devote the book to her. Please, have it appear on the very first page, Jason, ‘to Barbara, my dear mother.’ And then let me tell you about her and you’ll be as shocked as I was with it all.” Henrietta took a generous sip of her apple cider and a big breath. “ As I told you before, I grew up in a cottage in the suburbs. My father was a serious man, a minister in the Episcopal church, and my mother was a quiet, thin woman, a loving and generous minister’s wife. She gave tea parties and loved to play with us, all four of her children. I am the youngest, Jason, and the only girl, so, my mum my first and best friend also, you know, the first female presence in my life. To me she was this. Like she was born to be my mother and nothing else. Children are like that, don’t you agree, Jason? Selfish enough to assume that things have always been as they found them upon their own arrival. Like my mum had always been a thirty year old woman, in her warm dresses baking cookies every morning. Little did I know my mum had had a glamorous career, which I admit, I haven’t and will never surpass.” Henrietta took a break for a breath.

“You mean she never shared anything about her dance career with you?” Jason asked. “Nothing. A clergy man’s wife was not supposed to have, even worse, to share a life before her marriage. Especially a life in the spotlight. At some point she and my father got divorced. Still, it was much later, when she herself decided to write about her dancing career and have it published.” She said. “A book I think I should read.” Jason said. “Absolutely.” Henrietta said and continued: “Jason, she had Balanchine himself create tailor made choreographies on her! She has danced in La Scala and in the Paris Opera House when she was only fourteen. It’s inconceivable and unsurpassable. And she had decided to take this secret to her grave. Isn’t it crazy! Though I knew no facts, reading her book put all my suspicions into place.” Henrietta said, then stretched the muscles around her neck before she lit a new cigarette. “You mean, you had already discovered her secret?” Jason asked, his hands typing feverishly.

“Dance, Jason, is not something you do; it’s something you are. It’s built on you from the inside, so by the time you are a professional, you are so full of it that it overflows. Not something to hide for too long. Right now, if you ask me, I can spot a dancer from a thousand miles. It’s just like love; it charges up the aura around you. I was five and a girl in kindergarten had shown me a short dancing routine which she had learned in the dance school she attended. I went back home super excited to learn something new! So, I ran to show it to my mum. I remember it so vividly: She smiled and from the first time I showed it to her she could do it, you know, immediately and she even added so many extra steps, two poses and a simple turn. I was ecstatic to see it. Something inside me knew that this was not too ordinary a reaction. To justify it she said she had seen too many performances but so did so many other ladies and no one was like her. You should see her poise! Her inner strength! Henrietta took a breath and went on: “My brother was learning to play the piano and we laughed to see that mum could recognize so many classical melodies. Stravinsky, Tchaikovsky, Mozart, she knew almost every composer, it was unbelievable. One day, I was home alone. At the time I was eight, curious to enter womanhood, so I did what most girls do, I started searching through my mum’s stuff wanting to find some make up or to try on her jewelry, you know, anything to make me feel like a real woman as my eight-year-old self could imagine. I searched all of mother’s stuff, trying to put it all back exactly as it was to make it look untouched. I came across a metal box, in which there was a book under the title *Dance to the Piper* with an inscription. It said: To Barbara, with high hopes. Agnes de Mille. I didn’t know who this lady was, but it felt like something massive, you know, no ordinary gift. For a long time, I was wondering what that inscription meant. I never dared ask.” Henrietta took a final puff before stubbing it out while looking deep into Jason’s eyes. “But, come on, I wasn’t stupid.” “What else did you find in that box?” Jason asked, reverting his eyes, trying to save face. But he had to admit he wasn’t sure if this could also un-charge the aura around him, Henrietta was no fool. Maybe she’d known it long before he did. “I can’t recall, actually, but I remember that this moment I knew. All I needed was the confirmation which came even after my own retirement.” She sighed. “Did your mother encourage you to dance?” Jason asked. “Well, she didn’t stop me at least.” Henrietta hid a smile. “I used to be furious to see other ballet mums taking it to the edge, you know, to help their daughters succeed in ballet, while mine would always stand in the shadows, neutral, almost wishing that I’d change my mind and stop dancing. Little did I know about her abuse by a major choreographer. Little could I imagine that she was

fearing that I'd be traumatized like she was from a harsh world. But when I found out her truth, Jason..." That tear proved stronger than Henrietta and it spoke of regret and forgiveness and some type of profound connection to the womanhood of dancers of all time who knew the same pain and the same invincible love for dance.

