

# Robert Fulghum

IF YOU LOVE ME STILL,  
WILL YOU LOVE ME MOVING?



Tales from the Century Ballroom  
Illustrations by Willow Bader

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Fiction

by Robert Fulghum

Art

by Willow Bader

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A page from the diary of Marisol Machado:

*“There was a door in the room of Aristos’ life he had never opened.  
He knew it was there.  
But he assumed it was locked.  
He had never even tried the handle.*

*But the door was not locked - only closed.*

*One day he realized he was endlessly arranging and re-arranging the  
furniture and contents inside the room of his life.  
This could go on forever.  
If nothing changed, the words on his gravestone someday would say:*

**HERE LIES ARISTOS JOYCE.**

**DIED OF BOREDOM, MONOTONY, AND LONELINESS.**

*That same day he thought he heard sounds on the other side of the door.  
A woman’s voice?  
And music playing for dancing?*

*He thought he heard a knock on the door.  
He tried the handle.  
The door swung open.  
And there I was - Marisol Machado - in the Century Ballroom.  
Waiting to dance.  
He was afraid to walk through the door, and afraid not to.  
But he did.*

*Aristos never went back through that door again.  
And forever after, he looked at doors differently.  
He tried the handle of any closed door he came to.*

*As for me?  
I am also an opener of doors . . . but I always knock first.”*





## Perspective

In the center of the dance floor of the Century Ballroom there is a small bronze nail - about an inch long - hammered deep into the wood in the fall of 1906. In that year the completed building was dedicated by a fraternal organization called the Independent Order of Odd Fellows.

Their ballroom was used for social occasions, banquets, meetings, and the ceremonies binding their brotherhood.

The bronze pin marked the literal center of the hall, as well as the center of the ritual life of the Odd Fellows.

In time the Odd Fellows numbers declined, and the building was sold.

On the street level, the space became retail shops.

The second floor became the Century Ballroom.

Its facility includes rehearsal spaces, a restaurant and bar.

The main hall is dedicated to social dancing.

The bronze pin remains embedded in the center of the dance floor.

Though few people know it is there, the pin has now become the ritual center of the Century Ballroom. Sooner or later, for one reason or another, almost everyone who participates in the life of the Century Ballroom passes over or around that point - employees, patrons, and performers.

The Century Ballroom has become more than a dance hall - more than a place to work or perform. It is a sanctuary for dancers.

It may be said that those who come to the Century are on a pilgrimage to a sacred place dedicated to the need to be loved, to be touched, and to be embraced by the deeply human event of moving to music together - the common desire to dance.

Stories unfold there - some are short, some are long, and some stop.

And others continue - far beyond the frame of this recounting.

No matter who lives the stories or tells the stories . . .

All are tales of the Century Ballroom.

A less elegant summary of the attitude defining the Century Ballroom may be found expressed in a well-preserved line of graffiti.

Graffiti is usually not tolerated anywhere at the Century Ballroom. Whenever it appears it is removed or painted over. There is this one exception.

In the women's bathroom - just off the main ballroom - some lines were written on the wall by the sink during the first week the Century opened, and though the bathroom has been repainted twice in the last ten years, the graffiti remains. A frame has been placed around the words.

They have been preserved with purpose:

In a modest cursive script, there is this lament:

*I want to dance but I can't dance. I'm not a dancer!*

Underneath, written by a surer hand:

*It's just a phase we've all been through, honey.  
Move your ass - get back out on the floor!*

When Hello Silverman, the owner of the Century Ballroom, saw the graffiti, she said, "Leave it - keep it. It's the spirit of this dance hall."





## The Disc Jockey's Story

*If you were to be nearby while the Century Ballroom's regular disc jockey was setting up for the evening - and if you were to ask him about his job and life at the Century - you could sit back and listen without having to ask another question. He talks non-stop while sorting through CDs, making up the dance program for the evening.*

*Buck is his name.*

*Monologues are his specialty.*

\*

Me? I'm just a disc jockey.

I play recorded music while people dance . . .

That's it. That's all . . . no big deal.

Just the guy up here in the booth.

Most dancers don't know my name or even notice I'm here . . . because at the Century Ballroom the DJ isn't in the spotlight . . . not a featured personality like in some big-time night clubs.

I don't like being in the limelight, anyhow, but I like being around people and music . . . so . . . what I do suits me just fine.

It's not that I'm not important . . . the shape of the whole evening depends mostly on me and my feel for music and dance and people.

I can make it or break it . . . but I never let the dancers down . . .

I know what I know . . . I do what I do . . . and I'm pretty good at it.

I'm not *just* a disc jockey . . .

I'm the invisible master of ceremonies.

It's a great job for a shy guy like me!

