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## 1983 Excerpt from play *Folded Dreams* by Angela Bowen

Angela Bowen

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FOLDED DREAMS

FOLDED DREAMS

THE CHARACTERS

by

ANGELUS

ELLIE An 18 year old black girl  
MAMA Mrs. Perkins, Ellie's mother  
MADAME Ellie's dance teacher  
DAVIS Ellie's 24 year old lover  
CHARISMA Ellie's best friend

THE TIME

Spring, 1988

CLAUDER COMPETITION  
June 30, 1988

Angela Bowen  
159 Pearl St.  
Cambridge, MA. 02139

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TIME: Spring 1953

PLACE: Mama's (Mrs. Perkins') and Ellie's apartment, any large northern city.

### FOLDED DREAMS

Act I, scene 1

Friday, Afternoon

### THE CHARACTERS

ELLIE An 18 year old black girl  
MAMA an Mrs Perkins, Ellie's mother  
MADAME Ellie's dance teacher (white, with French accent)  
MAVIS Ellie's 24 year old sister  
CLARISSA Ellie's best friend (white)

### THE TIME

Spring, 1953

### THE PLACE

Any large northern city

Ah, (breathes out a sigh of satisfaction).  
Clarissa? Yesterday, I found my balance point  
on the arabesque, just like Madame said I would if I kept  
concentrating and working at it. I swear, I felt as if I could  
have stayed on that spot forever, if I'd wanted.

Whaw! You've got so much heart, Ellie, I swear. You can make  
anything happen.

(laughing) Yeah, Ellie can do anything.

Right, right, remember Madame that time, Ellie?

Are you kidding? Why do you think I said it?

Ellie? Sing? Why, of course she can; Ellie can do anything.  
(They collapse into one another's arms, weak with laughter)

And Ellie was the flattest one in the room.

And no one dared tell Madame

ELLIE

Silly. (They hug. Clarissa heads for the door; Ellie leans over to take off her ballet slippers)

CLARISSA

(turning to look at Ellie, with her hand on the door) Ellie?

ELLIE

Yeah?

CLARISSA

Persevere. (Ellie nods. Clarissa exits. Her footsteps recede)

lights fade

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Act I, scene 2  
early Friday evening

(ELLIE washing dishes; radio playing early 50's rhythm & blues; she glances at clock, goes to stove & gets kettle; fills it with water, putting it on to boil. Returns to sink. Hears front door slam. Looks up the hall)

ELLIE

(nervously) Mama?

MAMA

(faintly, from offstage) Hi, Ellie ... Do I hear that water whistling?

Ellie

Just got it on, Mama. Come rest a bit, it'll be ready in a minute. (Mama comes into the kitchen sighing, and plops a shopping bag onto the chair as she sits in the other chair facing straight out into the audience across the table) You didn't have to stop off in all this heat. I could have gone out for those things.

MAMA

It's alright. I don't want you worrying about all this shopping and housework. You do enough.

ELLIE

Well, so do you. (turns down radio) I'm not even working. It's the least I can do.

MAMA  
I'm used to it. It's just second nature, no more than I'd expect for myself. But you got other fish to fry.

(Ellie shows her discomfort. She bustles over to the stove.)

ELLIE  
Here's the kettle singing. Tea in a minute. (She grabs a mug in one hand and a box of tea in the other, taking them to the stove and beginning to make tea)

MAMA  
Lemon in the bag here. You know, Ellie, it's hard to think of you finally going off to college. The struggle's been so long and hard -- and sometimes I thought I had a nerve to be even thinking it could happen.

ELLIE  
Mama...

MAMA  
Oh yeah, I know you've heard it so much, you're tired of me talking about it. And bragging about you to everybody. But you're the first...

ELLIE  
I know, Mama. (She is murmuring and looking distressed, keeping her head down while she fumbles in the bag for the lemon)

MAMA  
..on either side of the family. Course, it helps that you love to study and keep yourself ahead of your class, or you'd never of got that scholarship. People like us could of never afforded college without that. It'll be all I can do to keep you in books and give you allowance, 'cause ...

ELLIE  
Mama?

MAMA  
(smiling fondly at her) What's up, baby?

ELLIE  
Mama... well ... ah ... here ... here's your tea.

