

ANN COPELAND

## *Six Bagatelles for Dancers*

### 1. LEARNING THE STEPS

Time: 1940-1946, any Friday afternoon or evening between September and June.

Place: Waterbury, Connecticut, a town distinguished by a high percentage of Roman Catholics, largely second-generation immigrant factory workers now coalesced into strong ethnic communities, and a corresponding abundance of debt-ridden churches in sections of town serving Irish, French, Italian, Polish, Lithuanian, and German parishioners. By contrast, the fewer Protestant churches tend to be handsome in gray stone or gleaming white clapboard and exhibit tenderly cared for landscapes beneath their splendid, weathervane-topped spires.

At the center of the large downtown Green, a tall flag pole waves the Stars and Stripes high above a circle of seasonal flowers and various lollers-about relaxing on park benches here and there. To one side of the Green, just across West Main Street, a large handsome Roman Catholic Romanesque church, the Immaculate Conception, holds its high gold doors open toward the Green, the flag, the loiterers. If debt troubles this magnificent church, it certainly does not show. At the far end of the Green, quietly elegant, stands St. John's Episcopal Church, stunning in its grey stone, doors locked except on Sunday.

In my study today hangs a poster showing Waterbury's dashing Fife and Drum Corps proudly strutting in red white and blue Revolutionary garb in front of St. John's. The banner flying alongside their U.S. flag identifies *Mattatuck Fife and Drum Band since 1767*, the oldest fife and drum corps continuously operating in the country. Just visible behind them, on a little grass island near the church, stands the Soldier's Monument, tribute to those fallen in battle. Thus did one artist choose to synthesize a vision of history, religion, music and patriotism with local color in downtown Waterbury, Connecticut.

While the presence, location, and relative number of churches may seem far removed from the learning of basic dance steps, perhaps it is not—or at least was not in that time and that place.

Across Prospect Street, on the opposite corner from the Immaculate Conception Church—locally referred to as “The Immaculate”—the Hotel Elton faces the Green. During my growing-up years, entering the side door from Prospect Street would bring you into a short hallway. Turn left, go up a few steps, and you will come upon a small ballroom.

Friday dancing classes for children take place in this ballroom with its highly polished floor and its rows of straight-backed chairs along either side. Lasting one hour, classes begin at four in the afternoon, after school dismissal. As early as third grade, children may begin lessons. Parents anxious that their young fry absorb socially acceptable formulas of dance, deportment, and social discourse send their children here at the cost of twenty-five dollars *per annum*. Tap dance is offered somewhere else in town, but—despite the example of Donald O’Connor and Fred Astaire—tap seems, at least for my parents, to lack sufficient social promise. At Miss Slocum’s it’s virtually guaranteed that by the end of grammar school your child will know the proper thing to do in a given social situation, whether or not she chooses to do it.

Just outside the ballroom, down a few steps and to the left, a cloakroom with racks of hangers and space for boots bustles with activity on Friday afternoon and evening as children are delivered by parents. Only at the final reception will parents be permitted to trip the light fantastic and survive a twirl with their own small fry or other prepubescent offspring. On that evening, niceties of “cutting in” and exchanging partners will be executed in an atmosphere at once cordial and reassuring.

For now, the task is to learn the steps.

As they shed their wraps, children laugh and talk and push and shove, bursting with end-of-school-week energy. Little girls display short dresses of velvet, cotton, and taffeta, white socks and gleaming patent leather Mary Janes. The boys sport dark blue suits (short pants or long, depending on age and height), dark shoes and socks (high for those in shorts), white shirts and ties. When the girls turn eleven or twelve and move into the after supper class, they will wear stockings with low pumps; all the boys will graduate to long pants.

White cotton gloves, it seems, transcend age or gender. Spanking fresh each week, they protect against sweating palms and are rarely forgotten.

As children mill about near the cloakroom waiting for the hour of their class, the first hurdle looms: partnering. Who will ask you to walk in with him? Jack Hutchinson, who bounces in the polka? Chubby Tuttle, who hops but is a good kid? Jerry Post, whose hands sweat through his gloves? Pee Wee Johnson, whose head scrapes your nose? Or, unasked this week, will you have to find a partner among the other stranded girls, preserve face, and walk in smiling?

“Walking in” is a big deal, a nerve-wracking liminal experience. It involves standing silently in line with the boy who has asked you to walk in with him, then going up the stairs together and into the ballroom where, just inside the doorway, you will be graciously greeted by the teacher, Miss Benita Virginia Slocum, and her assistants, Miss Coffee and Mrs. Arnold. By this time, your escort of the moment—be he four or five feet tall—has made sure he knows your name. He takes your gloved hand in his gloved hand and holds you forth to introduce you to Miss Slocum—who perfectly well knows who you are. She greets you both by name, he bows slightly, you curtsy, he turns away and leads you to a chair along the sidelines of the ballroom, then sits down beside you. Even at this stage, he has learned to see his partner off the dance floor and back to her place. No cheese is ever to be left standing alone at Miss Slocum’s Dancing School.

You both sit with ankles crossed, hands on lap, until all the children have taken their places along the side of the ballroom, hands on laps, ankles crossed. In this orderly cosmos, attention deficit disorder and hyperactivity seem nonexistent; nudging, shoving, whispering, squirming were cast off with coats and boots in the cloakroom outside.