This is a place where anybody is welcome to come and dance . . . and I mean *anybody* . . . straight, gay, old, young, any race or color . . . whatever. Just as long as you behave yourself and want to dance.

Dancing . . . that's the bottom line.



We've got lessons for beginners, practices for intermediate dancers,  
and all-out dances . . . swing, salsa, jitterbug, tango, waltz, and Western.

Whatever suits your taste and style . . . we got it.

And there are special stage production shows all year long, too.

There's nothing like the Century Ballroom in Seattle, or maybe  
anywhere, for all I know.

If you were to pass down the hallway any night around ten and take  
a look through the ballroom doors you'd see a lot of people dancing . . .  
having a good time . . . totally into the scene . . .

It's like looking into an old black-and-white movie.

But if you sat up here with me night after night you'd begin to see the  
regulars . . . the types . . . and you'd figure out that what's going on is a lot  
more complicated than just dancing . . .

It's simple, see - we got *people* here.

That means *anything* can happen.

And from where I sit, I can see things nobody else notices.

The Century Ballroom isn't just a *place* as much as it is the sum of all  
the *stories* that happen here.

And not all of the stories are about dancers.

There are regulars who don't dance at all . . . ever.

They just watch.

I guess they just want to be where dancing is happening . . . to be  
around dancers and musicians . . . maybe for the same reason people go to  
sporting events and don't get out on the field to play.

See that young woman sitting way back there at the corner table?

Marisol Machado is her name.

She's a journalist for a Spanish magazine - doing a series of articles  
about the American tango scene. She's around a lot, talking to people, taking  
notes, whacking away on her laptop.

She knows a lot about the Century.

I've never seen her dance, though.

I thought she was only going to be around for a week or two, but maybe she's found a home at the Century - she comes, goes away for awhile to check out other venues, and then comes back here again.

She's friends with Frieda, the bartender, and Oscar, the doorman.  
Those two have tales to tell, too.  
You should talk to them sometime.

Look up there in the balcony . . . see those two guys?

One's the attorney for the Century, Aristos Joyce.  
He's around almost every evening, talking to people, writing in his notebooks. At first we thought he was just doing his legal homework . . . but something else is going on.

He says he's writing about the Century . . . I don't know what . . .  
I think he wants to learn how to dance, but he's got a long way to go.  
If you want stories, talk to him - he knows the Century pretty well.

And the other guy - the one in the uniform - is O'Malley . . . Father O'Malley we call him . . . he's a prince . . . he watches over us all.

Officially he's our security officer and night watchman, but he always comes early and watches the dancing . . . not because he's looking out for trouble . . . we don't have much trouble, actually.

It's because he's a serious dance spectator . . . just enjoys watching . . .  
I don't think he dances himself.

One more thing . . .  
Every night here is different - the music and the dancers.  
If you want my advice, come on tango night.  
It draws the classiest crowd . . . and the most interesting.  
I'm not always the DJ on those nights, but I come to watch, too.

And one last thing . . .  
You won't really understand the Century until you meet the impresario - the owner, manager, godmother, and star of the show.

Her name is Hello Silverman . . . no kidding . . . Hello Silverman.  
You want her story? You better ask her, but it's hard to catch her when she's not busy - she never stands still.

Better you should just watch her in action . . . not just while she's  
being the boss . . . watch her dance or teach or perform in a show.  
More than anything else, she's a dancer . . . the best.

Enough for now . . .  
I've gotta stop talking and play music.  
It's dance time.





## The View From the Balcony - O'Malley's Story

(1)

“O'Malley, come into my office for a minute, will you?”

An invitation into the inner sanctum of the owner of the Security Seattle Agency usually meant either a reprimand or a special assignment. Never a social visit.

O'Malley's boss was an ex-Navy intelligence officer who hired employees with similar backgrounds and ran his business along military lines. He wasn't known for small talk.

“At ease, O'Malley. Sit down.

A question: Dancing? How do you feel about dancing?

That's all I want to ask . . . it's open-ended . . . take your time . . . take the answer anywhere.”

O'Malley sat back in his chair.

Thinking.

In slow motion he crossed his legs . . . crossed his arms . . . closed his eyes. He sifted through the thoughts that came to mind . . . opened his eyes, uncrossed his legs . . . uncrossed his arms . . . leaned forward . . . and finally gave his carefully considered response:

“Well, Captain, I hope you're not fishing for someone to police a strip joint, a nightclub, or a rock festival.

You know I don't want to be a bouncer.

Maybe you've got something connected with social dancing - a fancy ball - socialites and all that.”

His boss smiled. O'Malley's intuition always impressed him.

“Close. Go on,” he said.

“One, I'm not a dancer myself . . . always wanted to give it a try . . . but never even got around to it in the Navy, though a lot of sailors dance.

