

Can I walk you home?

Seven years and why it is important to Speak Up

January 2007

As nights tend to be, it was dark; but this one was darker than usual. At about 9.00 pm on New Year's Eve, in torrential rain I walked along the narrow, cobbled streets of Paris to the club. Just past Place des Vosges, I recognised Bob and Helena Carr huddled under a large, black umbrella and peering into the cluttered window of an *antiquaire*. Yet chatting in the pouring rain with two people I had last seen outside a parliamentary chamber on the other side of the world more than twenty years previously was not the most extraordinary thing to happen that evening.

Latina occupied part of the first floor of a boutique cinema on the western edge of Le Marais. Cinema-goers pass through it to and from the cinema *salle*. Alfredo augmented the revenues he earned from the bar by displaying and selling art work, so original paintings, drawings and photographs often lined the walls, adding to the ambience. Access to the club was by means of a wide staircase ascending from beside the cinema box-office. This meant that one's first glimpse of arrivals was the top of their head or their hat or, as was mostly the case on this evening, their feathers.

Nicole and I had arranged to meet there, and although we had paid in advance, Alfredo had forgotten and so we didn't have a reservation. He found a table for us, which we knew he would, but it was a table for four and he said other people would be sitting with us. It turned out the other was a dour American woman we hadn't seen before who insisted on speaking in French. Neither of us could understand a word she said. I tried speaking in English, but she didn't respond, so I gave up.

I felt (a bit) sorry for her: bravely, she had come alone to a club she wasn't familiar with, and Nicole and I have a habit of sharing private jokes, usually at someone's expense; so it was even more uncomfortable for her, at least until she got the idea of conversing in English. From then on I could explain to her a lot of what was going on. She warmed up and I think in the end enjoyed herself.

The club isn't big and most of it is taken up with the dance floor. Along one wall are four tables for four with, at each end, round tables that sit up to six, but often get ten crowded around them. Two other walls are taken up with five tables for two, and along the wall near the entrance there is one rectangular table for six that is always left for people without a reservation.

At one table was a middle-aged couple, from the provinces, judging by their girth: a bit like animated salt and pepper shakers. Another table was occupied

by two terribly chic couples of very good dancers that I had seen there once or twice before. They wisely kept to themselves the whole evening.

A third table was an odd group, in what seemed like fancy dress - sort of overcooked 1920s garb with lots of sequins, fringes and feathers. One of the men wore a Gagney-style hat. They had no idea about tango, but that didn't stop them prancing about the floor in entertaining postures. It was clear that they were feeling no pain, and as practically nobody else was dancing, weren't causing anybody else any pain either.

Aside from the tables of couples and the vamps, the room was full of old chooks (our table included, I'm afraid to say) in their best plumage Waiting To Be Invited.

The first hour was dire. Alfredo was in a frenzy trying to get his decorative but malfunctioning waiters actually to get food, drink and cutlery on the tables at more or less the same time, help his wife Isabel serve the food; and in between try and satisfy (by dancing with) each of the matrons in turn to give the impression of a busy, fashionable night club. The image that sticks is of a gifted, but overworked rooster trying to service, simultaneously, twenty five impatient, ageing chooks - and look as if he was enjoying it. The effect was not diminished by the sheer profusion of feathers.

One of the vamps presented one of the other vamps with a headband, like you see on fashion plates of the era. It featured three ostrich feathers protruding vertically at the centre-front from a gold lamé band. The sort of thing I would have thought very chic about ten years earlier, but being older and crabbier, it looked a bit silly. I told her it was splendid and she seemed pleased. Nicole was struggling to control herself. At one point the Vamp and Cagney went over to sit at the bar, which is the only part of the club you were allowed to smoke in. There wasn't much else to do, so Nicole was making as much as she could of the headband. I remarked that all it needed was for him to set fire to her feathers with his cigarette. We waited impatiently for it to happen, but it didn't. *Hélas*.