During this entrance ritual, at the far end of the ballroom on a slightly raised stage, Miss Larkin sits erect at the small cream-colored upright piano, playing something steadily rhythmic, one, two, three, four, to encourage the line of children forward for introductions.

You try to sit still, not your greatest talent. The piano’s emphatic rhythms zap through you, tingle your feet as you sit there struggling not to twitch.

When the last young lady has taken her seat, Miss Slocum comes to the center of the room in her long salmon-colored gown and her dancing shoes. She faces you all, pleasant, a bit grave. "Good evening, girls and boys. Tonight we will begin with a review of the waltz. Please stand."

Miss Slocum: was she sixty, seventy, even eighty? Her face merges now with the face of Everywoman over sixty. But her dress, her stance, her manner, her firm steady courtesy, her patience: that remains seared in memory. Miss Slocum's hair was decidedly not white but colored a mousey brown and curled; she always wore a long dress with long sleeves, her feet and ankles exposed so you could watch and learn from them. Each Friday a large corsage decorated her left shoulder. She wore a hearing aid, which sent a thin dark cord down behind the collar of her dress. She spoke clearly, but never raised her voice. I now know, from the article that *Life Magazine* ran on that dancing school in 1945, that she was then seventy-seven and had been teaching dancing and deportment for fifty-four years.

You rise, take your places in lines on the floor, girls standing in front of boys, all facing Miss Slocum, waiting for her demonstration. The girls will first learn the boys' parts: waltz, fox trot, polka, or, later, rumba, tango, Lindy hop, conga. Like all effective teachers, Miss Slocum breaks down the dance into clear formulas for the feet. After the basic steps have been mastered, the girls will practice them in reverse, with imaginary partners. Finally will come the moment when she pairs boys and girls and the truth will out: who can lead, who can follow, whose feet spring, whose feet drag.

For now, as Mrs. Larkin plays an unmistakable waltz, each child will follow Miss Slocum's elegant salmon-colored back, her trim ankles. Effortlessly, she demonstrates the first steps. She clacks her clacker and every child holds white-gloved hands up, elbows bent, as he or she imitates those teaching shoes.

Dancing class has begun.

So it goes for six years. And while you are in those classes, the significance of whether you attend a stone church or a debt-ridden Roman Catholic church, whether you attend a small parochial school or a select private school, whether you live at the bottom of the hill, the top of the hill, or outside town in the rolling green

Connecticut countryside and keep horses, begins to sink in. By eighth grade you understand that a chasm of class, custom, religious practice, inherited privilege and expectation, separates your own Irish-Catholic middle-class family from "The Four Hundred," the established Yankee residents of Waterbury, Connecticut and environs, the families that own the factories.

Even so, you have had the advantage of learning the basic steps. And there is no telling when they may come in handy, where they may lead.

## 2. ON THE ROOF

Time: March, 1943

Place: The Hotel New Yorker, Manhattan.

Newsreels persistently remind that Our Boys are being killed or wounded "Over There." "When Johnny Comes Marching Home Again," "Anchors Away, My Boys," and Kate Smith's "God Bless America" echo in your head as Frank Sinatra and Donald O'Connor tap their way in uniform across the big screen at Loew's Poli Theatre on Saturday afternoons.

For Waterbury, "Brass Center of the World," the War Effort has special meaning. Scovill, American Brass, Chase Brass and Copper: their shops teem with defense workers, many of them women, churning out bullets, brass buttons, and fodder for the defense industry. Blackout curtains have been hung around town, and during air raid drills fathers and uncles prowl neighborhoods to check that no light shows through the fissures of that darkened world.

Yet light finds its fissure and dazzles an eleven-year-old moving with her brother and parents through a wilderness of neon, crowds, sirens, horns, shouts and murmurs: even in wartime, Manhattan is Manhattan. You and your mother knit socks for The Boys. You and your brother crush aluminum cans. Your dad finds ways to get extra ration books. The War, however, touches you largely through pictures and voices—Van Johnson stunning in uniform, Vera Lynn singing patriotism, Lowell Thomas crooning *The Evening News*, an extra Hail Holy Queen each morning at school for Our Boys fighting in this valley of tears.

This is no valley of tears. Here you are, in the embrace of parents who have brought you to experience the City. You've seen *Oklahoma*, watched the radio show Ralph Edwards' *Truth or Consequences*. At *Hells A-Poppin'* Olsen and Johnson actually brought you up on stage. All of that was prelude to this cool Friday evening in downtown Manhattan. Your father and mother have decided to bring you and your thirteen-year-old brother to the Starlight Roof. You wear a maroon velvet dress with a lace collar, flesh-colored nylons with seams up the back, and Mary Janes with T-straps. Getting ready in your room at the New Yorker Hotel, your mother curled your hair with the curling iron, carefully slipping a comb between the heat and your scalp as she wrapped each bunch of hair around the iron. You watched her curl her eyelashes with that funny metal object she carries for special occasions.

Nothing of the food, the drink, the light talk of that evening now remains. What sticks is the generalized heady aura of being out in Manhattan with your parents, sitting at a table covered by a thick white tablecloth, surrounded by conversational murmur and the clinking of glasses, right next to the crowded dance floor—and longing to be out there.