Two, I like being around dancing. I enjoy watching people dance.  
And, three, I've liked most of the dancers I've ever known well.  
Usually pretty fine people."

"Good, O'Malley. One more question I don't think I need to ask  
because our policy is to be people-neutral, and nothing I've ever heard you  
say or known you to do violates that policy.

Still, just to be clear, I'll ask.

There's a unique clientele involved in the job.

You got any problem with being around a really mixed crowd -  
Caucasians, Blacks, Latinos, gays, lesbians, rich and poor, old and young  
- all together . . . dancing?"

O'Malley sat back in his chair again.

Closed his eyes again.

He didn't know any place like that in Seattle.

Ought to be an interesting assignment.

"No, not at all. I'm good with that. But what's the venue?"

"It's called The Century Ballroom.

Here's the job description they sent.

Look it over."

(2)

**"The Century Ballroom wishes to employ  
an experienced officer to secure our dance and  
rehearsal facilities, our restaurant, and our  
premises - the Odd Fellows Building - from midnight  
to 8:00 a.m. seven days a week. We want both a  
visible presence of recognizable authority and the  
reliable surveillance of the facilities when they  
are unoccupied overnight.**

**Tasks included: being visible at closing time;  
locking outside doors leading to stairways to upper**

**floors; making sure all lights except night security lights are turned off; seeing that all windows are closed, all spaces are empty at closing time, and that nobody remains in the building without advance authorization. Offices, restrooms, closets, elevator, bar, kitchen, and restaurant must be carefully checked.**

**We require someone experienced in law enforcement, a mature person with an open mind and a confident personality - someone who is willing to objectively assess our unique situation and fit in with a community built around social dancing and dance performance.**

**We do not want an armed police presence. We do not want someone with a 9-1-1 mentality. And we do not want just a night watchman. We do require a person who represents competent authority and who commands respect and trust from our clients and our staff."**

**Hello Silverman, owner**

**(3)**

O'Malley read the job description three times.

"You think I'm what they're looking for?"

"Trust me. You're the guy."

"Thanks. Anything else?" he asked.

"There's another page covering the mundane contractual details. But what you've read is the essential stuff. Oh, and they want to interview you, and they'll pay to have you spend a week with them getting mutually acquainted before they sign a contract. What's your first response?"

"Am I expected to wear a uniform or carry any weapons?"

"Weapons, no. Uniform, yes. Plus your radio and a cell phone."

“That suits me fine.”

“Can I tell them I’m sending you over?”

“OK. At least I’ll go for the interview and the week.”

And that’s how it began.

Next came the interview with Hello Silverman and her staff.

Then the week of being around every night in uniform.

O’Malley quickly felt at ease at the Century Ballroom.

The dancers and the dancing fascinated him.

To his surprise, he also fascinated them.

He wasn’t like any cop they had ever met.

“He’s like a real person - like one of us,” said Buck, the DJ.

And that’s how it continued.

Seven years later he was a fixture at the Century.

He was formally referred to as “Officer O’Malley,” but those who worked there and danced there thought of him as “Father O’Malley.”

The Century Ballroom was not just a job.

It became the center of his life.

He worked a six-day shift, only rarely asking his Agency for relief.

Did he dance? Everyone wondered.

Certainly nobody ever saw him dance or felt free to invite him.

Dancing was not in his job description, of course.

And nobody thought of O’Malley as a dancer.

Neither did O’Malley.

Not in the beginning . . .

But in these seven years O’Malley had become a dancer at heart.

He came an hour or two early each evening.

Not yet on duty, on his own time, he sat up in the ballroom balcony and intently watched the dancers on the floor below.

That’s how O’Malley, in his own way, learned to dance.





# The Tale of Aristophanes Joyce

(1)

William Jones was a minor success as a Shakespearean actor in England. To improve his theatrical image he changed his name to Aristophanes Joyce.

To improve his career chances he left old England for New England. Because he loved to sing and dance as well as act, he shifted from Shakespeare to roles in musical comedies. He was a minor success in a traveling repertory ensemble for many years.

Exhausted by life on the road but unwilling to abandon the theater as a way of life, he became the stage manager of the Belmont Playhouse in Boston. As he wished, he passed from this life to the next while onstage - as he was moving scenery during a rehearsal of a production of *Brigadoon*.

Aristophanes Joyce II, his son, was born out of wedlock to a young actress who died in childbirth. Raised by his father in the world of theater, he wanted more security than an actor's life provided.

Working his way through college, he earned a PhD and became a professor of dramatic arts in a small New England college - teaching, directing, and occasionally performing in musicals.

He, too, loved to sing and dance and act.