During all this excitement, an *habitué* arrived. We knew him by sight but not his name: a very good dancer - when he danced, which was too seldom. We are both always a bit miffed that he never invited us. I found him a bit of a dish too - although Nicole didn't agree - always dressed in a suit and ironed shirt. About 45, I suppose. Alfredo sat Le Danseur at one of the tables for two with a septuagenarian chook. She plumped up her feathers: he was Hers. He smiled politely. It was painful to watch.

About the same time another male, not before seen at Latina, appeared at the top of the stairs and sat at the bar, trying to be unobtrusive. All Eyes Turned. Feathers fluttered.

The poor man was visibly shaken by what he saw, but to his credit, stood his ground. He selected a chook at random and we all watched closely. She was no more than an average dancer, and Nicole dismissed him too, but I thought he danced very well.

We were still bitching over the injustice of sticking Le Danseur with that old boiler when the other old boilers started to mobilise. Nicole was having none of this. We had decided that perhaps he was just very, very shy, so she went over to him and said: "Are you shy?" "Yes, I'm very, very shy." (What was he going to say? "No: the reason I don't invite you to dance is because I think you're a pair of dreary old chooks!" ?) "If you ask us to dance we won't say No." "Thank you, that is very kind." Then one of the others swooped in on him. Three feathers wafted after her.

The parvenu came to our table and asked if any of us would like to dance. Nicole bowed out. I didn't wait for our American friend to leap in, so I did - nearly up-ending two chairs as I did. Yeehaaah - a dance!

It had been worth the wait. We danced more than the regulatory three. No longer an old chook: I was a tango camel, stocking up against the drought.

I told Nicole she must try him. "Good?" "Argentine!" These few dances primed me to go and invite Le Danseur, whose name turns out to be Madjid. Over I went, heart in mouth. (The only thing worse than being refused is to be accepted out of politeness. But I like to think I did him justice, and he asked me to dance again.)

The combination of exceptionally good dancers: two, three if you count Alfredo, fabulous music and a practically empty dance floor is infrequent and therefore to be cherished. Now we were having a fab time and hardly noticed the feathers.

The Argentine (who turns out to be called Alberto) and I danced some more. Then it all went a bit blurry, and the next time I looked around the place had more or less filled up and it was midnight.

Nicole said goodbye at about one o'clock and the rest of the evening was spent dancing with Alberto, who kept telling me that I had made his evening. (He had certainly made a big difference to mine!) We left together at about two thirty, and with all the effusion about having made his evening, I sort of thought he would ask for my telephone number, but he didn't. He said he had lived in Paris for 29 years and was a mathematician working as a researcher. Not a story you'd make up - unless you seriously want to discourage questions (except from me of course, but I'm wierd). Anyway, I said I hoped we'd run into each other again very soon, and we said goodbye.

Alberto came to Latina three or four more times and we danced lots together. The Chemistry was At Work. Is it the self-effacing manner, the aspect of intense concentration or the very sensuous style of dancing that is irresistible? All three, but the melt factor is the brown eyes, which speak to you. This posed a dilemma: while I was in no mood to take on another Man in my life - having freed myself from Jean-Pierre only six months earlier - I did think that if Alberto were to make a move on me, I might be receptive. But he didn't.

One evening, leaving the club together, he said something to me that I didn't hear. He had an embarrassed air and was mumbling, so I didn't insist. I supposed that he was saying it was best we didn't see each other again: I concluded that his apparent embarrassment had to do with a partner who was about to return from visiting family outside Paris. So I shrugged and we parted. I still didn't know what he'd said, but I knew I wouldn't see him again. Very sad, but he was probably doing the right thing.

This didn't stop me from intently scrutinizing, for some months to come, every head-top ascending the staircase. Eventually I got used to the fact that it was not to be.

