

DANCING LESSON

a play by

Nora Douglass

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Characters:

EDWARD, the father. A man in his thirties. Tall, lean and good natured; quite vain about his conventional good looks.

CECELIA, the mother. A woman in her thirties. Witty, charming, confident in her well-bred beauty.

LUCY, the daughter. A woman in her thirties. A stranger in a strange land. Passionate, intense, awkward; ever searching for a place in the world.

ALFREDO, the perfect waiter. Proud, aloof, ever in control. Hears all, sees all, says nothing. Always in the right place at the right time.

ROBERT, a creature of the dance floor. Poised, graceful, and quite pleased with himself and the world, in that order.

GEORGIA, The perfect match for ROBERT.

Time:

During the course of one evening, and in and out of the years of LUCY's life.

The Scene:

A formal ballroom, as might be envisioned by an eager Hollywood set decorator during the height of the Great Depression. It is a rarified world of shiny surfaces and make-believe. Framing the dance floor are large potted palms and linen covered tables. Although the play might take place in the future, the setting should hark back to the ostentatious elegance of earlier time.

A Note on the Costumes:

Except for Lucy, who's clothing may evoke a more modern time, all wear formal dress-the men in white tie and tails, the women in elegant gowns-that match the era of their surroundings. ALFREDO wears the formal waiter's uniform of black pants and short white coat. All wear white gloves.

At Rise:

We hear music from an off-stage orchestra, a waltz and then become aware of low rumblings outside, mortar fire and occasional explosions. ALFREDO, towel over his arm, enters and makes a last check of his tables before greeting his guests for the evening. He takes no notice of a rocket bomb that whizzes overhead, barely missing him, and crashes through the opposite wall. There is a beat and ROBERT enters, narrowly escaping another explosion. Once safely inside, however, he recovers quickly. He pauses in the doorway, a movie star awaiting his close-up, lights a cigarette, and surveys the scene. ALFREDO brings ROBERT a drink. After a moment, CECELIA enters, and strikes a pose. CECELIA and ROBERT exchange glances. CECELIA continues to one of the tables. ALFREDO is there to seat her. ALFREDO prepares to light the candle at her table; ROBERT is there. ROBERT lights the candle, and then seeing something more interesting at the other end of the ballroom, exits. ALFREDO serves CECELIA a drink. She studies the dance floor. EDWARD enters, pausing in the doorway for effect. ALFREDO brings him a drink. After taking in the scene he joins CECELIA at her table. They do not acknowledge each other. ALFREDO brings EDWARD and CECELIA opera glasses on a tray. There is a break in the music. ALFREDO holds up his hand to make an announcement.

ALFREDO

Ladies and Gentlemen, let the dancing begin.

(The music resumes. EDWARD and CECELIA pick up their binoculars and begin scoping out the evening's opportunities. There is a crash and LUCY, wearing a tattered trench coat and fedora, enters. She looks around open-mouthed, as if un-sure where she is. Upon spotting EDWARD and CECELIA, she puts on a pair of dark glasses and quickly dips down behind a nearby palm to peek out. ALFREDO watches this without comment. After a moment, LUCY pops up from behind her plant and

begins to slide surreptitiously along the back wall.
ALFREDO comes quietly up behind her).

ALFREDO (continued).

Good evening, Miss Lucy. May I take your disguise?

LUCY

No – Thank you.

ALFREDO

Very good, Miss. May I place you?

(ALFREDO seats LUCY. She cranes her neck to study
EDWARD and CECELIA).

LUCY

Have they been here long?

ALFREDO

As per usual, Miss.

(ALFREDO exits. LUCY watches the following scene
from a plant through a brightly colored telescope).

EDWARD

Ooh, I've decided. That one.

CECELIA

Which one?

EDWARD

That one. With the delicious burgundy stripe in his hose.

CECELIA

Where?

EDWARD

There. Dancing with horse face. Do you see?

(LUCY follows their gaze with her telescope).

CECELIA

Oh. Him? – Really?

EDWARD

He's beautiful.

CECELIA

Mmm...

EDWARD

I'm beautiful. We belong together.

CECELIA

He has a cruel mouth.

EDWARD

Yes.

CECELIA

You're going to get hurt.

EDWARD

That's later.

CECELIA

She does have a horse face. A very sweet horse face. But him? You want him?

EDWARD

You really don't understand, do you?

CECELIA

Too well.

(EDWARD sighs).

CECELIA (continued).

Well, I for one, am waiting for true love.

EDWARD

True love. True lust. What's the difference?

CECELIA

Pain and passion.

EDWARD

Pain and Passion. Passion and Pain!

CECELIA

La!

EDWARD

I've experienced it.

CECELIA

Oh! I've hurt your feelings.

EDWARD

No, you haven't.

CECELIA

Yes I have. I've hurt your feelings. I'm sorry.

EDWARD

La!

CECELIA

Really, I am.

(EDWARD pouts. CECELIA whispers something in his ear. He begrudgingly smiles. ALFREDO enters; approaches LUCY).

ALFREDO

Are you ready, Miss?

LUCY

Now?!

ALFREDO

It's time.

LUCY

Oh, please. Just give me a few more minutes.

ALFREDO

Oh, very well.

(He serves EDWARD and CECELIA).

CECELIA

Thank you, Alfredo.

EDWARD

Thanks, Fred.

(ALFREDO starts out).

Say, Fred!

ALFREDO

Yes, sir.

EDWARD

Any new ones tonight?

(He slips ALFREDO a large bill).

ALFREDO

Two counts, a vice-president...

(EDWARD slips ALFREDO another bill).

ALFREDO (continued).

And a used car salesman.

CECELIA

And a used car salesman!

EDWARD

Mmmn.

CECELIA

Don't despair, darling. The night is young.

ALFREDO

Yes, sir. The night is young.

EDWARD

Yes, Fred. Young. And you're...

CECELIA

The waiter.

EDWARD

I was going to say young. And I'm...

CECELIA

Not.

EDWARD

Thank you, Fred. That will be all for now.

(EDWARD gives ALFREDO more money; ALFREDO exits).

EDWARD (continued).

That wasn't very nice.