Aristophanes Joyce III was his son, born of a passionate but unsustainable marriage between his father and one of his father's students. Even though he was raised, as his grandfather and father before him, in a theatrical environment, he was not drawn to a life onstage or in the classroom. He did not love to sing and dance and act.

He shortened his name to Aristos Joyce.

To further distance himself from the world of his grandfather and father, he went to California to university, graduated from Stanford Law School, and went to work as an attorney in Seattle for a large firm with a general practice of law.

After several years as an attorney, Aristos felt a change coming.

He called it “The Time of the Wall.” He first noticed it in his peers at the law firm. After a few years they seemed to stagnate - their forward motion stopped. The signs were restlessness and boredom.

An office love affair was common - often leading to marriage failures, alcohol abuse, and self-indulgence in man-toys - the motorcycles, boats, and fast cars. The fallout from that usually led to dismissal or resignation.

A third of the new hires were gone by the end of ten years.

When he talked to them afterward, they all used the same expression: “I just hit a wall and I don’t know what to do next.”

Aristos was waiting for the Time of the Wall in his own life, and when he felt it coming, he was prepared. That was his way - he was, above all, a thoughtful, reflective man. He had talked with his father about what he had seen in his office and what he sensed might happen to him.

His father had expected - even hoped - this time would come. He was ready with advice: “Of course, everybody needs to move on. Don’t do it because you’re forced to. Take the initiative. Think about what you know and love. Apply your professional skills to that. Everybody and every enterprise needs a lawyer. You’ve found your profession. Find a better place for you to practice it. Move on but not out!”

The Time of the Wall for Aristos came late one night at the office. Bugged down in the morass of a lawsuit of little consequence regardless of how it was settled, his mind seemed to seize up.

And he realized he didn’t care enough about the case or the client to force his way forward. A dead end. He pushed his chair away from his desk and stared at the mound of paperwork and files.

“The Wall,” he said.

He cleared off his desk - stacking all the files and loose documents into disorderly piles on the floor. He got up, put on his jacket, turned out the lights, closed and locked his door, went out to the elevator, rode down, and walked out of the building - knowing that episode of his life was over.

(3)

At home in his apartment, Aristos poured himself a glass of red wine. He sat down in his easy chair, leaned back, closed his eyes.

*Now what? What's on the other side of The Wall?  
Is there a door?  
Locked or just closed?*

Picking up a yellow legal pad and yellow pencil - applying his skill at analyzing and simplifying problems - he began to write:

- 1. I've proved myself as a lawyer, but corporate law is deadly hell.*
- 2. I like and respect the legal profession - it's useful and necessary.*
- 3. Could I practice law in a world I enjoy being in?*
- 4. The theater is in my blood - I know that world.*
- 5. I'm happiest in the company of artistically creative people.*
- 6. I don't want to be an actor and I can't sing or dance.*
- 7. I could find a place for myself doing law in the world of fine arts.*

Aristos re-read his list several times, but had nothing to add.

*It's that simple,* he said aloud.



*I move that the court adjourn.*

With that, he turned his mind to consider the door.

(4)

The transition took six months.  
Aristos resigned his position with his firm.  
He opened a small office.

On the door:  
*ARISTOS JOYCE, Attorney at Law*  
*Legal Services for the Fine Arts*

The possibilities for his new practice were broad.  
He could represent musicians, singers, dancers, actors, and writers,  
in their contract negotiations. He could handle copyrights - all intellectual  
properties involve legal protection. And he might find work as legal counsel  
to theaters, orchestras, art museums, or any organization supporting the arts.  
And he was willing to work pro bono to establish his credibility.

By the end of a year he was busy.  
An accomplished lawyer who knows and understands and appreciates  
the arts was in demand, especially if he tailored his fees to the ability of his  
clients to pay. Word gets around.

Aristos' reputation was enhanced by his eagerness to meet his clients  
outside his office - to experience firsthand the realms of art studios, practice  
halls, concerts, and stage performances.  
He attended gallery openings, rehearsals, and art auctions.  
And let it be known he was available to serve on advisory committees  
or boards of institutions.

Little did he expect that he would soon become the attorney for all the  
legal affairs of the Century Ballroom.

Nor, to his even greater surprise, that he would be spending evenings  
sitting up in the balcony of the ballroom . . . wishing he could dance . . .

(5)

When he was sought by the Century Ballroom to negotiate a new lease with the owners of the Odd Fellows building, Aristos was intrigued. He had substantial experience with real estate contracts. But he had never dealt with the special needs of a dance venue. Never even been inside a dance hall. And he was definitely not a dancer.

When he was called by the proprietor of the Century Ballroom, he explained that he would need to spend some time getting to know her establishment and its activities before he could do the legal work.