2.2.6 Forgiven

David stepped to the side and let the door pull itself shut. He came towards the couch by the curtains and stood close to Christina. “How are you?” he asked forcing his eyes to move around the room, focusing on the annoying and omnipresent particles of dust that were hovering in the air and they just wouldn’t settle. Christina could tell David was almost smiling to be seeing her again. She wondered if she should respond to his question in the casual I-am-good-what-about-you manner or whether this was in fact an interrogation and the only accepted response was an apology.

“I just wanted to see you.” She said and immediately felt embarrassed at how petty and repetitive it sounded; still it was the truest thing she could word. “How come?” he asked, only that this time his eyes were painfully piercing hers. Strange how his shaky voice was hiding a thousand more questions begging for a reasonable response, even though they both knew that no words would do.

She stepped forward and looked deep into his ebony eyes, sneaking through his borders of resistance, taming his reaction, leading him back to all their shared moments of eternity, “Glad you let me in” she spoke softly through her breath which reached his own up in the charged air and became one with it, adding to their collection of all those shared breaths and heartbeats that had remained dormant but now were coming alive once again. “I’ve missed you, David” She said and though uninvited, she hid herself into his nervous arms before her elegant fingers ran over his warm skin, barely touching it, carving soft tracks of desire.

He didn’t step back this time. Instead, she felt his hand wrap around her waist and it suddenly felt so real, with its familiar warmth, with those long, artistic fingers, with the veins running through and around it, a detailed raised pattern under his skin. She turned to face him again and there she found it. His two dark eyes, sparkling, sizzling with desire, adoring her every cell; the perfect mirror. Once more, she became the prettiest woman in the world, the privileged one, the one who could get away with anything; She smiled with relief and relaxed at his embrace, which felt safe and pure, like a cozy home. “Good to see you.” He said, with his eyes half closed and his nostrils close to her skin, as though sedated by the evocative scent around her neck.

She felt the butterflies waking up in her belly, fluttering their buzzing wings to every direction, overflowing her body and spreading beyond her physical limits, filling up the whole living room, raising the temperature, sharpening all senses, numbing up all thoughts. That embrace felt cozy, like hiding under a soft blanket on a chilly December evening, when the wind would blow the windows shaky and howl through the keyholes; safe like a harbor; warm like a home.

Christina was travelling back in time; un-meeting Jason, sticking with David and sharing all those steamed up evenings, that would turn to sweet early nights and then to healthy morning habits of the fit and vibrant that Jason laughed at, as they forever seemed to be so beneath him. She then heard David's voice deep and croaky through his body, inviting her to sit with him on the fluffy couch and that moment she swore she'd only say yes to anything he might ask, as hesitation was none of her friends. She lay her head on David's chest and felt his heart banging and then, as she bit her bottom lip in excitement and gazed at her newly reclaimed territory, she froze.

The little wooden frame on the coffee table among David's art, stood out as sharp as a furious slap on Christina's face. Inside this frame there was David sharing dinner with a woman who was smiling at him. She was a cute brunette, with shoulder length hair and a plain casual white tee. Nothing was too extraordinary about her, except for her joy which seemed to be filling up the tiny frame, enlarging it, giving it a breath and a loud carefree laughter. "Oh well" David said after a few awkward seconds of silence. Christina wondered how intently she must have been looking at the photograph, so as to make him get up, grab the frame and store it in the drawer underneath. "How long have you ...?" she asked. "It's been a while, but, you know, it's not..." He hesitated. Christina looked at his face. He was red like a crab. "Are you sharing this apartment...?" she asked. "No, no, this is actually my art studio and sometimes I spend the night here working. I'm sharing another place downtown. But not... like all the time. It's, not too... labeled" He said and pulled himself an inch further.