The band starts to play. The familiar itch consumes you. Your shiny black shoes move in time beneath the table, you glance at your mother who, you can tell, is feeling the same urge. In contrast to your brother—now embarrassingly tall and pimpled—you have excelled at dancing school and long to put it to the test in public. You want to show off. You look at your father. You know he is not feeling well, but he is your only hope. “Would you like to dance?” he finally says. Or perhaps your mother leaned over and whispered to him, “Bill, take her out to the dance floor.”

He does like to show you off, his only daughter. You both get up, head for the dance floor as the band starts a waltz. One two three, one two three. It invades your sinews, your muscles, your bones, zings through you as you rise to the balls of your feet, ready. You know how to follow your partner as he leads you through a turn and oh, finally, sometimes into a dip at the very end.

Your dad's stomach grazes you; your head comes to his shoulder. The trouble is: you don't dance. He has this odd way of just moving forward. Later you will hear it called “The Two Step.” It is totally unsatisfying. Why can't he feel the rhythm and follow it, why can't

he at least do a box step? No, just forward and then forward, a bit like walking, sometimes a chassée, only you can never tell just when he will stick one in.

Three of the six years he has been given to live have already passed. You know this. Your home is kept quiet. Afternoons when he gets home from work at the Connecticut Light & Power Co., he often rests before dinner. One day not too long ago when you were with him in the living room, helping him turn the key that lifts the heavy weights on the grandmother clock, he said: "Who's going to do this when I kick the bucket?" Heart sinking, you rose to the occasion and told him you would. Years later you will interpret this memorable New York excursion as his attempt to outwit time: now rather than later. There will be no later.

He pushes you forward through the other dancers for a bit, then has to stop. You both go back to the table. No doubt your face makes it clear that although you have danced, you haven't *really* danced. You're trying to be good; after all this is a special trip. But even if your father doesn't know how to dance, *you do*.

After a few moments, a man from a neighboring table comes over to speak to your parents. "I wonder, would you mind if I danced with your daughter?"

You're ready to leap up from the table, hit the dance floor, execute a dazzling dip. You'd like to be June Allyson, Judy Garland, Ginger Rogers, all wrapped up into one. Oh for the chance to show what you have so aptly learned. (On other occasions, you also long to be Jennifer Jones in *The Song of Bernadette* who, regrettably, didn't dance.)

Mr. Ruff introduces himself to you and pulls out your chair. Unfazed, nervously happy, you feel his hand on your elbow piloting you to the dance floor. Ah, bliss, it's instantly clear: *he can dance*. You can follow. He can lead. And not only does he know the box step and the turn, he can also maneuver you into the conversational, which you've recently learned. Oh, this is heaven. And a little hesitation when he senses it in the music. Totally in command, Mr. Ruff moves you through the steps on the dance floor to the strains of some song you cannot now name. For a few little twirls under his arm, he pushes you through and is there to catch you on the return. At the end, oh joy, he leads you into a dip. For the first time,

a strong arm holds you steady instead of the little boy arm, which always threatens to let you go kerplunk.

And then it is over.

The night fades. The hotel, the size of the rooms, the neon names of Broadway: all of it fades. There remains one golden moment on the dance floor.

Mr. Ruff.

He was a stranger. You were a little girl dressed up and out with your parents and brother for a big evening. He observed the forms of courtesy. It worked. He led you through the dance. You knew what to do. Your steps followed his; together you moved in time to the music. He returned you to the table, to your family, and left you feeling accomplished, happy, noticed, admired.

You felt the joy of finding a suitable partner for the dance.

What fun for an eleven-year-old girl in the midst of World War II, out for an evening in Manhattan with a father who would die two years later, a brother who would see his own military service and, later, die too young, a mother who would never, into her nineties, lose her ability to dance.

Learning the steps paid off.

### 3. THE WORLD'S FAIR

Time: late May, 1964

Place: Flushing Meadows, New York

The driver wedges the station wagon between a Chrysler and a maroon Buick and six figures climb out clothed in black to the ankles, their faces framed by starched white headdresses. Each sister carries a small paper bag with a peanut butter sandwich, two cookies, and a small carton of apple juice inside. Deep in each underskirt pocket, next to the rosary case, lies a folded five-dollar bill.

The day glows. A high bright sun beats down on their covered heads; a welcome breeze ruffles veils. High domes, spires, cubes of plastic, cement, and steel, and puffy white clouds dot the sky, a blue sky today. Thank God for the breeze, for it is hot, and black serge does not breathe.



Their two-dollar entrance fee paid by the senior sister, the six nuns head for the Unisphere, a huge glittering globe with its stainless steel rings—symbol of this year's World's Fair.

Water, water everywhere—lakes, lagoons, reflecting pools, fountains—this make-believe world is awash in water. At the base of the Unisphere a reflecting pool receives the tossed coins of passersby, hopes tossed for progress, tossed toward a future without pain, without shadow. Coins of hope. The nuns have no coins to throw away.

