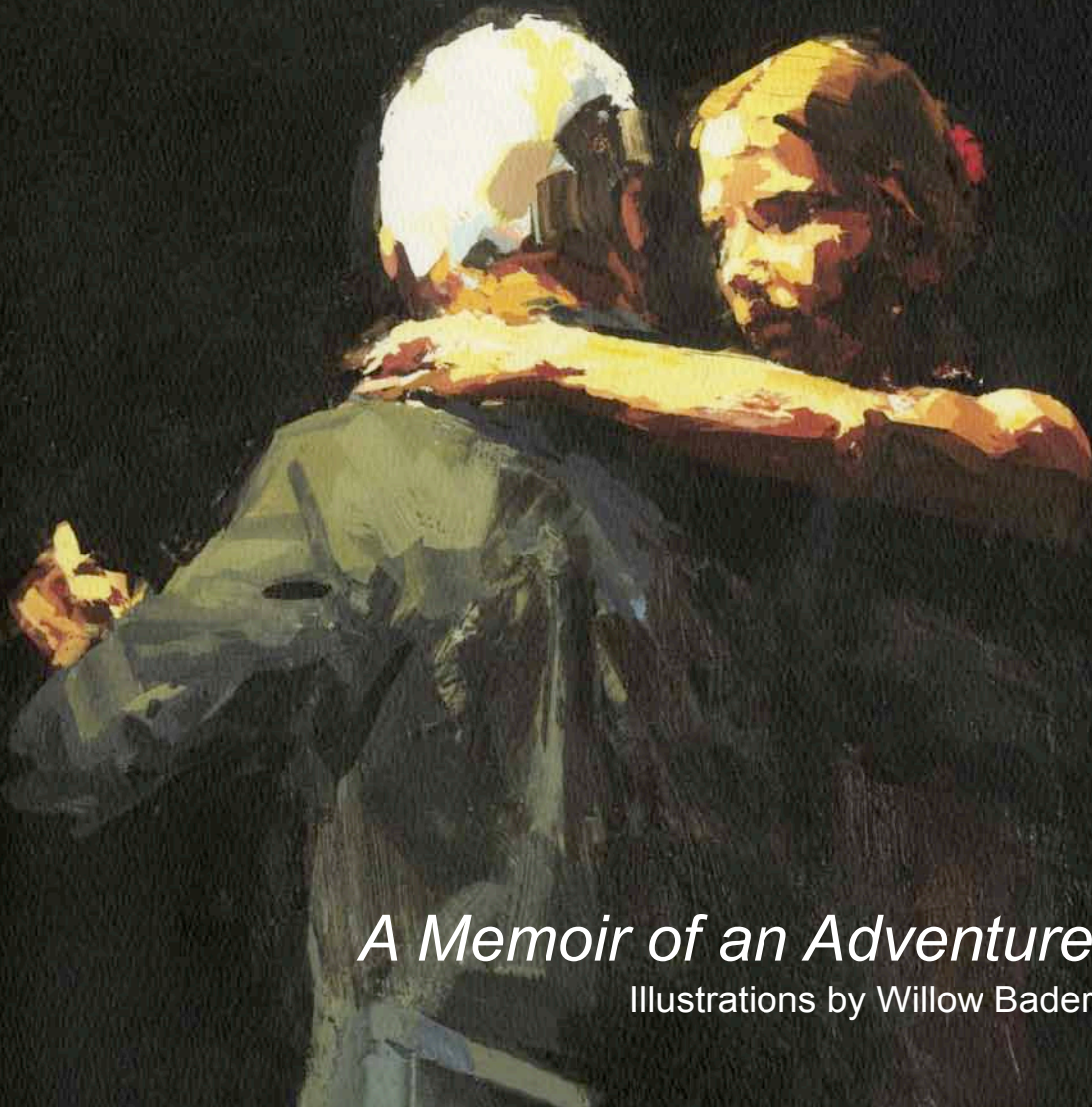


Robert Fulghum

*The Argentine Tango Chronicles
of Senor Don Roberto Juan Carlos
Fuljumero y Suipacha*



A Memoir of an Adventure

Illustrations by Willow Bader

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Roberto Juan Carlos Fuljumero y Suipacha*

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A Memoir of an Adventure

by

Robert Fulghum

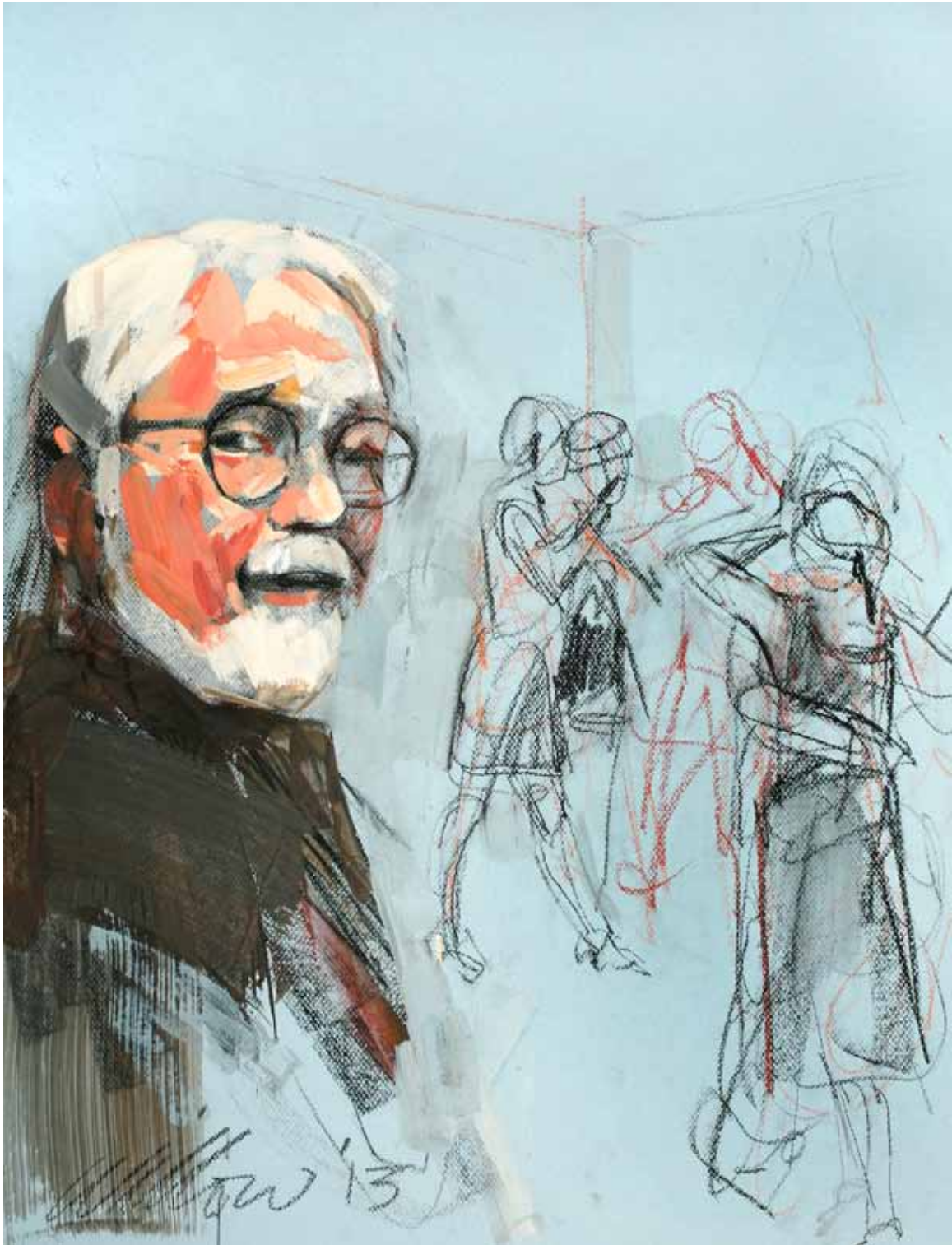
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Illustrations

by Willow Bader

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To Begin . . .

Senor don Roberto Juan Carlos Fuljumero y Suipacha.

That's me.

My private name for myself in Buenos Aires.

In this memoir, you can think of me as Senor Fuljumero.

As I often do.

Why the alternate identity?

One of the opportunities of a single traveler in a faraway land is temporary self-reinvention. You may think of yourself for a time as an actor in the theater of your mind, wandering about on the stage of the world.

Imagining myself as Senor Fuljumero was not an attempt to deny my past or deceive my present.

It was a way to employ my imagination, to be onstage in the drama that is Argentina, and to step outside Robert Fulghum at times and consider the role that he, as Senor Fuljumero, was playing.

I never introduced myself in Buenos Aires as Senor don Roberto Juan Carlos Fuljumero y Suipacha, or ever told anyone in Argentina about the life of Senor Fuljumero.

It was a harmless untruth I lived within, as an act of play.

The tale of my Argentine tango adventure has two tipping points - moments when major decisions were made about my future as a tango dancer. Once in the beginning in Seattle, and again in the beginning in Argentina.

Come, I will take you to dinner - where tango began for me.

The Door

*Penn Cove mussels in a saffron-trebbiano broth, with basil.
Calamari sautéed with toasted garlic, basil, tomatoes, and wine.
Sourdough bread served with a side of Sicilian olive oil.
A bottle of Seghesio old-vine zinfandel.
At Il Bistro - a table at the back.
For one.*

That menu and setting were first and foremost on my mind late one rainy Thursday night in September 2006, in Seattle.

Il Bistro is an Italian restaurant tucked back into a cavern underneath the Pike Place Market downtown.

Opened in 1975, it's European in style - a food establishment with dark wood, white tablecloths, cozy private nooks, and a candlelit ambiance that emphatically says *romance*. In fact, Il Bistro prides itself on being voted the most romantic place to dine in Seattle.

But romance was not on my mind.

I was simply going out to eat a favorite meal at a favorite restaurant, alone; and go home, alone.

The meal, the service, and the ambiance would suffice.

Little did I know that I would come home dancing.

At least in my mind.

By the time I arrived at the Il Bistro, the dinner crowd was leaving, and a different clientele was gathering in the bar.

Attractive women and men drifted in - often alone. And each one carried a small bag.

Meanwhile, the tables and chairs in the upper dining room were being cleared away to leave an open floor.

When I inquired of my waiter, he said, "It's tango night."

All I knew about tango was what I had seen on stage, in the movies, and on television. Broadway tango. Show tango. Tango in performance by flashy dancers throwing themselves around like acrobats in heat.

And that's going to happen here? At the Il Bistro? Tonight?

I didn't see any performers.

Only men in suits and ties - women in frilly dresses and high heels - mingling at the bar.

Notably drinking champagne.

Carrying my wine, I moved to the dining room - now an open floor - sat in a chair back by the wall, and waited.

The first music drew the clients away from the bar.

Men and women came to the ballroom, sat to change their street shoes for tango shoes (*Oh, so that's what was in their bags*) and continued to sit and chat while the music played.

I noticed that most of the women sat on one side of the room, and the men sat on the other.

And then . . . and then - by magic, by some signals I could not perceive - the men and women stood, walked forth, met on the floor, and briefly talked. As the music floated out over the room, the couples embraced, and danced and danced and danced . . .

And I sat . . . enchanted.

I was in a film.

A dream.

A fairy tale.

All my life I had been a competent and enthusiastic dancer.

Never had I been to a dance when I did not get up and participate - two-step, waltz, polka, rumba, jitterbug, swing, even Greek dancing - whatever - I could do it or quickly figure out how to pretend to do it.

But this . . . tango?

Me? No.

The music, the protocols, the style . . .

The passionate energy . . .

Women with their heads tucked up under their partners' chins and their eyes closed, making wonderful figures with their feet . . .

The men so subtly confident in their moves with their partners while

coordinating with the counter-clockwise movement of the ensemble . . .
Me? No.

There are few times in my life when I have been rendered speechless.
And this was one.
I didn't know what to say or who to say it to.
I could only think:
I want this. I want to dance tango. I want to be part of this world.

Here was an unexpected door in a wall of infinite possibility.
I put my hand on the handle and found the door was unlocked.
I was suddenly certain that I could learn to do this.
Yes!
And I went home, dancing.
In my imagination.

Little did I know that a year later I would be enrolled in a tango academy in
Buenos Aires, Argentina.
Me?
Tango?
Yes.



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Glossary - a Few Essentials

Many books about tango and Argentina have a glossary.
Often an intimidating catalogue of terms and translations.
Usually placed at the end of the book.
To be seen long after a reader might have found the information useful.

I place the glossary here - early on - and keep the list short and simple.
There are terms too specific in meaning and too lovely in sound not to be employed often in the text in Spanish - as spices in the stew.
Here's all you need to know for now:

porteno. A citizen of Buenos Aires (a port city).

milonga. The place and occasion where you dance tango - but also the name of a particular style of tango. Confusing, I know, but there it is. Likewise, tango refers both to the entire dance genre, but also to a particular style of tango music. The third style of tango music is *vals* - waltz tempo.

tanda. A set of four to six, three-minute tango songs, which will be either tangos, milongas, or vals. Got it?

cortina. Curtain - a non-tango piece of music marking the end of a set.

cabeceo. The glance of invitation to dance tango at a milonga.

abrazo. An embrace of greeting or in dancing tango.

tanguero/a. A man or woman who dances tango.

milonguero/a. An experienced tango dancer, usually of mature years.

principiantes. Beginners.

jubilado. A retired senior citizen - a jubilado milonguero is a senior citizen who focuses his life around dancing tango - usually a compliment to be called one and an honor to be one.

parrilla. A cafe specializing in meat - barbecued over hot coals.

bandoneon. Simply said, this is an accordion, unique to tango - important enough to tango to deserve a longer elaboration, below.

* * *

The bandoneon (ban-don-ee-on) is essential to tango. If this was a film instead of a book, the sound of the bandoneon would dominate the sound track.

Invented in Germany in the mid-nineteenth century, it was intended as a small organ for religious music. Exactly how it got to Argentina and why it became the heart of tango is unknown. That is a subject for heated argument among the aficionados of Argentine tango.

The bandoneon is a heavy, boxy concertina made of wood and leather, and played on the knee while sitting.

No keys, unlike a piano and or an accordion. There are thirty-eight buttons on the right side and thirty-three on the left. A player cannot see the buttons while playing, but must rely on sensitive fingertips.

Each button makes two notes - one while the bellows are pulled open, and another while the bellows are squeezed closed.

The movement of air vibrates tiny reeds inside the instrument.

The bandoneon is a formidable instrument - daunting to play. Not only must the player have musical talent and skills, but strong muscles in the chest and arms are mandatory. The bandoneon is the primary percussion instrument of tango - there are no drums - and its sharp, staccato rhythmic playing takes strength and endurance. Though there are some female bandoneon players, it is largely played by men.

It is said that the melancholy sound can make grown men want to cry, but its music drives them to dance.

A tango instrumental group may include a piano, violin, bass, flute or clarinet, and guitar - but always a bandoneon front and center. In fact, tango can be and often is danced to the music of a bandoneon alone.

There are several great tango orchestras in Argentina, playing in the largest concert halls. In every respect they resemble standard classical music ensembles of the European style - strings, horns, harp - even full percussion. The difference is that there is a front row of bandoneons - as many as twelve - and while the musicians are professionals capable of playing any form of classical music, the style is tango - driven by the bandoneons.



Tango Mania

What kept the intentional tango dream moving forward?

Answer: An attitude expressed in the essay below, which I wrote during the year in Seattle I spent preparing for the Argentine adventure.

I carried the essay with me to Buenos Aires to read again and again in times of doubt . . .

* * *

Remember the film *Saturday Night Fever*?

Remember the way John Travolta pranced down the street?

Remember how he walked onto the dance floor?

Electric, alive . . . a stud-horse with flaring nostrils!

The men stood back. The women breathed heavily, twitching with eager rhythm, drops of perspiration on their brows. The music cranked and the crowd went wild when John went into his disco moves.

The man could dance!

Disco was his style.

Tango is going to be mine.

Tango is not disco.

I don't care.

The *Saturday Night Fever effect* is what I'm after in taking up the Argentine tango challenge.

It's the impression I want to make.

I want attitude you can smell.

When I walk into a *milonga*, and put on my shoes, I want people to stand back in awe and fear.

He's here! Ohmygod! Senor Fuljumero! The king-of-the-hill milonguero himself!

The man can dance!

Women will stand in line to be asked.

Fat chance, you say. Me, a white-haired, seventy-year-old man whose round potbelly shows no matter how hard he tries to suck it in.

A murmur will go up from the crowd - that's for sure.

“Ohmygod, *why* is *he* here *again?*”

Men will smirk. Women will leave en masse for the ladies’ room.
Bartenders will call Security or 911.

Go ahead, mock me.

What care I?

Senor Fuljumero, *classico tanguero* (classical tango dancer), is on the move.

Well, OK, so far I can flare my nostrils pretty well.

And I have the suit, shoes - even the hat.

The lessons are coming along . . . so-so.

And nobody actually runs when I show up for an evening milonga.

Looking like you *might* know what you’re doing is essential, and I can at least *look* that way.

Women have actually asked me to dance.

Well, OK, one woman. The beauty-impaired, sequined-up old lady with toxic breath who seems to show up whenever I go to a dance.

Maybe I’m overdoing the nostril flaring.

Tango is not for wimps and sissies.

Tango training requires stamina, fitness, and the ability to make quick, graceful moves without falling down.

Tango dancing doesn’t start until around eleven o’clock at night and goes to five o’clock in the morning. Shifting to being a night owl is a new zone for me.

Like having musical jet lag.

My children are embarrassed by my activities. They don’t talk to me about how I’m spending my time. They know. But they are all middle-aged wimps and sissies. They never ask for details.

They can only imagine.

“What’s your old man doing these days?”

“Well, he’s obsessed with tango dancing, and he’s out on the town until three in the morning, three nights a week.”

“Wigged out? Senile?”

“We’re not sure - but something’s loose.”

So? So?

What's wrong with being loose?

Loose is not immoral or illegal. So they'll have to come and get me in Buenos Aires because things got so loose some of my parts came unhinged, and I'm in a wheelchair?

Or so what if I die some humid night dancing in a basement waterfront dive with a smoldering Latina wrapped around my body like an anaconda.

So?

* * *

Keep these collected thoughts about tango in mind:

It is the vertical expression of horizontal desire. Born as an expression of longing, lust, passion, loneliness, and conflict. It lives on as a dance that arises at the center of the soul to meet the dancing soul of another.

Often referred to as a three-minute love affair, tango is an exchange of mutual pleasure - sensual, without intimacy. And it's forever true: it takes two to tango.

In tango we dance our emotions rather than speak them. The dance floor becomes a canvas, and our hearts become palettes. Feet and bodies paint sensuous emotions in sweeping strokes. With a dab of desire here and a shading of sorrow there, the tango comes to life.

We dance tango because we have secrets.

Got it? This is not stamp collecting or golf.

It does not describe life in a nursing home, either.

A friend asked if my tango mania wasn't a little over the top.

"Tango? At your age? You must be out of your mind."

Perhaps. Silly to some. Comedy to others. Serious to me.

You want the truth?

The blustery macho noises I make about tango disguise fearfulness.

I fear the shrinking of life that comes with aging.

I fear the boredom that comes with not learning, not taking chances, not getting out on a limb of some kind - where the fruit is.

I fear traveling around as a senior spectator tourist just looking at the world without being involved in it.

I fear the dying that goes on inside when you get up from the game to sit in the waiting room for the final checkout line.

No. Never!

I want the sharp pleasure of the anxious edge that comes from beginning something new that calls on all my resources and challenges my ego and mind and body.

A very dear friend died last week.

Died, as we say, peacefully in his sleep after a long life and a quiet retirement. His files were organized, his basement and garage clean, and all his dues paid up.

A tidy, admirable end.

Not for me.

My goal now is to dance tango.

All the dances, as long as I can.

And then . . . and then . . . to sit down, contented, after the last elegant tango some sweet night and pass on - because there just wasn't another dance left in me.

Argentina, here I come . . .