Christina wondered if she had ever felt more stupid. Then she asked herself if she had really expected anything better and hated herself for having paid this visit only to look like a loser. This was even comparable to being left alone at home for days and nights with the excuse of a career, though she was positive that the latter was the champion of its kind. And with this thought she got transferred to reality and Jason and their shared

place downtown, to that day off from work and to the current disastrous moment, which she had built with her naïve expectations little by little, adding ridicule to her existence. She flirted with the idea of getting up and walking out then and there but like in a scary dream, when one has to run away from danger yet their body is left paralyzed, she remained seated in the fluffy couch and mimicked David in the awkward observation of the dust particle as they were hovering purposelessly all around.

Christina wanted to ask everything about this brunette woman, her name, her age, how rich she was, how intelligent; and at the same time, she wanted to know nothing about her, as this was none of her business and there was no way it was included in the useful-information box in her mind. So, she chose to deliberately forget her, unsee the frame, keep enjoying her day off and make her visit to the past last for as long as possible.

“Are you working on a particular project these days?” she asked. “Let me show you.” He said and got up. Christina followed him inside what used to be his old darkroom, but now it sounded way upgraded and evolved and indeed it was. On the one side, there was a long desk, a big computer and multiple printers underneath the windows between which there were exotic indoor plants with those huge leaves that require little light and lots of love. On the other side of the room there were no windows and there was a white background, a tripod, light stands and other pieces of equipment. “Wow, you really made it” she let out and she’d swear he got an inch taller out of his pride for his new art kingdom and all its potential. “Currently, I work with fashion brands and my next project will be overseas. I am planning to spend six months in Greece. Actually, I am leaving in a few days.” He said and his face glowed. “Ever been there?” he asked.

With no second thought, she looked at him in the eyes, fueled with an urge to beg him to let her join him on his trip overseas and if this was not possible then she needed a place back into his life where she’d be loved back to her happy self and away from the lifeless caricature she had turned into. And if Jason saw her in this glory she’d bet that she’d have all his attention again, but this time she’d know better, she definitely would, and let him pass her by.

But she didn’t dare speak. “Maybe it’s time for me to go” she said and without waiting for a response, she stepped out of the darkroom, and a matter of seconds she once again stepped out of that cute house in Prospect Heights, with no promise of returning, after all it wasn’t necessary regarding a place where she’d forever belong.

2.2.7 Henrietta the lover

“What about your first love?” Jason asked, almost ready to endure the whole narration. “I guess you expect to hear about dreamy love stories that include running around barefoot on the golden secluded beaches, about glamour and blinding lights.” She stopped abruptly. “Am I right, Jason?” and she continued in the same calm tone as in the very beginning “But I might disappoint you; I’ll talk to you about burnt out bodies, with purple and black bruises, covered in smelly sweat, frustrated souls, bleeding feet and messed up hair, blemished skin and empty stomachs still going strong in steamed up rehearsal rooms with sticky dance floors, which, together with the repetitive music felt too comforting, almost a piece of luxury at the time of preparation. And that was how I met Alexei, on a messy day, after bitter tears because my triple turns were not coming along as Giovanni had been expecting and I was feeling sick of having tried it more than a thousand times in the light of that first performance with Giovanni’s professional team.” She sighed and shook her head.