Children with ice cream dripping from their mouths run by, parents at the chase. The smell of pizza floats on the air, enough to make any abstemious nun's mouth water. Grown-ups stream past balancing Belgian waffles topped with strawberries and whipped cream as children tug at their hands. In the International Section, sixty-six countries are officially represented. Flags snap brilliant rainbows in the wind, New York, New Jersey, Wisconsin, Pakistan, Sweden, France: the world.

The Swiss Sky Ride screams above you. Everyone seems to be wearing yellow General Electric buttons proclaiming *I Have Seen the Future*. As you notice the buttons, a long-buried memory pops up: the trip to the World's Fair in 1939 with your parents and brother. The three of you stood mesmerized before General Motors' *Futurama*, fascinated by sleek automobiles racing around landscaped highways, through tunnels, over bridges. And here you are now, twenty-five years later, plunk inside that *Futurama*: you traveled a landscaped highway to get here, zoomed beneath tunnels, across bridges, in a sleek automobile. You are covered in black and white, veiled. Who could have seen this future? Yet *I Have Seen the Future* buttons continue to sell.

*Do we ever willingly dispense with illusion?*

*Does the future never lose its lure?*

Straight ahead—the Vatican Pavilion, its gold roof agleam. To look at it hurts the eyes.

First, you all must locate the Pietà. If Mary and her son had not made this trip to Flushing Meadows, neither would you. Seeing her tops the official list of Things to Do. After the Vatican Pavilion, you will be freed to roam for several hours before returning to the parking lot, climbing into the van, heading back to your cloistered convent in New Rochelle. A rare event, this, for semi-cloistered nuns who are allowed out only for purposes of health or education.

Some higher power has judged The World's Fair educational. And you have your own secret plan.

Pinkerton men guard the doorway to the Vatican Pavilion. "They wanted to dress the Pinkerton men like Swiss Guard," remarks one nun, as you all board the conveyor belt that will carry you slowly past the Mother and her Son. "Rome was smart enough to say no."

You cannot summon a reply. Part of you wants to see the Pietà. If not now, when?

Hot expectant humans breathe around you. The tall clergyman beside you in a gray suit with a Roman collar looks pinched, as if behind that cloth secret pain leaks. Ahead of you, a small stocky woman, her long blonde curls pulled back by a knotted cowboy-style kerchief, her purple high heels fairly tottering as she clutches the rail, turns to you, eyes aglow: "I'm so excited, Sister," she whispers. "This is what I came to see. I came all the way from Wyoming."

*"What did you go into the desert to see? A reed shaken in the wind?"*

The conveyor belt moves slowly, like a department store escalator propelled by an outside power, headed this time not for Ladies Ready-to-Wear but for the lady herself. Bulletproof Lucite will protect viewers as they look into the large blue velour grotto. Monks from somewhere can be heard chanting the Solemn Salve Regina. *At te suspiramus, gementes et flentes in hac lacrimarum valle*. You think: what a farce. Thomas Merton should see this. Could Trappists in backwoods Kentucky in their sweat-drenched cowls guess what use their sublime prayer would be put to?

The conveyor belt inches out of the wings, toward the center. Suddenly it shudders.

*Et Jesum, benedictum fructum ventris tui.*

There she is. Her serene face inclines over the body of her dead son.

*"What did you go out to the desert to see?"*

Fifty spotlights beaming down on the figure of Mary and her dead son . . . *nobis post hoc exilium ostende* . . . fake votive candles, half watt blue lights, four hundred of them, twinkling to create a phony atmosphere of peace, of prayer, of *what*?

You stop for a moment directly in front of the virgin, the mother. And there, before that sublime form—so simple, so pure—your mind finally grows still. Pure grief in the cold embrace of white Carrara marble.

Then . . . *gone*.

The belt jiggles along.

"Wasn't she beautiful?" whispers the small woman, pressing against you.

How do you isolate such a moment from its context? How do you learn to ignore implication? "*Unless you become as little children you cannot enter the kingdom of heaven.*" Becoming as little children itself holds too much implication.

One by one you step off the conveyor belt and move *en masse* into the center of the pavilion where Cardinal Spellman's stamp and coin collection is on view. Nuns of every stripe and color surround you, habits in various stages of reconstruction and deconstruction: ankle-length, calf-length, knee-length, tones of navy blue and gray, modest, unstylish, headdresses pared down to reveal hair, clumps of laced black oxfords beside which your black loafers (no pennies) look positively daring. Cloistered eyes stare at the display on Catholic schools: *Catholic schools make a \$22 billion contribution to the American economy*. In these days of Vatican II, you've been wondering about that contribution, for no assertion about the Church in America or, for that matter, in the world now seems clear or simple, devoid of context, of implication. Nearby, slide boxes demonstrate the life of the church and for the Eucharist include a glossy close-up of grapes, a loaf of Jewish rye, a wine glass, a basket of rolls.

*Does a figure with a whip wait just beyond the door to the Vatican Pavilion?*

Release will come.

Live rhythms will displace canned monks, real dancing subsume frozen grief. You have a secret.

You have set it up in advance: with a sympathetic nun companion—for nuns still must travel in twos—you will ditch the others and make your way to the Spanish Pavilion.

As crowds ooze away from displays and out the door, two nuns drift off to sit in the giant floating egg, feature of IBM. Two others want to experience the picture phone. You are all to meet by the Unisphere at five o'clock. Sister Maura, true friend, stays with you.