CECELIA

I know how attached you get to the hired help. They're all too smart for you, darling.

EDWARD

(after a time).

Alright, now tell me who I'm to make look presentable tonight.

CECELIA

See that mouse sitting in the corner?

EDWARD

Barely. She's almost indistinguishable from the wallpaper.

CECELIA

I want her.

EDWARD

Why, for heaven's sake?

CECELIA

She needs me.

EDWARD

She's faded and she's short.

CECELIA

As long as I can make her out and her feet touch the floor...

EDWARD

Well, we're not going to look at all well dancing together.

CECELIA

It's only for a few minutes. Can you endure?

EDWARD

If I must.

CECELIA

You must.

(ALFREDO returns to LUCY's plant).

ALFREDO

Shall we?

LUCY

Just tell me one thing. Do they want me?

ALFREDO

You know the circumstances. Shall we go?

LUCY

Wait! Couldn't I just refuse to be born?

ALFREDO

A little late for that, I'm afraid. You're already a gleam in your father's eye.

(EDWARD and CECELIA share a joke. We hear a dainty little scream from CECELIA).

LUCY

Oh, Alfredo! What am I going to do??

ALFREDO

"Do", Miss?

LUCY

This isn't what I had in mind at all.

ALFREDO

Well, the place isn't what it used to be, of course...

(A cartoon cherry bomb crashes through a window. ALFREDO casually picks it up and tosses it back out the way it came).

ALFREDO (continued).

There was a slight siege.

LUCY

A "slight" siege?

ALFREDO

Well, the world didn't end, if that's what you mean. You're here – Well, coming.

LUCY

So, it's not QUITE the end of the world. Great.

ALFREDO

You're awfully young to have such a chip on your shoulder.

LUCY

I guess I just imagined it a little differently, that's all.

ALFREDO

A little brick house with a white picket fence...

LUCY

Not necessarily...

ALFREDO

Cozy family dinners around the big kitchen table...

LUCY

Well...

ALFREDO

And mom, greeting you every day after school with a fresh batch of chocolate chip cookies.

LUCY

Not every day.

ALFREDO

A cute little puppy dog with sad brown eyes and long floppy ears. What's his name? Spike?? Oh! And a swing set your Dad build for you out in the back yard.

LUCY

(defiant).

A red swing set!

ALFREDO

I don't know where you people get these ideas. Shall we go?

LUCY

Wait! What if I just tried it for six months. See how it goes?

ALFREDO

You're stalling.

(ALFREDO starts off; LUCY straggles behind).

LUCY

They're so beautiful! What are they going to do when they get me?

ALFREDO

Come on, it's late.

CECELIA

(to EDWARD)

Alright, how are we going to maneuver this?

EDWARD

I stand up, like this...

LUCY

Aren't they going to get ready for me?!?

ALFREDO

Come along. Come along, please...

(LUCY follows ALFREDO out).

EDWARD

A slight flourish with the wrist, so they can catch sight of us out of the corner of their eyes and enjoy thinking they are covert witnesses to a clandestine affair...

CECELIA

Oh, honestly, Edward.

EDWARD

I graciously ignore that remark. I look at you as if I'm seeing you for the first time. I start back! Stars rise in my longing eyes; bells go off in my hungry brain. Do I look starry-eyed and hungry with longing?

CECELIA

You look ridiculous, but do go on.

EDWARD

Ah, you're getting into it. I knew you'd come 'round.

CECELIA

Go on. Go on!

EDWARD

I bow to you.

CECELIA

I nod condescendingly, barely acknowledging your presence.

EDWARD

Very nice. This makes me shy, but ever more determined. I stick my courage to the screwing place, take your delicate gloved hand and brush my lips over it ever so lightly.

CECELIA

Out of lustful respect.

EDWARD

That's my line.

CECELIA

And not one of your better ones my darling.

EDWARD

Critic. Alright, how's this? If my ladyship will permit...

(EDWARD bends low, takes CECELIA's foot in his hand;
kisses her shoe)

CECELIA

Sit down, Edward. You're calling attention.

EDWARD

That's the point isn't it?

CECELIA

They'll think you're making fun of them.

EDWARD

I am.

CECELIA

You're dangerous.

EDWARD

You're beautiful.

CECELIA

My favorite thing to do in the whole wide world is to take off my shoes and stockings and go mucking about through the pig pen.

EDWARD

Why are you telling me this?

CECELIA

Just to remind you who I really am.

EDWARD

(interested).
Mmmn...

CECELIA

Now, be serious, please.

EDWARD

Alright, let's give them what they want. Two beautiful people; one male, one female; both handsome, near-perfect specimens...

CECELIA

One of us is perfect.

EDWARD

I was being polite...

CECELIA

Touché.

EDWARD

Now where was I? – Ah, yes, "falling modestly, and yet..."

EDWARD & CECELIA

"...Head-Long into Conventional Merge".

EDWARD

(a beat, while he forgives her for ruining his best line).
My dear Miss Etherage, may I have the pleasure of this dance?

CECELIA

Why, Mr. Swann! What a lovely surprise to see you here!

EDWARD

Just say yes, damn you.

CECELIA

Why thank you, Mr. Swann. Let me check my card.

(CECELIA takes her time studying the dance card hanging
from her wrist).

EDWARD

Just because your wall flower will stayed glued to that chair until the charwoman throws her
out...

CECELIA

Oh, Mr. Swann, you say the sweetest things!

EDWARD

Please call me Edward and get the fuck up here.

CECELIA

Oh, I just love a man who asks for what he wants!

(They start to dance; ALFREDO enters with LUCY in tow.
She sits in a red wagon).

ALFREDO

Congratulations, Madam. It's a girl.

CECELIA

Really? Already?

ALFREDO

Yes, Madam.

(LUCY cries; ALFREDO plugs her with a pacifier).

CECELIA

(to EDWARD).

Darling, it's a girl.

EDWARD

A girl? Oh, Cec! How do you feel?

CECELIA

(she thinks).

Fine! Let's dance.

EDWARD

Oh, yes, let's!

(they take a few steps in their tango).

Mommy!

CECELIA

Daddy!

ALFREDO

Baby.