MAMA  
Thank you, Ellie, you're so thoughtful. (pulls the cup closer, leans forward and sniffs). I thought you were getting ready with that old business again about you can work part-time while you're going to school. I know lots of kids do, and I also know how hard

MAMA (continued)

it must be. So, maybe you won't have much money, but you'll have the time to put yourself into your studies just like the best of them.

ELLIE

(squirming now): Mama... it's my life.

MAMA

You'll have time to join clubs and have a little fun too, so you can have good memories of your college days.

ELLIE

(hands over her ears now ... practically yelling) Mama... please... listen.

MAMA

Our dream's finally coming tr ..

ELLIE

Your dream, Mama... yours, not mine.

MAMA

What are you saying, Ellie?

ELLIE

I ... I...don't think I can go, Mama. It's not what I really want. Well, I want it, but, I mean, I'm just not so sure any more, Mama.

MAMA

Ellie!

ELLIE

I'm sorry, Mama... I'm sorry (crying) I wanted to tell you, I just didn't know how.

MAMA

Don't say this ... Please don't say this. Please, Ellie, don't tell me this.

ELLIE

Mama, try to understand ... I'm not saying never, I'm just saying it's not what I want right now.

MAMA

No, not right now ... all you got on your mind right now is dance, dance, dance. It's time for you to realize, girl, our people don't need any more dancers -- we need lawyers, doctors, teachers. Education is what will get us out of this position.

ELLIE

But what about me? What's going to make me happy?

MAMA

Girl, I know dancin's fun, but you've gotta have a profession you can make a living at. That's what my struggle's been for.

ELLIE

It's not just fun, Mama -- it's my life.

MAMA

How can just dancin' be your life? You've got to give up this foolishness, Ellie.

ELLIE

Mama, please -- don't call it foolishness.

MAMA

Ellie, you've got the brains to do great things. You're a good student, too, you don't even have to struggle for it. Girl, intelligent people don't waste their lives dancing.

ELLIE

It's not a waste. Oh, why can't you listen?

MAMA

Because I've heard it all before. And I told you before ... We been dancing for centuries now. We need to do more.

ELLIE

But not this kind of dancing, Mama. This is different.

MAMA

Ellie, you're not saying anything different. What's new about it?

ELLIE

Well, could you at least give me three minutes to talk? Is that so much to ask? Is it? Please? Mama, listen, it's taken me six years to get my body to this point, so that it will obey my commands without me having to think about where I place every part. Now I can move freely so I can communicate what I'm feeling from inside, Mama, really let out what's in there, not just do choreography, you know? It's taken me so long to be able to move within the music, instead of before the beat, or after it, or outside of it. It's taken me all these years to unfreeze my face and radiate the message that's in my heart. It's taken so long, Mama ... so long. But I have it now. I have it, finally. Mama, please. How can I give that up now?

MAMA

(rocking back & forth, eyes closed) Oh, Lord, help me through this. Oh, Lord, help me to know what I can do to bear this.

ELLIE

Mama, stop it! You're not even listening. In three weeks I'll be 18. It's been awful for the last couple of months, knowing I've got to make some decision about the scholarship and I'd probably disappoint you. I know how hard you've worked. But I've worked to get where I am with my dancing -- no, Mama, don't talk yet, please. The warm weather has given my body a chance to really loosen up. I feel myself at my peak right now. It's never been easier for me. The school stuff can wait. Please, Mama, let me finish. The dancing's got to be now, while I'm young. Delaying it even for four years will put me out of the running for any serious career in ballet. If I don't do it now, I'm not going to be able to do it at all. I want you to understand. I pray you will. Oh, Mama, aren't you the one who always told me I had to be true to myself and take control of my life and handle it because after everything, I'd have to answer to my God? Aren't you? Well, I believed it. I do believe it. So that's what I'm going to do. By whatever means I have to, I'll make it. Help me, Mama, please help me. At least help me feel I've got the right to make this decision. And have faith in me. I swear I'll make you proud!

MAMA

Oh, Lord, give me strength. Oh, Lord, my sacrifices meant nothing. Oh, Lord ...

ELLIE

(backing away, staring in horror at her mother): You're not fair. You're being awful ...