“That’s just what I heard you would do,” she said, “and it’s why I came to you. Our current lawyer stayed in his office. He never set foot in the Century. I don’t need a new lease as much as I need someone who’s interested in what we do - someone to cover all our legal bases.

By the way, do you dance?”

There was a long pause while the question hung in the air. Aristos was not surprised when he finally answered . . . “No.” But he was very surprised when he added . . . “Not yet.”

\*

First there was a daytime tour of the Century - to get an overview of its operations. Aristos went again on a Tuesday night to eat dinner in the Century’s restaurant, and to familiarize himself with the staff and clientele.

It was tango night in the ballroom - an hour of lessons, followed by an hour of practice time, followed by an evening of open dancing.

Aristos sat at a table well back from the dance floor, intending to watch awhile and leave. Later he moved up into the balcony to have a wider view of the ballroom and the dancers.

*It’s all theater*, he thought.

At closing time - midnight - he was still there.

He had come to another wall - one he had not anticipated.

(6)

Aristos had begun the evening appraising the Century Ballroom with a professional eye. He had focused on matters of safety, security, and staffing.

Then he considered the patrons of the bar and restaurant, and finally the clients in the ballroom. At first he had felt at ease as an observer.

His attention had shifted to the dancers themselves.

First on the awkward rookies taking first lessons in tango.

Then on the group who came to practice.

And finally on the experienced patrons who came after 9:30.

The real tango dancers.

Purposeful, well-dressed, fine shoes.

An easy feeling of companionable community entered with them.

When the lights dimmed down, the music rose up, and the dancers moved out onto the floor, embraced, and danced.

Aristos had sat very still.

He felt tears welling up in his eyes.

*What the hell?* he asked himself.

He sensed an invisible wall between him and what he saw.

He could not join the dancers moving gracefully around the floor.

But . . . he wanted to . . . wished he could.

*I can't dance*, he thought.

*Why not?* he asked himself. *Afraid. Because I'm afraid.*

He moved to the balcony.

He watched the rest of the evening, but nothing changed.

He still yearned to be down there dancing.

And the fear of failure in even trying remained strong and clear.

As he followed the dancers down the stairs at evening's end, he came to another wall as he watched couples move off into the night arm-in-arm.

*And I'm going home alone*, he thought.

*Not just alone, but lonely.*

As he sat in his car, a sense of sadness gripped him.

It seemed like a long time before he could drive away.

Home. Alone.



(7)

Aristos had never married. Nor had his grandfather. His father's marriage was brief. All three had grown up as only children, raised by a man - without the presence of a mother or sisters or cousins or aunts.

Women were a mystery to him - maybe a mystery to his father and grandfather, too. Women were never a topic of discussion among them.

Aristos Joyce was an attractive man - intelligent, successful, and very single. He was one of those men for whom friends wanted to arrange blind dates - in high school and college, and even from time to time after he began to practice law.

Moreover, he was all the more attractive by virtue of his self-deprecating social shyness. Friends wanted to look after him, and women wanted to take care of him. But he only wanted to take care of himself.

Somehow it had never seemed a commanding need to find a life companion or settle down and raise a family. He was too busy with his career. And, besides, he felt that if . . . a woman really got to know him . . .

But driving home alone after the evening at the Century Ballroom he wished, for the first time in his life, that there was . . . *what?*

*What's going on?* he wondered, as he lay in bed wide awake.

Tears again. *What the hell?*

A darker, heavier thought crept through his mind.

*What if I did find the right woman - someone I would want to love - a companion . . . someone to dance with - but would she want me - love me? Am I lovable? Am I?*

As he turned out the light, he said to himself what he often said:

*You idiot . . .*

He fell asleep - on a pillow damp with tears.



Early the next morning Aristos called his father in Boston.  
 His father was an upbeat, energetic man with ideas to burn.  
 Never bored or boring, and easily excited.  
 He wasn't nicknamed "Dr. Juice" without cause.  
 A very small piece of mind-kindling was enough for him to build a quick fire and start a blaze of lively conversation. Every time the fire died down, he would throw on more sticks of ideas.  
 Aristos counted on that when he called.  
 He told him about the Century Ballroom.

"Wonderful! What a scene! Wish I was there. Did you dance?"  
 "No."  
 "No? What? Why not?"  
 "I don't know how, Dad - I'm not a dancer, you *know* that."  
 "But I am and your grandfather was - it's *in you* somewhere."  
 "Maybe."  
 "No maybe - you just haven't considered it. Come on. Pay attention. If you feel the urge to dance, you've got to do it. Your genes are calling out to you. Take some lessons. Give it a try. You're a confident guy. You've done much harder things than learning to dance. What have you got to lose? How hard can it be? Don't be a sissy. What are you afraid of?"  
 "Nothing I can name. Maybe you're right - I'll think about it."