You both move quickly on ahead, threading the crowd, and finally pass through the huge grilled door of the Spanish Pavilion into space, open space, blooming with the color of hundreds of flowers, but it's not so much color as the sense of spaciousness itself that

meets you head on, as if suddenly the world opened, as if somehow space itself could offer you the gift of inner freedom. You are gloriously free of the crowded, noisy, sweaty, exhilarating streets of The World's Fair outside this enclosure. Seclusion strokes your soul, hushes its murmurs, a different kind of air brushes your starch-framed cheek. Many years later, you'll watch prisoners emerge from dungeon darkness in Beethoven's *Fidelio*—dark ragged figures slowly reaching for light, for air, breathing first in quiet wonder, their voices gradually swelling in their glorious hymn to air:

*O welche Lust! In freier Luft  
den Atem leicht zu heben!  
Nur hier, nur hier ist Leben,  
der Kerker eine Gruft.  
Sprecht leise, haltet euch zurück!  
Wir sind belauscht mit Ohr und Blick.*

You will momentarily leave the Seattle Opera House and return to this transforming moment in the courtyard of the Spanish Pavilion when you yourself seemed to breathe in a new elixir created by space—as if a sudden openness supplied new life to your spirit, to your soul.

O what joy in the open air  
To breathe with ease!  
Only here, only here is life,  
the prison a tomb.  
Speak softly, restrain yourselves!  
We are overheard by ears and eyes.

Together you now hurry by Turcios murals—subdued grays, blacks, tans, and white tones narrating Spanish discovery and conquest, understated images of power perfectly integrated with the architecture of this wondrous pavilion. You climb the massive stairway past white stucco walls and move through geranium-crowded courtyards to the exhibitions. You want to pause everywhere as you pass through museum alcoves and the gallery of Old Masters; you have never been to Europe and have no hope of going there.

Guitars throb. You hurry past a statue of Junipero Serro. There isn't time to stop and gawk. You have tickets. A truly astonishing fact. How would you have tickets when religious poverty demands that all household money be controlled by the superior? A superior who, you are perfectly clear, would never, even for educational reasons, send you to a show. These tickets were not distributed by your superior. In fact, she knows nothing about them. Thanks to the discreet generosity of a friend on the outside, you and your friend on the inside are about to have a great, illicit treat. Your pulse throbs in anticipation.

Finally: the theater.

And now it begins, on the large stage, the perfect dialogue of body and mind. Guitars weep and cry their subtle rhythms, growing, growing. Feet stamp, elbows bend, knees flicker, layers of ruffled hemlines wave. You sit in the dark, mesmerized. What is this sinuous geometry of the body that gathers into itself so many moods—anger, fear, passion, betrayal, jealousy—dispersing them through the bend of an elbow, the tension of a knee? The gentle, supple curving arms, the revolving wrists, the swiveling hips, the eloquent hands of this woman who dances with a shawl as if it were a partner, her speaking fingers part of the dance. And the slow, controlled movement of the tall slim man in his skin tight black pants, his dark hat and ruffled shirt, as he twirls, bows, advances, stands aside, surveys, and stretches into the turn and stamp of a shiny black boot. You want to be inside those orange ruffles, make them dip, you want to learn how to manage the intricate clicks of those black heels, how to swirl a shawl as if it were a partner, you want to know how to tease with long slender legs, with which you, unfortunately, have not been blessed. How is it possible to combine such elaborate showiness with such interiority? How can subtle abstraction be embodied in such austere, disciplined body gestures? Here, in the gorgeous building simulating the courtyards of Castille, the filigreed palaces of Andalusia, you are no longer, for one hour, held in a vise of white starch and covered by a long black skirt with no ruffles. You are *elsewhere*.

You are, in fact, the only nuns in the theater.

You want to stay, see it again, delay the moment of leaving.

The images, the rhythm, the sustained pauses, the gorgeous stately moves, the nimble ankles. The wonderful click click and

stamp of those marvelous black shoes. The slowly weaving arms of the dancers, the graceful wrists, the perfectly calibrated invitation and delay, the gracious, teasing dialogue of man and woman, seducer and seduced, the seen and the ignored, heel and toe, body and mind. Flamenco.

Back, then, to the Unisphere.

Years later, many years later, you will see flamenco dancing again, up close enough to watch beads of sweat appear on the intense faces, and you will recognize in the words of Federico García Lorca the astonishing accomplishment of the flamenco dancer.

The dancer's trembling heart must bring everything into harmony, from the tips of her shoes to the flutter of her eyelashes, from the ruffles of her dress to the incessant play of her fingers. Shipwrecked in a field of air, she must measure lines, silences, zigzags, and rapid curves, with a sixth sense of aroma and geometry, without ever mistaking her terrain. In this she resembles the torero, whose heart must keep to the neck of the bull. Both of them face the same danger—he, death; and she, darkness.

She must fill a dead, gray space with a living, clear, trembling arabesque, one which can be vividly remembered. This is how she speaks, this is her tongue.