(EDWARD and CECELIA stop dancing).

EDWARD & CECELIA

Oh.

EDWARD

Is that it?

ALFREDO

Yes, sir.

CECELIA

Let's call her Lucy, dear. After your mother.

EDWARD

My mother!

(he stops; thinks)

My mother's name isn't Lucy.

CECELIA

It isn't? Maybe that's my mother.

EDWARD

Well, never mind. Lucy. Our little Lucy. Daddy's little girl. What does she do?

CECELIA

Does she talk? Hello.

(LUCY grabs CECELIA's finger)

Oh!

EDWARD

What do you do?

(LUCY bites EDWARD'S finger).

Oh, my...

ALFREDO

She is just an infant, sir.

EDWARD

An infant.

CECELIA

Yes, darling, a baby. Oh, I do wish you could talk!

(She instructs LUCY).

C h a m p a g n e ?...C o g n a c ?...T a n g o ? Perhaps we could get her into one of those accelerated courses.

LUCY

(trying to speak).

Maa...Maa...

(GEORGIA enters on a cloud of self-satisfaction and strikes a pose. EDWARD sees her; signals to CECELIA).

EDWARD

Cec! Two o'clock!

(CECELIA turns her head to see GEORGIA drop her scarf and exit).

LUCY

Daa...Da da...Mam ma...

EDWARD

(looking after GEORGIA)

Look here, Fred. Perhaps you could bring her back when she can communicate. There's a good man.

LUCY

Da da!...

EDWARD

(touched).

Oohh!

(He thrusts a wad of bills and credit cards at ALFREDO).

Spare no expense! Nothing's too good for our little girl.

(he gingerly pats her head).

CECELIA

Oh, Edward!

Maa!

LUCY

Bye bye!

CECELIA

Bye bye, baby!

EDWARD

Daaa!...Maaa!!...

LUCY

(ALFREDO exits with LUCY. EDWARD and CECELIA run to GEORGIA's scarf. They both bend down to pick it up).

Change of plan?

EDWARD

Change of plan.

CECELIA

Shall I?

EDWARD

Oh, May I?

CECELIA

Mother, May I?

EDWARD

(CECELIA reluctantly relinquishes her end of the scarf).

Oh, alright.

CECELIA

(EDWARD eagerly exits after GEORGIA. CECELIA returns to her table to watch the scene through her opera glasses. LUCY, dressed as a school girl, enters. She carries a pencil and large school tablet).

LUCY

Mummy?

CECELIA

(watching the dance floor through her opera glasses).
Just a moment, darling.

LUCY

Mummy??

CECELIA

There she goes! Alright, now what is it, darling?

LUCY

I have to write an essay on a famous American.

CECELIA

(continuing to watch EDWARD's progress).
Mmm Mmmn...

LUCY

I was thinking of George Washington. He was "first in war, first in peace, and..."

CECELIA

"...first in the hearts of his countrymen." You get that conservative streak from your father.

LUCY

What I want to write about is his teeth.

CECELIA

ARE his teeth, darling – His teeth?

LUCY

You know, his false teeth. I want to trace the progression of his leadership in relation to the progression of his lost teeth.

CECELIA

How old are you?

LUCY

Eleven. I think I'll call it, "False Teeth in Foreign Policy." Listen to this. This is what he wrote on inauguration day, April 30, 1789: "I should consider myself as entering upon an unexplored field surrounded on every side with clouds and darkness."

(LUCY waits expectantly for CECELIA's response.
CECELIA finally feels LUCY's gaze).

CECELIA

Sounds like kind of a Gloomy Gus.

LUCY

Exactly. He had lost fourteen teeth by then.

CECELIA

That many!

LUCY

And at seventeen he wrote: "I greatly fear my countrymen will expect too much from me".
See??

CECELIA

(studying her closely).
Eleven.

(EDWARD enters with GEORGIA on one arm and
ROBERT on the other).

CECELIA (continued).

Well! What have we here?

EDWARD

Two for the price of one!

LUCY

I have a quote for every lost tooth.

CECELIA

That's fine, darling.

(to EDWARD).

Won't you introduce us?

EDWARD

Georgia, I'd like you to meet Cecelia. Cecelia...

CECELIA

(tasting the name).

Georgia!

(she kisses GEORGIA's hand).

And who's this?

GEORGIA

This is my friend Robert.

EDWARD

May I call you Bob?

(EDWARD kisses ROBERT's hand).

CECELIA and GEORGIA

"Bob!"

LUCY

Maybe I should call it, "Lost Teeth, Lost Ideals".

GEORGIA

(to LUCY)

Oh. Hello.

EDWARD

A little young, don't you think, Cec?

CECELIA

This is your daughter, Lucy.

EDWARD

Oh, right. I keep forgetting. Hello, Biddybones. What 'ya workin' on?

CECELIA

It's a cute little essay on George Washington's wooden choppers.

EDWARD

Oh. Well, who's ready for champagne?

LUCY

Walrus tusks.

EDWARD

I'm sorry?

LUCY

They were carved out of walrus tusks, not wood.

EDWARD

Oh. What were?

GEORGIA

Oh, I know! This is one of those new games, isn't it? "Follow the Conversation!"

ROBERT

Oh! How fun!

GEORGIA

Walrus...

ROBERT

Tusks.

GEORGIA

Walrus-Tusks-Not-Wood.

(ALFREDO enters as ROBERT and GEORGIA think).

EDWARD

Hallo, Fred. How 'bout some champagne for this little study group. You choose. Something that'll inspire whatever collective genius we may possess.

GEORGIA

(raises her hand).

Oh, I know! I know!...

ALFREDO

Very good, sir.

GEORGIA

George Washington's teeth, right?

EDWARD

We're helping our little girl here write a paper! Have you met – Uhhh –

ALFREDO

Lucy. Yes, sir.

EDWARD

Lucy! Yes!

ALFREDO

(to LUCY)

Hello.

LUCY

Hello.

ALFREDO

(To Lucy, as he goes)

Fourteen sets by the time he died.

LUCY

Yes, I know!

LUCY (continued).

(to EDWARD).

Did you know, there are eight American and two European museums that have sets of George Washington's teeth on display. And did you know that those institutions boast, on average, a twelve percent higher endowment?