“We’d been working on a jazz choreography inspired by the hippies. It had so much potential, you know, it was rebellious, youthful and upbeat. My part was both a one of my greatest ever, but at the same time a nightmare, since it included so many quick turns and jumps on different levels, knees on the floor and back up again, high rise and jump, then down again, then up again. It was a real challenge. I had confessed to Giovanni that I had started feeling more than embarrassed to have both of my knees constantly bruised. Mind you, we’d rehearse that part for hours every single day at the time and I always started alone before others to work on my deadly part. But the biggest challenge was my dance partner. Paul was the guy with whom I was supposed to perform that pas de deux, had somehow disappeared. I heard there had been unresolved financial disagreements between him and Giovanni. So, what Giovanni did was simply let him go, like he didn’t need him, like it wasn’t a week before the opening performance. The next second Giovanni put up announcements and organized casting after casting and within five days he managed to schedule a rehearsal with the new member of our team, which was no other than Alexei Williams, an almost famous rising star of the stage.” Henrietta paused for a breath.

“What did you like about him?” He asked and drank some more apple cider to escape eye contact. “At the time I couldn’t tell, but now I think I know. It was the freedom in his aura, how he embodied the feline predator about which Giovanni had preached so many times. How firm and gentle his touch, how decisive his desire for me. I felt seen even in my sweaty, exhausted moments. I felt wanted. I felt excited. He took the movements to higher levels of difficulty unafraid, not holding back. He took risks. Later it was he who introduced me to ballroom, which led to unexpected success, and to the tv shows to which I owe my current name. Alexei was not perfect, but he made me who I am.” Henrietta said.

Immediately, Jason got back to typing and he felt his eyes getting itchy which was strange as there was no wind and dust to blame for it, nor was there any smoke around; he knew it was all due to the screen and more precisely that combination of the letters that formed the phrase ‘Henrietta and Alexei’. Maybe these two names standing so close to each other on the page clashed badly affecting his aesthetics. He felt a dash was needed between them, a bigger gap, maybe another word or many; whatever it took to keep one distant from the other; ideally these two names should be written on separate pages and chapters; better on different stories, one away from the other unaware of each other’s presence.

But these two had written history together and, in a way, the world had embraced them as one. Henrietta and Alexei had been one of those couples that everyone has at some point seen at a theater show, or on tv or in the cosmopolitan section of the New York magazines and had definitely paused to admire, as though they were something out of this world. And maybe this was not just an illusion, for indeed, though they existed in this limited world, part of them always belonged in another, a limitless one.

“Alexei and I stayed one hour longer than the others at the rehearsal room that first day. Giovanni’s voice had gone hoarse and his face was sweaty from the stress and his hair had gone messy after hours of his pulling it like a maniac. Imagine his frustration. We had less than two weeks for the show to be ready and his anxiety had reached higher than the highest limit.

The long rectangular practice room had started seeming too big for my aching legs and the mirrors on its sides was giving me vertigo. Alexei had lost his aftershave freshness and had ended up leaving traces of thick drops of sweat in his every step,

while I was the messiest I had ever been, with my muscles burning, contracting uncontrollably and in the mirrors all around I could see my face pale like a ghost's but I was still dancing with all my might, including every muscle in the process. If you allowed your expression to grow heavy, Giovanni would snap and tell you off even worse than he would if you made a technical mistake. He'd say, 'tired is for weightlifters', and Jason, please don't tell me he was unfeeling, because he knew and we all knew the pain involved but if a dancer was to show his or her pain, dance would be nothing more than freaky movement in crisis. That's where the art lies, Jason, in making beauty out of pain. Instead of feeling the pain, I let music carry me away and drift my spirit to new lands. I didn't complain either. I wanted to prove Giovanni right for picking me for the team. I also wanted to show Alexei that I was worthy sharing a stage with and that I was reliable and collaborative and I think I made it." She said.

"By the time we finished the rehearsal, the moon had appeared among the clouds in the sky and every dancer would admit that it was an honour to have spent a day dancing with Alexei. His learning capacity had exceeded our expectations and my heart beat faster when at the end of the day he smiled. It meant that he was satisfied with the new job, and I felt more than proud at the thought that he was happy working with me. I remember how his ears shook and tiny dimples appeared on his cheeks and I swear up until that day I'd never seen anything cuter.