MAMA

...scrubbin' white folks' floors on my hands and knees to give my girls a better life. Oh, Lord ...

ELLIE

Mama, don't do this to me ... It's my life ... mine ... Why can't I choose for myself?

MAMA

(still rocking and chanting): ... takin' care of white brats who spit in my face and call me outa my name when they get ready. Oh, Lord ...

ELLIE

I'm not going to listen any more. *I'm going in my room* YOU OUGHT TO BE ASHAMED!

MAMA

Scrubbing white folks' shitty toilets and acting like I enjoy it. (Ellie slams into her room. Mama's voice raises to accommodate the distance) Oh, Lord, sharper than a serpent's tooth is the pain of an ungrateful child.



(We see Ellie on the other side of the door, hands over her ears, moaning)

ELLIE

Stop, stop ... please, please stop.

MAMA

Oh, Lord, what a viper I nurtured in my bosom.

Ellie

(leaning against the door, whispering fiercely): I'm not going ... I'm not, not, NOT GOING!!

ELLIE

Yeah? Said what?

fade

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Act I scene 3

Ellie's bedroom

Later that evening.

(ELLIE is lying on her bed staring at the ceiling. A knock sounds on the door. Ellie snuffles. Another knock. Ellie sits, wipes face with towel, throws it back to bottom of bed, sits up, straightening hair & clothing)

ELLIE

Mama?

MAVIS

No, it's me, Mavis.

ELLIE

Oh, come in.

MAVIS

(pushing open the door and poking her head in) Is it alright? Can I really enter the sacred domain?

ELLIE

(laughing shakily) O.K. O.K, I get the point. I'm becoming a little more relaxed about it in my old age. Look, there's no sign on the door.

MAVIS

Oh, right, let's see, what were some of them? This is a private place ! Keep out unless invited in by owner!

ELLIE

Knock and WAIT FOR ANSWER before entering.

MAVIS

Eleanor Alice Perkins, esquire, owner. it's like.

ELLIE

Oh, no, you're lying now. how would I know what that's like?  
just old Mavis.

MAVIS

I swear. You were about seven then. Ask Mama. (They fall abruptly silent at the mention of Mama.)

TOGETHER

Well ELLIE So, did Mama ... can't? Mavis is here to look after  
little MAVIS Well, Mama called and said ... lines so she can be in  
the church play. Saw her dress so she can be the bride in the Tom  
Thomson wedding. Ask her spelling words so she can win the

ELLIE

Yeah? Said what? take her to dancing school ... take her to  
rehearsals ... take her downtown to buy ballet slippers. Work  
backstage as the fairy so Mama can sit in the audience.

MAVIS

That she thought she was gonna just die of heartache. dances,  
sing, makes the honor roll, runs the 100 yard dash, swims. I AM

ELLIE

That's so unfair. taking away through the latter part of  
by the time she finishes

MAVIS

Unfair? She meant it.

ELLIE

Well, of course she's disappointed, I know that. But die of  
heartache? Why does she have to be so melodramatic?

MAVIS

Listen, Little Sis -- you know she's been counting on this for a  
long, long time. Ever since she realized how smart you are -- and  
that's about 16 of your 18 years on earth, you know. you would  
match up clothes, how neat you were (Mavis's smile is fading), how  
fast you could dash around the house in order when Mama

ELLIE

I wouldn't mind being a little less smart. Maybe then I'd have a  
little more permission to be myself.

MAVIS

The house. (sighed) MAVIS  
Oh, you're yourself. Smart is a big part of who you are. You  
enjoy it. (Ellie is silent) Well, you do, don't you? (silence)

DON'T YOU? used to show me and Clarissa and my other friends how  
to manicure our nails and push the cuticles back with that little  
orange stick. Your hair

ELLIE:

Yes, of course, but I want to use it for what I want to use it  
for. I'm tired of being pushed around on account of it.

MAVIS

Your hands (sarcastic) MAVIS  
Hmph! (turning her head away)

ELLIE

Well, it's true. You don't know what it's like.

MAVIS

No, of course I don't. How would I know what that's like? I'm just old Mavis.

ELLIE

I don't mean it that way, Mavis.