Six years and eight months later:

A pretty ordinary Friday evening and I arrive at Retro, another favourite haunt. Latina had long since moved on and the population of regular tango dancers in Paris had both mushroomed and dispersed, thanks to a number of very popular films that featured tango dancers. A dozen venues had become several dozen venues, each with its own style and usual crowd.

Retro is a much bigger venue than Latina was: it is an old cinema dating from the early twentieth century, since refitted as a ballroom, with alcoves of seats ranged around two dance floors in a split-level configuration. A stage in front of what was the cinema screen was built to accommodate a big band.

I'm one of a small group of regulars who like to get there early, to make the most of that rare combination of plenty of space, just enough good dancers and excellent music. With only two or three couples on the lower dance floor, a newcomer attracts close attention. "Ooh", I thought: "he's a good dancer. I wonder where he comes from. And what's he doing dancing with *her*?? I hope he asks me to dance before the crowds arrive."

He did. Its an odd thing, tango: a perfect stranger nods at you, upon which you put your arms around his neck and hold your torso against his. Assuming the position, a penny, no, two pennies dropped. He exclaimed: "I know you! You're the Australian!" I thought: "Great! He's forgotten my name!", I exclaimed: "Alberto!"

Now he carries on about how he's so glad to have found me after all this time. I thought that was a bit rich, since he was the one that bugged off, and in any case he knew perfectly well where to find me. But I kept my peace. And we danced pretty much the rest of the evening together. The Chemistry was still At Work.

It turned out that evening there was a demonstration by a couple who had studied with a friend of Alberto's in the US. They were holding classes the following day and he asked if I'd accompany him. I assumed he was doing so out of politeness, so I demurred. In any case I dislike collective courses: they tend to show you hideously complicated figures that you've no hope of executing on the dance floor and you learn nothing useful. Private classes are much better value.

They were indeed splendid dancers, and Alberto and I chatted with them after their show. He took the opportunity to show off his heavily accented English and I struggled to keep cool. They spoke to us as a couple and I indeed felt illogically close to Alberto, even though being again in a couple was a situation I'd strenuously avoided for the last seven years and had no intention of succumbing to.

We left the club together and talked about our preferred venues. It turns out his is Abrazzo, which is not far from where he lives. Abrazzo started life as a Chinese restaurant called '*Shining Moon*' in the 1980s or thereabouts, in a part of Paris where Chinese restaurants are noted more for their quantity than their quality. It features walls of glass, with aluminium frames, surmounted with rectangular panels announcing '*Shining Moon*' in Latin and Chinese characters. The glass walls are lined with translucent curtains of no particular colour. Steel-framed chairs and some tables line the dance floor, with a bar at one end. You could say that it is characterised by its complete lack of character. But they play great music, and some very good dancers congregate there.

Alberto said he'd be at Retro the following Friday. But he didn't ask me for any contact details. The excitement of having re-met Alberto was for me such that I managed to trip over the pavement and fall, skinning my knees.

The following Friday George and Nicole were at Retro so I was thrilled to present Alberto, as Nicole had asked me repeatedly during the previous seven years whether I'd seen him. But it was slightly awkward as I had to divide my attention between George and Nicole and Alberto. I was in a state of high excitement.

I was due to go to Australia a couple of weeks later and was keen not to lose contact. So I asked if he'd be shocked if I gave him my business card. He looked positively horrified and exclaimed: "What for?!" But then he said: "Oh alright, give me your card then."

For the next couple of weeks I had other engagements and didn't go dancing, so we didn't coincide. And I wasn't surprised to receive no communication from him at all. It was only after my return from Oz, nearly five weeks later, that we ran into each other at Abrazzo.

Alberto was leaving as I arrived. "You're too late!" he said. But his eyes told me he was very glad to see me. It was about 9.30 and I noted that in Alberto's estimation it was I who was late, not he who was leaving early. The club closes at 1.00 am.