The Reality of Argentina

The Argentine Republic (*Republica Argentina*) is:
the second largest country in South America by land area,
the eighth largest country in the world by land area,
a country of 41 million people.

Human beings have lived there at least 11,000 years.

The first Europeans arrived in 1516, and the Spanish settled in 1527.

It has been an independent nation since July 9, 1816.

The ethnic mix - White European 61%, Mestizo 26%, Amerindian 1%,
Black 1%, Asian 1%, and the rest a little of everything else.

Spanish is the official national language - but Italian, German, French, and
English are commonly spoken second languages that have shaped the special
character of Rioplatanese Spanish, and the slang argot *lunfardo*.

The official national religion is Roman Catholic - 92%, but it is said that
only 20% of the population is religiously active.

The president of the nation is Senora Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner, elected
in 2007.

(Yes, in a macho country, the president is a woman!)

The capital city, Buenos Aires (*Ciudad Autonoma de Buenos Aires*) is:
a city with a population of 13 million people in its metropolitan area,
the second largest city in South America,
the 17th largest city in the world,
the largest shipping port in South America.

Its people are referred to as portenos - people of the port.

The majority of the population comes from immigrant stock from the
southern Mediterranean - Spain and Italy - giving the style of the city a
flavor similar to that of the Italian port city of Naples.

The seasons are upside down from North America: Winter is in May through
August, spring is September through December, and summer is January into
April.

The peso is the basis of the currency.
Autos drive on the right - trains travel on the left.
Tango is the national dance.
Enough for now - I'll tell you more as my adventure unfolds.

“Tango is a form of transportation . . .”

This is an often-quoted shorthand aphorism in the tango community, meaning that tango is a short trip across the dance floor, an adventure in your mind, and a yearning that takes you to faraway places to dance.

In other words, tango is a trip.

The Dandy Dandi

Where did Senor Fuljumero reside in Buenos Aires?

For the first month, the Mansion Dandi Royale, Residential Tango Academy - in the barrio San Telmo, one of the oldest districts of the city.

The establishment combines two adjacent family mansions built in the prosperous early 1900s, when San Telmo was an elegant neighborhood. To escape the advent of yellow fever at the end of nineteenth century, the original owners of the mansions moved away. Over the years the family homes became apartments, then a brothel, and finally a private club for police and armed forces officers.

At the end of the twentieth century, in the rising tide of tourist tango, the two historic buildings were merged into one - restored, remodeled, and redecorated to emphasize the spirit of tango. The facilities are a mix of the nostalgic old and the functional modern.

One enters the elegant first floor reception area and into the past - high ceilings, Victorian-era furnishings, and classy tango murals on the walls. Up on the sixth-floor roof, there is a fully contemporary outdoor deck with pool and lounge chairs. The ground-floor dining room has the ambiance of a turn-of-the-century bistro. But the dance studios are modern spaces with wood floors and wall-to-wall mirrors.

The two mansions are not parallel in their construction. The floor levels do not match. The second floor of one, for example, is connected to the third floor of the others. This gives the Academy a quirky, eccentric feel - maze-like at the intersections - in the tango spirit of surprise mixed with reliable predictability.

The Mansion Dandi is a full-service establishment designed to meet all the needs of the tango tourist. In addition to the thirty hotel rooms on five floors, a breakfast cafe, a restaurant, and dance studios, it provides private lessons, group practices, stage shows on weekends, and regular social milongas open to the public.

The staff was ready with advice on where to buy tango shoes, where to shop for clothes, and suggestions for eating out. Tours could be arranged to almost anywhere, but especially to famous milongas.

The clients of the Dandi were from all over the world. While I was in residence there I met people from Japan, Australia, Denmark, France, Finland, Canada, Brazil, Chile, and the U.S. (That gives you some idea of the popularity of tango beyond Argentina.)

The staff spoke Spanish, English, French, German, and Portuguese.

Most clients came in groups for a two-week immersion in tango.

They arrived not only with their luggage, but bearing excitement and enthusiasm for tango, adding to the energy of the Dandi.

In sum, the Dandi was dandy.

All I could want in one place - food, bedroom, and a total immersion in tango - private lessons, group practices, milongas, stage shows, and a totally tango-oriented atmosphere - plus fellow guests as focused on the dance as I. Nothing but tango, nonstop, day and night.

Yes!

I remember how often I thought, *I am in the right place, at the right time, doing the right thing.*

All in all, everything Senor Fuljumero wanted and needed to take a headlong plunge into the world of tango.

The Dandi's location was also perfect.

The Confiteria Ideal - my favorite tango venue, was in walking distance in one direction, and my favorite parrilla was within easy walking distance in another.

On nearby Suipacha Street, the best stores for tango shoes and clothing were to be found. And not far away was a tailor who would quickly provide made-to-measure, double-breasted suits for milongueros.

The Plaza Dorrego is five blocks away - antique stores, and an almost-museum-quality antique fair every weekend, plus an outdoor public milonga on Sunday nights after the fair closes.

Primo Milonga

Here I am in Buenos Aires in September of 2007, already enrolled in lessons at the tango academy and eager to get out into the real world and apply what I know by going to a public milonga - alone.

This adventure proved to be the second tipping point.

It's nine o'clock on a Sunday evening.

The tradesmen's booths of the Plaza Dorrego fair had been cleared away.

The milongueros and tangueras appeared.

Smooth mats were laid down on top of the cobblestones of the square. The DJ played a few songs to establish the style of the evening.

And those who had come in couples led the way for the first tanda of four tango songs by the famous orchestra of Di Sarli.

The singles stand on the edge of the dance - waiting for partners.

Senor Fuljumero walks to the edge of the plaza to watch.

A tanguero he is not - yet.

Not a native porteno - for certain.

But he is well and properly dressed in suit and tie.

And he is looking for a partner.

She was a hot water heater.

With handles.

A solid tube of a woman, standing with hands on her hips, leaning against a graffiti-decorated wall. Her surprisingly slim legs came to a fine conclusion with restless dainty feet lightly clad in high-heeled dancing shoes of red and black leather.

I recognized her immediately.

A tanguera. A tango dancer. The real deal

Passion at the ready.

As yet not fully familiar with the protocols of a public milonga, Senor Fuljumero looks at the hot water heater with interest.

White hair, like his - red lips, gold hoop earrings, black dress.

His look of interest is that of a writer studying tango culture.
But for the hot water heater, his look is a *cabeceo* - the focused glance that is an invitation to tango.

She raises her eyebrows. *Yes.*
He raises his eyebrows. *What?*
The water heater accepts and moves in his direction.

Oh! He has forgotten about the *cabeceo* and its meaning.
Too late!

Senor Fuljumero, stupefied like a gnat at the approach of a spider, has no time to explain or reject.
Shyly, he offers the embrace.
She steps into his clumsily constructed frame of dance.
And waits.
And waits.
And waits . . .

Senor Fuljumero is petrified.
This is the moment he has come to Buenos Aires for.
Dance, you fool!
But his feet will not obey.

Finally, oh so carefully, he shifts his weight, steps back to begin the dance, and the hot water heater closes her eyes.

But the music stops.
The tango is over.
Senor Fuljumero has spent the dance frozen in time and space.

The hot water heater steps back, smiles, pats him on the face, and says,
“Standing still is not dancing, Senor. You must move at times.”
She walks away. And turns back to say,
“Be careful with the *cabeceo*.”
“Si. Gracias.”

So ends the first lesson in real Argentine tango for Senor Fuljumero.

Rule: If you throw the cabeceo, you must dance with the woman who catches it. Or else it is you who will be thought of as a water heater - without fire - full of cold water.

And this was the moment of truth for Senor Fuljumero.

Give up?

Go on?

Stand by and watch?

Or dance?

This was a reality check and, as I look back, a tipping point.

I wandered away after my failure, in a funk.

Into the dark streets of the old barrio San Telmo.

Here I was, living the dream of tango in Buenos Aires.

Here I was in the real world, not the practice studio.

And the reality was that I was afraid to take a chance and dance.

Maybe I should give up the dream and go home to Seattle.

But the water heater had accepted my invitation.

I had made an impression on her.

She thought I *looked* like I could dance.

I stopped and considered my reflection in a shop window.

I do, I thought. *I do look like I can dance.*

And so, with the faint music of the milonga in the distance, I held up my arms in an embrace and danced with an invisible partner in front of the shop window.

Not that bad, really.

I had embraced myself.

I can, I will . . . dance tango.

And I went back to the Plaza Dorrego.
I found the water heater.
I explained, and asked for her patient indulgence.

She smiled.
“Yes, I know about this, senior, I was once a beginner myself.”

We danced.

Onward

The next morning I went to my class at the Tango Academy with renewed determination.

How did Senor Fuljumero appear at tango lessons in those early days?
As a man might appear as a stand-in at a rehearsal for an execution.
Ill at ease, despite knowing that there were no bullets in the rifles of the death squad.
He walked to his place on the studio floor, counting,
Four, three, two, one - Fire!
He stood tall and still and awaited the commands of his captain, the tiny teacher, Noelia.
He would decline the blindfold.
He thought of accepting a last cigarette.

And how did Senor Fuljumero dress?
White shirt, black vest, grey pin-striped trousers, black suspenders.
And his shoes . . . well . . . about the shoes . . .

Since he was determined to have tango shoes that above all fit perfectly, and since he wanted only the plainest, classical style, he had first sought a shoe for his right foot - the smaller one - and, indeed, the perfect fit was found in black leather for that foot.
Alas, the black left shoe did not fit well enough.
Another pair, then - to find a fit for the left foot - but the perfect shoe was only available in red.

So? Why not?

There are many beautiful shoes to be seen on the feet of men at milongas in Buenos Aires - black and white, striped, checkered, in the skins of many reptiles, suede, with high heels and low.
But no milonguero has been seen dancing wearing one black shoe and one red shoe.
Senor Fuljumero may not be remembered for his dancing, but he might as well be remembered at least for his shoes.

And what did his teacher think?

“Senor, your shoes are as eccentric as your dancing.”

She smiled, suppressing a giggle.

Senor Fuljumpero liked it when Noelia smiled.

She had a tiny diamond in her right incisor.

It was one reason he did not ask for the blindfold at the daily rehearsal for the execution.

And what of the hair of Senor Fuljumpero?

As was his custom, he went to the local *pelequeria* - the place of the barber - and asked for the style of the country - especially for that of the Argentine milonguero.

Now well oiled, his hair was combed straight back.

Sleek as a seal was he.

And his beard and moustache were trimmed like that of a Spanish conquistador. A look of benevolent mischief, perhaps.

If one is going to be in show business, and tango is certainly that, then one must have the complete look.

(Fitzgerald, the author of The Great Gatsby, is said to have said that a writer is many people trying to be one person. Yes. At times. But it is also possible that a writer is one person who has a self-issued license to be as many people as possible, as long as nobody gets hurt.

This is the plan of Senor Fuljumpero.)

And after tango lessons, where does Senor Fuljumpero sit and meditate upon his life and times?

At El Hipopotamo- the Hippopotamus Bar - on the Plaza Lezama - with a glass of the afternoon aperitif in hand.

“Fernet” it is called.

It tastes like a combination of Old Spice Shaving Lotion, stale Coca-Cola, and laundry bleach.

Booze to brood on, for sure.

But when Senor Fuljumero has had two Fernets, it puts his mind in motion to continue practicing the special street tango of the portenos on the way home. To sidestep random sausages of dog crap, unexplained broken sections of sidewalk, sodden heaps of garbage, and little old ladies with shopping carts. And to cross streets avoiding assaultive buses, as a matador might finesse a bull.

These are the steps of the dance of the real life of Buenos Aires. Senor Fuljumero is learning this dance - always moving lightly, with a milonguero attitude of sincere delight, dignity, and self-respect. Onward!

Maria-Jose, Senorita Arriba!

The language barrier was higher in Argentina than I expected. The Tex-Mex border Spanish of my childhood and the Castilian Spanish courses taken in college were inadequate preparation for the language of Buenos Aires - Rioplatense - a unique mix of the regional dialects of Spain and coastal Italy.

A friend who had lived many years in Argentina explained the language and culture problem this way: "Americans think Argentina is just South Mexico. That's like saying New England and New Zealand are neighbors and speak the same language."

Moreover, English is not as common in Argentina as I hoped. In sum, I could get by and get around, but I could not get connected. Senor Fuljumpero needed a cultural attaché.

Enter Maria-Jose, Senorita Arriba!

We met when she substituted for my teacher for a few days at the Mansion Dandi academy.

By way of the kindness of the Fates, I soon employed her as the literary and cultural attaché of Senor Fuljumpero.

A tiny, vivacious brunette, whose mother ran an English language school in Uruguay. Fluent in Rioplatense, Spanish, Italian, and English. Culturally astute, streetwise, and adept at navigating both the day life and night life of Buenos Aires.

Maria-Jose could unlock and open doors for Senor Fuljumpero when he could not even locate the handle. His ability to relate to Argentina was increased exponentially. Now he had easy access to music, dance, food, art, history, and venues where tourists never go or even think to go.

And - best of all - the very best of all - Maria-Jose was a dance gypsy - a show-tango dancer, as well as teacher of tango.

Her professional life was financially fragile and unpredictable.

She needed a flexible job to augment her dancer's income.

And Senor Fuljumpero needed help - supervision - a nanny.

Deal.

Not only did Maria-Jose have a broad knowledge of tango and tango culture, she had fiercely high standards as a teacher.

That's why Senor Fuljumero called her Senorita Arriba!

Arriba means upstairs - but it is a shorthand slang admonition:

As in Arriba! Stand up straight!

Arriba! Look up!

Arriba! Head up!

Even Arriba! Cheer up!

Everything was Up, up, up! with Maria-Jose.

I will explain.

Here's Senor Fuljumero in his apartment with his back in a corset-like brace.

The middle finger of his left hand is in a splint, bound with tape.

He walks tenderly with a slight limp - his ankles and feet are sore.

He is obsessively humming or whistling the "Colonel Bogey March" or

"The Stars and Stripes Forever" wherever he goes.

Pity him not. A bus did not hit him.

These are self-inflicted conditions and symptoms of the syndrome that might be called "arriba tango-itis."

And I've got a serious case.

Senor Fuljumero's posture, especially in dancing tango, is unacceptable to Maria-Jose.

She calls him Senor Slumpy.

Because he stands slightly stoop-shouldered.

He dances in a crouch.

Worse, he is always looking down at the floor, monitoring the moves he is trying to make with his feet.

And Maria-Jose shouts Arriba! at him constantly.

She's even stuck a big sign on his wall: ARRIBA!

Stand up! Dance up! Head up! Cheer up! Arriba!

The back brace is Senor Fuljumero's idea.

To make him stand up straight while practicing dancing in his apartment alone.

The finger splint is also his idea. He wears it all day.

To remind him to improve his posture and stand up straight no matter where he is.

He is limping because when he practices tango alone, he holds a broom handle loosely in each hand so he can see how his moves make his lady partner's legs move.

Twice he has tripped over the broom handles and ended up in a sprawled heap on the floor.

He marches around to military band music in his head, because he wants to move like a Marine Sergeant in a parade ground review.

Proud. Confident. Dignified.

He wants people to look at him and think, "There goes a dancer - one of those legendary tango jubilado milongueros."

Arriba Man, not Senor Slumpy.

Maria-Jose says I must stop thinking about my activities as practicing tango. It is about living life in a self-aware way.

"Zen-tango," she calls it.

The spirit of tango from the inside out.

"Focus. Do the best you can do for the time being.

Do what you are capable of on this day.

Arriba! Stand straight even when alone, and walk out your door and down the hall with the dancer's countdown, ' . . . 5, 6, 7, 8, *dance!*'

Think of life as a dance - an all-day milonga.

Arriba!"

I even started going to sleep in an Arriba posture - back and body straight, arms to my side, face up. I may look like a corpse laid out in a coffin for a funeral, but Senor Fuljumero is actually in tango-mind.

My inner condition is in conflict with Maria-Jose's standards.

She wants me:

to learn the basic steps and the classic postures so well that they become innate - to dance without thinking or planning;

to lead a partner with intelligence and subtle shoulder suggestions;

to know the difference between the musical styles of dance - a tango, a milonga, and a *vals*;

to move with style;

to keep my mind focused on the task at hand and not race ahead or throw in little decorative foo-foo jackass moves;

and above all, Arriba!

So far none of this has happened, or when it does, it's done awkwardly

She is patient.

I am not.

She keeps a firm hand on the reins of my inclinations.

I do not.

In my mind I know she's right. But in my heart I want to whirl around the room like Fred Astaire, create all my own steps and moves - *Tango Fuljумero* - and, at the end of a lesson, tap dance up and down the stairway of my apartment and take a bow.

Perhaps that time will come.

For now the brace on my back and the splint on my finger are a reminder that discipline is required; that exuberance must be grounded in skill; that passion requires confidence, and that when dancing up and down stairs, it is useful to know where and how to land well at the bottom. Otherwise, limping will be my lot.

Meanwhile, I am readying myself for the upcoming milongas.

My eagerness is restrained by the knowledge that I am still a tango klutz - a rookie with mostly dreams and ambitions as qualifications.

Well, so what?

I address myself in the mirror:

Arriba! Rise up, Senor Fuljумero, up out of your trench of fear, up and over the top and into the fray.

Trust Maria Jose!

ARRIBA!

The Sandwich

Maria-Jose Arriba! was not always available to supervise my tango activities. But she gave me the courage to launch out alone to find my own way and learn from experience without a nanny's supervision.

Senor Fuljumero survived his first tango festival.
Three days of instruction. Four nights of dancing. One midnight-to-dawn milonga, one breakfast party, and too many conversations to count.
Tangoed to the max.

Excerpt:

“Excuse me. You're a fabulous dancer. I'm a Tango Klutz. Would you dance with me so that I know what its like to dance with someone with your graceful ability?”

No, this is not a trashy pickup line.
Tired of just watching the amazing dancing at the Buenos Aires Mega-Milonga, and feeling like an inhibited wooden soldier, Senor Fuljumero has carefully watched and chosen a lovely, mature lady in a black satin dress.
A classica tanguera.
She doesn't do any of the mating-stork moves, with legs slashing out in all directions. She's safe for Senor Fuljumero, who doesn't want to get disabled too early on in his tango career.

“Of course,” she says.
“Thank you. Please be patient. I really don't know what I'm doing.”
The lady smiles kindly, knowingly, and replies,
“It's all right. I do.”
And she does.

No matter what he unleashes - minimal tango, semi-tango, cha-cha-cha, waltz, or the who-knows-what-that-was move, she follows Senor Fuljumero without a missed step.
And nobody got hurt.
She even said, “Very interesting” at the end.
Lesson learned.

* * *

Senor Fuljumero was reminded of a night at a smaller venue, the Il Bistro in Seattle, in the early stages of his tango experience.

A lovely Chinese lady - who he later learned was visiting from Hong Kong, where she is the vice-president of a bank - had come for dinner and stayed to watch tango. She was responding to the music while sitting.

Senor Fuljumero to the rescue.

“Do you tango?”

“No, but I’ve always wanted to learn.”

“Well, then, allow me to give you a most basic lesson.”

“But I don’t know what I’m doing.”

“Ah, but I do.”

*(I was told once that “A man like you - of a certain age - who is well-dressed and well-mannered - is considered safe. And anyone will dance with you, especially if you dance well.”
Safe? Me?)*

Miss Hong Kong apparently thought I was safe, and in my awkward way we danced one song. She seemed pleased. But only Senor Fuljumero knew how fumble-footed he really was.

The next day, Senor Fuljumero was at his lesson, unloading his dancing encounters of the weekend and seeking counseling from his teacher.

“I’m still confused and frustrated. I dance like a fire plug or else break training and dance like someone having an idiopathic seizure. Where’s the subtle, *passion* part of this tango thing?”

She gave me her most indulgent smile.

“Come, I will teach you the *mordita* (the little bite) - also called *sanguchito* (the sandwich). Something a little bit sexy.”