Aristos could not tell his father that it wasn't so much the dancing, it was what dancing might or might not lead to. Finding or not finding . . .  
 And his father wasn't as good with the more solemn sides of life. Comedy was his specialty, not tragedy.

"Wait. One more question," said his father.  
 "Yes?"  
 "I've got an *idea*. Listen, have you ever thought of writing a play?"  
 "Me? No."  
 "Well, you should. Theater is in your blood, my son. And while you may not be an actor or director or producer . . . any of that . . . trying to write a play about dancing and dancers . . . about the Century Ballroom . . . would at least force you to look at what's going on very carefully and thoughtfully - in a way you would never do by just being a spectator."

“Maybe so, but . . .”

“No maybe. It’s true. Listen to me: engagement with the creative enterprise always forces attention. And, who knows, you might even *really* write a play. You’ve already got a great background in theater . . . mostly by osmosis from me and your grandfather . . . and you *know* theater . . . you *know* it . . . and you know how to *think* about what you know.

Think about writing a play. Get some books on playwriting. Spend some time at the Century looking through the lens of a playwright. Really notice the dancers and employees. Cast some parts. Give it a try.”

“That’s a little crazy, Dad. Have you ever written a play?”

“No . . . not my thing. But it’s not crazy for you to try. And even if it is, you could use a little loosey-goosey action in your life. Lighten up. It’s a risk that will cost you little but may pay you great dividends.

Promise me you’ll at least think about it.

Remember! You are Aristophanes Joyce, the third.

My father wasn’t a coward. I’m not, and you’re not either.

It’s not like I’m asking you to face a firing squad or defuse a bomb. Just *think* about learning to dance and seeing that as theater and try turning what happens into a play, that’s all. Focus that fine analytical mind of yours on being *creative* for once.

If nothing comes of it, so what? Nothing lost.

If it pays off, you’re on a roll and in the money.

At least *think* about it. Seriously. Promise me?”

“Promise.”

Talking with his father always left Aristos both exhausted and inspired.

He sat down in a chair to recover.

And soon said aloud to himself:

“A promise made is a promise kept, especially if made to Dr. Juice. I’ll think about it. At least that.”

Two mornings later, on his bathroom mirror, Aristos wrote with a piece of soap:

*Whatever became of me?*

Yesterday, underneath those words, he added a new line:

*What am I waiting for?*

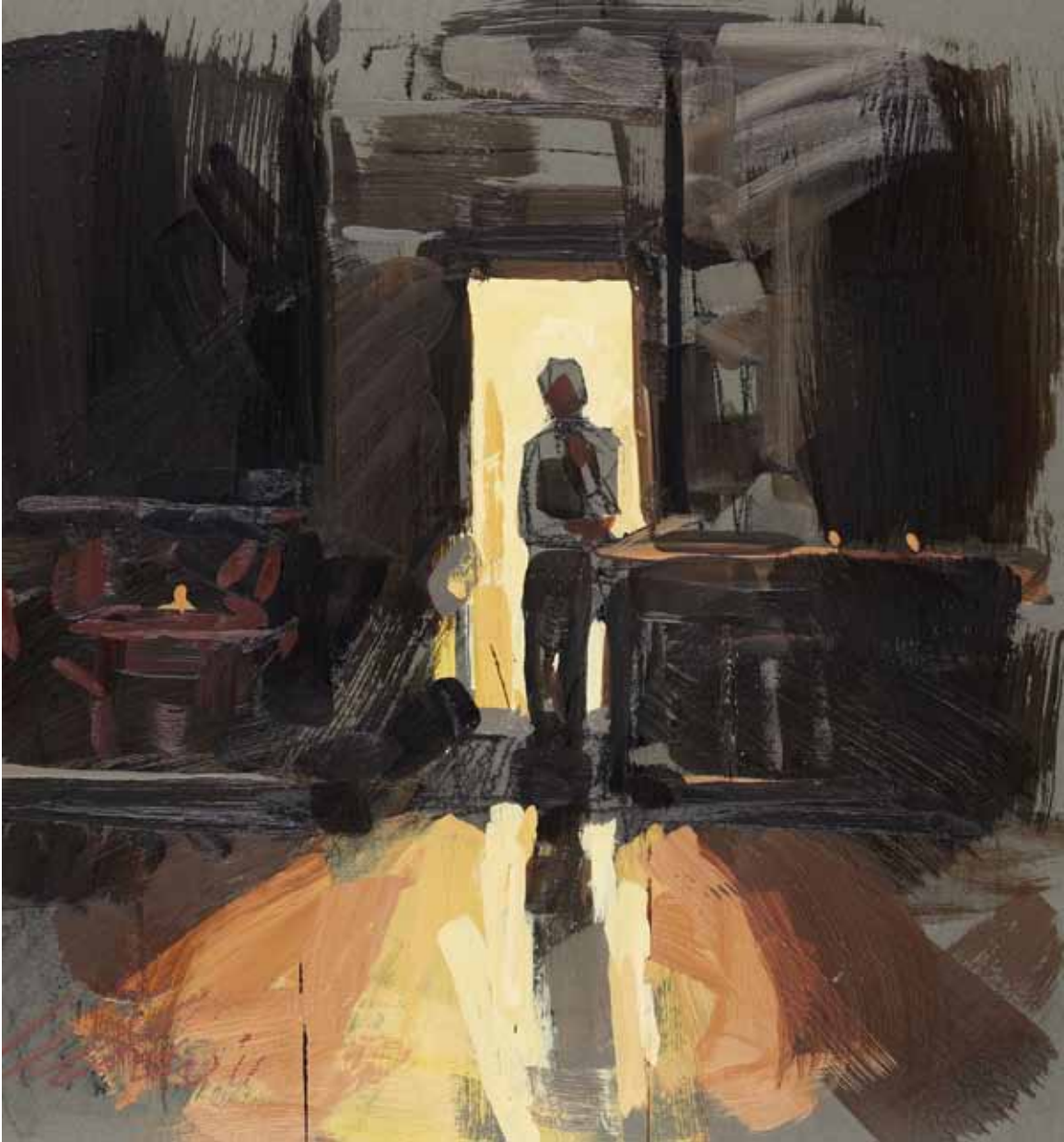
And this morning:

*Dammit, dance!*

He stood back and considered the words he had written.  
He laughed.

*Idiot.*  
*I must be out of my mind.*

As he walked out of the bathroom, he had a second thought.  
*Maybe that's a good thing . . .for a change.*



# Dance Manual

(1)

The Century Ballroom offers an evening's instruction for beginners.  
For those who have never danced, but want to.  
For those who do not think of themselves as dancers, but want to.

The first class does not offer instruction in any specific style of dance.  
It's just about the possibility of dancing  
All one must do is *be there* - with or without a partner.  
Come as you are, dress as you please.  
But please bring the one essential, an attitude:  
*I do not dance. I want to dance. Now what?*

\*

Monday night. Six o'clock.  
The main ballroom.  
Buck is in the booth, on the job - playing lively salsa music.  
Thirty people have enrolled in the class for beginners.

The first to arrive are *The Enthusiasts*, who, whenever they decide to chance jumping into deep water, will take a running leap and fling themselves recklessly into the air in the care of Fate.

Their preparations reflect their commitment and their fantasies:  
Nice clothes, well-groomed, new shoes just for dancing, and plastic bottles of water. The women often bring back-up bags containing a change of clothes and shoes, deodorant, makeup, perfume, combs and brushes, small towels, gum, and mints.

*The Enthusiasts* are ballroom-ready.  
They come early and mill around - too wound up to sit still.

Others, *The Prudent*, arrive in a more solemn state, as if they had finally decided to have their teeth whitened or their noses straightened.  
They do want to learn to dance, but are not yet fully committed.



*The Prudent* sit at the edge of the dance floor, with an eye on the exit, appraising their fellow students. They are anxious, cautious - even fearful.

A very few, *The Unready*, get as far as the door of the ballroom, shyly peer inside, and turn away . . . back down the hallway . . . down the stairs . . . and out onto the sidewalk . . . miserably defeated once again as their yearning has been waylaid by proximity to reality.

And one or two, *The Perplexed* - hung up on the knife edge of indecision - will find their way up the stairs to sit anonymously in the protective darkness of the balcony . . . and watch.

Of the thirty people enrolled, about twenty-four will finally manage to walk out onto the dance floor when the teacher invites them.

Who are these want-to-become dancers?

It's a mistake to generalize.

To judge by appearance alone is inconclusive.

A wide variety of ages, sizes, shapes, races, and styles of dress.

What they have in common can't be seen from the outside, only surmised - and observed when they finally move out onto the floor and open themselves to the possibility of dancing.

Many come alone or with a friend, but not as a couple.

And that is the first clue that dancing is not all they have in mind.

Dancers have one hidden agenda in common.

The subtext always has something to do with love and romance.

From smoldering desire to deeply hidden need - it's there - it comes in the door with the dancers.

Believe it.

No matter what the dance - waltz, salsa, tango, swing, square dance, folk dance - whatever - an intimate connection with another human being is at stake and in play.

Always.

(2)

The teacher is a petite, lively woman of middle years.  
Her credentials are established by the way she focuses on her students.  
Her message is not “Look at me - I’m a professional dance teacher.”  
It’s “Look at you - you’re here - wonderful - I’ll help you dance.”  
The students feel it - they believe in Giselle the minute they see her.