He asked me to join him for a drink and I accepted. In our messy looks the only place we were welcome was a casual rock café in my neighborhood. It was one of those tiny spaces with capacity for twenty people yet somehow they always fit more than a hundred. Inside you see people of all ages, most of them dressed in torn denim or leather clothes, with loud tattoos and eccentric piercings, moving their heads and hands to loud rock sounds while chatting with their friends or hugging their lover, or both, laughing at times making it look like they were having the time of their lives and I bet you they'd be there in the very same seats with the same people the next evening at the same time, enjoying it just as much, looking even surprised at how intense the colors on the wall graffiti are, as if their every time there is their first.

Alexei and I sat at the only free stools at the back corner of the bar, right under the pirate Mona Lisa on the wall and next to the black and white Harley Davison photos. We ordered two pints and then a second round and when the world started getting blurry

and shaky, I felt his hand holding mine and just like that he held me in his arms and kissed me. He never feared of ruining our collaboration, he never cared about rumors. If Alexei wanted to do something he just did it.” Henrietta sighed. “Isn’t there something magical every time you kiss someone for the first time?”

This force that unites you with another world that feeling of softness of their lips; sharing a breath with while putting the world on pause for as long as it lasts. And when it’s over you wonder if it really happened or if it was nothing more than an illusion so you reach for their lips again, this time with greater force, with all your senses on alert because you are determined to taste it more intensely and record it in your memory hoping it won’t slip away; it always slips away.” Henrietta looked at Jason as if needing some help. “You can’t really recreate a kiss. Not in your mind, not in words, not in images. You only treasure it in that very moment and then all you can do is hold out for the next one, equally unique as the one right behind you, private and precious.” Henrietta said and took a sip of her own apple cider. Jason looked at her lips and he wished he didn’t care about collaborations and rumors. But to his dismay, he wasn’t Alexei, nor could he ever be.

2.2.8 Christina flees

The message arrived late, around midnight; the kind of late that made Christina jump out of bed and reach for her phone. She read it with her eyes rolled. “Would you travel to Greece with me?” She read it once more; and again.

Elated, she floated to the window and pulled the curtain aside. Strange though how whole galaxies were being revealed that night in the darkest skies of New York. Christina felt she needed to take in the vastness of it all and the open shutters were not enough. If she could, she’d tear down the whole wall so as to see more of the sky, and if she ever made it big, she’d buy herself a house in the suburbs with a glass roof in the attic, where she’d lie every night and fall asleep under the twinkling light of the stars and wake up every morning to the softest rays of sun on her face.

Then, with her cheeks burning with guilt undermining her enthusiasm, she grabbed her laptop and checked out the plane tickets. Soon her account was diminished by a few hundreds of dollars. “Ticket booked. See you at the check in.” she texted back and put her pillow on the floor right by the transparent glass window. She lay there, with a light duvet on top of her, like a stray cat, a creature of the night, reluctant to abide by any rules, unbothered by human habits. She hadn’t lost her spark completely after all.

The window was cold but the darkness felt warming; empowering. The sky was turning into a blue velvet carpet and the stars were becoming tiny crystal beads woven on it. It looked tamed; almost walkable. If the day hadn’t worn her out she’d willingly start walking through it, above the Atlantic Ocean and reach Europe, then, she’d turn South for the Mediterranean Sea and arrive on Mykonos earlier than David and take her time to discover all the places she’d been bold enough to promise to take him. The new moon was winking at Christina and as she was about to wink back, a loud laughter came from deep within. It was hard to grasp how much things had changed since the last time she had kissed the moon goodnight and something inside her was eager to see what was next.

She reached for her phone one last time. No text or call from Jason, but how small did it seem from the Greek paradise perspective. The sun was already tanning her thin skin

and warming her fragile bones, as the wind was clearing her mind off all worries. She took a deep breath as she closed her eyes and she'd swear her nostrils were full of the briny sea breeze. She started typing: "I need to leave you to find myself." And then she sent it off to Jason at exactly midnight, just like that, in the frowned upon safety of a text and in the liberty that ruthlessness gave her.