“Two steps left, an *ocho* (when the woman makes a figure-eight move backwards, crossing and uncrossing her feet), and when the woman plants

her right foot, you put the ball of your right foot beside hers, touching, and your left foot on the other side, touching - *the sandwich* - then you step back with your right foot, opening the embrace, and she does the flashing leg thing - between your legs and up and down the left one - then an *ocho* again, feet together, and step ahead into another move. Slowly, romantically.”

We do it.

Now, NOW, this is tango.

Encouraged, Senor Fuljumero signed up for three lessons a week.

Just wait until Miss Hong Kong gets back to town.

“Care for a sandwich?”

* * *

What I am learning in Argentina is much more than sexy dancing. Over the weekend of the festival I carried a reporter’s notebook, explaining that I was a writer seriously interested in the lives of the *tangueras* and would like to know their views of tango. If you ask, people will gladly tell you.

From my notes:

Tango is a way of life.

A culture. A community.

One should know the history, the music, the literature, and the style.

Half the *tangueras* do not and even *have not* danced any other dance.

Women dress to impress - fancy clothes, special hairdo. And high heels with straps over the instep - because they dance on the balls of the feet.

Men dress to impress, as well, but more conservatively, with low-heeled, soft leather shoes - suede soles - to move smoothly across the floor.

Women prefer to dance Argentina-style, in close embrace, chest-to-chest, cheek-to-cheek, with eyes closed.

Men lead, with eyes open, always moving in the line of dance, counter clockwise around the floor.

In fact, if you stand back and get an overview, all the couples on the floor are performing to unspoken choreography - dancing counter-clockwise, never passing another couple, never dancing backwards to the line of dance.

Tango is a group performance danced in couples.

As the floor becomes crowded, the men lead with more economical steps, still respecting the choreography of the larger group.

A good tango dancer never bumps into another couple.

These views of tango have become layered in my thinking.

My mind is becoming a tango sandwich.



Cooking with Tango

If all your tango dancing happens in someplace like Seattle, Washington, U.S.A. -

If you do not speak Spanish -

If you never travel to Argentina -

Then you will miss out on an essential part of deeper tango:

Namely, the words of the songs - tango lyrics.

If you take a long, wide, simple view, it may be said that most tango songs are about love. And love songs the world over are not all that different.

Before I get to the texts of tango songs, I'll stand back and take a running chance of explanation from an oblique angle.

Let's first boil down tango love stories into essential baking steps.

Make a dough out of romance, love, and sex.

Add the raw yeast of desire.

Mix well.

Call the product "It."

The eleven stages are:

1. I want It - I need It.
2. There It is - (*dough rising*).
3. Someone wants to give It to me to share - (*dough still rising*).
4. I am on fire with It - (*dough baking*).
5. I am consuming all I can get of It, and It is consuming me!
6. It is growing stale and moldy.
7. I don't want It anymore.
8. I'm a failure at baking.
9. I wish I was dead.
10. Wait. Look. Here It comes again.
11. I want It - I need It . . .

To spice up the mix, add pain, sorrow, blood, ecstasy, alcohol, night, bitterness, rain, jail, nostalgia, solitude, and anguish.

Add a shot of it-hurts-so-good sauce, a dash of your-new-lover-is-a-bastard or only-my-saintly-mother-would-understand.

Consume the bread of tango alone.
With a bottle of wine.
Smoke a cigarette.
Have a good cry.

Simply said, the lyrics of popular tango songs in Argentina are pretty much the same as country-western lyrics are in the United States.

For North Americans, tango is instrumental music for dancing.
For Argentines, tango is, above all, something to sing.
Dancing, for sure, but the songs are primary.

Often I rode in taxis while nonstop tango songs played on the radio.
If the driver spoke English and I asked Do you dance tango? the answer was usually No, I just sing it.

Once I asked for a translation of the words of a song.
The driver's favorite was *La Mariposa* (the butterfly).
I wrote down this line as he dictated it to me:

"It's not that I repent having loved you so much, but what makes me sad is your betrayal that drowns me in bitter tears."

"Beautiful! It's a drinking song," explained the driver.

"Do you know such songs, señor?"

Do I? Oh yes.

And I launched into Hank Williams's "Your Cheating Heart" and a chorus of Merle Haggard's "Tonight, the Bottle Let Me Down."

"That's tango, señor."

"Yes."

Thick books have been written about tango lyrics - but mostly in Spanish.
Anthropologists and historians deconstruct the meaning of the texts across time and culture.

Because tango lyrics are the popular poetry of Argentina.

And I came to respect the depth of feeling underneath the bittersweet humor.
It's the poetry of contradiction - the essence of love.

To taste the rich flavor of this art, one must get closer to the roots - not at a milonga, where the focus is on dancing, but at a venue well off the tourist track, where tango is sung.

* * *

My assistant, Maria-Jose, said she had a surprise for me.
A night of tango, but I would not need my dancing shoes.
Without a certain experience, tango would always be shallow.

We traveled by taxi a long way out into greater Buenos Aires.
Our destination was the Cafe Esquina Osvaldo Pugliese.
When we walked in, I thought I was at a church supper.
A restaurant full of old people.
Elderly gentlemen with grey or white hair, well-dressed in double-breasted suits, with ties. For the gentle-ladies, full makeup, dyed and well-coiffed hair, jewelry, fashionable dresses, and elegant shoes.
A classy, conservative crowd.
A tiny stage up front, with only a microphone and a piano.
No dance floor.
Oh, no, Argentine karaoke night in the suburbs, I thought.

Maria-Jose explained that every Friday night, the most famous of the living old-time tango singers gather here at the Cafe Esquina Osvaldo Pugliese and perform from late in the evening until well into the morning.
The audience and the performers always sit mixed together.
It was hard for me to tell which was which - I was often surprised by who got up to sing. *Him? Really?*

But the singers still had the chops - the stage presence - the timing - the ability to scoop up an audience and carry it away.
The great Oscar Ferrari was there the night I attended.
Famous in the 1950s.
A tiny man with self-confident dignity.
His huge voice - romantic, vibrant - brought the house down.

And up - a standing ovation after his performance.
He's eighty-three.

Three singers followed.
Another man and two women.
All three could deliver the goods.
My Argentine Spanish is not sufficient to follow the subtleties of the lyrics,
but more than once the singers moved me to the edge of tears with their
passion, their intensity, and their courage to pour out their hearts and souls in
song.

As a break between singers there was a brief, token dance performance.
Impressive if only for the small size of the stage.
The male dancer was appropriately swarthy, sinister, and talented.
But his partner stole the show.
A blond woman with a very slight body. She had rather obviously
succumbed to the temptations of cosmetic augmentation.
Her breasts were like a subdivision of the rest of her.
Half of her body weight was above the waist.
Obeying the rule "If you've got 'em, flaunt 'em," she wore a dress that did
not quite move in sync with her weighty bosom. The dress went one way
and her upper torso went another.
Fascinating.

When her partner turned her almost upside down in the final flamboyant
pose of the dance, her left breast popped out.
There was a stunned silence just before the rowdy applause.
Eighty-three-year-old Oscar Ferrari gave her a standing ovation, shouting,
"Encore, encore!" And when he sang again later, he dedicated his song to the
charms of the blond tanguera - a tango song of desire and longing.

The power of his songs soon overcame the memory of the dancer.
When he sang the last tango of the evening, his reward was the silence of an
awed audience, followed by still another standing ovation.

Senor Fuljumero returned to the Cafe Esquina Osvaldo Pugliese three times.
He was beginning to understand tango as more than a dance.
"Only when you know the songs can you dance tango from your soul,"
explained Maria-Jose.
Yes.



Tango Taxi

At some large tango events in the United States, especially festivals, Tango Taxis are available.

Not for a cab ride home if you have had too much alcohol.

(Tango dancers don't drink much, actually. A drunk is unwelcome.)

No, a Tango Taxi is a member of the community of experienced dancers - usually identified with a name tag - who will gladly dance with the less experienced to help them learn.

What a concept. How utterly sane!

As one Tango Taxi explained to me,

“Sitting on the sidelines and *wishing* is not dancing - so we grant a wish and go for a ride.”

Tango is not only a passionate dance, but it is a compassionate, welcoming community.

(And imagine other possibilities with the same purpose: a Ballet Taxi, an Art Museum Taxi, a Jazz Taxi, a Baseball Taxi, a Horse Racing Taxi, and a Singing Taxi.)

Essentially, the Taxis are supposed to be professional instructors who will take you out for an evening to a milonga, dance with you at your level, and help you advance a little in your skills.

You pay the teacher's fee, buy the food and drink, and that's all.

Woe be unto you if you think this is a cover for a sexual encounter.

Taking a Tango Taxi simply means going out of the dance studio into the real world, with a teacher as a companion.

Sure, there are personal trainers, and computer trainers, and music teachers everywhere. But this Tango Taxi thing is different. It doesn't operate in your home or office or in a studio, but *out in the world*, making you feel at home in it.

It's not *about* a dimension of life, but *in* life.

I had been told that in Buenos Aires, Tango Taxis are available for tourist-tango-wannabes like Senor Fuljumero.

And they were, but not entirely as I had imagined.

One night when Maria-Jose was not available and I spoke to the front desk manager of my hotel about employing a Tango Taxi, he raised his eyebrows and smiled.

“Are you sure?”

“I am sure.”

“Is cost an issue?”

“No. I want the best.”

Now . . . there well may be Tango Taxis of the American style available in Buenos Aires - it's possible.

But I learned (*later*) that Tango Taxi is a concept and term commonly used euphemistically to describe the services of a young male gigolo who will escort single middle-aged foreign women - “cougars” - on an evening fling in Buenos Aires.

Dancing may or may not be involved.

Single American men my age don't usually come to Buenos Aires to learn to dance tango. But if they do and they want more than companionship for dancing, the weekly newspapers are full of astonishing advertisements that include descriptions of the women, their skills and preferences.

An example straight from a newspaper:

“Beautiful young French model - 23 - intelligent, tall, slender - 5 feet 6, 110 pounds, 38x26x34, fluent in Spanish, French, and English. New to Buenos Aires - open-minded and easy-going - looking for a fine evening with a high-class gentleman. Call Marie-Ange at . . .”

“Escort” is the polite term.

I knew the term and its implications.

But I did not want an escort - I wanted a Tango Taxi.

And so . . .

“Your Tango Taxi is waiting in the foyer, senior.”

And there she was - one of the most strikingly beautiful young women I have ever seen. Slender, blond, perfect features, flawless skin, fashionably dressed in a tight, bright blue dress and high, high silver heels
The fine perfume of Chanel No. 5 reached out across the room.

Senor Fuljumero stared.

Before him was a lovely child dressed in the costume of a lady of the night. Using her obvious assets in a desperately courageous way to make her way and her living in Buenos Aires.

“I am Luci.”

“And I am Roberto Fuljumero.”

“How old are you, Luci?”

“Twenty-one. I can show you my passport.”

“Where are we going to dance - which milonga?” I asked.

“Dance?” she asked. “What kind of dancing?”

“Tango, of course.”

“I . . . don't . . . tango . . .”

Well, you can imagine what happened next . . .

But you would probably be wrong.

The truth suddenly dawned on Senor Fuljumero.

He has granddaughters the same age as Luci.

What to do?

Ah, she said she could not dance tango.

Well, then . . . he did . . . somewhat . . . but enough.

“Would you like to learn tango, Luci?”

“Oh, yes.”

“Do you know what a Tango Taxi is?”

“No.”

“Good. I am a Tango Taxi. I will explain. And perform my duties as your companion for the evening.”

And Senor Fuljumero did that.

There was no bill for the evening - not on her part or mine.

I paid the cover charges at the milonga, the tab for food and wine at the restaurant, and her taxi home - the real kind.

She graced my evening, and I educated her.

She was not really a good tango prospect, but she was game.

I wasn't that great a teacher, but I was patient and kind.
My confidence, and even my dancing, improved a little.
And it is always true that the best way to learn is by teaching.

Late that night I went to bed smiling, knowing that in the morning the desk manager would ask me, with a lascivious leer, "How was it, senior?"
And I would say, leering back.
"Senior Fuljumero is a Tango Taxi now."

And for one lovely night, in his own way, he was.



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The Dark Side

(Addressing this subject was a struggle.

I began it early in the memoir process, and then experienced a revolving syndrome of abandon-restore-abandon-restore.

This was the last part of the memoir to be finished.

One cannot begin to understand Argentina without acknowledging and addressing its Dark Side. It must be looked at with open eyes - without turning aside.

The reality of the Dark Side is not only a matter of past history; it is an ever-present part of history-in-the-making. And it directly influenced my life in Buenos Aires.

I am a realist at heart - neither optimist nor pessimist - and it is not my way to consciously look for or dwell on evil.

But I cannot ignore or dismiss it.

I cannot do justice to the Dark Side of Argentina - far more qualified observers and commentators than I have exposed the Dark Side in full, and the country as a whole deals with it on a daily basis.

What's more, there are those who experienced the worst of the evil times who are still alive and present in Argentina. Unreconciled.

And - those who were responsible for the horror are also alive and walking around, as well. Unpunished.

I'm sure I met representatives of both groups on the streets, in the cafes, and even tango dancing.

I will take an idiosyncratic, roundabout approach to the Dark Side of Argentina, and will be both blunt and brief.)

* * *

Begin around 1516.

First there were European explorers, then colonists, destruction of the native population, then exploitation, the importation of African slaves, then wars of Independence, then national identity, then wars, economic booms and crisis, more war, depression and recession, governmental crisis, the rise of the military industrial complex, more wars, and more economic crisis.

And here we are in the twenty-first century. And still, as always, a deep

division between the haves and the have-nots remains; the impoverished lower class and the privileged upper class remain; boom, bust, and crisis continue.

Wait. Is this Argentina? Or the United States?
Keep those questions in mind.

“If you visited the United States, what would you want to see and do, where would you go? What first comes to mind?”

A question I’ve asked of friends I met in Europe and Argentina.

The usual answers: New York (Broadway); Washington, DC; Hollywood; San Francisco; the Grand Canyon; New Orleans; Miami Beach; and, always, Disneyland or Disney World.

This is the two-week Theme-Park-America tour.

To see cowboys and Indians, hear Dixieland jazz, rock and roll, eat steak and hamburgers, and experience freedom - a little bit of heaven on earth. Free to go anywhere, do anything, and say anything.

What’s the answer to the same question about Argentina?

To experience tango, to see gauchos, Patagonia, penguins, drink red Malbec wine, visit ranches on the pampas, watch polo, see the Andes.

The two-week Theme-Park-Argentina tour.

As to experiencing freedom . . . problematical.

Every country has its stereotypical image.

Two weeks is all you need to experience that picture.

You will not likely experience the Dark Side.

You would not have the Dark Side of either country on your list.

But live in the United States for three months, and its Dark Side will come to light. There are demons in our basement. You cannot avoid the residual effects of the Viet Nam War, the Civil Rights struggle, the purges of anti-Communism, the near police-state mentality of the War on Terrorism, ongoing racism, religious fanaticism, poverty, and economic chaos.

These are woven into the fabric of our being. It's part of who we are and where we are going. You will never understand American culture if you ignore its Dark Side.

Just as three months in Buenos Aires would have been a superficial experience if I only lived on the light side and ignored the Dark Side. It's not all tango.

Walking late one Sunday afternoon down Defensa toward the Plaza Dorrego, I stopped often to watch the street performers who are a feature of the regular Antiques Fair. Jugglers, mimes, magicians, dancers, fire-eaters.

As I walked and stopped, I kept my eye on the street and sidewalk. The streets are cobbled, and the sidewalks are cracked and broken. One must be careful of one's footing at all times.

Settling on a safe place - a place to stand while watching the entertainment - I looked down and realized I was standing on a small bronze plaque that almost blended in with the sidewalk.

*“Aqui vivio Paloma Alonso, Militant Popular.
Detenida Desaparacadia por el terrismo de estado.”*

I moved across the street into the Plaza Dorrego, to lean against an iron fence surrounding a small, feeble tree. At the foot of the tree was another, barely legible plaque.

*“Adelina Noemi Garivolo - 21/2/1944.
Detenida, desaparecida - military - 8 July 1976.”*

I soon recognized these plaques when I saw them, all around the city.

Who were Paloma and Adelina?
What did they do to deserve detention, torture, death, and oblivion?

In the “dirty war” - against its own people - of the military dictatorship of 1976–83 (not so very long ago), any freedom of expression was brutally assaulted. As many as 30,000 people were detained and then “disappeared”

for offending the ideology of the military dictatorship.
The horrors of those times are unspeakable.

Just this last week a memorial wall was dedicated containing the names of 8,718 known victims of state terror. And more names are still being added to that list. The latest count is 8,961.

Presiding over the memorial event was President-elect Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner, surrounded by the *Madres de la Plaza de Mayo* - the mothers and grandmothers and now, the children, of the detained and disappeared.

Every Thursday at 3:30 p.m. - for thirty years - these tireless women, in their white kerchiefs bearing the names of their children, have walked silently around the obelisk in the center of the plaza.

They memorialize sorrow.

If you know now that your young daughter was detained and tortured.

That her newborn child was taken and given away.

That her body was dumped from a plane out over the Atlantic. . .

Well . . . you can only imagine.

The Madres will never forgive or forget or stop demanding closure.

The Madres are free to protest - but not free to have a daughter returned or to know what happened to their grandchild.

On Saturday, there was a Gay Pride march and celebration in the city center. In the Plaza de Mayo. In front of the Pink House - the Argentine equivalent of the White House in Washington.

Not a large event - just five blocks long.

The usual flamboyant costumes and music and signs.

Very little police presence.

This is more or less a Catholic country. Still, the government neither opposes nor endorses the Pride event. But it's an important symbol of freedom of expression in general. Like the issue of homosexuality everywhere, it is still a work in progress.

Some of the Madres were there at the Gay Pride event.

Some of their children were gay.

And were detained and disappeared just because of that.

The times have changed and continue changing.

The Mothers memorialize the Way It Was and silently insist on the freedom of a Way Ahead.

There's more of the Dark Side.

The Argentine economic catastrophe at the beginning of this century led to desperate poverty. Crime became the only way of life for many. Theft, mugging, and robbery were rampant. Pickpockets, bag-snatchers, and scam artists abounded. Though conditions have improved, small-scale crime remains a part of Argentine urban life.

The streets of Buenos Aires are particularly dangerous at night. I had been warned before I came, and warned repeatedly while there.

Twice I was robbed while walking alone after dark. The first time, four large young men surrounded me and pushed me into a darkened doorway. One simply held out his hand in a gesture that meant "Give me your wallet the easy way, or we'll take it by force." I gave them my wallet.

Thanks to the advice of friends, it was a dummy wallet. This one contained only a copy of an old driver's license, an inactive credit card, and five American twenty-dollar bills. The leader of the group smiled. He knew that I knew that he knew what I had offered, and why. If they had stripped me naked, including my shoes and underwear, they would have found more money and cards and identity. And if I had been wearing a watch or jewelry . . . but I was not. One hundred dollars was enough. Removing the cash, he handed my wallet back to me. "Muchas gracias, señor. Have a nice day."

I got a taxi home using the pesos in my socks.
Prophylactic paranoia paid off.

The whole city of Buenos Aires is paranoid. Every shop has barred windows and steel shutters, and most have a security guard. Everybody owns a dog for home protection. People carry little of value with them, especially at night. The subway shuts down at 11:00 p.m.

And most people call a radio taxi instead of hailing one on the street.

As with any conditions, you get used to it after awhile, since everybody is in the same boat. And people watch out for each other. Several times people stopped me to say a pocket of my shoulder bag was open, or that I should have the strap across my chest, not just on my shoulder.

I learned the hard way.

In broad daylight, crossing a street, my shoulder bag was snatched. By a young man riding on the back of a motorcycle. The driver nudged me, I moved to get out of the way, and the bag was torn away, spinning me around and down into the street. A policeman ran over to redirect oncoming traffic and help me up. At the sidewalk, he checked to see that I was not injured, and said, "I am very sorry, *senor*. This is the way it is. Nothing can be done."

Fortunately there was nothing in my bag except the results of shopping: A new pair of tango shoes, some books, and some music CDs. Nothing I could not afford to lose. What I lost was my easy-going *naïveté* - ever afterward I would go about the streets of Buenos Aires a little afraid - looking over my shoulder for trouble.