EDWARD

(at a loss)

No! Really?

LUCY

Really!

(She looks expectantly at her father).

EDWARD

Uhhh –

ROBERT

(to GEORGIA).

Oh, let's do it again!

LUCY

(to EDWARD).

Do you want to hear what he really said at Valley forge?

ROBERT

All right, now give me a sentence – not too many words – and I'll tell you what you said.

LUCY

(to EDWARD)

George Washington was the Father of our country.

EDWARD

Oh.

LUCY

But he didn't have any children. Why do you suppose?

EDWARD

Uhh – Maybe because he knew how much work it was having a country.

(GEORGIA and ROBERT applaud. EDWARD is surprised and pleased with himself).

LUCY

He had two step-children.

CECELIA

That's nice, dear...

LUCY

But they died. Martha junior-they didn't call her that; they called her Patsy – She died when she was only three years older than me. George wept and said a prayer by her bed the night she died.

CECELIA

Darling...

LUCY

(to EDWARD)

Would you weep and say a prayer for me if I died?

CECELIA

Nobody's going to die, darling.

LUCY

I know. But what if I did?

(EDWARD is saved by ALFREDO's entrance).

EDWARD

Ah! Here we are!

LUCY

Do you want to hear about George's step-son?

CECELIA

Not if he died, darling.

LUCY

Well, they all did, eventually.

EDWARD

A toast!

CECELIA, GEORGIA and ROBERT

A toast!

LUCY

It's a really interesting story...

EDWARD

To us. Here we are, the upper crust of the upper crust...

CECELIA

Enjoying our upper crusts.

(EDWARD laughs in appreciation. GEORGIA joins in).

ROBERT

I say, is that witty?

CECELIA

I beg your pardon?

ROBERT

Is that clever?

GEORGIA

Rather!

(she nudges him).

ROBERT

Oh!

(he laughs with enthusiasm).

GEORGIA

Another one. To George Washington!

CECELIA, EDWARD & ROBERT

George!

(During the ensuing laughter, LUCY lifts up the tablecloth and crawls under the table).

LUCY

(she writes)

"George Washington did not like parties..."

(LUCY pulls the corner of the tablecloth down around her, concealing her from view. The music changes to a dignified waltz. EDWARD and CECELIA, and ROBERT and GEORGIA exchange a nod and take to the dance floor. After a moment, the couples exchange partners. EDWARD and GEORGIA dance; ROBERT and CECELIA dance. The women are twirled; the men's eyes meet. The women dip; the men gaze out. The women's eyes meet. The men's eyes meet. The men and women exchange partners. LUCY enters, now dressed for her prom in an ill-fitting gown similar to her mother's. CECELIA and GEORGIA dance by. She tries to get her mother's attention).

LUCY

Mummy!...Mummy!

(EDWARD and ROBERT float by).

Daddy!...Daddy?...

(CECELIA and GEORGIA dance through).

Mummy! See, Mummy? I've got it on. Do you recognize it? Well, it didn't fit exactly, but see, I fixed it. Do you think I did a good job?

(she twirls).

What do you think of my hair? Do you like it this way?

CECELIA

Don't slouch, darling.

LUCY

Do you think I look pretty?

CECELIA

You'll get a hump.

LUCY

Mother...

CECELIA

Like poor old Mrs. Pettyjohn. Do you remember her?

LUCY

It's my prom tonight.

CECELIA

No, perhaps you were too young.

LUCY

Mummy, will you help me...

CECELIA

That hem could come up an inch or two.

(LUCY attempts to shorten her skirt by stuffing it into her waistband).

LUCY

How's this?

(CECELIA and GEORGIA drift off to another part of the floor)

Mummy??

(EDWARD and ROBERT dance by).

Daddy! – Daddy?

EDWARD

Say, don't you look – I didn't know it was costume night.

LUCY

Daddy, it's my prom tonight.

EDWARD

Oh! Well, have a good time!
(he starts off).

LUCY

Daddy! – Daddy, the only thing is, well...

EDWARD

What is it, Biddybones?

LUCY

Daddy, remember when I was little and you'd let me put my feet on your shoes and we'd dance? Well, I don't know how to dance any other way. And what I was hoping was, well – Daddy, would you teach me how to dance?

EDWARD

(a beat of terror, then gallantly).
Oh, Dearie! Of course Bones, I'd be delighted.
(to ROBERT, who is enjoying EDWARD's discomfort).
Do you mind? Our little girl's big night.

ROBERT

No, Daddy. You go right ahead. I'll watch.

LUCY

Oh, thank you, Daddy! You don't know what this means to me.

EDWARD

Right. Why don't we start over here?

(EDWARD leads LUCY to a secluded corner of the dance floor, and away from ROBERT's amused gaze).

EDWARD (continued).

We don't want anyone to get in our way.

(They start to dance; LUCY puts her feet on top of EDWARD's)
Oww! Tell you what. Let's try it with all of our feet on the floor. Alright, now, one-two-three, one-two – Lucy, let me lead, dear – No, now – Owwww!

(EDWARD hobbles over to a place where he can sit).

LUCY

(watching him).
Daddy, I think I'm tired.

EDWARD

Really??

LUCY

(a beat).
Yeah.

EDWARD

(a great sigh of relief).
Well, if you're sure.

LUCY

Thank you, Daddy.
(she kisses him).

(CECELIA and GEORGIA return; CECELIA gives EDWARD the high sign to join her).

EDWARD

Well, have a swell time, Biddy.

LUCY

I will.

EDWARD

Good! Good. Well...

(They all start out).

CECELIA

Don't stay out too late, darling.

Have fun!

EDWARD

Stand up straight, dear.

CECELIA

Relax!

EDWARD

Smile!

CECELIA and EDWARD

Pleasure to meet you.

ROBERT

Ta ta!

GEORGIA

Keep your chins up!

EDWARD

Bye bye!...

ALL

(They exit. LUCY stands at the edge of the dance floor watching wistfully, and then slowly begins to move with the music. After a time, she gets an idea, and crossing to one of the palms, wraps herself in the fronds and begins practicing her waltz. ALFREDO enters. He approaches her and gently taps her on the shoulder).