2.2.9 Ready

The antique hanging wall clock in Henrietta's guestroom struck midnight when Jason found himself organizing the digital notes on his laptop, deleting and rewriting the first part of Henrietta's story while lying in the guest bed. He had to admit that it hadn't gone bad for a first day's work. Though still not as controversially open as he'd have liked, Henrietta had been fairly candid, emotional and unexpectedly vulnerable, especially compared to all her previous interviews. He wondered if this was on him at all or if she was having a releasing outburst after all those decades of holding it all back. Regardless, the beginning looked promising, like the dawn of a smash hit. It felt even more intoxicating than alcohol.

Jason felt his head weighed heavy on his shoulders; his eyelids too eager to call it a day. He stretched his arms above the soft pillows and put his laptop on the varnished wooden floor under the bed. Then he turned off the bedside lamp and though his brain was overloaded with a whole day's information bombing, his smartphone flashed in his mind like a ghost on a moonlit night. He must have left it in the pocket of his jacket at the coat hanger by the entrance downstairs. Maybe he should just tiptoe and find it. He knew he was supposed to text Christina goodnight, or was it the time to set both of them free?

But, he remained still. He'd do it the following day. After all, his phone was downstairs and it felt inappropriate to make noise and interrupt Henrietta's sleep. Well, if she would be sleeping. Who knew. Her bedroom was further he couldn't know. She might be drinking; she might have secretly welcomed a lover through a side door in utter silence to use for her own selfish pleasure until the early hours. That would be one more added to the list of her innocent victims, oblivious to the hurt that awaits them, or maybe fully aware of it, still consciously deciding to go all in, because a night with her was obviously worth all the drama it was rumored to bring. He should simply ignore the rumors; besides, society's ethics were too dull and undesirable, sterile and painfully envious of a woman's flame. He should be more daring, he had to show his feelings more openly. He should remember to tell his inner danger alarm to back off, because

danger was his close friend and the heartbreak seemed too inevitable that it ended up being welcome.

He turned his head to the side to take a look outside through the attic window glass. He hadn't seen the city skies so clear in a long time. He looked at the stars hanging from above with those invisible threads and then he let them take him to all of his favorite places, beyond the Atlantic Ocean and he wondered if the same stars had seen those places a few hours prior and if they could reflect some of that beauty upon him and sprinkle some golden sand through his fingers and some Atlantic Ocean spray around his pillow. Half asleep, he reached for his bag and inside he found his flask of gin. He took in two long sips and then he fell asleep peacefully content, like a teenager, before his big rebellion.

Reflections and Insights

Writing *The Memoir* has been an insightful process. However, one of the main challenges I faced has to do with the conceptualization and actual presentation of the characters. I felt that special care was needed in order to develop characters with uncommon lifestyles while trying to keep them grounded by accentuating both their strengths and weaknesses so that they appear as realistic as possible. In this way, I tried to present them as relatable and likeable to the readers. For example, introducing Henrietta, a narcissistic and self-centered persona who is inducing a flirty interaction with a man almost half her age was a risky choice of character as the line separating this forbidden attraction to an implausible or even awkward situation was indeed a thin one. Also, Henrietta is a dancer and she is asked in *The Memoir* to talk about her career. Here, the risk was to have her focus too much on stage terminology rather than on sharing her experience in a straightforward way with a young man who knows nothing about this art and, hence, with the readers of this story. This part has been a personal bet, as I have tried to hold back on my enthusiasm in writing about dancing techniques, using performance vocabulary that can indeed be found in most dancers' memoirs. I consciously decided that these details did not contribute to the development of the story, so I put limits so that I could prioritize a solid, as far as this was possible, character development.