And I found trouble - in another form. I think of it as the goop-on-the-suit ploy.

This is a street scam, usually worked by three people. One is up on a construction scaffold or in a tree, and he squirts salsa or a mix of ketchup-mustard-and-vinegar (imitation bird shit) on you. A second guy just happens to have some napkins and a bottle of water handy, he sympathizes with you and starts wiping off the mess, or else offers to hold your bag while you take off your jacket to clean it. A third guy comes running by and makes off with your coat and bag.

The more fastidious types just mash an ice cream cone into you - by accident, of course - and the scam goes on from there. I had been warned. I got the salsa treatment - dropped from a construction scaffold - and the

fake bird shit squirted out of a tree. But knew enough to refuse help and walked away. Twice I saw someone else get the ice cream squash, and learned that standing around outside an ice cream parlor was not a good idea.

The petty crime is a product of a desperate economy - improving, but still in the grips of desperately hard times.

The economic crisis of 2001 was equivalent to the Great Depression in the U.S. in many ways. First galloping inflation, and then a radical devaluation of the peso. Many middle class people suddenly were poor.

Some lasting signs of the economic crisis: the numbers of small vendors with goods spread out on the sidewalks; the sellers of single flowers and tissues and oranges; the endless antique shops stocked with all those things people had to sell to get by - family silverware, heirlooms, jewelry, watches, and fur coats; an endless offering of homemade crafts - leather goods, wooden objects, silver jewelry, ceramics - anything that might sell and bring in a few pesos for food and shelter.

Just as sad to see are the *cartoneros* (the scavengers) - who sort through the garbage of the city of Buenos Aires. An army of young and old pushing wheeled carts of every description comb the streets for anything of use that can be sold - `paper, plastic, aluminum, wire, plumbing parts, food - whatever. Whole families come in by train late at night. The parents break down cardboard boxes while their children tear open the black garbage bags left at curbside. I saw children eating what they found.

There's more - corruption in government, organized gambling and prostitution, protection rackets, and vicious gang activity. All the ills of a huge urban environment, compounded by widespread poverty.

The Dark Side of Buenos Aires breeds a sense of bitter hopelessness in the poor and a collective psychosis in the middle classes.

Underneath the surface of almost every Argentine I got to know well, I found a worried, depressed, pessimistic state of mind.

It is out of this Dark Side that tango was born, and tango continues.

The Dark Side from the Inside

The November day began well enough. Spring sunshine, no wind, and the jacaranda trees were in bloom all across the city - lining the avenues with great frothy explosions of shades of blue and purple - as if the trees had been turned upside down, dipped in cornflower blue paint, and turned right side up again for display.

My task for the day was simple: journey from the barrio Palermo into the city center of Buenos Aires. (I had moved from the Dandi to an apartment, but I'll tell you about that shortly.)

I was to meet with a travel agent to arrange some excursions out of the city - to Uruguay, an *estancia*, and perhaps to the Mendoza wine country. Looking southwest out my bathroom window I could see a long, dark billowy line of clouds on the far horizon. Maybe wise to take an umbrella?

When I have the chance to ride on a train, I do. Unfortunately, passenger train service in Argentina has deteriorated from the days when the English built cross-country railroads and stations. Nowadays freight goes by rail, and people go by bus and car. The old long-distance trains run infrequently and unreliably. The trains remaining in regular service are mostly on the lines hauling commuters to and from the far suburbs of Buenos Aires. But - a train is a train - and I hadn't been on one Buenos Aires - and a station was not far from my house. Why not today?

My rule of thumb for travel in crowds in Buenos Aires now was to carry nothing I couldn't afford to lose. No shoulder bag or backpack. No passport. No watch or ring. Just my dummy wallet - with only enough money to go downtown and return: five twenty-dollar bills and a few pesos. The less the risk, the less the loss. So as not to attract attention, I dressed "local." Black shirt, blue jeans, black windbreaker, and black sport shoes.

The morning train was jammed, but I managed to squeeze into a car full of blue-collar service industry workers - maids, janitors, kitchen staff, gardeners, street sweepers - many dressed in the uniform of their trade. The train banged and bungled and lurched along on ill-maintained tracks until it reached its final stop at Retiro Station.

Once a magnificent edifice, French in style, the Estacion Retiro was built in the glory days of railroading, opening in 1915.

It is now shabby, run-down, dirty, stinking, and crowded.

An ant hill of activity - more like a stockyard than a train station.

It's also a great place to get robbed, according to friends.

I joined the mainstream of passengers flowing into the city.

So much for train travel in Argentina.

What a disappointment.

Bummer.

My mood began drifting downhill.

Walking only a few blocks to the office of the travel bureau, I learned that my agent was home sick - try again tomorrow.

Bummer.

Now free to wander around, I walked over to the old Port of Buenos Aires to see if there was any life in the docks. The only ship there was the *Presidente Sarmiento* - a magnificent three-masted training ship built for the Argentine navy in 1890. It's a museum now.

And of course, the museum was closed.

Bummer.

"Why?" I asked the security guard on the dock.

"The pampero is coming - look."

I turned around to see that the sky to the south was now filled with fast-moving dark clouds, spewing lightning beneath them. Like an upside-down tsunami in the ocean of sky.

A storm was coming - a big storm - coming fast.

Before I could clear the dockyard, the blasting wind struck, almost knocking me off my feet.

And even though I ran as fast as I could, the deluge began just before I found refuge in a small dockside cafe.

My umbrella had blown inside out, and I was soaked.

Bummer.

The young woman in charge of the cafe was just securing the door when I ran up. She was in a panic of her own, because the tables and chairs outside had blown over and away down the dock, to pile up against a chain-link fence.

She reluctantly let me in, then slammed and locked the door.

Taking a seat by the window, I ordered coffee and stared out the window. The full force of the storm fell onto the city, the power went out, and even though it was only early afternoon, it suddenly seemed like night.

The pampero had arrived.

Pampero is the special name for a full-bodied, muscular storm - capable of producing tornadoes on land and waterspouts on the water. It brings with it a scouring wind that moves everything not nailed down, as well as some things that are.

Cold air pouring down from the Andes heats as it crosses the hot, dry pampas. Moisture is sucked up off the Atlantic and the delta of the Rio de la Plata - and all hell breaks loose over Buenos Aires.

Booming thunder, flashing lightning, and slashing rain - often more than an inch an hour - for several hours.

The sewer system cannot handle the flood, and the streets become shallow canals, making the city seem more like Venice than Buenos Aires.

The city shuts down - no taxis, no buses, no subway - and every living creature takes shelter until the storm passes.

And now I was stranded - for who knows how long.

Bummer.

The waitress brought me a towel, which was appreciated, and yerba maté, which was not appreciated. Yerba maté is a bitter herbal tea, served in a gourd, with a straw - the national drink of Argentina.

An acquired taste that I had not acquired - and never did.
It seems that the coffee machine was out of service.
And I was out of sorts, grumbling.

My mood turned as black inside as the day outside.
Well, damn and double damn.

The waitress seemed to have disappeared.
I was alone in the dark.

The Committee went into session. This is my metaphor for the voices
inside my mind that try to sort out any situation. And some members of The
Committee seem to rejoice in crisis.
The Pessimist, the Alarmist, and the Voice of Existential Despair speak
loudest at times like these.
You are doomed!

The Committee Meeting continued:

*Listen, being alone with you with the lights out is scary.
The waitress is probably hiding in the kitchen, clutching a frying pan in one
hand and a carving knife in the other. When her boyfriend comes to rescue
her, he will beat you senseless for frightening her.*

Nobody knows who you are or where you are.

Right.

*Listen, you could have a heart attack or a stroke.
If you die suddenly, nobody will know what to do with your body.
You have no identity papers on you.
Nothing in your pockets or wallet says where you live in Buenos Aires, and
nothing says who to contact in the United States.
You will wind up in the unclaimed body section of the city morgue.*

I began to feel very sad, lonely, and sorry for myself.

*You really are alone.
All those people you've met in Buenos Aires are superficial relationships -
short-term. No girl friend, no lover, no steady companion or dance partner.
Not here or back home.*

Nobody loves you.

And the unrelenting, merciless rain kept slashing down.

Coming to Argentina was delusional.

Buenos Aires is a dangerous place to be.

Your efforts at learning tango are a joke.

Your garbled Spanish is Martian - not Argentine. No wonder you can't hold a conversation.

Face it: You are seventy and worn out and headed over the hill.

And you look it - check a mirror - you're not a pretty sight.

If you had a dog it would be dead now - drowned in the deluge of the pampero or hit by a bus.

You will never get home from here. Besides, you don't have anything waiting for you when you go home to the States - nothing to look forward to.

When night comes, you will be stuck in a dangerous neighborhood.

And in a dangerous cafe - don't forget about the young woman in the kitchen with the frying pan and the butcher knife.

You are in deep shit, Fulghum.

You'd be better off dead.

Give up.

Run outside and throw yourself off the dock, into the sea.

The Committee raged on in my head.

Meanwhile, the storm raged on outside.

And I finally drank the awful yerba maté like Socrates drank hemlock.

* * *

And then what happened?

I wish there was some truly magical, fairy-tale ending.

Some dramatic coincidence turning despair to delight.

But the ending is mundane, really.

The storm blew itself out over the Atlantic, as it always does.

The waters drained away from the streets, as they always do.

The electricity came back on, as it always does.

The father of the waitress came to fetch her in his taxi.

Neither he nor she seemed alarmed by the pampero.

“De nada, señor. It comes, it goes - it’s nothing.”

They drove me home to my apartment.

He and his daughter lived nearby - no problem.

I offered to pay, but he refused. I had kept his daughter company during the storm and helped retrieve the tables and chairs from the fence.

“A favor is returned for a favor, señor.”

The Committee shut down for the night, as did I.

My body was in my bed, not in the morgue.

Life would go on in the morning.

As it always does.

Arriba!

Life in a Corn Silo

As I said, I had changed my Buenos Aires address.

Senor don Roberto Juan Carlos Fuljumero y Suipacha moved camp from the barrio San Telmo far across Buenos Aires to the barrio Palermo.

Why did he move?

The Mansion Dandi Royale Boutique Hotel and Tango Academy was safe and secure and full-service. But it was a bit unreal - a cocoon - not connected directly to daily life out and about in the city.

Like a small cruise ship moored offshore.

And its barrio, San Telmo, had become a theme park.

It was tango, but not really tango in Argentina.

The barrio did have historic charm - narrow, canyoned, treeless, cobbled streets, and quaint old houses.

Famous bars and parrillas.

But going out was like going ashore on a tourist island.

Crowded in daytime and dangerous at night.

Leaving the Mansion Dandi was a sad day. Every member of the staff had been kind and generous to me - from the manager to the front desk staff to the teachers, maids and waiters, and maintenance personnel.

I knew them by name and personality.

I spent a happy month there. I was already nostalgic about the Dandi after being away three days. But it was an artificial scene - a hotel and tango school catering to foreigners.

It was time for Senor Fuljumero to move out and on, into Buenos Aires.

Why did he choose the barrio Palermo?

Long answer, but by the time I'm finished you'll think, *Well, of course.*

The barrio Palermo includes the national polo stadium, the Palermo Horse Racing Track, the King Fahd Islamic Cultural Center, the huge Parque Tres de Febrero - the largest open space in Buenos Aires - the zoo and botanical gardens, the planetarium, and the Japanese Gardens.

Palermo has neighborhoods, parks, tree-lined streets with two-story houses and buildings for the most part. Single-family houses, apartments, children, schools, cafes, churches, corner stores, and teenagers.

The tourist buses don't drive around in it - just through it.

Palermo is the largest barrio, with the most varied lifestyles in Buenos Aires. It has five overlapping subdistricts, each nevertheless distinct in character:

Palermo Viejo - is the oldest part - where Jorge Borges and Che Guevara once lived - with still-active emigrant communities from Poland, Ukraine, Armenia, Lebanon, Spain, and Italy - their ongoing existence reflected by their churches, community centers, restaurants, and schools.

Alto Palermo and Villa Freud - a main shopping area - and said to be the home of more psychotherapists and psychiatrists than anywhere in the city - hence the reference to Sigmund Freud.

Palermo Soho - the area around Plaza Serrano, a focus for young, upper-class Argentines - trendy shops and bars and restaurants - a weekly crafts fair, and a lively club scene at night. Plus several bookstores.

Palermo Chico and Palermo Parque - fashionable residential districts - The Buenos Aires Museum of Decorative Arts is there, and the National Museum of Latin American Art is close by.

Finally, Palermo Hollywood - where a number of TV, radio, and film studios settled in warehouses and industrial buildings in the late 1990s. The district has become a magnet for the hip artistic set - lots of cafes, bars, restaurants, and an active night life.

And Senor Fuljumero? In exactly what neighborhood does he live?

In Palermo Hollywood.

In a corn silo.

The new residence is a converted space in the top of a former corn storage silo. Once a part of a commercial factory producing corn oil.

Located at the corner of Dorrego and Zapiola streets.

(Senor Fuljumero likes the sound - Zapiola.)

The sixth-floor apartment is one high-ceilinged space - with brick walls, beamed ceiling, old-but-refinished wood floors. An open upper loft on one side, reached by a flight of stairs, contains a bed, closets, and a bathroom - with a view out over the Rio de la Plata.

The small kitchen is on the lower floor, just off the main living room. By moving furniture around, I turned the living room into a ballroom, perfect for practicing tango.

The view out my living room windows is a multi-story apartment building, where it is easy to observe the daily life of those who live there.

And late at night, after a hot day, the slight smell of popcorn oozes out of the pores of the building, and I go to sleep thinking I am in a cinema.

In other words, living in Palermo Hollywood is like living in a movie. Sweet!

The corn silo apartment complex is large, with both permanent and transient occupants, most of whom seem to work in Palermo. The building has enough residents to support its own small ground-floor restaurant called The 1940.

There is a daily happy hour beginning at five o'clock, featuring "The Spider" - an ice-cold double martini in a fragile glass with a black olive. The olive has a stem and is not pitted. The Spider is a little dangerous - due to the combination of the amount of gin in the glass and the pit in the olive.

You can addle your mind and break a tooth.

But the informal club that gathers after five o'clock - The Friends of the Spider - provides acquaintances outside the world of tango. In fact, Senor Fuljumero is the only Friend of the Spider who is a tango dancer. I have unexpected (and if they only knew) unwarranted status.

I give you these details because they are the background and environment for much of the rest of my stay in Argentina and many of the stories I have yet to tell. Other than excursions to late-night milongas around the city, I do not live in Buenos Aires now, but in barrio Palermo.

In a corn silo.

Sucede

“Si me preguntas en donde he estado, deb decir. Sucede!”

(Ask me where have I been, and I'll tell you: Things keep happening.)

No, my Spanish is not that good.

That's a line from one of Pablo Neruda's poems - explaining why he keeps on writing.

And it is the same for Senor Fuljumero:

Sucede.

Things keep happening . . .

What to tell you?

About the evening at the nearby Armenian Cultural Center enduring the Armenian Food Torture Ritual - mounds of food - *eat, eat, eat!* - plus the excitement of nervously watching waiters parading around serving meat off swords big enough to duel with?

About the scary intermission at the neighborhood flamenco bar, when I stood on the sidewalk outside to cool off from the heat generated by the dancing inside, and a Gypsy man standing next to me took out a switchblade knife? *Uh-oh.* But he only used the blade to pick a piece of meat from his teeth, and then to cut a cigarette in half to share with a friend.

What to tell you?

About teaching a plump Dutch babe some basic tango steps - while trying to keep a straight face as her boyfriend lurked around the room like a friendly tiger - not looking for dance - but for another woman to devour?

About the encounter at the 36 Billares billiard and dance hall - with a handsome young woman who identified herself as a Maori from New Zealand (mother is half) but who is a tango teacher in Bath, England, and here in Buenos Aires to improve her Spanish and tango technique? Would you believe we spent most of the time talking about the location and details of the ritual tattoos she's thinking of having on various parts of her body if

she commits to Maori culture?

What to tell you?

About dancing Tango Nuevo with Shanina, whose passion is the sport of fencing with foil? She did not dance, she lunged and retreated.

About meeting the tall, blond Danish couple just arrived from Copenhagen to enhance their skills at both dancing tango and managing a milonga? Danes and tango is a stretch. But there they were.

What to tell you?

About my very elegant friend Becky - born in Morocco, lived in France and now Argentina? Speaks four languages fluently, has a brother who paints in the style of Francis Bacon and almost as well, and who has a twin sister who lives a block a way, with whom she does not speak. I met her at an American-style Thanksgiving Dinner.

About lunch at the famous Jockey Club with Julian, the intellectual helicopter pilot who drives an antique Cadillac around town?

What to tell you?

About dancing at a milonga with a woman who is a nurse in a clinic specializing in cosmetic procedures?

“What do you think I need?” I asked. “Make a recommendation.”

“Turn around and let me look at you. A procedure called the ‘bikini-butt’ - an enlargement of each of the cheeks of your rear end so that you can wear a thong on the beach and look sexy.”

“Really?”

“Also an *el semental* (the stallion) - a permanent flaring of the nostrils like a stud-horse in heat.”

What to tell you?

About the lady dog-walker who marched around the neighborhood each day with twenty-two dogs tied to a single lead on a harness strapped around an

elderly Saint Bernard? The lady herself did not have a leash in hand - her connection to the dog-mob was invisible.

She walked ahead, giving sharp commands only with her eyes and head. At a stoplight, they all sat down immediately when she looked at them. When she lifted her head up in a gesture of “Arriba!” they all rose together and followed. (I could not help but wonder what she would be like as a tango partner. Would she want to lead? Would I want to follow?)

Shall I tell you about these people and adventures in detail?

No.

You would think I was making it up.

So I won't.

But I'm not . . .

Sucede - things keep happening.

Circus Tango

It might be said that Palermo itself is a circus with a daily carnival.
That's a metaphor, of course.
More literally, circus was actually being taught and performed there.

There were two academies offering serious professional training for circus performance - such as high wire, trapeze, acrobatics, and clowning.

But another kind of circus education was available in empty warehouses and parking garages at night. As a result of economic crises, many young people were unemployed. The informal circus academies offered instruction in small-scale acts that could be used for street performing, at fairs, or in parks. And even at busy intersections.

When traffic was heavy in the evenings, young performers would run out in front of cars stopped at a traffic light and juggle or do acrobatics or even breathe fire. And then hold out a hat for tips when the cars moved.

The less skilled performers were the young women I saw who would walk down a line of stopped cars and offer to flash their breasts or bare butt to a male driver.

One peso per look.

Sad . . . but if you're poor and desperate . . .

One evening I watched students in a parking garage practicing juggling, stilt walking, clowning, gymnastics, and slack rope walking.
In the background, tango songs were playing on a radio.

I'd like to do that, thought Senor Fuljumero. Or some of that.

And just what, you may ask, appealed to Senor Fuljumero?

Slack rope walking.

Yes.

It's a matter of concentration, and you're only about a foot off the ground, and you can use a long pole or an umbrella for balance.

And it's safe enough for clowning around.

So . . . imagine:

And now, ladies and gentlemen, on the very low, very slack rope, THE AMAZING BLIND BOBBY BOBADA! (Note the dark glasses.) Watch carefully, the show won't last long.

I went into the garage.

“Could I . . . would you . . . me?” I asked the instructor, pointing at the slack rope. His enthusiastic response convinced and reassured me:

“Of course, señor! Come back tomorrow night. Wear gym clothes and heavy socks. You can do it!”

I believed him.

So. On Wednesday night. There I was.

In the parking garage, balanced on a thick rope tied loosely between two cement pillars.

With a large red umbrella in one hand, and the instructor holding onto my other hand.

“Use the umbrella as a handle on the sky,” he said.

I learned:

Don't look down at the ground, look at the rope.

The best direction is forward.

It's like dancing - you must find the balance inside yourself.

Balance is a combination of confidence, desire, and motion.

Keep moving - it's like bicycle riding - don't stop.

Problems happen when you start swinging from side to side. You can get launched into the air beyond the safety mats.