ALFREDO

May I have the honor of this dance?

(ALFREDO leads LUCY out of the jungle of potted plants to an open area beside the dance floor).

ALFREDO (continued).

Perhaps we should start over here.

(ALFREDO strikes his waltz position with a space for her to fit into and waits patiently until she finally joins him).

ALFREDO

Now then. One-two-three, One-two-three, One-two-three...

(She stumbles and they stop. He strikes his pose and waits).

One-two-three, One-two-three, One-two-three...

(LUCY joins in the count).

ALFREDO and LUCY

One-two-three, One-two-three, One-two-three...

LUCY

Oh, Alfredo!...

ALFREDO

One-two-three, One-two-three...

LUCY

One-two-three, One-two-three – I'm doing it!

LUCY and ALFREDO

One-two-three, One-two-three, One-two-three...

(They relax into their waltz; the counting stops).

ALFREDO

(after a time).

Nice Perfume.

LUCY

It's called "Unspoken" – "For those moments that go beyond words"

(They continue to dance silently for a few moments).

ALFREDO

Shall we take to the floor?

LUCY

Oh, Alfredo! I can go to the prom now! Thank you. Oh, thank you!

(LUCY gives ALFREDO a quick kiss on the cheek and runs out. ALFREDO watches her go, blows her a kiss, and then gallantly returns to his duties. The music changes, to a passionate, tormented tango. ROBERT and GEORGIA enter and strike a pose. They tango deftly across the floor and exit. ROBERT immediately returns with LUCY enwrapped in his dance. They tango).

ROBERT

Have we met? I think I love you.

LUCY

What??

ROBERT

I adore you. I can contain myself no longer.

(LUCY breaks away; ROBERT pursues her never losing the steps of the dance).

LUCY

Are you crazy? Who are you??

(GEORGIA and ALFREDO enter and tango in pursuit of ROBERT and LUCY. Upon their meeting, GEORGIA drops ALFREDO and takes up LUCY).

GEORGIA

(as she tangos with LUCY)

I thought we'd never be alone. Come away with me tonight.

LUCY

What?!?

GEORGIA

I said...

I heard what you said!

LUCY

(The abandoned ROBERT dances with ALFREDO to get himself into position to once again, snag LUCY. ALFREDO returns to his duties, cool intact).

I love you.

GEORGIA

(snagging LUCY).
I have always loved you.

ROBERT

(LUCY's emotions swing from horror to attraction as the music and dancers grow in passion. GEORGIA and ROBERT take turns dancing with LUCY. During brief moments, the three are dancing together).

(as she tangoes with LUCY)
He'll break your heart, you know.

GEORGIA

(as he tangoes with LUCY)
She'll break your heart, you know.

ROBERT

Have I told you...

GEORGIA

...how beautiful you are?

ROBERT

(LUCY suddenly stops).

Alright. What's the gag?

LUCY

GEORGIA

Como se dice, "Gag"?

(ROBERT shrugs; and then the battle is on again for LUCY's attention. ROBERT finally manages to send GEORGIA off).

ROBERT

Now, where were we?

(They dance. A new level of passion and terror. LUCY stops. ROBERT stops).

LUCY

Did you know that one of my legs is longer than the other?

ROBERT

No, I didn't know that.

LUCY

Well, it is. One of my legs is longer than the other by one and a half inches.

ROBERT

It isn't noticeable.

LUCY

Yes it is! Look. Watch carefully when I walk.
(She walks for ROBERT).

ROBERT

I can't see it.
(He closes in on her. They dance).

LUCY

(breaking free again)
A slight limp. See?
(She walks for him again).

No...

ROBERT

Well, it's there!

LUCY

If you say so.

ROBERT

And this is only the beginning.

LUCY

Come away with me.

ROBERT

Look at me hands. I bite my nails. Nothing to be done. I'm five feet six and seven-eighths inches tall.

LUCY

So.

ROBERT

So?? Normal is five foot six.

LUCY

You don't look too tall.

GEORGIA

I slouch.

LUCY

I don't care. I love you.

GEORGIA

Will you stop saying that??

LUCY

(Although the form of the dance is never completely abandoned, the pace and energy of LUCY's defensive moves grow quicker and more acrobatic, and ROBERT and GEORGIA's possession of her more fleeting as the music reaches its peak).

ROBERT

She's in love with your soul. I love your...

LUCY

I'm left-handed, my eyes are bad, my feet are flat, and my hearing is sub-normal – Huh? Did you say something? – I sucked my thumb until I was twelve years old. Look! My thumb won't bend.

GEORGIA

No!

ROBERT

No!

LUCY

Yes! Stiff as a board. And three piano teachers gave up on me and told my mother I was unteachable. So, you can see the miscalculations of your emotions.

GEORGIA

I don't care. I love you.

LUCY

You just think you do.

ROBERT

And you love me. I can see it in your face.

LUCY

Where??

ROBERT

There. It's a physical reaction. You can't fight it.

LUCY

Oh yes, I can *too* fight it!

ROBERT

Oh no you can't!

(During the following GEORGIA and ROBERT re-discover each other).

LUCY

(a beat; choosing her words carefully)

Now, I know that there are strange feelings that sometimes shudder through us. And I'm sure I don't know what to do with them. But thankfully, they are only temporary, and I always manage to go on.

GEORGIA

(to ROBERT)

My darling!

ROBERT

(to GEORGIA)

Oh, I've missed you so!

LUCY

Alright, you win. I give up. Take me!

ROBERT

(to GEORGIA)

My dearest one!

GEORGIA

(to ROBERT)

Where have you been??

(ROBERT and GEORGIA bring their tango to a florid finish and exit).

LUCY

Take me! Wait, are you leaving? I said, I give up. Where are you going??

(LUCY collapses at her table, miserable. ALFREDO brings her a drink).

LUCY (continued).

Oh, Alfredo! I'm going to be alone forever!

(Without abandoning his waiterly equanimity, ALFREDO motions to the offstage orchestra to begin again).

ALFREDO

Miss?

(LUCY joins him and they tango).

LUCY

(as they dance).