As far as Christina is concerned, again, keeping the balance between her hurt and rejected side with her vengeful, sensual and, therefore, resilient one was not easy. Thus, I constantly felt that both sides of her character had to be alternately fortified so that the way her feelings are displayed is justified and her humane aspect of her character is highlighted. Only in this way would she be relatable to the readers. As regards the creation of Jason's profile, it has been a challenging one so that a balance is kept in the way he expresses desire - without seeming overly carnal and rough mannered as well as weak due to extraordinary circumstances. Overall, the portrayal of these characters needed extra attention so that they remain consistent to the needs of the story narrative and display their energetic outlook in the way they move and act through and in the story by pushing it forward.

Another aspect which proved challenging while writing this story was the scaffolding of the interview part. As a member of the audience, I mostly have had access to the cut and refined presentation of an interview, rather than its backstage. Therefore, I had to spend a lot of time guessing and imagining what could probably be taking place at the backstage of an interview. I also did some research on it: in fact, I discovered a book written by Peter Evans titled *Ava Gardner: The Secret Conversations* in which Evans reveals the process of his interview with Ava Gardner. In particular, he shares: “the narrative was a mess, the continuity nonexistent... she was all over the place, lost in the debris of her past. Rather than try to dig her out, I just shut up and listened. The material was all grist for the mill, nothing could be wasted; her tone, her cynicism and ribald vocabulary, would be invaluable when I attempted to reproduce her voice on the page. But, first, if she was going to deliver the goods, she had to come clean about herself; she had to stop sidestepping the interesting truths and ducking the painful ones” (33). In this excerpt, Evans reveals how the human factor of the interviewee poses problems and the interview does not develop smoothly and how the reporter’s job is to use all the faulty aspects of the interview to the benefit of it. Although Evans’ book includes much different characters on another level of interaction, it still shed light on the atmosphere and rules of the interview process which helped me understand how it worked while deciding on which rules to stretch and bend these rules in my version of the interview narrative.

Besides the difficulties of writing *The Memoir*, I also found it a great opportunity to channel via my characters certain feelings that are commonly experienced in all humans, yet sometimes they may be overlooked or misjudged. For example, the helplessness that results from the realization that love is fading and there is no way to rekindle it; the frustration in giving in to a career out of a mere need for income, as expressed through Christina’s actions; the intensity of falling in love with the impossible as expressed through Jason’s point of view; the realization that one’s successful career and glamorous lifestyle must be left behind and the deep sadness such a realization brings, as expressed through Henrietta. These are only a few examples of feelings and experiences that are usually muted, overlooked and very often deemed as invalid in real life. This is exactly where the importance of writing a memoir lies: in the realization that such feelings carry importance because they act as guiding forces by

dictating an individual's choices and therefore determining their legacy. Also, the expression of such feelings validates their human aspect which makes the interviewees more relatable to the readers. Regarding his collaboration with Gardner, Evans states: "It was hard to believe that this apparently uninhibited woman...whose romantic life had mirrored that of her most famous screen character- the lovely and amoral Lady Brett Ashley in Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises*- was now fretting about minor indiscretions half a century before" (259-260), which is an illustration of what he previously has declared to her: "Only you could say these things the way you say them. Readers will love that" (258). Evans shows his surprise at the revelation of Gardner's weaker side but his choice to include this part in his book shows how important he considers it. At the same time, he shows his certainty that readers will also appreciate it. Therefore, I took the opportunity to voice such feelings in my story through the characters' own actions and reactions. Bringing these aspects of human emotion into attention, together with some words of life wisdom as expressed through Henrietta had a profound and restoring effect on me, with the process of writing this memoir validating the decisions I had to make while crafting the characters and their motives.

Closing, I would like to share that writing *The Memoir* has been both a pleasure and a moment of instruction for me but above all it has been an opportunity and a challenge at the same time: to be exposed to a writing process that highlights your own and through you your characters' inner strengths and vulnerabilities while feeling unexpectedly empowered by such an exposure. Memoir writing is indeed valuable in keeping record of an individual's achievements, feelings and their personal evolution through time as well as a healing tool and a way to restore someone's reputation through the highly respected art of writing and the unique connection with the readers it provides.

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