And while falling off is not good, you don't fall far - or hard, if you learn to roll with the fall.

So I learned and practiced the basics of slack rope walking, and - after three night's instruction - I managed to actually walk the length of the rope all by myself.

Up until then nobody seemed to pay any attention to me - some old guy fooling around - but when I crossed all the way over on my own, I realized the other students had stopped their practicing and were watching me.

Applause. *He did it!* Applause.

And so ended my circus career in Buenos Aires.

Once across alone was enough - what could I do for an encore?

Could I do this when I returned to Seattle? I wondered.

Imagine: Look out there in the park. It's The Amazing Blind Bobby Bobada - the Buenos Aires Bonanza - on the very low rope. Carrying a red umbrella and swinging gently from side to side.

Laughing.

Look fast - it's a short performance - once across and he's done.

* * *

In a park in Palermo one fine Sunday afternoon, I watched a man and a pig performing for an audience gathered in a semi-circle.

The pig was dressed in a red-and-white polka-dot outfit - shirt and pants - with a sequined pointed hat perched on its head.

The man's outfit matched that of the pig.

A sign on an easel said The Smallest Circus in the World.

The circus equipment included a hoop, a teeter-totter, a large red ball, and a big red box, upon which the pig sat.

It's hard to read a pig's mind, but there seemed to be a look of amused contempt on its face as it stared at the man and the audience.

The trainer announced to the audience what the pig would do.

He then explained that to the pig, as if reminding the pig of his talents.

Finally, he demonstrated to the pig just how each trick worked.

The trainer jumped through the hoop, balanced on the red ball, and rolled over on his back and played dead.

The pig never moved.

Its trainer pleaded, implored, and encouraged the pig to perform.

He demonstrated each trick several times.

The trainer was quite good, actually.

But who knows what the pig could do or how well.

Because the pig did nothing but sit and watch.

Finally, the man got down on his knees in front of the pig and begged the pig to do something . . . anything.

The pig got down off his box and walked away.

End of circus?

Not quite.

As the crowd applauded, the pig reappeared carrying a basket in its mouth, carefully approaching each member of the audience for a donation. The pig would not move on unless money was placed in its basket.

This gave me an idea for a circus act of my own - even safer than slack-rope walking.

The World's Smallest Circus - the performing trainer and pig.

I would be the pig.

A True Shaggy Dog Story

One night, when evening finally brought relief to a hot and muggy day, I walked about in my village seeking adventure.

I say *village* because Buenos Aires is not a big city but more an infinite series of small villages inside towns inside the city.

And I say *my* because I had come to feel at home in the barrio Palermo.

Only two blocks away from my apartment I was drawn to a commotion further down the street. A small crowd was gathered on the sidewalk.

Shouting, wailing, crying.

Machine-gun Spanish ricocheted off the walls of the houses.

A young girl raced by me, crying. *Madre de Dios!*

As I got closer, I saw a grandmotherly woman alternately soothing an animal on the sidewalk and throwing sharp verbal stones at three small boys standing nearby, their heads held low, sobbing.

Now I saw that the animal that was the center of attention on the sidewalk had the vague form of what must have once been a large, black, grey-muzzled, shaggy, limber-legged, free-roaming village dog.

He was still alive, but inert and whimpering, his head in the gentle hands of the grandmother.

What had happened? Was the dog run over by a passing bus? Is the dog dying? And why are there people standing around shouting at the three children, while piling pity on the downed dog?

When I got a closer look, I realized I would not need to understand Spanish to know the story. It's universal. Come look:

The dog resembles a small, silver-striped zebra. He has been duct-taped by the three little boys to the extent that UPS might accept the dog for international shipment.

The little boys have done their work well.

They must have started with the tail, which now resembles an aluminum baseball bat, so heavy with tape the dog cannot even wag it.

And then the legs, taped together.

And then the body, striped with tape.

Thank god someone caught them before they made a mummy out of the poor creature, which seems to be what they had in mind.
A few more wraps and the dog would have died of asphyxiation.

Now a cadre of volunteers is standing by with scissors, clippers, and various bottles of liquids that might separate the dog from the tape.

Ah, but just how do you de-duct-tape a dog?

And it is a big dog.

Harmless in its packaging, but who knows how it will respond to radical rescue? You can't just rip the tape off a dog and expect docile appreciation as the hair tears off its skin.

It's a community emergency turnout. Mothers, fathers, aunts, uncles, cousins, neighbors, and passersby like me. Everyone seems to know exactly what to do, but there's no consensus.

Do something! *Madre de Dios!* Do something!

The urgency would explain the young woman who ran by me up the street . . . on her way to the veterinarian's office a few blocks further on . . . desperately seeking professional help before the amateurs set to work. Maybe it's her dog. And the boys her brothers. And when the dog is finally freed, the little boys will run from her as fast as she is running for the vet.

Bloody hell!

Whatever happens, the dog is probably not going to ever look - or feel - quite the same again.

Notice the glances between the bystanders.

Your son would do something like this . . .

My little boy was led astray by your little boy . . .

These rotten kids today . . .

You know the drill. If you've raised little boys or ever been a little boy, you know. And I, too, know, which is why I am mute in meditation.

I remember . . .

A little boy I know all too well once stuck a cat's tail in kerosene and set fire to it. And the same little boy, with help from co-conspirators, once crucified a lizard on a cross, in the style of the Spanish Inquisition.

I was that little boy, and there was hell to pay for those misdeeds.

And now, there will be hell to pay for these three little boys, who respond to demands of *Porque? Porque??* (Why?) with sniveling snorts of *No se, no se* (I don't know).

They don't know why. Little boys just do what little boys are too inclined to do. It seemed like a good idea at the time. And the poor old dog was quite willing and cooperative.

Someday this will be funny.

Remember the time Pablo and Jose and Humberto duct-taped Senora Amada's dog? Ha-ha. What a laugh!

But it is also not funny.

Not now, certainly.

Maybe not even someday.

I walked away, deep in thought.

* * *

What is this evil . . . this mindless, foolish cruelty . . . that lurks in the hearts of little boys and, in time, grown-up men?

Is this the same seed that grows and flowers and bears toxic fruit in the form of torture by adult male human beings in every time, in every land?

If, as some insist, Man is made in God's image, what does this say about our image of God?

If God is in charge of everything, why this?

Porque?

Surely, surely a tendency to indulge in the suffering of other creatures could have been left out of the mix by the Creator.

No se, no se . . .

I wrote this on a day in Argentina when the newspapers reported that many of those involved in what the military referred to as Operation Condor are finally under arrest for what they did thirty years ago.

These agents of the dictatorships of South America are charged with atrocities so awful that I'll give you just one:

Detaining the pregnant daughter of a poet, whisking her away from Argentina to Chile, chaining her to a wall, torturing her, and after she gave birth, killing her and then giving away her child to somebody else. Her child has never been found. Nor her body. It was wrapped in tape and dumped from a plane somewhere out over the Pacific Ocean . . .

This is not rumor.

There were witnesses.

And records have been found to prove it.

Will the guilty be punished?

Maybe.

Some, but not all.

“The devil made me do it” is no defense.

Never. Ever.

For little boys or grown men.

We do it on our own.

Porque?

No se, no se . . .

“When I think of the on-going-ness of evil in the human heart, I remember the haunting words of Hannah Arendt. After observing the trial of Adolph Eichmann, she said that Eichmann troubled her because there were so many others like him - neither perverted nor sadistic; they were, and still are, terribly and terrifyingly normal.

“But it is also true that there is an on-going-ness of good in the human heart. That, too, is normal. And, in the end, the good will triumph. I cannot prove that - and at times it seems like I am woefully wrong. Still, that is what I am compelled and determined to believe.”

—Alex Evans

The Tango of Polo

The closest I had ever been to anything polo was in one of Ralph Lauren's clothing stores. And, like many men world wide, I had worn a polo shirt with the image of a player on it without ever thinking of the realities of the game or ever wondering what the little man on the horse was doing.

But polo is a grand sport in Argentina. Its major tournaments are featured on TV. Many of the world's finest players are Argentine, and the great national polo stadium is in the barrio Palermo, my neighborhood.

Polo time.

A good part of my younger life was spent on or around horses.

Horses are in my genes. My people for several generations back - father, grandfather, and his father before him, were horse people.

And for a number of years I spent my summers as a horse wrangler on working dude ranches in the western U.S.

Though it's been a while since I owned a horse or spent much time in the saddle, I was drawn to polo as much for the horses as anything.

You may not have any affinity for horses or polo, but this is a memoir, and when I think of Argentina, my memories of polo are strong.

My first experience of polo came when a friend invited me to attend the 114th Hurlingham Open, one of the three major tournaments of the year. An event that is as important to polo as the World Series is to baseball.

The tournament was sponsored by Mercedes-Benz, Rolex, and Mumm Champagne. That should give you a clue about the class level of the aficionados of the sport.

The venue is named after the Hurlingham Club in London, and was founded in 1888 by the local Anglo-Argentine community.

Facts: The club covers 73 hectares - about 182 acres - and has an eighteen-hole golf course, five polo fields, stables for more than three-hundred horses, schools of polo and horseback riding, eighteen tennis courts, a cricket pitch, two swimming pools, an indoor athletic complex with a gym, squash court, spa, and dressing rooms. The elegant clubhouse has function rooms, restaurant and bars, plus hotel rooms available to members.

In other words, about as posh as posh can get.

Suppose you want to field a competitive professional team?

It helps to be very, very rich or have very, very rich friends with very deep pockets and a lot of free time. Professional polo is in a league with blue-water ocean racing, Formula One car racing, and big-time horse racing. You don't go into big-time polo to make money, but to spend it.

You will need some riders - Roman-faced men - tan, fit, macho, with forearms and thighs and butts of steel. With names like Adolfo, Matias, Mariano, Cesar, Sebastian, Alejandro, Horacio, Santiago, or Ignacio. The players will each need dozens of custom-made, long-handled mallets - made of whippy cane, with wooden heads. And several saddles each - plus boots, spurs, leather knee guards, a special glove for the right hand (no left-handed players allowed to play). And you will need grooms and stable hands and trainers and horse trailers and veterinarians, and lots of the best hay and grain.

You'll need at least four men to play on your team, with a substitute or two - (players do fall off and do get injured). And each team will need thirty to forty horses per game - a horse gets ridden for about seven minutes on average. A rider will change horses by racing off the field, leaping from one saddle to the next, and racing back.

Two referees are required for a game, plus a king-sized, real-grass field - flat as a chessboard and twice as big as a soccer field. For about an hour, your team will charge in cavalry style, combat up and down the field at full speed, whacking and slashing away with their mallets in an effort to slam a ball the size of an orange between wicker posts. Imagine soccer played on horses - with mallets, a tiny ball, and no goalies to defend the goals from attacking players.

Meanwhile, the spectators will sit quite politely - and applaud politely when pleased. An elegant crowd, well behaved and well dressed. English clothes - tan faces, sleek hair, and lots of perfect white teeth. The same people who ski at St. Moritz in winter, sail in the Med in summer, and inhabit spas on tropical islands. All in all, a very high-class, sporting crowd.

Professional polo is played by astonishingly gifted athletes.

It was my privilege to see the man called the greatest polo player of all time play - Adolfo Cambiaso. Ranked number one in the world, rated at ten goals (which means his goals don't count until after he has scored ten). His team, La Dolfina, won the Argentine Open three years in a row, including the year I was there, 2007. Simply said, it was like watching a centaur - man and horse as one.

The other astonishingly gifted athletes involved are the horses. Not a distinct breed, but their bloodlines include Arabian, quarter horse, thoroughbred, Criollo, and cutting horse stock. They are called ponies because they are not big and tall horses, but small and lean. They're bred for smarts, speed, and nimbleness, as well as a nose for the game. A first-rate polo pony seems to be as enthusiastic for the game as is the man on his back. The horse and rider are of equal importance in polo. I spent as much time around the stables watching training as I did in the stands watching matches. When I was asked if I played polo, I had to say no, but I wish. Someday . . .

Do the polo people tango? I wondered, so I asked. "No. Not really. It's not really for . . . us."

But there is an element of tango in the game. Two living creatures so attuned to what they are doing that they move as one, even though each has to make very different moves. I tried explaining this to my host. He lifted his eyebrows in dismay and turned back to the game.

Well, then, never mind getting involved in polo. *Save your money, Senor Fuljumero*, I thought. *Stick to tango.* But I did purchase a polo ball, just in case I wanted to start a team someday. The Queen Anne Polo and Tango Club came to mind.

Having a ball is the beginning - for polo, or tango.

*“Much is written and said about tango.
Always a mix of fact and fiction.
Whatever a man tells you about tango, divide it by five.
Whatever a woman tells you about tango, multiply it by three.
Add your imagination . . .”*

—Dulce-Maria



The History of Tango - In Brief

Most books concerning tango include a history of the dance.
I can't ignore the relevance, but choose to tell you in this way:

What is jazz?
What's the history of jazz?
You see the problem right away.

What is tango?
What's the history of tango?
Same problem.

A clear, simple, short answer won't tell you much.

When there is no documentary evidence, and all the originators of an art form are dead, and those who have given it life and variation are too numerous to count, and even all those have their own versions of the truth - then such questions become meaningless.

And, even if you knew the answers to those questions, would it make any difference to your tango dancing? Would you think of definitions and history while out on the floor in a ballroom?
I'd hope not.

There is, of course, the romantic, sentimental view, which says:
Tango was born in the riverbank slums of the port of Buenos Aires - in brothels and on street corners - in the late nineteenth century.
Tango was a dance brought to life by poor emigrants from Europe, slaves from Africa, and gauchos driven to the city by lack of work in the newly fenced pampas.

Is that tango? Yes and No.
The most erudite scholars and historians do not agree.
It's a far more complicated and confused story than that.
A story that's still being written and rewritten.

What about the classic parody of what tango has become?
Will that tell us anything useful?

Yes and No.

Imagine: A Latin street hoodlum in black suit and hat. His partner, a lovely Latina - black hair, skimpy top and revealing skirt, rose clenched in her teeth. They are whirling and kicking, with fiercely passionate expressions on their faces. They dance welded together cheek-to-cheek, bodies slammed together at the chest, rubbing their sensuality together hard enough to make smoke. Their feet are a flashing blur - he in black Cuban heels; she in red high heels. They are dancing in unlimited space, oblivious to the world.

Is that tango?

Yes and No.

That's pretty much the answer to all the deeper questions about the history of tango. Did it happen this way or that?

Yes and No.

There are many, many books about tango history.

I have read most of them.

You may find and read them on your own.

This is not one of them.

But if you want to go through that door into tango, there are a hundred books to read. At least get the ones with pictures . . .



Adolescente

There is a high school near my apartment.
Students go down the street to a fast-food joint to eat and talk at lunchtime.
And I also eat lunch there because, having been a high school teacher for twenty years, I still enjoy being around the young.

Sitting at a nearby table, I overheard these Spanish words and phrases - the explosive, extravagant comments of the young in conversation - self-explanatory, I think:

Estupendamente!

Fabulos!

Es la bomba!

Fenomenal!

Fantastico! Exquisita!

Es lo Maximo!

Efectamente!

Cooly Cool!

And *Esa chica una mamita!*

(The last phrase means “A babe!”)

Ni fu ni fa. So so.

Es una juerguista. Party animal.

Un banana. A jerk who doesn't know the score, but who thinks he is way, way cool.

One of the teenagers explained to me that when text messaging on your phone, you end with 50538-50538 - which reads, in Spanish, BESOS BESOS - kisses kisses - when read upside down on the screen.

They were amazed that I was a student of tango.
When I asked if they danced tango, they did not.
But they knew all the words to all the songs and would sing samples to me about unrequited love and broken hearts - teenage tango.

The economics of Argentina in 2007 were such that not many people owned personal laptop computers, especially not teenagers. Every neighborhood in Palermo has Internet cafes, frequented by the *adolescentes*.

Since it was a hassle for me to get e-mail connections in my apartment, I, too, used the Internet cafes regularly.

As it turned out, many of the same high school students I met over lunch also used the same Internet cafe as I. They were pleased to help me with my Spanish, and I was pleased to help them with their English.

Some graphic phrases of slang I found appealing:

Este aparato se congelo. This computer has congealed. Seized up.

Grax! Thanks! (short form of *gracias*.)

And the reply is *De nax* - short form of you're welcome, *De nada*.

abollado. Dented - the way you look after a hard night out.

pescado. A fish - an idiot.

Sacate las pilas! Take your batteries out. Calm down.

Lo atamos con alambre. Tie it with wire. Wire around it. Make do.

La noche esta en panales. The night is in diapers. The night is still young.

When I used that last phrase one evening when Argentine adult friends were debating where to go dancing next, I received a high compliment:

“Where did you learn that? Very *porteno*, *senor*.”

“I have teachers who are cooly cool.”

Tango Partner

My intensive tango life continued.
Multiple milongas and lessons.
A strong festival and two evenings of professional show tango.

I learned to dance with strangers at a milonga. And developed a skill in spotting those who were *principiantes* (beginners) like me - usually foreign lady tango tourists who were grateful for my attention and efforts on their behalf.

But I did miss the comfort of dancing with a regular partner whose skills and style I knew well - and vice versa

It's late at night, and I both do and do not want to go out dancing.
I think of my best partner, back in Seattle, with nostalgic longing.

As I write, I gaze across the room at her in my imagination - as if she were here in Argentina with me. I smile and wink at her, as she waits for me in silent expectation of a dance.

We've not been together long, but we are a steady couple.

Her name is Louise.
Orange-red hair, pink dress, gold shoes, scarlet lipstick.
An enigmatic, enchanting Mona Lisa smile on her expressive face.
Lovely.

Louise is, in fact, a full-size lady orangutan.
A stuffed animal. A large stuffed animal.
Yes.
I saw her in a toy store window one day, dressed as she is now.
I was smitten.

“Is this a gift for your daughter or grandchild?” asked the clerk.
“No. She is for me. For tango purposes only . . .”
“Oh, well then . . .”

Louise is always ready to dance.
Her embrace is reliable.
Louise follows extremely well.
She never complains, and we don't step on each other's feet.
In fact, her feet hardly touch the floor.
I can easily make some very flashy moves with her.
Swing her around my neck, throw her up in the air, or slide her between my legs - like the professional show dancers in Argentina do.
And she doesn't mind if I talk while we dance.

They say that some extreme tango moves may be dangerous to your health - you can fall and hurt yourself or drop your partner hard on the floor.
You should not try them unless a medic and an ambulance are standing by.
But if your partner is a stuffed orangutan . . .
No problem.
Anything goes.

I miss Louise.
She is there - faithfully waiting for me to come home.
Waiting for me to show her the moves I've learned in Buenos Aires!

Snapshots of Silence

I mentioned that Louise does not mind if I talk while dancing.
Senor Fuljumero is temperamentally talky.
A babblemouth.
He often suffers from logorrhea - the endless flow of words.

But a cardinal rule of tango dancing is silence.
Talking while dancing is sacrilegious.

Some collected comments from dismayed partners or couples dancing near Senor Fuljumero:

“Senor, if you want to chat, we go to the bar.
If you want to dance, you must speak only with your feet.”

“It’s not that you are talking while dancing. It’s that you are thinking, which leads to talking. Don’t think. Dance.”

“Shut up and dance. Please.”

“Your talking is keeping me from my dreams and fantasies.”

“If you must talk, whisper sexy words in my ear.”

“Talk or dance. Pick one, and if it’s talk, do not dance with me.”

“Arriba! Stand up straight, Senor Slumpy. Close mouth. Open soul. Listen only to the music. Dance.”

“Shhhhh . . . We’re trying to dance . . .”

Keeping one’s mouth shut while dancing is a hard lesson to learn, and wearing tape over your mouth while on the floor is not a solution. But it *is* slightly romantic when a partner puts her soft fingers gently over your lips to signal silence.

Works for me.



Una Mesa para Uno - A Table for One

And what did Senor Fuljumero eat in Argentina?

A friend explained the difference between what Americans eat in the morning and the Argentine custom.