MAVIS

Well, just what way DO you mean it? Mavis is here to look after little shining star Ellie. Feed her her lines so she can be in the church play. Sew her dress so she can be the bride in the Tom Thumb wedding. Ask her her spelling words so she can win the spelling bee. Take her to dancing school ... take her to rehearsals ... take her downtown to buy ballet slippers. Work backstage as the family member so Mama can sit in the audience. Smile and agree with everyone about how wonderful she dances, sings, makes the honor roll, runs the 100 yard dash, swims. I AM SO SICK OF YOU! (Ellie is backing away through the latter part of the speech, covering her mouth with her hands. Mavis is panting by the time she finishes)

ELLIE

I...I...didn't know...

MAVIS

How could you know? I was just your big dumb sister Mavis.

ELLIE

Dumb? Dumb? I NEVER saw you that way. I always thought you were so beautiful. And smart. (Mavis looks startled and begins to smile) I remember how proud I always was of the way you could match up clothes, how neat you were (Mavis's smile is fading), how fast you could dash around and get the house in order when Mama was on her way home.

MAVIS

The house. (amazed)

ELLIE

And how you used to show me and Clarissa and my other friends how to manicure our nails and push the cuticles back with that little orange stick. Your nails always looked so pretty, and our hands were so raggedy.

MAVIS

Your hands (sarcastically)

ELLIE

No ... well, yes, kind of.

ELLIE

And I was always telling my friends I'd ask my big sister whenever we didn't know who made a certain recording, or how to get someplace in the city, or the rules to certain games.

MAVIS

Games! (scornfully)

ELLIE

Well, those were the things we wanted to know.

MAVIS

You never asked me about anything to do with schoolwork.

ELLIE

No ... I never needed to.

MAVIS

See? That's what I mean.

ELLIE

(puzzled) But if I didn't need to...

MAVIS

God, you can be so smart and so stupid all at the same time. I dressed neat, I could straighten up the house in a flash, I could tell you how to play games, how to care for your nails...but I couldn't tell you anything about being bright, creative, talented. I'm six years older than you, but you've never needed to ask me anything really important ...and you think I'm not supposed to feel anything about that? Did you even know I wanted to go to college?

ELLIE

Oh, Mavis, please ... don't. Why are you doing this to me? You don't know what I've been through with Mama today. I was hoping you could help me talk to her. I always thought I could count on you.

MAVIS

Sure, you can always count on good old Mavis. And who does Mavis count on? Listen, didn't I just ask you a question?

ELLIE

What? What was the question?

MAVIS

I asked, did you know I wanted to go to college?

ELLIE

No ... well, yes, kind of.

MAVIS

And why do you think I couldn't go? Since I'm not going to college you can have just as big a wedding as you want. And I'll be too.

ELLIE

The money? Your marks? I don't really know.

MAVIS

You never REALLY know anything about ANYTHING or ANYONE except yourself. You never have. I don't think you ever will. You're so damned selfish.

ELLIE

I don't believe that's true.

MAVIS

(mockingly) I don't believe that's true.

ELLIE

Well, what was it then? Money or your marks?

MAVIS

Both. My marks weren't so bad I couldn't get into college. But they weren't good enough to get me any kind of scholarship either. And Mama couldn't afford to send me...not even to the State Teacher's College. And that's all I ever wanted to be ... a teacher. But she was still raising you, so there I was. I had to get out and get a job. If they hadn't opened up this residential training program to get some practical nurses for the City Hospital, I wouldn't have a profession at all.

ELLIE

I'm sorry, Mavis, I didn't...

MAVIS

Spare me your sympathy, please. Here I was scraping to make it on that twenty dollars a week the city so generously gave us, and feeling proud that I could manage to give Mama five of it every week ... and then to find out she was spending ten dollars every other week on toe shoes for you...for a hobby! At least that's what we thought it was at the time...I couldn't believe the injustice of it...

ELLIE

Oh, Mavis ...

MAVIS

And now, when I'm trying to get married next fall, she can barely help me with my wedding. I've got to have some at-home affair with her home cooking because you need books, clothes, train fare, God knows what all.

ELLIE

Well, you ought to feel happy now. Since I'm not going to college you can have just as big a wedding as you want. And I'll help too.

MAVIS

Ha!