Oh, Alfredo! Why couldn't you have been a real person??

ALFREDO

Miss?

LUCY

Well, you're the waiter!

ALFREDO

(a beat).

Ah. Yes, Miss.

(ALFREDO courteously tangos LUCY off the stage. There is a beat, and EDWARD and CECELIA enter. They wear party hats, are covered with confetti and streamers, and carry noisemakers which they playfully toot at each other. ALFREDO enters. With a shared look, EDWARD and CECELIA sneak up behind him and blow their party horns. Non-plussed, ALFREDO exits for their drinks and they finally settle at their table. There is a beat, and we hear LUCY and ALFREDO, off).

Are they here?
LUCY

Yes, Miss.
ALFREDO

Here comes somebody!
EDWARD

And I'll bet that we know who!
CECELIA

Congratulations, Miss.
ALFREDO'S VOICE

Thank you.
LUCY'S VOICE

Let's hide!
EDWARD

(EDWARD and CECELIA hide; LUCY enters wearing a wedding gown).

LUCY
Mummy? Daddy? Where are you? Alfredo said you were here. Hello? Mother? Daddy? Oh, I get it. I'm supposed to find you, right?

(During the following, LUCY searches for her parents; they elude her by moving from one hiding place to another).

LUCY
Well, I guess you know what day this is. Don't you want to meet him? You don't have to. But I think you'd like him. His name is Ted. Oh, please come out! Well, anyway, I just came by to tell you that I love him. I love him very much. I'm very happy. Well, that's all I wanted to say, I guess.

(LUCY waits another moment for them to appear and then reluctantly exits. EDWARD and CECELIA crawl out from their hiding places as ALFREDO enters with a tray of drinks).

CECELIA

Oh, Alfredo! Were we just too naughty?

ALFREDO

(a hint of disapproval).
I'm sure I wouldn't know, Madame.

(CECELIA and EDWARD laugh, and then are cast down by ALFREDO's lack of enthusiasm for their joke).

EDWARD

Oh, I think so.

CECELIA

We were bad.

EDWARD

Fred's mad.

CECELIA

Oops!...
(she giggles).

ALFREDO

Certainly not. It's none of my affair.

CECELIA

Alfredo, run after her and tell her we're sorry.

EDWARD

Yes. Tell her to come back. Tell her we're really sorry.

CECELIA

We're really, really sorry.

ALFREDO

Very well, Madam. If you insist.

(ALFREDO exits and their apologies turn into a new game).

EDWARD

We're really, really, really sorry.

CECELIA

We're really, really, really, Really sorry.

EDWARD

No, we're really, really, really, really, REALLY sorry.

CECELIA

We're REALLY, REALLY, really, really, really, really sorry.

(They collapse in laughter. LUCY enters, carrying two large suitcases. Upon seeing LUCY, CECELIA immediately switches gears and joins in the mood of the new scene).

CECELIA

(sympathetic)

Oh, Lucy darling. We got your message. Come join us.

EDWARD

I'll order champagne. Are we celebrating, or drowning?

CECELIA

Does it matter?

EDWARD

Are you kidding? It only informs me whether I'm ordering a foreign or domestic.

CECELIA

How can you put a price on this?

EDWARD

You're absolutely right. Fred, a case of your best. What's money at a time like this?

(ALFREDO exits. EDWARD turns to LUCY, who has stood fixed, suitcases in hand).

EDWARD (continued).

So, how are you, Biddybones, all right?

(In response, LUCY finally drops her suitcases where she stands and lets her tears fall. There is a beat. CECELIA goes to LUCY).

CECELIA

Come tell Mummy all about it, sweetheart.

(LUCY accepts the invitation; goes to CECELIA; puts her head in her mother's lap. CECELIA strokes LUCY's hair).

CECELIA (continued).

I know it hurts now, but you'll get over it.

EDWARD

God knows your mother and I always do. The more you do it, the easier it gets, eh, Cec? Biddybones, I remember your mother. The first forty times or so, I swear, it was like the world had ended.

(to CECELIA).

But you got used to it.

CECELIA

You never get used to it

EDWARD

Remember Prague?

CECELIA

Maria.

EDWARD

You took it hard.

CECELIA

I loved her.

EDWARD

See, now that's the difference between us. She always thinks it's love.

CECELIA

It always is.

LUCY

This was not a two-week affair! This was a ten-year marriage!

CECELIA

Of course, it was. Ten LONG years with Ned.

LUCY

Ted.

CECELIA

What sweetheart? I can never understand you when you mumble.

LUCY

Ted. His name is Ted.

CECELIA

Of course it is.

(ALFREDO enters).

ALFREDO

Ladies and Gentlemen, please choose your partners for the last dance.

CECELIA

(a cloud appears)

Oh...

EDWARD

Cec?

CECELIA

(the cloud lifts).

Oh, darling! – If you're still yearning, I'm still burning.

LUCY

Oh! Why did I ever expect it to be any different? You haven't changed. You'll never change.

CECELIA

(to LUCY)

Forever yours, darling.

LUCY

Both of you. You're just butterflies. Flitting along the tops of the flowers. Never landing, never settling. Just skimming along the surface and then moving on.

CECELIA

Butterflies. I like it.

EDWARD

Cec! We're metaphors! Come, my little gypsy moth, let's dance.

CECELIA

Do you mind? It is the last dance.

(EDWARD and CECELIA dance off. There is a beat.
During the following, LUCY performs a series of elaborate
deep breathing exercises and Tai Chi moves).

LUCY

You do what you need to do! Because I can EMBRACE this moment! Six and a half years in therapy and I can RELISH the EXPERIENCE. I invite myself to RELISH the EXPERIENCE. Relishing. I'm Relishing. I am centered. And I am RELISHING.

(She centers herself with an elaborate yoga stance, and a few deep breaths).

Yes. Yes. The answer is Yes.

(More deep breaths).

LUCY (continued).

So, it's REALLY ALL RIGHT for you to go off and leave me like this is my EXTREME moment of EXTREME pain. Because you have always left me in my EXTREME moments of EXTREME pain. It's nothing personal. I know that. You are who you are. And I am who I am, BECAUSE OF THAT! No, that's not right. It's all right. It is really okay.