“An American breakfast is bacon, eggs, hash brown potatoes, toast, butter, jelly, orange juice, and coffee. An Argentine breakfast is coffee and a cigarette. We do not eat breakfast, senor, we wait.”

Both are stereotypes of a country's breakfast, of course.

All over the world the American Breakfast is listed on the menu, and if you order one, that's what you'll get.

I've never seen an Argentine Breakfast on a menu anywhere.

Because there isn't one.

In part because if you eat a substantial evening meal after ten o'clock the night before and you get up to go to work the next morning at six o'clock, you're not going to be very hungry.

When I fell into the Argentine rhythm, I learned to wait to eat something until sometime between eleven o'clock and noon.

For the first food - *desayuno*, Senor Fuljumero had *café con leche*, juice of the small, sweet Spanish oranges, chocolate croissants, and cognac.

And for the *segundo* - the next meal?

To prime the senor for the rigors of the tango, an early meal at 8:00 p.m. at El Desnivel, on Defensa near the Plaza Dorrego in San Telmo.

A legendary parrilla.

One goes early to avoid the late-coming crowds.

Senor Fuljumero came early and often, even after moving to Palermo.

Vamonos! (Let's go) . . . Come with Senor Fuljumero to El Desnivel.

Pass in through the front door by the grill sizzling with fat sausages, halves of chickens, and cuts of beef, some recognizable, some not.

The headwaiter, Juan Carlos, “the Bull” - a man of heroic proportions - greets regulars with an embrace that lifts them off the floor, turns them completely around, and sets them on the way to their tables.

The small tables seating one or two are along the walls.

Right away you will notice that all the many pictures on the walls are hung crooked. Why? They have always been that way - for reasons unknown, but it emphasizes the casual spirit of El Desnivel.

Don't even think of straightening them.

Take the hint and stay loose.

The tables are covered with oilcloth, and the extra-large knife and fork are for serious carving of meat or self-defense in a fight.

No menu is offered.

The Bull knows what you need - *carne, vino tinto*, onions, tomatoes, and *agua sin gas*. And in no time at all the man places on the table water from the snows of the Andes, a bottle of Malbec from Mendoza, the salad, hot bread, and whatever cut of beef Juan Carlos deems the best on the grill tonight. Usually for Senor Fuljumero a *mariposa* - a butterflyed, boneless rib eye steak the size of a catcher's mitt.

And the rest is up to Senor Fuljumero.

There is no hurry.

No rush.

Eat slowly - enjoy.

The Bull insists.

In passing it should be noted that Argentines prefer plain food - so good it can stand on its own, without spices or peppers. The onions and tomatoes do not require any dressing. The meat tastes like meat, not some secret sauce. This suits Senor Fuljumero very well.

And it is part of his understanding of salon tango - nothing fancy - just the basics done simply and well.

After Senor Fuljumero finishes his meal, the table is deftly cleared.

Flan and coffee are served without asking, along with the bill.

The toothpicks by the door are mint flavored.

The Bull provides a parting abrazo (embrace), lifting up Senor Fuljumero and placing him gently outside on the sidewalk.

The walk to the milonga at Confeiteria Ideal is just long enough to settle the meal and arouse a new hunger - to experience salon tango culture in its richest, most complex form.

Midnight Milonga at the Confiteria Ideal

I often went to the Confiteria Ideal early and stayed late.
It is the oldest classic tango emporium in Buenos Aires.
Many tango films have been made there, and the moment you walk in, you understand why. You have entered a time warp - it is the nineteenth century. Because the venue attracts a large and varied crowd, stories unfold all around an observer.
Here's one.

She was a pink, soft-shelled crab, with gold-tipped claws, feet, and tail. Waving her antennae back and forth, she poised on the edge of her chair, alert to the slightest invitation to dance - a glance, a smile, a wink, a raised eyebrow, a nod - anything even resembling a cabeceo would do.
She sat through two tandas.
No takers.

Desperate, she would have responded to a cough, a sneeze, a hiccup. The men across the room, who had come to a milonga to connect, not to be consumed, carefully avoided contact - even accidental.

And then. Oh, then . . .

In walked an eel.

A middle-aged, middle-sized, middle-brained eel.

A red-tipped, black-and-white, pin-striped eel

Red tie, red shoes, red nose, black heart.

Displaying pomaded hair and an equally oily personality.

He slithered into the ballroom and cast about for his evening meal.

The pink, soft-shelled crab almost fell off her chair.

Yes!

The eel dangled his bait.

Took a table for two, ordered champagne for two and drew up another chair, as if there would soon be a companion.

He had laid his bait and set his trap.

He expertly popped the champagne cork himself.

Poured two glasses.

And only then did he scan the room.

He focused his eely eyes on the crab, launching a cabeceo as one might

throw a spear.
She coyly raised her eyebrows. *Me?*
He raised his in response. *Si!*

The orchestra began a smooth Di Sarli set.
The crab and the eel rose, locked eyes, walked slowly to the outer edge of her side of the floor, and paused face-to-face.
He offered his left hand.
She placed hers in his, stepped into the frame of his embrace, settled her chest and cheek against his, and floated her left hand over his head to flutter down softly onto his shoulder.

She closed her eyes - took a deep breath.
For eight counts they did not move, and then . . . they danced away and around, and away and around . . . as if hardly in contact with the floor.
He, with the masterful slight-touch control of a grand prix racing driver negotiating a crowded course.
She, with the small, quick-quick-slow-slow, delicate steps of a shore bird, pausing occasionally to draw puzzles in the sand.

Now that, that is tango, thought Senor Fuljumero.
And this is not the first time the crab and eel have danced together.

No longer a crab and an eel in his mind - a mental misjudgment - a writer's fantasy projected onto the wrong people.
These were primo tango dancers.
A man and a woman who brought grace and passion to the milonga.

At the end of the four dances of the tanda, he escorted her to his table.
They lifted their glasses of champagne while they remained standing.
Hooking their arms one within the other, they drank, laughed.
They sat down, and laughed again.
She leaned, he leaned - they kissed . . . oh so tenderly.

Meanwhile, Senor Fuljumero, welded into his chair at a back table, intimidated by the quality of the dancing at this milonga, straining to scratch writerly metaphors into his notebook and taking care not to throw the invitational look accidentally while still watching carefully, wondered:

If I showed what I was thinking and writing to the crab and the eel, would they be insulted or complimented? Or even pleased and amused?

If Senor Fuljumero got to know them, would he still think of them as a crab and an eel?

No.

If he learned that they were really a husband and wife who met here at the milonga from time to time and played out their part in the theater of tango, as a long-running amusement, would he still have a story?

Yes.

Given the power of a writer to push observed reality into imagined fiction, and the power of a reader to accept what is imagined, then let us assume that is their story.

They are actors in their own theater of romance.

Yes.

Why not?



Como Rie La Vida - How the Life Laughs!

It is that hour that is neither night nor morning: 3:00 a.m.
High sultry summer - still steamy warm at this hour.

The Bar Avilar, on the Avenida de Mayo, is crowded with melancholy Spaniards, Gypsies, and aficionados of flamenco. There for the music, the dance, and to dip into the flamenco Way of Life.

This is a classic setting for a 1930s black-and-white film.
Dark night, dark and smoky bar, dark and smoky people in dark and smoky moods, eating dark and smoky food and drinking dark red wine.
Very dark.

Except for the chef.

Through a service window I can see into the brightly lit kitchen.
From time to time the pale face of the chef appears.
An alert, animated face - topped by the white hat of his trade.

He keeps glancing out of the window toward the stage, where solo flamenco dancers come and go in response to the guitar player's choice of songs. The chef pauses to consider the music.

Onstage, a particularly beautiful dancer stands poised to perform.
Slender, wearing a black-and-white polka-dot dress and red shoes.
She raises her castanets level with her exotic face and sets the rhythm.
Click, click, click-click-click
The guitar player strums introductory chords.
An older man begins clapping in the complex flamenco style.

The chef, still in the kitchen but peering out the service window, raises his eyebrows and disappears from my view.
Moments later he rushes out of the kitchen and up onto the stage.
Still in his food-stained apron - and with hands raised over his head - he picks up the beat and dances flamenco.

The woman performer moves to the edge of the stage to give him room.
She is taller than the chef, but he is somehow larger in his presence.
She accepts her role as his partner, responding to his fervor and energy as
he roils around her, clapping his hands, stamping his feet, gesturing with his
head and shoulders.

At first his dancing might be seen as a comedic parody of flamenco.
But as the chef dances on, it is clear that he is the real deal.
He's just damned good, that's all.
He has skill, passion, soul, heart, and cojones.

Once, he breaks out of the solemn visage expected of flamenco.
He laughs.
The energized crowd laughs back and shouts encouragement:
Ole! Ole! Eso es! (Yes, Yes! That's it!)

After slashing and pounding the stage to the cataclysmic ending of the song,
the little man stands poised with hands held high in triumph, like a matador
who has just killed a bull with one thrust of the sword.

The crowd goes wild.
Standing ovation. *Ole! Ole! Ole!*
Joy is not a customary dimension of the flamenco scene.
But the chef has brought smiles and laughter into this venue of the dark
night of the soul. *Ole! Ole! Ole!*

The chef rushes off the stage as quickly as he came.
His face reappears in the kitchen's service window.
He places plates of tapas up on the serving shelf.
But his eyes and mouth are smiling - he is still dancing . . .

"Is he a cook who likes to dance or a dancer who likes to cook?" I ask.
Nobody seems to know for sure, though the answer is apparent: Both.

Is he Spanish - a Gypsy?
So some say, but nobody seems to know for sure.

Every time I returned to the Bar Avilar, the chef/dancer performed.
He had become a star attraction.
People came just to be there when he launched from the kitchen and danced;
came to be sustained and lifted up by his food and his dancing.

One night I met the owner of the bar and asked about the chef.
Was he Spanish? No.
Gypsy? No.
He is Norwegian.
Norwegian?
Si. He came to Argentina some years ago as a chef on a cruise ship.
He took shore leave in Buenos Aires, wandered around, and fell in love with
tango and flamenco.
And stayed to dance.
He needed a job - the Bar Avilar needed a chef.
But nobody knew about the dancing.
Until the magic night he first launched out of the kitchen.

Does he perform every night?
“No, only when he is moved.”
“What does it take to move him?”
“Well, señor, we never know, but when he is moved, he comes out and
dances, and we are pleased. His passionate vitality is infectious.
He may be a Norwegian cook, but in his heart he is a Spanish Gypsy.
He has found himself and we have found him. Ole!”

* * *

Come with me . . . now that you know all this, sit through this movie again -
imagine . . . Buenos Aires . . .

*It is that hour that is neither night nor morning: 3:00 a.m.
It is high sultry summer, and still steamy warm at this hour.*

*The Bar Avilar is crowded with melancholy Spaniards, Gypsies, and
aficionados of flamenco. There for the music, the dance, and to touch into
the flamenco Way of Life.*

*This is a classic setting for a 1930s black-and-white film.
Dark night, dark and smoky bar, dark and smoky people in dark and smoky
moods, eating dark and smoky food, and drinking dark red wine.
Very dark.
Except for the chef.*

*From the kitchen, the chef in his apron explodes onto the stage.
A small man with a large heart and music in the soles of his shoes.
The Norwegian cook who has become a Spanish Gypsy King.
The chef smiles.
“Ole! Ole! Ole!” the crowd cries.*

“Como rie la vida!” say the Argentines - How the life laughs!



One-Lady Band

The time: Sunday around two o'clock in the afternoon - Buenos Aires.

The place: Defensa street, two blocks west of the Plaza Dorrego.

The circumstances:

The square and the street are set aside for pedestrians during the weekly antiques and crafts fair. In addition to the vendors, there are musicians, tango dancers, jugglers, stilt-walkers.

And actors dressed as Indians, prostitutes, statues, emigrants, and gauchos - you can have your picture taken with these.

(My favorites: the identical twin brothers dressed as Charlie Chaplin.)

A woman:

If you were to see her walking along in the flow of the crowd, you would not pay her any special attention. One of many women of a certain age on an outing with their peers.

Sensible shoes, classy jeans, white blouse, sweater tied across the shoulders, well-combed natural grey hair - shoulder length - practical tortoise-shell glasses parked up in her hair.

And the signs of a "tourist-who-has-been-warned-to-be-careful": no jewelry or watch, small purse well zipped, carried with the strap across her chest and clutched firmly with one hand.

Nice face - tan, the creases of age, but no makeup. You would assume that friends of her tribe were not far away, or that her mate was sitting in a cafe reading the paper while she shops.

However.

Place this same woman on a small folding stool, sitting on the sidewalk in front of a shop that is closed for the day.

In front of the woman is a toy trap-drum set: bass drum, snare drum, and cymbals.

Across the top of the bass drum is a set of plastic cups - imitation timbales for Latin rhythms.

Beside the woman is a paper bag on which an assortment of toy instruments sits - trumpet, trombone, kazoo.

On the other side of the woman is her knitted hat.

This is not a common sight.

What is her story?

What will she do with her equipment?

Perhaps she is one of those unexpectedly financially flattened by the devaluation of the peso and is out here on Sundays to make just enough to tide her over.

Or. Perhaps she has made a break with the boring Sunday habits of her later years. Church, family lunch, siesta, tea with gossipy neighbors, TV, and bed - while her husband spends the day with the papers and her children and grandchildren who ritually come and ritually go.

Maybe she had given the drum set and toy instruments to her grandchildren, only to find out that they had no interest in any toy that was not electronic. And so. One Sunday morning - perhaps this one - she rebelled. Just walked out with the drums and horns and hit the street.

People less attractive than she, with less talent than she, had managed it.

How hard might this be?

Put out the hat, sing a little song - play a little tune - and who knows what might happen?

Life is short. Drink the wine of possibility.

She sits, waiting. Looking up and down the street.

Senor Fuljumero to the rescue.

Initiate the performance.

Placing a ten-peso note in her hat, he smiled and stepped back.

A little startled, she laughed nervously.

She began singing "The Darktown Strutters' Ball" - New Orleans style, in a high-pitched, gravelly voice a la Louis Armstrong.

She was pretty good on the drums and did a great honking trumpet solo with the kazoo.

She stopped. She blushed. Laughed.

I applauded. And went on my way.

And then it occurred to me that she was sitting there because she had bought the drum set and horns in one of the antique shops and was only waiting for friends or husband to come along and help carry the stuff back to the car. My imagination had run away with me again.

You idiot.

When I looked back, she was gone.

Perhaps I was her only audience.

Her only performance.

One crazy act deserves another.

Money in the hat. One song. One performance. Why not?

And now we both have stories to tell.

Imagine hers.

* * *

This is what tango dancing is like.

A sudden recognition across a dance floor.

An attraction based on assumptions and illusions and imagination.

A three-minute dancing romance with a stranger.

And nothing left the next day but two versions of a lovely memory made of desire for the way you want the world to be - at least momentarily.

Card Games

There is an uncommon interest in the occult in Buenos Aires. Friends from many walks of life would casually mention or discuss their regular encounters with psychics, tarot card readers, fortune tellers, astrologers, palmists, shamans, and even witches. They spoke with no more caution than they would talk of going to get their hair cut or nails done. As casually as I would mention that I had been to see my doctor for a checkup or to my dentist to have my teeth cleaned. An accepted part of normal life.

“I can’t come Wednesday - my card reader says it’s not auspicious.”

“Mercury is in retrograde, and my luck is about to change.”

“My skin will clear up in three days if I wear this amulet.”

While I am unfamiliar with the occult sciences and skeptical of the claims of the paranormal, I have a reasonably curious mind.

Because I had been collecting material for a novel that might include characters drawn from life in Argentina, it occurred to me that I should include this faith in the paranormal in the mix. Perhaps I could visit a psychic and have a reading done for a fictitious personality.

My assistant, Maria-Jose, was not only excited about this possibility, but she, herself, was a devotee of the occult arts and would help make arrangements. She offered to go along as a translator.

In response I offered to pay for her own private reading.

Deal!

Off to see the Gypsy.

Doctor Senora Hebe Gil was a famous practitioner of occult science. The thirty-seven diplomas I counted on her office wall attested to her education and training in universities and academies in Argentina and abroad.

Hers was not a Gypsy tent or back-alley crib. Her well-appointed office resembled that of a successful attorney or a medical doctor. Along with the diplomas were photographs of her alongside famous clients from the worlds of politics, entertainment, business, and sports.

And she herself was a tastefully-dressed, mature woman with an open and accessible personality. She did not speak English, but her overtures in Spanish felt warm and welcoming.

I was surprised and impressed.

When Maria-Jose outlined my mission, Senora Hebe Gil turned solemn. Now it was she who was surprised. But not impressed. She asked Maria-Jose to explain to me that what I asked was impossible. She could not do a reading for a fictitious character. Her contact with invisible forces and spirits could only be employed on behalf of a real person. Her work was serious and only connected to those who were living human beings. She was so sorry, but . . .

We sat in silence.

Oh, well . . .

Doctor Senora Hebe Gil looked closely at me. She smiled benevolently, reached across her desk, and took both my hands in hers.

While looking at me, she spoke to Maria-Jose.

She had an idea . . . just a thought . . .

The Senor might learn something useful if she did a reading for *him*.

“Well . . . I . . .”

“Say yes, say yes, please say yes,” whispered Maria-Jose.

Well . . . why not? I thought

“Yes.”

The details of the process of the reading are a blur in my mind.

Dr. Gil released my hands, but asked that I keep them on the table.

She then asked me for three questions - about serious matters that concerned me most.

Well . . .

I explained that I had written a large novel over many years - published in Czech - but I want to know if it will ever get published in English. Will it?

My second question concerned the dissolution of my marriage.
Will that be accomplished amicably and soon?

And finally . . . and finally . . . Will I ever find love again?

(Silence.)

Doctor Senora Hebe Gil took a deck of cards from a velvet bag and shuffled them as expertly as a blackjack dealer in Las Vegas.

I was asked to divide the deck into several piles.

She shuffled again.

I divided again.

And then she asked me to take a total of nine cards at random off the stacks and hand them to her, face down.

I did that.

She placed the cards on the table in front of me in a pattern I don't remember or understand.

By then I was mesmerized.

She began turning the cards face up one at a time, considering each one as its face was revealed.

She studied the cards for a long, long, long time.

She spoke slowly, as Maria-Jose translated.

Yes, my novel will be published in English - soon.

Yes, my marriage will be resolved amicably - soon enough.

And . . . a great love is waiting for me . . . but not in Argentina . . . someone you already know or have met. And sooner or later . . .

(Silence.)

Dr. Gil collected the cards, returned them to the deck, and the deck to the velvet bag. She spoke softly to Maria-Jose while looking at me.

It seemed that the cards had no more to say, but I must promise to come for another reading before returning to the United States.

The spirits are always at work - and I should stay in touch.

With a warm handshake, I was excused - to wait in the outer office in a state of euphoria - while Maria-Jose had her reading. I paid the secretary for services received - about one hundred US dollars, if memory serves me well.

In time Maria-Jose appeared wreathed in smiles, followed by Dr. Senora Hebe Gil, who reminded me that I must come at least once more.

When I returned to my apartment, my skepticism remained intact.

Nobody can really predict the future.

Of course not.

Getting the novel published in English and the divorce settled amicably were an easy and reasonable call for Doctor Gil to make. I was already expecting those developments, though it was reassuring to have the spirits' confirmation.

As to finding love . . . well . . .

I sat for an hour composing a list of all the eligible single women I knew, then added to the list the maybe-eligible, and the you've-got-to-be-kidding-eligible, and finally even a couple of *no-way*-eligible names.

I contemplated the list.

Nothing - nobody.

The cards were playing games with me, or else Dr. Gil is a charlatan.

Clever and sensitive and skilled, but still, a charlatan.

But, on the other hand, it was a provocative experience.

And a promise is a promise . . .

I would visit Dr. Gil once more before leaving Argentina.

You never know.

Maybe the spirits would come up with a name for the true love waiting for me in the States . . .

Banana Tango

One pleasure of being a stranger in a strange land is being adopted by the natives, who delight in introducing you to their friends as a curiosity - an example of exotic foreign fauna found washed up on their shores. In this instance, I had been invited to dinner by a friend of a friend. Little did I know that I was to be part of the entertainment . . .