ELLIE

Ha, what? (Mavis stares in a hostile way) Mavis, it sounds like you didn't want to be a nurse either. Did you?

MAVIS

Hell, no! It was Mama's suggestion for me to go and take the nursing training. Mama once wanted to be a nurse, so to her it was like a gift. I wish to hell she could have taken the damned training herself. I HATE nursing.

ELLIE

Mama wanted to be a nurse? She never told me that.

MAVIS

Have you ever wanted to know anything about anyone?

ELLIE

And you hate it? But, Mavis, that's awful. Why don't you try to do something else?

MAVIS

I am. I'm marrying Clyde. Maybe I'll get pregnant right away, then I can stay home.

ELLIE

But you never liked kids.

MAVIS

Ellie, can you hear anything? I'll get to stay home.

ELLIE

That's it? Get married and stay home? Well, I... I hope you have a very beautiful wedding ... if that's what you want.

MAVIS

Ha!

ELLIE

What now, Ha? What's that supposed to mean, anyway?

MAVIS

First of all, I don't believe you're not really going to college. Speaking of melodramatic, you're no lightweight in that department yourself, so I wouldn't be a bit surprised to find out this was some trick of yours to get Mama to give you something you want. And second, even if it is true that you're really not going to college, it doesn't exactly do my heart good to get help from Mama this way. I'd rather have her help me because she felt my wedding was just as important as your schooling. So, either way, I'm not exactly thrilled.

ELLIE

You don't know me at all, do you? I'd never hurt Mama like this just to pull a trick. And besides, I'm not as selfish as you make me out to be. In fact, now that I listen to you, I don't even think I'm as selfish as you are. At least I've always known Mama was doing the best she could. I wouldn't put the blame on her if I were in your shoes and couldn't win a scholarship to college. And for you to talk about a home wedding is pretty mean too. Mama's catered plenty of other weddings and made a good reputation doing it. She did well enough at it for plenty of rich white girls to feel satisfied. You could do a lot worse.

MAVIS

Look who's talking. And you couldn't do any worse than to string Mama along your whole damn life, taking all her sacrifices, then pull this on her. You're something else, you know?

ELLIE

Listen, I don't need you to tell me how bad Mama feels. I feel bad too. But it's still my life, you know? I ought to be able to decide what to do with it. I tried and tried to do what Mama wanted. But I just know it wouldn't work. I HAVE to dance. There's nothing else for me now. It's my time for it. School you can do when you're 30, or 40 -- but you have to dance when you're young. That's just the way it is. Madame's got that right.

MAVIS

And will Madame take care of your expenses while you're busy becoming the first black ballerina of the universe?

ELLIE

I don't see why you have to be so sarcastic. If you had a talent you wanted to develop, I'd be proud of you.

MAVIS

Why should I be proud of you for something you had nothing to do with? You're born with brains, you're born with looks, or you're born with talent. You didn't create it, you know. You're just lucky.

ELLIE

But I worked to develop it. Plenty of girls -- boys, too -- came in to Madame with just as much talent as me. Some with more.

MAVIS

(drawing it out sarcastically) NOOOO!

ELLIE

I didn't expect you to understand.

MAVIS

Nope, I'm just ordinary little old untalented Mavis, so I guess there's nothing for me to do except worship at your shrine. But I'll tell you one thing -- if you can't do what Mama wants, you shouldn't expect her to support you while you break her heart.

ELLIE

That's where you're wrong. If she believes in what she's taught me all along about following your dream and working hard at it, and God will see you through, then she ought to be willing to at least give me two full years of support. After all, she'd have had to take care of me for four years if I'd gone to college, paying for books, clothes, travel, and all the other incidentals. All she has to do is think of this as my college education. Why not?

MAVIS

Damn, you've got a lot of nerve.

ELLIE

Well, what's wrong with it?

MAVIS

(shaking her head) You're not even real.

ELLIE

After she gets over being disappointed, she'll see the light -- I hope.

MAVIS

And if she doesn't?

ELLIE

I'll figure out the next step then.

MAVIS

Go live with Madame, I suppose?

ELLIE

That's a possibility.



MAVIS

It would tear Mama up. (She sits up, sitting in the middle of her bed, looking unexpectant. She speaks slowly, in a listless monotone.)