—García Lorca, "In Praise of Antonia Mercé, *La Argentina*," *In Search of Duende*

#### 4. IN THE KITCHEN: PART A

Time: Noon, a September day, 1982

Place: Sackville, pop 3000, New Brunswick, Canada

It isn't the perfect ballroom, but the new floor works. We've finally gotten rid of the loathsome brown kitchen rug, which displayed every drop of flour, and this new cushion floor works for dancing. Besides, this isn't romantic or display dancing. It's fun dancing.

The theater is a small town in New Brunswick, Canada, home of two stove foundries, a university, and a few other smaller enterprises. Tom, the older son, is in seventh grade at the one local elemen-

tary school. This is the era of bullies in the schoolyard. He can walk home from school for lunch. We live just a few blocks away.

I'm in the kitchen preparing a lunch for him and his dad, who also may arrive over the noon hour, walking home from the university, which is five minutes away.

Last summer, at a family dance camp in Pointe d'Église, Nova Scotia, a week of lessons in four types of social dancing—ballroom, folk, square, and Scottish—taught us, among many other things, the cha-cha. During this school year my husband and I have guaranteed ourselves a weekly date: we drive to Moncton, the nearest city, where we drop off Tom for his tap lesson while we head for ballroom dance lessons at Club d'Age d'Or. The Spanish Pavilion this is not. Nor are we costumed in ruffles, shawls, skintight black pants and snapping black heels. Nonetheless, we have found a fine teacher, Aurelle Belliveau, and weekly he puts us through newly learned paces doing the cha-cha, rhumba, waltz, fox trot. We dance International Style, now, which differs from the beginnings we made at an Elks Club in McMinnville, Oregon, when we were on leave there last academic year. The Quick Step, dazzling to behold and difficult to execute, challenges us. Dance camp last summer has enlarged our repertoire of steps and heightened our confidence. Each evening the kids, who had been in their own dance classes during the day, had a chance to join the larger party in the school gym where we all danced, about 150 strong, whatever we'd been drilling that day.

Executions of the jive were sometimes a wonder to witness—that tossing and twirling and complicated messaging back and forth between partners, the sheer energetic fun of it.

Now we are back home, dance camp over, school year begun. The urge to move a body in rhythm to music hasn't quite succumbed to winter inertia. And so, on some days shortly after noon, Tom arrives. I have the music on. He's keen for the jive and cha-cha. We hit it, on the cushion floor, usually the jive, for then he gets to push his mother around—twirl me, under his arm, out from him, wind up, unwind, all with a certain glee at his mastery. The younger bones are more fluid and when we do the cha-cha his hips are looser, while mine say I am now a mother. He has a terrific sense of rhythm.

Round and round we go in the kitchen, sandwiches waiting as we narrowly avoid bumping counters or stove. This ballroom is much

too small. Giggles set in as he speeds things up, throws me around, I grow short-winded, breathless, cry for him to stop, and still he leads on and on, until I drop to the floor laughing hysterically.

When his dad comes in he finds me rolling on the floor, breathless.

Sandwiches come after.

The walk to school comes after.

Facing bullies comes after.

Classes in French Immersion come after. Math, social studies, English, science: all comes after the dance. Composing a new story comes after. Returning to face university students comes after.

*What is this dancing?*

It's an interlude from life, something light, something quick, something that leaves us breathlessly laughing. A reprieve. A move away from shadows.

A far cry from Miss Slocum, this. A farther cry, yet, from a nun sitting in the Spanish Pavilion at the World's Fair, throbbing to the beat, longing to dance.

Farther still from a fifth-grade little girl anxious to be on the dance floor and prove herself able to keep step with the gentleman from the next table in the hotel who asks her to dance. The Starlight Roof? That was another country.

These are crevices in time, that's all.

Discern the crevice, inhabit it while you can.

## PART B

Time: Eight o'clock in an early spring evening, 2003

Place: Salem, Oregon

Now, all these years later, twenty-one of them, and no longer living in Canada, no longer with children at home, we live on Mill Creek in Salem, showers-with-sunny-breaks-Oregon. We decided one evening last spring to have in new neighbors across the creek for dinner. We invited our other nearby neighbors on this side of the creek, as well, to join us for a potluck.

Around the dinner table by candlelight, near the framed Gregorian chant which celebrates "*Hodie, nata est,*" our new neighbors, Kate



and Lee, seemed to be enjoying this return to a neighborhood Kate had known as a child. In their return, they are starting a new life.

Toward the end of the meal, Kate lifted her head and looked around the table: "I have a confession to make," she said in a quiet voice.

Ears pricked up. Forks were set down.

She looked at me and then at my husband as if sizing up both us and the moment.

"I looked over the other night and the light was on in your kitchen," she said. During spring and the long summer, trees shade both sides of the creek, but now our large sycamore was still pretty bare. "I looked over to see if you'd wave to me," she went on, for occasionally we've waved at each other through our respective kitchen windows when the trees are bare and we putter about preparing dinner. "I couldn't see you," she said. "But then I saw something moving and I watched. It was the two of you in the kitchen," she said, with a slight hesitation, "and you seemed to be hugging."

No one was eating.

"I watched. Then I saw that you were moving as you hugged. You were *dancing*. I could see you holding one another, moving around, and I just stood there and watched. I didn't want it to stop. It was beautiful."