There were thirty other friends of the host in an elegant home.
Massive mounds of premium-quality meat on the grill.
An ample supply of fine wine and cold beer.
And, to please the visiting American author, tango entertainment had been arranged - a professional singer and two dancers.

After dinner, space was cleared - the guests settled in a circle.
The singer performed admirably.
Followed by the dancers, who were young and talented.
They performed *nuevo tango* - a flashy style danced to electronic music, fashionable among the cutting edge of hip tango aficionados.
So far, so good.

And then . . . to my surprise, the hostess explained that the American guest was a student of tango. Turning to me, she asked if I, the visitor, would now honor the occasion and demonstrate my skills by dancing with the young lady.
Applause. Applause.
Ole! Ole!

Right. She's talking about me. Oh, sure. Ohdeargod!

Senor Fuljumpero was, in fact, tangoed up a bit - in semi-milonguero costume - dark grey pin-striped, double-breasted tango suit, with a black turtle-necked shirt.
Looking good.

Not knowing what was in store, alas, he was wearing street shoes - not his treasured pair of black and red tango slippers.
But then . . . tango for men is not about the shoes - it's about attitude.

The *presencia* - one's presence and style.
And that I had brought with me.

There was an expression of what might have been seen as steely confidence on Senor Fuljumpero's face as he rose and walked to meet his partner. He was thinking of John Travolta in *Saturday Night Fever*. That look. That walk. He flared his nostrils.
Stand back . . .

The basis for his self-confident condition was something he had discovered when mingling with the polo crowd. The guests at the party were polo people. So actually, he knew more about tango than most of the guests.

Upper class Argentines like these are as familiar with tango as upper class Americans are with square dancing. They know about it, vaguely, as part of their cultural heritage. But they've never actually done it. Not one of the guests was a tango dancer - I had asked. Knowing that armed a fool like Senor Fuljumpero with confidence. He flared his nostrils again.

He smiled.
His partner-to-be smiled.
He spoke to her: "*Pardon, pero no hablo mucho Espanol. Desculpe-me, soy tango principiante. Yo tengo un banana.*" (Excuse me, but I don't speak much Spanish. Forgive me - I am a beginner at tango. I am a banana.) A banana, as my teenaged friends had explained, is Argentine slang for someone who looks like they know what they are doing but who is in fact an idiot - not truly cool.

That's what Senor Fuljumpero wanted to express. And he did say all that, except he should have said "*Soy un banana*" instead of "*Yo tengo un banana.*" Because "I have a banana" is slang for having an erection. Senor Fuljumpero was unaware of his language error at the time. Well, you can imagine . . .

The guests overheard, laughed and applauded.
The banana tango!
Americans are crazy!
He's hot. He has an erection!
Yes! Milonguero and chica!
Yes! Go get 'em *gaucho* - ARRIBA! - get it up!
Ole! Ole! Ole!

The young woman said nothing, but, accepting her fate, flung herself around in wild abandon as the techno tango beat throbbed on.
Senor Fuljumero, ditto.
With a slam-dunk finish, the chica perched on his knee.
OLE!
Applause, applause.

After which the young woman fled to the protection of her partner.
And the guests laughed themselves silly.

As he was departing later that evening, one of the male guests walked with him out to the waiting taxi.
The man was chuckling as he said, "Senor, about your use of Spanish. You might like to know the difference between *being* a banana and *having* a banana . . ."

And the evening's star idiot, Senor Banana, went home to pack for the next day's embarkation on a ship that would take him far, far away from the scene of his first . . . and last . . . show-time performance of tango in Buenos Aires, Argentina.



The Deep Blue Sea

The *Norwegian Dream* Becomes a Norwegian Nightmare

(If I don't tell you now, you will soon wonder why this memoir is drifting out to sea, far from Buenos Aires. The story loops away before it returns to dry land. But come along for the ride. I promise to take you to places where you have probably never been and may never go. At the far end of the loop is one of the finest nights of tango Señor Fuljumero ever had - at sea.)

Imagine:

Cape Horn

The Drake Passage

The Beagle Channel

The Straits of Magellan

Tierra del Fuego

These are at the far southern tip of the Americas, where the Pacific and Atlantic Oceans join. A part of the world that seemed so far away when I once read the great stories of the early ship-borne explorers.

I never expected to travel there to see it with my own eyes.

I glanced in a travel agent's window at a poster announcing voyages. One caught my eye. From Buenos Aires to Cape Horn, through the Drake Passage, circling back into the Beagle Channel, through the Straits of Magellan and on up through the fjords of western Chile to Valparaiso. The route of Darwin on the *Beagle* in the winter of 1832.

I won't be this far south again . . . and I could . . . why not?

This adventure was not on my "to do" list when I left Seattle.

But staying open to unexpected possibilities was.

"Be open to surprise" was underlined several times.

And, besides, weeks of day-and-night tango plus the intensity of life in Buenos Aires had left me exhausted. Too much of a good thing. Señor Fuljumero was over-tangoed and needed a break.

The open sea beckoned.

But I am duly surprised, because a cruise ship is not my style.
But the only vessel with a scheduled sailing that fit my available time slot was just that: a cruise ship - the *Norwegian Dream*.
Two weeks on the route of Darwin, dock at Valparaiso, Chile, fly back to Buenos Aires by Christmas, and get back to Plan A - tango.
And, lest I falter in my ultimate Argentine quest, my travel agent pointed out that a tango teacher would be aboard for the trip.

The *Norwegian Dream*.

Not the contemporary cruise ship that is a combination resort hotel, gambling casino, theme park, and shopping mall that seems to have fallen into the sea and stayed afloat - the ones carrying 5,000 passengers and infinite crew.

No, The *Norwegian Dream* was a smaller, older boat - a ship-shaped ocean liner - carrying 1,700 passengers and a crew of 500.

And it is *Norwegian*, and those nice, blonde Vikings surely know all about ships and sailing, right?

Wrong.

The *Norwegian Dream* was registered in the Bahamas, owned by a corporation based in Miami, which, in turn, was probably owned by a hedge fund backed by a bank in Dubai.

As it turned out, most of the crew was from the Philippines, Jamaica, and Eastern Europe.

The officers were from many countries, but not Norway.

The captain was Croatian.

(I'll tell you more about the captain later.)

And the passengers seemed to be mostly senior citizen coupon clippers - bargain hunting travelers - from so many countries that all announcements aboard ship were given in English, Spanish, German, French, and Gibberish. But what the hell, it was a cheap ticket, the boat's going where I want to go, I have an outside room with a small deck, and I don't have to play bingo or shuffleboard if I don't want to.

Just eat, sleep, read, write, think, dream of Norway, and maybe tango.

What could go wrong?

We sailed from the port of Buenos Aires at dusk - arriving in Montevideo, Uruguay the next morning - with a day ashore.

Good - Montevideo, Uruguay, was on my short-trip list.

But, as it turned out, Montevideo seemed too much like Buenos Aires in every way, and I soon retreated to my cabin on the ship to watch old black-and-white tango movies on TV.

We sailed again in the late afternoon, outward bound for the South Atlantic, the Falkland Islands, and Cape Horn.

Clear day, calm sea, green light for full speed of 17 knots.

Excellent.

As we sailed along in the middle of the narrow dredged channel through the muddy estuary of the Rio de la Plata, directly ahead of us and going in the same direction was a large barge being towed by a tugboat.

The barge was fully loaded with cargo containers stacked six high, topped off with open trailers full of new automobiles.

And we hit that barge dead center at full speed - rode right up onto its stern - tossing cargo containers and new cars up into the air and off into the sea like chips flying away from a giant axe chop.

How could this happen? you ask.

Nobody knew, or if they did, the passengers were never told.

The crew of the *Norwegian Dream* didn't to want to talk about it.

But there's no doubt about what actually happened, thanks to the Geriatric Gadget Brigade. These older passengers - veteran cruisers - with their multi-pocketed vests and cargo pants were alert and prepared for an event like this. They were gathered on the foredeck with cameras, VCRs, hand-held GPSs, binoculars, laptops, and cell phones.

At their stations forward, they were in position to record and describe the accident in detail, share the data around the ship, and send the news around the world - in minutes.

Captain Nenad Movic - (real name - I swear - Croatian) - came on the public address system to say in deeply accented English that we had "touched a barge."

He said that. But his term for the event was at odds with what we were seeing with our own eyes from the deck of the ship.



The smashed-up barge floated by.
New cars and cargo containers continued to slide off into the sea.
Deckhands on both the barge and the ship were scrambling into action.
And all the while, images of what really happened were circulating the ship
and the world, thanks to the passengers' satellite phone cameras.

The captain made the mistake of trying to cover up and minimize a serious
accident by saying we would soon be under way again.
Right. Just "touched a barge."
The Geriatric Gadget Brigade was on his ass in no time.
E-mails and pictures went out at warp speed to personal attorneys, insurance
brokers, travel agents, and the corporate office in Miami.

For twenty-four hours, the ship lay limply at anchor in the middle of the
now blocked and littered channel, while all the dominoes than can fall in all
directions as a result of a collision did fall.
Coast guard, Uruguayan navy, corporate officers, insurance company
representatives, harbor pilots - the whole hoo-ha scrambled into action.

Finally, the ship was allowed to return to Montevideo.
Freed from sea, the passengers assembled on the dock at the bow of the ship,
now shark-like in profile with a huge chunk torn out of the bow, and the skin
of the ship clawed to the water line.
And probably with internal damage - as yet unknown.

"Touched a barge" became a standing joke and the name of a cocktail.
And Captain Nenad Mogic disappeared from the ship, hustled away under
cover of darkness.

We were two more days in Montevideo while all the authorities did their
authority dances. A shipyard crew welded a couple of huge steel bandages
onto the prow and repainted the scabs and scars.
Supervised and filmed from shore by the Geriatric Gadget Brigade.

Try again. We sailed in the late afternoon.
The new master of the ship, whose name I first thought was AAAAgghh
Haagabaggavik when introduced over the ship's quacky PA system, is, now
that I see it in print, Captain Aage Hoddevik.

A real Norwegian!

A large, affable Viking-esque mountain of a man, he speaks in slow and amiably morose tones, as though giving a eulogy at the funeral for a beloved pet. In olden times he would have been the guy the Vikings left to watch the boats on the beach because he was inept and unenthusiastic at raping and pillaging and burning.

It was like having a sorrowful Santa Claus for a captain.

The captain made solemn, confusing-yet-comforting announcements, concluding with a poem or a bit of wisdom for the day.

Sample: "Yesterday is history; tomorrow is a mystery; today is a gift - and that's why we call it the present."

Or, and this one caused a moment of silence across the ship, "Life is endless chaotic struggle. Have a nice day. Struggle on."

That was offered at dawn on a cold, rainy, windy morning, as the ship surged and wallowed and heaved itself into the roiling Atlantic.

The Norwegian Nightmare continued.

One afternoon the electrical system failed completely, shutting down everything aboard - the bingo game, the casino games, the Internet - lights, air conditioning - everything.

Total silence.

Quite a lovely time, I thought - maybe like being becalmed at sea in the old sailing ship days. But some passengers panicked and appeared on deck in life jackets.

Squaring away the gambling casino must have been interesting when the lights came back on -

"I'm sure I had just drawn an ace."

"There were snake eyes on the table before the lights went out."

"Somebody took half my chips in the dark."

A change of schedule was announced - forgoing some ports - and perhaps skipping Cape Horn.

The passengers were alarmed. No way!

E-mails to the corporate offices restored the Cape Horn transit.

The captain resorted to bemoaning how many people had died going around the Horn - in the olden days, of course. Have a nice day!
He actually said that.

There was a night of heavy seas and winds and ship-shuddering smack-downs. Vomit bags were distributed until the supply ran out. Word rapidly ran around the ship about rampant diarrhea caused by rancid food.
The ship seemed deserted.

When the mollifying news from corporate headquarters came announcing a \$150 immediate credit for each passenger and 50 percent off all booze, many passengers emerged and crowded into the ship's bars.
By nightfall we were a ship of fools - drunks, pukers, boomers, the simply dazed, and the completely terrified, still huddling in their cabins.
Funny, really - but only if you were one of the still functional sober.
As was I.

The passengers were not completely stupefied into submission. The next morning four ladies from the lower decks organized a protest against nautical malpractice, claiming to represent 800 disaffected passengers.
One lady was trying to rally passengers around what she perceived as mistreatment of the lowest paid workers on the ship. If "Free the Filipinas" signs appeared by afternoon I would not have been surprised.
And there are still five days to go.
I'm excited. I've always wanted to be part of a mutiny at sea.

A rough night in the Drake Passage, rounding the Horn.
The drunks, pukers, boomers, and the terrified are all in their cabins.
The smell aboard ship is not that of the open sea.
But the ship's social director tried to do her job.
Tonight, in the ballroom, there will be tango lessons at 10:00.

I am the only passenger who shows up.
The teacher is both surprised and pleased.
Surprised to have a client, and pleased that I am carrying tango shoes.
She smiles.
Ekaterina (*call me Katy*) is Ukrainian.
Natural blond, pretty face, athletic figure, mid-thirties perhaps.

Dressed in black satin pants and top, and wearing gold tango shoes.

I tell her my story.

She tells me hers:

Fled Ukraine and Communism to find a better life in the West.

Went to Paris to work as a model while learning every social dance and every language she could.

Applied for cruise-ship work as a show dancer, dance teacher, assistant social director, and dining-room hostess. Now she's been all over the world in several ships. Europe, Asia, the Americas, the Caribbean, the Mediterranean - even to Alaska. It is her way of life.

Six months on and three months off, for five years.

What dance does she prefer?

Tango - not just to teach, but as a style of life.

And she has experienced tango everywhere - Buenos Aires, Paris, Helsinki, Tokyo, Melbourne, and New York - and knows all the styles - Argentine close-embrace, nuevo tango, open-embrace, techno tango - plus she's performed onstage in show tango productions.

Tango is her passion.

In other words, this lady is a true milonguera - a Tango Taxi at sea.

And I have her all to myself.

We progressed through her repertoire.

The sensual, seductive style of Paris . . .

The rowdy way of the Australians . . .

The shy style of the Finns . . .

The fine-tuned finesse of Japanese tango . . .

And the experimental, wide-open style of nuevo and techno tango.

She would lead; I would follow. Then I would lead; she would follow.

Her assumption that I could dance tango raised my performance to a level I thought unreachable.

I could have danced all night.

The only odd part about our dancing was our response to the slow, rhythmic rolling of the ship from side to side as it sailed on, into the great southern sea. As the floor gently tilted, we danced down across to one side; then, as the ship rolled again, we were lifted up and danced down in the other

direction. This added a new dimension to the tango notion of navigating the floor.

On reflection, I realize that I never mentioned Senor Fuljumero to her.
He was not present that night.
It was Robert Fulghum's night to tango.
And that night he was becoming a milonguero.

Morning came and the Straits of Magellan opened up - with great, sweeping curtains of fog and rain being pulled across a landscape of snow-capped mountains, green forests, and blue-white glaciers.
Penguins, seals, whales, and albatross were nearby.

Hard to imagine being here in a sailing ship long ago, tacking back and forth in uncharted waters, with endless choices possible - with the current and wind pushing relentlessly back, west to east. Suddenly night falls - and you must sail on into utter darkness - with disaster always close at hand.

As for me, here and now?
The Norwegian nightmare had finally become more like a dream.
I had rounded Cape Horn dancing tango.
Surprise!



Milonga at Sea

Yesterday afternoon the captain of the Norwegian Nightmare eased the ship up-fjord, to the foot of the Amalia Glacier - a tongue of a massive ice sheet flowing down in several lobes from mountains lost to sight in the low-hanging, wooly clouds.

We could see the great fissured wall of blue and white ice and watch the small, orange boat from the ship retrieve a large chunk of it from the sea.

Later in the evening the bars served “Amalia Martinis” - blue-stained Bombay Sapphire gin shaken with chips of 15,000-year-old ice and poured into a proper glass.

No olives or onions or twists.

Just gin mixed with deep history.

Despite knowing that I am bound back for Buenos Aires where it is ninety-four degrees and not very Christmas-like, the combination of alpine fjords, wintry weather, snow, glaciers, evergreen trees, and even the syrupy seasonal music filtering through the ship have affected my mood over the last three days.

Watching a German cruise ship headed south for the Antarctic with crates of fir trees lashed on its afterdeck pushed me over the edge, into a quiet, Christmas state of being.

And the mood of the Norwegian Nightmare seemed to mellow, too.

An antiprotest-protest took the steam out of the passengers' angst.

“Calm Down” and “Christmas is Coming” read two signs.

The ship offered to do everybody's laundry at a minimal cost, which was already covered by the \$150 rebate - so we had clean laundry for free.

And the captain's daily announcements seemed sadder and sadder. I thought he might cry, actually.

(We did not know that he had been at the airport on his way home to Norway for Christmas with his family - first time in several years - when our emergency shipped him back to sea.)

Word from the crew is that the *Norwegian Dream* will be retired from service after this season and turned into a floating casino somewhere in Asia. Or will be sold to the North Korean navy for missile target practice. Or will be sunk and used as a breakwater for some south sea island port. The *Norwegian Dream-become-nightmare* is on its last voyage.

I began to see the trip in terms of tango as a metaphor.
We passengers were strangers at a social event, doing the dance of life.

As at a dance, one may essentially sail alone - stay as anonymous and disconnected from others as you wish. If you want to break solitude, a milonga move works nicely. As previously described, if you wish to dance at a milonga ashore, you must signal that desire.

You throw the cabeceo across the dance floor with grace. This is the look of invitation - eye contact, slight smile, raised eyebrows, a slight tilt of the head - very subtle if done well - but very clear to those who are alert and want to engage at least in some form of conversation.

And aboard ship there is a dance form in play, actually. Because of the movement of the ship, one can't stand completely still while talking. There is always an adjustment of feet going on - a little shuffle - a side step - a lean - to synchronize with the moves of the ship and other people.
It's a dance.

Look. There's a man standing aft on Deck 7 - the promenade deck that runs completely around the ship - used by early morning walkers and joggers and strollers and stumblers.

Consider the man. Black shoes - nicely polished. Grey twill wool trousers - nicely creased. Red Patagonia wind parka - black beret - white hair and beard - and smoking a pipe.

You've seen him several mornings before, at the rail looking out to sea. He is usually standing inboard from the rail, watching people as they loop the ship. This morning he very clearly and deliberately notices you, smiles, lifts his eyebrows, nods - throws the cabeceo.

The man is me.

You have been invited to get acquainted, if not dance.

The next time around the deck, stop and say hello.

Some of those who accepted the invitation:

There's the tall guy strolling along in a T-shirt while everybody else is wrapped up in winter clothes against the cold. He's from the Minnesota prairie. This is summer weather to him.

If he was home, he would be mowing grass tomorrow. And no, he wouldn't travel on south to the Antarctic to see more ice and snow. Four months of that a year in Minnesota is enough.

And he can't stand Garrison Keillor or *A Prairie Home Companion*.

It's all "hooey."

And he hates Lutherans.

Here's the Israeli lady who does four turns around the ship wearing a leopard-skin fur coat, red high heels, and a white baseball cap with ISRAEL spelled out in rhinestones.

She's a rabbi's wife.

From Brooklyn originally.

The rabbi doesn't come out on deck. He's been seasick the whole trip - even when the ship was docked.

Notice the lovey-dovey older couple who always hold hands.

Not old love, but new love. They just met last week for the first time, aboard ship during the days of disaster - were smitten by love-at-first-sight, and are talking nonstop about what happens next.

There's the old German lady I once saw doing country western line dancing late at night, taking a morning dip in the pool in the worst weather, and marching around the promenade deck every morning.

She's always dressed in black, with something red on her head - scarf, hat, bathing cap. Recently widowed and alone, but she's having a wonderful time. She was tired of Helmut and her whole family - and tired of everybody saying, "You're not really going to *do that* are you, Grandma - or *wear that*, are you, Grandma!"

To hell with them.

She's cruisin'.