Our paths crossed pretty regularly after that and each time we danced mostly with each other. But still no contact outside of tango. I developed various theories to explain this. Nicole and Genevieve, my next-door neighbour, said the obvious one was that he just wasn't interested. But his eyes said something else. So all communication took place in the minute or so between dances. He was getting the message but still no reciprocity. (Theoretically I didn't even know his name, but in fact had tracked him down through the university website and Facebook.)

One Saturday, finishing a dance with him, I gave him a peck on the side of the neck. It was entirely spontaneous and I felt dreadful, worrying what he would think. As we left the club, he asked if we could walk part of the way toward his place as there were a number of bicycle stations on the way where I could get a bike home. We walked together for about half a kilometre to Place d'Italie, where I immediately whipped out my *Velib'* card and leapt onto a bike. If he had intended to say something to me, I didn't give him the chance. I was still embarrassed about the kiss.



Genevieve and Nicole were both voicing their disappointment with me at shamelessly throwing myself at a man I knew hardly anything about. Not the Frances they knew. They were Worried.

In late October he had to go to Argentina for three weeks to see his father who is quite old. On the evening before he left, he said he'd write to me. I made it known that I would be very happy to hear from him, but made a mental note not to expect anything. This meant I checked my inbox only every fifteen minutes for two weeks. No message continued to arrive. I started preparing face-saving things to say for when we met again.

On the Tuesday of the last week a message appeared under the subject 'Argentine'. I nearly deleted it without reading it, assuming it was junk mail about some tango event I wasn't interested in. His message was long-ish and banal: about the differences between tango in Buenos Aires and Paris; and how he spends his time keeping his father company and helping organise his affairs. I

wondered if it was a ‘bugger off’ message, but Genevieve, who had been very sceptical that any message would arrive, said “Frances, men do not send emails to tell you to bugger off!” Now it was easy: all I had to do was to be very gay and write about things I do for work - which to outsiders does indeed look interesting and even glamorous - and infuse it all with some robust humour. By the time we saw each other again we had exchanged half a dozen long emails each and our conversation had become much more substantial. The correspondence continued after his return to Paris.

From things he had written I was almost, but not entirely, certain he wasn’t in a relationship. With New Year’s approaching (which would be the seventh anniversary of our meeting) I started speaking about tango evenings that might be interesting. “I have no plans yet for New Year’s Eve, but I’ll keep that in mind” was the response. !!!

One evening in mid-December, between dances, he asked me “Will you be coming here regularly?” Heaven knows what my face said. Was this the same person who’d written all those emails? Was I dealing with identical twins? Then, on 28 December, a Saturday, he asked if we could walk together to Place d’Italie, where I could take the metro home. We got there and I turned to say goodbye. He asked if he could come down to the platform with me. Now I’m on the train and he’s on the platform. Without warning he blurts: “*Je t’aime!*” the doors slammed shut and I zoomed off. By the time I caught my breath I’d missed my stop at the other end.

Next day I see an email saying “I would be very glad to see you sometime outside of tango.” At last! After some discourse it turned out that it had to be Monday 30th. So we met for a coffee and he asked if he could invite me to dinner or a film on New Year’s Eve and then we could perhaps go dancing afterward.

So we arranged to see a film at one of those horrible popcorn-infused cinemas at Bastille (though the film - *The Lunchbox* - was excellent). I messed up the *rendez-vous* and we nearly missed each other. I arrived at the cinema about thirty seconds before the film started and we didn’t even get to sit together. Alberto said he had been sure I wouldn’t turn up.

I messed up the tango venue too and Michel, the bouncer at Retro, told us that while there was indeed a dance that evening, it wasn’t tango. So we ended up at a place near Gare du Nord and had a blissful evening, starting with a champagne toast for 2014. And if there had been any ambiguity about what The Eyes had been saying before, there wasn’t now. On the last metro home, he asked why I’d turned him down before. “Turned you down?!” “That night, as we left Latina: you turned me down when I said to you: ‘Can I walk you home?’”