(More yoga breaths; a few Tai chi moves).

I-AM-LEARNING-TO-LET-GO. I-AM-VERY-VERY HAPPY!

(LUCY puts her head on the table and weeps).

(ALFREDO enters to clear the table).

ALFREDO

Excuse me, Miss.

LUCY

Maybe this is all just a horrible cosmic mistake. My soul had the wrong zip code.

(She watches her parents dance by).

Look at them. They should have had Miss America. I should have had – Who? Thomas Aquinas. Or maybe Pearl S. Buck. Or Quasimodo. Or, if I could've been Sherman's sister on Bullwinkle, I could have had Mr. Peabody. At least he explained things.

(EDWARD and CECELIA dance by and off).

LUCY (continued).

They're just so beautiful. Oh, Alfredo! I am doomed to a life of parents!

ALFREDO

Yes, Miss.

(he continues to clear around her).

LUCY

I was an accident. On a cold winter's night when Daddy didn't get his man and Mummy lost her one and only true love. It was another one of Mummy's larks to carry me to term.

ALFREDO

Oh, now Miss...

(EDWARD and CECELIA float by in their waltz, followed by ROBERT and GEORGIA).

LUCY

I've never met anyone who can resist their charms.

ALFREDO

No, Miss.

LUCY

(climbs on top of the table).

But do you know what it's like to live with that charm? Do you??

GEORGIA

Why are we stopped?

ROBERT

I think we're about to have a speech.

LUCY

It's like having nothing to eat but store-bought icing all your life. It makes you weak and scrawny and rotten inside.

EDWARD

Is she talking about us?

CECELIA

Mmmn.

LUCY

Well, what kind of role models have you been for me?

CECELIA

Negligible, I hope.

(ROBERT and GEORGIA applaud for CECELIA).

LUCY

Oh! Must you be so blasé about everything?

EDWARD

We work very hard at being blasé.

(ROBERT and GEORGIA clap for EDWARD).

CECELIA

(stops).

Lucy, darling. What is it that you want?

LUCY

I don't know what I want. Yes, I do. I want to know if I'm the only one who looks at this place and sees the holes in the walls. If I'm the only one who hears the explosions outside and tastes the dust from the falling plaster. And – And I want to understand what you – How you feel about me – No. What I really want. I want – I want – I want two normal parents!

EDWARD

What's your second choice?

CECELIA

I'm sorry dear, but...

EDWARD

We're incorrigible.

CECELIA

Hopeless.

EDWARD

We're just little dickens, aren't we dear?

CECELIA

Little dickens.

(They giggle).

LUCY

Mother, you've got to tell me what I should do.

CECELIA

You're thirty-two years old, dear. You tell me.

LUCY

Mother, I'm stuck. I don't know who I am. What I want!

ROBERT

Boring!...

CECELIA

And that's somehow my fault?

ROBERT

(to GEORGIA)

Come on, let's dance.

GEORGIA

Is the show over?

ROBERT

The good part, anyway.

(ROBERT and GEORGIA dance off into the night).

LUCY

Mother, I was a mistake! The product of a one-night stand.

CECELIA

It was not a one-night stand. It was a three week stand. And it was lovely.

(to EDWARD)

Wasn't it, darling?

EDWARD

Lovely.

(He dances with CECELIA)

The loveliest mistake I ever made.

LUCY

Daddy, this is serious.

(EDWARD leaves CECELIA, and dances with LUCY on the table).

EDWARD

The loveliest, most serious mistake I ever made.

CECELIA

Oh, Edward!

(she taps LUCY on the shoulder to cut in).

May I...?

(EDWARD dances with CECELIA on the table. As always, ALFREDO is there for LUCY)).

ALFREDO

(to LUCY).

May I...?

LUCY

No, it's not that easy.

EDWARD

Alfredo is a very good dancer.

LUCY

Oh, don't you see?? I can't go on until I find out who I am – I mean, who I'm supposed to be.

CECELIA

Be yourself, darling.

EDWARD

We just want you to be happy.

LUCY

But how can I be happy if I don't know what I'm supposed to want??

EDWARD

Ooh, that one's out of my depth. You take it, Cec.

(EDWARD comes down off the table and dances off by himself. CECELIA and LUCY sit at the table. A long moment passes).

CECELIA

My mother was a very cautious person. She was an excellent baker. She'd make the most delicious cakes. And in a coal-fired stove. Cakes need a hot oven, you know. And it's not easy to keep a coal oven heating at a steady temperature. She'd manage it, somehow. But after a while, she refused to use cake flour. Her family, she said, was too disrespectful. The minute she put a cake in the oven, one of her wayward children, or her wayward husband would bound into the kitchen with some petty child or husband crisis, and the cake would fall. So, she took to making coal cakes. Pound cakes, gingerbread, spice cakes – delicious, but heavier, and not so fragile. In a cast iron skillet, no less. She said you could plop them down into dying coals and they'd still come out just fine. And they always did. She needed that security, I guess. – God, I haven't thought of my mother for years.

LUCY

Mother...

CECELIA

You said it was like eating frosting. You're right. But frosting that's been beautifully arranged. Rococo designs on hollow shells. That's what we are, darling. These are our offices. And it's not just the frosting. It's the cake too. The most finely ground flour, made extra light by a flash of cream of tartar. If the cake doesn't look delicious...

(She turns to EDWARD, who has returned).

I don't know what I would have done without him.

LUCY

Mummy?

CECELIA

Yes, darling.

LUCY

If I hadn't been born, would you and Daddy have stayed together?

CECELIA

Edward, would you have stayed with me if Lucy here hadn't come along?

EDWARD
Mmmn...

LUCY
Daddy!

EDWARD
I have to think about it.

LUCY
What??

EDWARD
I take that to be a serious question. If you want a serious answer, you've got to let me think about it for a bit.
(He thinks).

LUCY
Well?

EDWARD
What was the question?

CECELIA
Our little accident here.

EDWARD
Oh. Yes. The answer is yes.

LUCY
Yes, what?

EDWARD
Yes, you were an accident. But so are most things in life. And if a man's worth his salt, he will claim them all as his own idea and his first choice.
(to CECELIA).
I'm not sorry, darling.