## 5. IN THE LIVING ROOM

Time: Between 1948 and 1954, any afternoon

Place: A six-room apartment, Buckingham Street, Waterbury, Connecticut

The living room in our apartment is not very large, but can hold two dancers if they keep their steps small. It could be any one of three living rooms, for we moved four times when I was growing up. When she orchestrated her fifth move, my then eighty-year-old mother was living alone. I place this scene in the apartment we moved to when I was a sophomore in high school, where my mother remained for years after I entered the convent. Two years after my father's death, she sold the big house which could accommodate both my brother's extensive drum set and my Chickering piano in

one end of the living room, with lots of space left over. This smaller living room preserves the essentials: the Chickering, three easy chairs, fireplace with mantel to hold several knickknacks, couch mother can sleep on when relatives arrive and need more sleeping space. The drums are gone. My brother is off at boarding school.

My mother loved to dance.

For seventeen years she was married to a man with minimal sense of rhythm, still less of tune, the apex of whose musical outlet occurred when, on rare occasions, he would be driving us all home from somewhere on a Sunday, perhaps a visit to relatives in Litchfield, and he would break into "Should auld acquaintance be forgot—" Then he would stop: that was it.

For her part, mother would now and then break into the first bars of "He's just my Bill," for him.

Ours was not, however, a singing household. I consider that loss.

We had 78s that featured "The Charleston, the Charleston, Made in Carolina" and now, decades past her flapper days but still nimble, my mother set herself to teach me the Charleston. These were my high school years when monthly CYO dances in the auditorium at Waterbury Catholic High School held little demand for the Charleston. Boys with crew cuts and leather jackets cruised about the crowded dance floor, hesitant to actually dance, as nuns watched from the sidelines.

Now and then, when mother had come home from the work she returned to after she lost dad, and I had finished with all my after-school music activities and had not begun to crack the pile of books waiting for me on the desk, we would dance. I would have changed from my navy blue serge uniform and long-sleeved white cotton blouse into dungarees and T-shirt.

We would put on a record, face each other in the living room on the rug with its patterns of rose and black and dull green against a neutral gray. The record would blare: "The Charleston, the Charleston, Made in Carolina" and she would break into it. To the end, at ninety-four, her ankles remained trim. Bothered by feet that sometimes kept her awake at night, she now abstained from spike heels and strove to make her peace with detested, low-heeled black lace oxfords.

So there we would be, I in bare feet, she in sensible shoes, facing one another, piano in one corner, sofa against the other wall, a chair

or two moved out of our way, and above the fireplace on the mantel statues of two gracious ladies draped in pastel colors who always seemed to suggest the kind of elegance my mother longed for.

We were anything but elegant—knees in, knees out, hands out, then back in to cross in front, as we bent slightly forward, turned heels inward, then toes inward, and went to it. No dangling pearls on mom now, no slim glittery flapper dress as I'd seen in old photos of an earlier time. Instead, a piqué house dress, or seersucker, or, in winter, perhaps a matching sweater and skirt, toned to whatever the colors were that year. Heels in, toes out, then reverse, and now, the little touch you don't always see: bend the knees, cross the hands, keep the feet moving, cross and re-cross on the knees as you bend forward. Now do the kick out, as you swing arms across each other in front of you.

Over and over, until the record stopped, and then we would collapse on the sofa or easy chair, breathless, exhilarated.

Back then to what was for supper, the homework at the desk, the Latin, the math, the ordinary high school stuff.

And for mother, back to sustaining the life of a woman early widowed, longing for style and comfort, back now to work to support and educate two growing children.

The dancing moment, though: that leaps full-blown into memory. The living room became a room of living: full of music and movement, energy, as if to say to the framed picture of my father dominating the wall, and in later years of my dead brother next to him (though slightly below): "We can still dance, Bill. We're having a ball." Life goes on—beyond the pictures of graduation, of uncles and aunts gathered for ritual holidays, of a dead grandmother from Ireland, and all the rest that says time stops.

Is it, then, that time stops while you dance? Or is it really a different kind of time?

That may be closer to it: you were in the enchanted crevice, protected from whatever preys, consumes, threatens, invades, destroys. For the length of a Charleston you were safe, dancing within a fissure of light.

Pure gift.

## 6. IN THE MOMENT, OUT OF TIME, OUT OF PLACE

What are the steps we need to learn?

And where can we learn them?

Despite images that Shakespeare puts before us to resolve his comedies, despite the glorious dances that Mozart and Gilbert and Sullivan offer us to round off tales of intrigue, disguise, infidelity, forgiveness, betrayal, mismatches re-matched, and impoverished heroes suddenly revealed as royal offspring, life offstage engages us only sometimes in its deeply comedic aspect.

Comedy offers the relief of steps laid out before us, steps the actors and actresses must themselves learn in order to arrive at the closing dance, to dramatize for their audience the possibility of resolution beyond tragedy.

As an image of life's consummate and passing joys, the dance prevails. When the Duke at the close of "The Marriage of Figaro" calls for the dance, we understand: forgiveness triumphs, manipulation and disguise have achieved their goals—to instruct, to please, to lead to revelation, recognition, and the joy of happy partnering. Mozart and DaPonte have led us neither to Valhalla nor to Faust's eternal fire, but to a place of this world where, inside the dance, human earthly joy is caught and known to us—for a long moment, before the final curtain falls.