See the swarthy Indian gold dealer from Mumbai, who lives in Dubai and has always wanted to see a glacier. Wrapped like a UPS parcel in layers of scarves tacked together with tape, he has marched by me on deck - scowling - every day, but not yesterday.

Much to his joy, he saw the glacier.
And stopped to dance with me.

Sometimes I am asked to dance first.
It's usually the pipe that provides the opening.
"My dad used to smoke a pipe" or "I really like the smell of a pipe" or "I brought my pipe but forgot my tobacco."
The pipe smoker's tango.

In about three minutes - the same length as one tango - the fragile, perishable intimacy of a brief encounter is possible - a life story quickly unfolded - a story never told to friends or family - but your version of who you are or, perhaps, who you would like to be for the length of one dance.
One opens one's heart and life to another, both of you knowing you will probably never see each other again. Still, you dance . . .
Tango at sea.

In my early morning rambles I spent more time with members of the crew than with passengers.

The breakfast cooks were eager to be recognized as fellow human beings and not just background employees. One, a Jamaican with long, slender fingers, was idly shuffling a deck of cards with the most elegant style I've ever seen. A master.

"Where and how did you learn to do that?"

"In prison - it's a long story."

"Tell me. How long were you in prison?"

"I don't tell nobody that."

"Teach me how to shuffle cards the way you do."

He smiled. "That would take 21 months and 6 days."

Part of this tango adventure of mine is reading South American literature. This is from *Extraordinary Tales* by Jorge Luis Borges, the great Argentine man of letters:

"As you are not unaware, I am much traveled. This fact allows me to corroborate the assertion that a voyage is always more or less illusory, that there is nothing new under the sun, that everything is one and the same, etcetera, but also, paradoxically enough, to assert that there is no foundation for despairing of finding surprises and something new; in truth, the world is inexhaustible."

Yes.

The pale light of morning appears now.

Waffle time at the breakfast bar.

Involving some clever dodging to avoid getting hooked into doing the Prostate Tango with the same grumpy old men who have been there every morning, brooding about their genitals.

The focus of their life is a good pee.

If they push me one more time to join them, I'll tell them I'm gay and have some genital stories of my own. Tempting . . .

* * *

December 22, 2007 - at sea off the southwest coast of Chile.

Solstice - the beginning of southern spring. Full moon, clear sky, west wind, and the soft, easy roll of the *Norwegian Dream*, inbound for port in calmer waters.

The winter solstice is always the first day of a new year for me.

The earth begins tilting toward more light, and spring.

Inevitable change is the essence of existence, I know, but marking it and considering it from time to time seems useful.

I stay out on deck as much as possible - to absorb everything.

I will not pass just this way again.

Life has calmed down on the Norwegian Nightmare.

The morose-but-kindly Master Viking left ship at a Chilean port. We applauded and sang him Christmas carols as he walked away down the dock.

Captain Hoddevik has flown home to Norway.

A no-nonsense Swede has taken his place.

The ship sails on.

While I was lost in reverie, a hand touched my elbow.

"It's me, Katy. It's tango night again."

"Really?"

"Not really, but the ballroom is empty. Would you like to dance?"

"Yes. Tango?"

"Of course."

Never before and never since have I danced as well.

“What’s the best night of tango you’ve ever had?” I’m asked.
At a milonga at sea.



Christmas Cortina

The glossary for this memoir is way back at the beginning.

Some of the terms set forth there are meaningful here, as my Argentine adventure comes to its inevitable end. Tango terminology and protocols are excellent metaphors for what happens next.

To refresh your memory, an evening of dance (a milonga) is composed of sections (tandas) - four or five songs in a particular style of tango, which you dance with the same partner.

To announce the end of one tanda and the beginning of another, a short piece of distinctly non-tango music is played - jazz, pop, even classical.

This musical interlude is called the cortina - the curtain.

One does not dance to this music.

When it plays, the dancers leave the floor.

It is the signal for changing partners, and it also alerts the dancers that a different style of tango music will follow.

* * *

After the memorable night of shipboard tango, the *Norwegian Dream* docked in Santiago, Chile. In my mind the cortina was Christmas carols - aboard ship - and on shore.

I was ready for the next tanda. Armed with newfound confidence in my dancing, I was eager to return to Buenos Aires and fling myself back into the tango culture with all the enthusiasm of the flamenco-dancing chef at the Bar Avilar.

Alas, the Christmas cortina was a long one - not much tango happening. Christmas comes at the beginning of the Argentine summer and is moderately celebrated, compared to the ways of the North Americans.

In a way I was glad to be free of the usual holiday obligations.

But I was oddly nostalgic for what I didn't really want to be part of.

Christmas increased my impatience as well as my loneliness.

* * *

In this state of mind, I went out on Christmas morning with no clear destination. Just go somewhere - maybe to a park or to a part of Buenos

Aires I had never visited. I expected to walk - taxis would be few and far between on Christmas morning.

To my surprise an empty taxi was cruising slowly down the street.
I waved. The taxi pulled up, and I got in.
I asked the driver why he was working on Christmas day, and he said he was escaping from his wife's family.
He would rather ride around with strangers in his cab.
Yes, I know about that . . .

When he asked my destination, I said I didn't have one and didn't much care where he took me.
He suggested a park on the shore of the river, the Rio de la Plata.

I had not spent any time at the riverside because there is no river there.
What you see is an estuary fifty miles wide. The water is brown with silt and heavily polluted. One is admonished not to swim in it, fish in it, boat on it, or, god help you, drink it.
But . . . I had nothing better to do.
"Sure, why not. Take me to the river."

Unlike most taxi rides in Buenos Aires, this was a leisurely trip.
Neither the driver nor I was in a hurry.
The music on the radio was Christmas carols - the cortina continued.

When we arrived at the shore, I handed the driver a hundred-peso note - which taxi drivers hate, because they try not to carry much change.
He frowned.
His expression brightened when I managed to fumble around in my grab bag of Spanish and explain that I understood about the family thing - that I had not given or gotten any Christmas presents - and that if he and I lived next door to one another we would be in a bar somewhere by now, having a drink and laughing and raking our in-laws over the coals.
"Feliz Navidad," I said. "This is not cab fare - it is a small present from one man to another. Have two drinks - one for you and one for me."

I just happened to be carrying two fine Cuban cigars.
I gave him one.

He leapt from the cab, raced around to open the door for me, threw his arms around my neck and stepped back - with tears in his eyes as he shook his head, unable to find the right words.

It was the same for me.

We shook hands and parted.

We will remember that day.

He, no longer a taxi driver.

Me, no longer a gringo tourist.

Just two grumpy guys.

Wrapped in the contradictory confusion of Christmas.

We understood each other and sympathized.

Both of us were on the receiving end for gifts of surprise and delight - the best kind of Christmas gift.

“De nada,” we both said.

It was nothing.

And it was so much.

And for a while the raunchy, muddy shore of the Rio de La Plata was a lovely place to be.

Encounters like these are the meta-tango.

The brief dance of give-and-take that we may do.

These moments are not in the guidebooks or on the maps or in the museums or on bus tours.

But they are available if you keep your eyes and mind and heart open.

The Next Tanda

The Christmas cortina finally came to an end, and my tango life resumed at a frantic pace.

The time to leave was coming fast, and I wanted to fill my tango tank to the brim - more lessons, more practicas, more milongas.

And I did that - not in the comic role of Senor Fuljumero, but as Robert Fulghum.

And it came to pass that I was a milonguero - a competent tango dancer. And with it, a desire to write about my journey from foolish failure to confident dancing.

But first, the unexpected was waiting - a dance with an old lady.

* * *

On my way to an Internet cafe amenable to writing (“Air Conditioned, Comfortable, Tranquil, Supervised”), I was carrying two one-peso coins loosely in my hand - to buy a copy of the *Buenos Aires Herald*.

An elderly woman, focused on counting the coins in her palm, stepped out of a maxikiosco (telephone booth) into my path.

In making sudden tricky-footed tango-esque moves of avoidance, I dropped my two pesos. Collecting my coins, I stood up to find the old lady smiling broadly and holding out her hand. “Muchas gracias, señor!”

She thought I had retrieved coins she had dropped.

Well. Sure. OK.

Even if we both spoke the same language, it would have been ungraceful of me to dispute the ownership of two pesos.

That would have debased the gift of her thanks.

I placed the two pesos in her hand. “De nada, senora.”

I resumed my walk toward the newsstand.

“Senor! Señor!” The old lady hobbled up behind me.

Now what?

She fired machine-gun bursts of Spanish at me.

“Pardon, senora, no hablo mucho Espanol,” I replied.

She lifted her eyebrows.

She held out her hands - two pesos in each.

She gestured for me to hold out my hand. Placing two pesos in my palm, she wrapped my fingers around the coins.

Apparently she knew exactly what she'd had when we collided, and knew she had not dropped anything. These extra coins must be mine. And I had given them to her. Because I thought they were hers.

She could have kept them. But no, here she was, with her own sense of what was graceful and morally correct.

She smiled, kissed me on both my cheeks as is the Argentine custom, and hobbled away.

The newspaper seller, from whom I have often bought the English-language *Herald*, was waiting close by. He had observed my encounter with the little old lady. He overheard the conversation and saw the transaction.

He smiled and handed me my paper.

He shook his head, refusing to accept my two pesos.

“De nada, señor.”

It is nothing - so they say.

And it's so very much.

This event of *two* two-peso surprises is enough to sanctify a day.

* * *

An experienced traveler knows that packed in the luggage of one's mind is a map of the illusions, fantasies, and daydreams wrought by your imagining before leaving home what will exist where you are going.

This is the sweet taste of anticipation.

An experienced traveler also knows that reality is not marked on this map of expectancy.

The map and the territory will not be the same.

Maps are clean and abstract - with no rain, or crime, or frustrations.

No potholes, language foul-ups, or moments of fear.

On the other hand, maps contain no pleasant surprises or small delights that make the experience of travel in a foreign land memorable.

All the little odds and ends of nothing that add up to unforgettable *something* do not appear on maps.

The Christmas day taxi ride and the two-peso encounters with the little old lady and the news vendor are fine examples.

Adios, Argentina

Leaving newfound friends is awkward.

It is the time of telling the velvet-draped untruths of goodbye.

“See you soon.”

“I’ll be back.”

“We’ll keep in touch.”

“If you’re ever in Seattle . . .”

“Don’t forget to write . . .”

All the while knowing the odds are stacked against these things ever coming to pass.

Tango as a metaphor applies.

One goes to the milonga - the dance - expecting a brief encounter with strangers. At most in one evening, Senor Fuljumero danced with five different partners, briefly chatted, took pleasure in the challenge of making each tanda successful, but all the while knew that the reward of the evening would simply be having danced well.

A milonga is best remembered and spoken of in terms of giving and receiving gifts. “He gave me a great tango” is the ultimate compliment and sign of a successful milonga.

The meta-tango of living three months in the fabled city of Buenos Aires is Senor Fuljumero having danced well with the people he met, under every circumstance.

He was there.

He paid *attention*.

He gave a stranger at least a good tango often enough.

* * *

To spend three months in a foreign city learning a dance may seem, on the face of it, an insignificant activity. Non-dancers may see this tango enterprise as harmless but self-indulgent play.

In reality, tango dancing was for me only the center point around which a larger shift in life revolved.

The adventure was meant to be a gift to myself in honor of my seventieth birthday. An affirmative exile to keep the fires burning in my belly - the ones that are stoked by my being provoked and stretched and disturbed by a new environment that would require a high alert of all my senses.

In other words, I wanted to go to the well of tango armed mostly with the tools of enthusiasm and an open mind. Let the fear of the unknown be matched by the excitement of the possible.

Moreover, I had made a checklist before leaving Seattle - a list of what I wanted to do.

As expected, I modified it as the weeks and surprises went by, but here's the original list from my notebook. Each item has a red check mark beside it now - because I accomplished each one.

1. To dig into South American literature - especially Borges, Neruda, and Gabriel Marquez.
2. To experience the seasons turned upside down - December in summer, Christmas as a summer's day.
3. To see polo first hand - and watch the legendary centaur, Adolfo Cambiaso, play.
4. To eat Argentine beef to my heart's content.
5. To view the pampas and plains of Patagonia.
6. To revive and test my Spanish.
7. To experience the city of Buenos Aires on foot - no car.
8. To expand tango knowledge from just dancing to recordings - to explore the orchestral music, song lyrics, singers, and history.
9. To live in Buenos Aires free of guidebooks and tours.

These things I came to do.
And I did them, and so declare.
Check.

And . . . the List of the Unexpected . . . what also happened - an accounting that is much longer, wider, and deeper.

1. Circus School - I learned the basics of slack rope walking.

2. Billiards - I watched enough classic carom billiards - (not pool) - to appreciate the subtleties of the game and take lessons.
3. Flamenco - I experienced not just flamenco performance, but the flamenco of the social world of Spanish émigrés. And the dancing chef.
4. Internet cafe. Never having used one, I had no idea of the youth subculture - the music, the slang, the hair and clothing styles - a window into a world where few can afford their own computers.
5. Ship trips - to the delta country of the Rio de la Plata on local ferries, a cruise around Cape Horn and on through the islands and fjords of coastal Chile.
6. An experiment with being “blind and deaf” - sitting on a bench in a plaza with my eyes closed or wearing Bose sound-deadening earphones - as a way of learning what my senses miss when all of them are functioning at once and input overwhelms comprehension of details.
7. Inspired by Borges, I reduced Buenos Aires to an area of the barrio Palermo five blocks square and set out to know as much about that world as possible. To see it day and night, house by house, store by store, cafe by cafe. Though I hope I will someday write about this at length, I found a universe at my doorstep - just a short walk from my apartment.
8. Carrying out my intention of playing with the alternate personality of Senor don Roberto Juan Carlos Fuljumero y Suipacha - a harmless experiment of inner theater that became regularly confused with real life.

And then there were all the new friends and acquaintances. These, I expected. I remember thinking about them as my incoming flight moved into the landing pattern and I could see the length and breadth of Buenos Aires.

I wonder who you are and where you are.

I knew they were there, but not who they would be.

Not their names and faces.

Now I know.

I can easily bring them up out of memory as I write this.

* * *

Finally, there is the matter of the future for Senor Fuljumero and me.

A last leave-taking task - a visit to Doctor Hebe Gil - as promised.
The professor of occult sciences, with thirty-seven diplomas on her wall.
She read the cards once again.
Once more the answers were positive - and almost identical.
Yes - on the novel. Yes - on the dissolution of marriage.
And an emphatic Yes on finding the love of my life.

The cards also said I would continue tango - become a milonguero.
And write and publish a new novel about tango and Argentina.
A final element was the assurance of good health and long life.

Not bad - a farewell blessing from the tarot cards.
A kind of psychic stamp of approval on my passport.
Who knows?
I turn homeward in high good spirits.
No longer Senor Slumpy - now Senor Arriba!

So the one-man caravan prepares to leave - loads up his traveling baggage
and sets out.
Bringing what?
A pair of well-worn tango shoes (one red, one black).
A new, dark-blue wool, pin-striped, double-breasted, classic milonguero suit
- made to measure.
A head full of stories.
A heart full of people.
The prophecies of the fortune teller in my favor.
Hundreds of fragments of brain-film of small precious moments, and the
jukebox of my mind filled with the sound of the bandoneon.
The accumulated oddities collected by a beachcomber of language.
A real gaucho's poncho, and the memory of a martini chilled by
15,000-year-old glacial ice.
All these keepsakes I bring with me.

And not a single regret.

* * *

In this very moment, as I write these words in a Buenos Aires Internet cafe, I am splashed with the giggles of two eight-year-old girls sitting beside me. They are massively entertained by who-knows-what-kind of computer mischief and can hardly contain themselves.

They soon overwhelm the rest of us keyboarders with their uninhibited, infectious giggling. The mood is contagious, spreading laughter and giggles and smiles across the Internet cafe.

What's so funny? We do not need to know.

Their little girls' foolish joy is enough.

De Nada. It is nothing.

And it is everything.

If I could manage it, I would include the sound of this close-by laughter as a gift to you.

Two pesos' worth.

Imagine . . .

Now the laughter is also yours.

“Como rie la vida!” say the Argentines, again and again.

How the life laughs!

Salud! Ole! Arriba!

* * *

(Here end the Chronicles . . .)

As lived by Senor don Roberto Juan Carlos Fuljumero y Suipacha during the winter of 2007 in Buenos Aires, Argentina.

As assembled and revised by Robert Fulghum during the winter of 2012 in the mountains of southeastern Utah.)

And Then What Happened?

I'm writing this in the spring of 2012 - five years after I returned from Buenos Aires, in the last lap of assembling the memories of that fine time. Life goes on - more chapters always get written. I must tell you what happened after Argentina.

My skepticism about the occult has been profoundly shaken. The tarot cards spoke more truth than I could believe at the time. Coincidences? Who is to say?

As the cards predicted, though I struggle to master tango, I am improving in technique and confidence. I am a milonguero now - at least that's what I tell myself.

As the cards predicted, my novel, *Third Wish*, was indeed published - in English and several other languages.

A new novel was written out of tango in Seattle: *If You Love Me Still, Will You Love Me Moving? Tales from the Century Ballroom* - premiered in Czech and soon to be published in English.

My former marriage was indeed dissolved amicably and fairly. My health remains good and strong, promising a long life.

All these were foretold by the cards and Doctor Hebe Gil.

And . . . what else?

Notice the lovely illustrations in this memoir. Paintings by the artist Willow Bader, tango dancer. And now, my wife. The love of my life. Waiting when I returned to Seattle.

Alas, she was not on my list. Ah, but I . . . was on hers . . .



Coda

I believe in dancing.

I believe it is in my nature to dance,
by virtue of the beat of my heart,
the pulse of my blood,
and the music in my mind.

I dance daily.

The seldom-used dining room of my house is now an often-used ballroom -
an open space with a hardwood floor, stereo, and a disco ball.

The CD changer has six discs at the ready:
waltz, swing, country, rock and roll, salsa, and tango.

Each morning when I walk through the house on the way to making coffee, I
turn on the music, hit the “shuffle” button, and it’s Dance Time!

I dance alone to whatever is playing.
Call it a form of existential aerobics and moving meditation.
Or just call it dancing.

Tango is my passion.

It remains a complex and difficult dance for me.

I’m still taking lessons and always will.
Three months of immersion in tango culture only taught me how much more
I need to know. I will always have something to look forward to.

* * *

I’ll always remember the first time I witnessed tango dancing.
I was too intimidated to get out on the floor.

Then I remembered the last time I had stayed on the sidelines - a long time ago - when the dancing began after a village wedding on the Greek island of Crete.

The fancy footwork confused me.

Don't make a fool of yourself, I thought. *Just watch.*

Reading my mind, an older woman dropped out of the dance, sat down beside me and said, "If you join the dancing, you will feel foolish.

"If you do not, you will feel foolish.

"So, why not dance?

"And I will tell you a secret:

"If you do not dance, we will know you are a fool.

"But if you dance, we will think well of you for trying."

Recalling her wise words, I took up the challenge of tango.

* * *

Use It or Lose It, we say about the aging mind.

In studies of mental and physical activities that reduce the risk of dementia and Alzheimer's disease, the most successful was social dancing.

Learning a new dance and dancing often reduced the risk of mental atrophy by 76 percent.

Why?

Because dancing simultaneously engages the mind, the body, and the musical and emotional processes.

Making split-second decisions using all your faculties is the key.

So, when people say, "Tango? At your age? Have lost your mind?"

I answer, "No, and I don't intend to."

I believe in dancing.

I will dance as long as I live.

Appendix: How to Tango

Want to learn to tango?

Listen to me carefully:

You cannot learn tango from a book.

Oh, there are many books - filled with diagrams and terminology.

Don't bother.

I repeat: You cannot learn tango from a book.

That's why you will not find any instructions in this memoir.

Take my advice - begin as I began.

Go to a milonga or a tango festival - there are many.

Watch.

Listen.

Imagine you out there on the floor.

If, at the end of the evening, you are enchanted and excited . . .

If, on your way home, you think to yourself:

I want that. I want to do that. I won't stop until I can.

Then you will have had your first tango lesson, but not your last . . .