CECELIA

Your father has been a real comfort to me.

LUCY

And are you happy?

(EDWARD and CECELIA look to each other. There is a long silence).

LUCY

Good bye, Daddy.

(She kisses EDWARD).

EDWARD

You're leaving?

LUCY

Good bye, Mummy.

(she kisses CECELIA).

CECELIA

Where are you going?

EDWARD

When are you coming back?

(LUCY exits).

EDWARD (continued).

She left.

CECELIA

Mmmn.

EDWARD

Just because we didn't answer one little question?

(ALFREDO enters and begins to blow out candles and turn off lights).

ALFREDO

The ballroom is closing. Five minutes, please.

(EDWARD and CECELIA find themselves at a loss as the lights dim. Sounds of the night – bombs and gun fire – can be heard once again in the distance. EDWARD and CECELIA move closer together for comfort. There is a beat and LUCY enters. A blanket is draped around her shoulders and she carries a teddy bear).

CECELIA

What is it, darling?

LUCY

Nothing.

EDWARD

Can't you sleep?

LUCY

(a beat).

I just wanted to make sure you weren't having any nightmares.

(EDWARD and CECELIA huddle together as the lights grow dimmer).

CECELIA

No, darling. We're having a wonderful time.

EDWARD

As we always do.

LUCY

Okay. I was just wondering.

(LUCY starts out).

EDWARD
Lucy!

LUCY
Yes, Daddy?

EDWARD
Aren't you going to kiss us good night?

(LUCY returns to her parents who are now huddled together in the dark. She kisses EDWARD).

LUCY
Good night, Daddy.

EDWARD
'Night, Biddybones.

LUCY
(kisses CECELIA)
Good night, Mummy.

CECELIA
Good night, Darling.

LUCY
Do you want me to tell you a story?

EDWARD
(frightened).
Is it like last night's story? Is it about monsters under your bed?

LUCY
Well – Do you want me to sing you a song?

EDWARD
Yes. Sing us a song.

(LUCY wraps the blanket around her parents and hands them the bear).

LUCY

(sings).

"The itsy bitsy spider
Climbed up the water spout.
Down came the rain
And washed the spider out.
Out came the sun
And dried up all the rain.
And the itsy bitsy spider
Climbed up the spout again".

CECELIA

That's very nice.

LUCY

Do you want me to sing you another one?

CECELIA

Yes, come sing us another one.

EDWARD

A lullaby.

LUCY

How about Rock-a-bye Baby?

CECELIA

Yes, come sing Rock-a-bye Baby.

(LUCY joins her parents and begins to sing).

LUCY

"Rock-a-bye baby
In the tree top.
When the wind blows,
The cradle will rock.
When the bough breaks,
The cradle will fall.
And down will come baby,
Cradle and all."

(LUCY holds EDWARD and CECELIA close and continues to hum. ALFREDO comes out of the shadows).

ALFREDO

(to LUCY).
One last dance, miss?

(He leads her to a lighted area downstage. They begin to dance – a slow waltz).

LUCY

They look so much smaller in the dark.

ALFREDO

Yes, miss.

LUCY

Do you think they will be okay? – Will they just sit there? All night?

ALFREDO

Until the dancing begins again. They are creatures of the light.

LUCY

Yes. And I am –

ALFREDO

Now, miss...

LUCY

Sorry. Sorry. I know I'm too serious. And I was probably born into the wrong family, but – But – Well, at least I'm trying to know who I am.

ALFREDO

Not everyone wants to know, Miss.

LUCY

But –

ALFREDO

They are who they are, miss. Morning always comes. And the ballroom always opens.

LUCY

Yes. I just wish –

ALFREDO

Yes, miss?

LUCY

Oh, nothing – Alfredo –

ALFREDO

Yes, miss.

LUCY

Is it always going to be this painful?

ALFREDO

I'll be here, miss.

LUCY

Oh, Alfredo! –

ALFREDO

Yes, miss.

(LUCY puts her head on ALFREDO's shoulder and they dance).

End of play.

DANCING LESSON

by Nora Douglass

SYNOPSIS

Set in a formal ballroom, this romp in eight scenes follows, between dance sets, the comic and often painful adventures of LUCY, a stranger in a strange land, growing up the awkward and ever serious daughter of beautiful, charming, and eternally young CECELIA and EDWARD, who frequent the ballroom to pick up fleeting friends and lovers. The play, which takes place during the course of one evening in the lives of EDWARD and CECELIA, and in and out of the years of LUCY's life, begins with the advent of LUCY's conception, where she tries to convince ALFREDO, maître d' and designate godfather, that it's all been a very grave mistake.

LUCY is born on stage, brought out in a red wagon, and she is forever trying to find her place in her parents' glamorous world. The play follows her through key episodes in her life while her parents continue to sip away at their champagne cocktails and size up the evening's possibilities. We meet LUCY, age eleven, charged with writing an essay on George Washington, more worried about the Father of our Country's views on child-rearing and his false teeth than his great campaigns; and at sixteen on prom night, having to ask her suave father to risk the embarrassment of an awkward partner on the dance floor to teach her to dance.

EDWARD makes a valiant effort, much to the amusement of his latest love-interest, but it is ALFREDO who finally teaches LUCY to dance, and in a brief moment of glory, she is sent off to the dance. She is immediately pushed back onto the stage by ROBERT and GEORGIA, and in a passionate, tormented tango, is ardently pursued by lovers of both sexes. LUCY must participate in a game of hide and seek with her parents on her wedding day. Her divorce, ten years, and on stage, thirty seconds later, where once again LUCY attempts to interest her delightfully unaware parents in her life, becomes merely a catalyst for a discussion over what kind of champagne to order.

Written from the point of view of the immature LUCY, a child trying to fit into the foreign domain of her parents' lives, DANCING LESSON is about trying to make sense of the sometimes-incomprehensible world of adult rules, where confusing codes of etiquette and dictates of style-decrees only they seem to understand-rule over honest emotion and common sense. It's about a child's limited ability to communicate and be heard. It's about learning to get by and let go. And finally, it's about growing up.