My final bagatelle of the dance encompasses a small clear space, a circle of light set within a darker context.

The Odd Fellows Hall in Amherst, Nova Scotia, is a clapboard structure on La Planche Street. On Valentine's Day, 1987—or was it 1986 or 1985?—that space was occupied by a dance for young people. That the precise date matters little suggests how imprecise are the standard markers for growing up, how unpredictable the cycles of maturing for a child who suffers from delayed development. Add to that unpredictability the vagaries of attention-deficit disorder, which entails a radical pull into the moment itself—as if one could tear that moment out of time's flow and climb inside it, devoid of context.

Knowing a goal and steps toward it offers a measure of security, a way of charting progress, achievement, within a given context. To find a partner whose steps may mesh creatively with yours, answering rather than duplicating your own, can entail many snags, delusions, and deceptions of hope. I know this path and rejoice in

having found such a partner. Dancing—so beautiful in the Astaire mode, so joyful when Gene Kelly goes singin' in the rain, so marvelous when Pegleg Clayton taps designs beyond our conceiving or Ruby Keeler shuffles off to Buffalo—conveys the artful deception that mastering steps is easy, that an arm will always be there to keep you from falling in a dip.

If, however, all steps are unclear, the goal simply not there—how does one find a partner to share that unmarked floor? There are no elegant ankles to follow, no beat impelling you to snap your ruffles and click your heels, no regular music inviting you forward toward a gracious welcome into the ballroom of life. If, as Thomas Mann so memorably conveyed in *Tonio Kröger*, a person seems destined to stand fixed forever outside the dance—can moments of shared rhythm, exhilaration, and relief, still occur?

Yes.

The human body is a wondrous thing, the brain even more so. And if one's circuitry differs, as in the case of this dancer, and its behavioral patterns cannot easily be read, nonetheless, it may happen in a given moment that something deep is revealed, shines out of the neural dark.

I have witnessed it.

This is the younger son, who danced for pennies in the ninth-grade cafeteria until authorities intervened, trying to explain to him *implication*. This is the same boy who expertly propelled confused older ladies through intricate square dance maneuvers at dance camp as the caller escalated complexity far past dosie-do. This is the boy who later, baffled to find himself adrift on the unmarked floor of adolescence (the very concept of "steps" distasteful, perhaps unfathomable) will seek release and attention on the tiny dance floor at a local bar-cum-club, until a phone call is made to parents. The word "exploitation" is used.

Nonetheless, here, on the small dance floor in the Oddfellows Hall, at this special dance for variously disabled teenagers, our young man of 14, or 15, or 16, or perhaps 12—how could you know?—finds his partner. Chauffeured by his parents, he has called for her at her home. This special event has required of him extra scrubbing, shaving, and dressing up. Running shoes, T-shirts, jeans have been left behind. In his pressed black trousers, dark shoes and socks, white

long-sleeved shirt with tie, and his dad's blue-and-white striped sports jacket, he is looking even more handsome than usual.

Once arrived at the Oddfellows Hall, they check coats, turn away from parents and, as the music starts up—something loud, with a heavy beat—they head together to the dance floor, sharing space with twenty or thirty other young people.

They do not need to embrace one another. There seems to be no leading or following. Instead, something mysterious occurs almost immediately—a shared intuition about each other's movements, separate, yet together, she in her size two shoes, her ballerina-like red skirt with net showing underneath, her bright blue eyes, her freshly curled hair, he shining with excitement. Then, as the dancing intensifies, bit by bit, the jacket is shed, the strangling tie pulled loose, the shirt collar unbuttoned, the legs and hips grow so fluid, so graceful, the shirt springs from above the creased black trousers, the dark eyes grow brighter, the dark curly hair begins to glisten. Bones, sinews, ligaments, tendons, hands, arms, shoulders, knees, ankles, feet, synapses: one long elastic thread seems to join every part in a perfect dance, together, speaking to one another with their bodies, answering. No Hermes Pan needed to choreograph this; no Ruby Keeler shuffling off to Buffalo hovers dimly in sight. A cosmos separates our dancers from the world of gigue, courante, gavotte, minuet. Neither break dancing nor the moonwalk touch this. This is their own creation, perfect improvising—rhythmic, daring, playful footwork, body movement, joyful in the moment, untroubled by misstep or mishap, unique, perfect.

For a time, in that drab setting, a spotlight of attention shines brightly on the couple. They inhabit that light, fully.

They execute a choreography of the chosen.

What their bodies do is stunning. You could wish for such abandon to the rhythm of the moment.

After this night, they will never see each other again.

Yet, for now, the deep nourishing joy-giving now, they dance inside time, stretching it, shrinking it, according to their whim.

*What is that other world out there—where time is numbered on the clock by sequences of seconds, where responsibilities borne assume density in duration, where work replaces play and ought becomes norm? It is another world, the world of parents, non-dancers, distant, exiled. Outside the dance.*

*They have not seen the future. They need help reading the present.*

*Ours is a different world, our very own, inside the dance: safe, rhythmic,  
shared, its time unmeasured, its end unknown, unanticipated, unthought-of.  
We can dance until the music stops.*

*Time has shrunk to now. We are in it.*

*We are it.*