ELLIE

It's up to her. She's got the choice. (Ellie looks to reversal. No, not like that way. I can't even know how to put it into words.)

MAVIS

(shaking her head slowly) My sweet baby sister. (Mavis moves I won't be able to carry it. Yeah, maybe that is how a broken heart feels, but I always thought I was related to being in love, and I've

ELLIE

At least I'm honest about what I'm doing. (Ellie is in love with dancing...or, I was...it feels like I'll never want to dance again... yeah, what happened with Mama... what happened with

MAVIS

Meaning? (Mavis looks at Madame? Oh, just tell her I can't come. I don't know what else to say. Bye, Clarissa. Sure, you can call later...I guess.)

ELLIE

I'd never marry someone just so I could stay home from a job I hated. (Ellie picks up phone, wraps her arms around her legs, puts her head on her knees and stares into space. A moment later, the phone rings three times before she picks it up. Then, slowly, she picks it

MAVIS

You...you... little LIAR. I NEVER SAID THAT!

ELLIE

Sounded like it to me. I never heard you say you loved Clyde. You just want to stay home and have a baby you probably won't like much either. Who do you love, anyway? What do you like? Who are you anyway besides a hypocrite? (Mavis slaps her soundly across the face.) (Thank you. No, Mama's catering a dinner tonight. Yes, she'll be here tomorrow. Yes, Sunday's her one day off. Just like you, Madame. Yes, take care of yourself. Thank you,

MAVIS

(hissing) Goddamn you! (shouting) GODDAMN YOU!

MAMA

(voice comes from offstage.) Mavis? Mavis? I didn't call you over here to abuse that child. I thought you'd talk some sense to her. What are you saying to her? Mavis?

ELLIE

Mavis, I have a curfew on myself. 9:30 bath, 10:00 o'clock bed. It's important for me to keep to my routine. I need my rest.

MAVIS

(moving toward the door, looking back over her shoulder. GodDAMN!

ELLIE

And would you mind closing the door? (Mavis slams the door as she leaves. Ellie sinks down on bed, holding arms around herself and looking at door)

fade

early Sunday morning.

kitchen

ELLIE

(talking on the telephone, sitting in the middle of her bed, looking unkempt. She speaks slowly, in a spiritless monotone.)

Clarissa, I can't ... I just can't come to rehearsal. No, not sick, not that way. I don't even know how to put it into words. Well, it's like there's a big space inside that's ... so heavy I... have to just keep sitting still because if I move I won't be able to carry it... Yeah, maybe that is how a broken heart feels, but I always thought that was related to being in love, and I've never ...I guess you're right, Clarissa, I am in love with dancing...or, I was...it feels like I'll never want to dance again... yeah, what happened with Mama... what happened with Mavis... Madame? Oh, just tell her I can't come. I don't know what else to say. Bye, Clarissa. Sure, you can call later...I guess.

(SHE hangs up phone, wraps her arms around her legs, puts her head on her knees and stares into space. A moment later, the phone rings three times before she hears it. Then, slowly, she picks it up)

Hello? Hello, Madame. No, I can't come. No, I don't feel well. No, I can't come. No, I can't dance. I'm sorry to let you down, Madame. I don't think I want to any more...well, I do but ... I just don't have the strength to move. Yes, Mama's angry with me. Mavis too. And now you, I guess. You're not? Concerned about me, Madame? Thank you. No, Mama's catering a dinner tonight. Yes, she'll be here tomorrow. Yes, Sunday's her one day off. Just like you, Madame. Yes, I'll take care of myself. Thank you, Madame. (SHE resumes her former position.)

MAMA

lights fade

I'd say it's a little bit of tea, but what the hell, if we're going to have to talk about a cup of tea?

\*\*\*\*\*

MADAME

Thank you. Very strong, please. In a glass with lemon if you have it.

MAMA

Sure, that's no problem; that's how I drink it too, only in a cup. (rises and walks to stove. During the rest of the conversation, Mama makes tea, pours it, they drink it, etc.)

MADAME

This is a very pretty kitchen. So sunny ... so many plants. You must have a green thumb.

MAMA

Yes, and Ellie takes after me with it. We both care for the plants. We have a little garden out back too.