Beside her is an older man.  
He is sitting in a high-tech wheelchair.  
He is an amputee. His legs end just below his knees.

“Hello, I’m Giselle . . . welcome to dancing.  
This is Gerard, also a teacher, and my dance partner tonight.  
As you will find out, in his way, he’s a better dancer than I am.”

\*

Up in the balcony, two men watch the lesson begin below.

O’Malley knows that the man sitting next to him - Aristos Joyce - the Century’s new attorney, is also a writer who spends a lot of time around the edges of the action at the Century . . . watching . . . talking to dancers and employees . . . and taking notes.

Aristos knows that O’Malley is the security guard and the night watchman, who often appears early at the Century and usually sits in the balcony.

They do not know each other well.  
Not yet.  
For now they only share a keen interest in dancing and dancers.

“You’d never know it, but the guy in the wheelchair is one helluva dancer. I don’t know if he learned to dance before or after his accident, but he’s got the *moves*,” said O’Malley. “I’m jealous.”

“I haven’t seen him before. Is he new?” asked Aristos.

“No, he comes and goes. He travels a lot. They say he dances wherever he goes.”

“Does he use artificial legs - prostheses?”

“Nope . . . dances sitting in his chair. I asked him about that once, and you know what he said? He said dancing was about something you *are*, not something you *do*. He said it’s not about the steps you take with your feet.”

“That’s probably why Giselle includes him in the first class.”

“Right. When they see what Gerard can do in a wheelchair, dancing on two feet doesn’t seem so hard. Just by dancing with him Giselle saves a lot of talk and explanation.”

\*

“We’ll begin with a short demonstration, playing three minutes of dance music that includes two-step, waltz, swing, salsa, and tango,” said Giselle. “Those are the basic dances we’ll consider together.”

The music began.

Gerard sat up straight in his chair, offered his hand, and Giselle took it with the same kind of gentle grace she might have expressed when stepping into a normal standing embrace.

And they danced.

With perfect timing Gerard moved his upper body, head, and arms to the music, while simultaneously moving his wheelchair forward, back, around, and pausing while he led Giselle around him - sometimes letting her dance freely away from him and then, in perfect time, reconnecting.

Two-step, waltz, swing, salsa, and tango, as the music called for.

Attending to his partner and his chair so seamlessly he seemed to have more than two arms and hands.

The music faded into silence.

The circle of beginners broke into sustained applause.

*Yes! Oh, Yes!*

“My friend Gerard always says that dancing is not about something you do with your feet, but about something you do with your heart and soul,” said Giselle.

“And I agree.”

“Any questions? Please feel free to ask. No? Then let’s begin.”

“Here’s the first lesson.

It’s just one page.

Please read it carefully.

We’ll practice each one of these parts tonight.

And I’ll give you a CD to take home with you.

All I ask is that you spend the week practicing the same things we do together tonight at home alone. When you come back next Monday we’ll go to lesson two.”

“My goal is to have you think . . . after every lesson . . .

*Well, I can do that - what’s next?”*

“Please read lesson one now, then we’ll continue.”

(3)

Lesson One:

*Dancing begins with desire.*

Turn on the music.

Sit down in a chair.

Close your eyes.

Be still.

Take three deep breaths.

Relax.

Listen.

*Do you want to dance?*

Find the beat of the music.  
Tap your fingers on your knees to the rhythm.  
All the way through the songs.  
Play the CD again.

Stand up and *walk* - just walk - around the room.  
Let the music tell you how to walk.  
Hold your arms up as in an embrace.  
Pause, turn in place in a circle.  
Walk again.

Stop when the music ends.  
Sit down once more.  
Close your eyes.  
Be still.  
Dance without moving.

*Do you want to dance?*

(4)

Giselle waited while the class read the First Lesson.  
After they read, they looked up at her - *That's all?*

“You’ll notice that I’ve emphasized closing your eyes.  
Here’s why: The music must first be *inside* you.  
When you watch tango, for example, you’ll see that many women  
close their eyes and keep them closed during an entire dance.

Next week I’ll bring a special guest, my friend, Dulci-Maria.  
She’s blind. And she’s one of the best tango dancers I know . . .  
because the music is *in* her . . . and she is *in* the music.  
That’s a little mystical, but when you see her dance you’ll understand.  
She trusts the lead of her partner to be careful . . . to be attentive to  
her, the music, and other couples on the dance floor.



Her tango dancing is very pure.  
When Dulci-Maria comes to a *milonga*, every good male lead is drawn to dance with her. You'll see for yourself.  
She may be blind . . . but she has a *vision of herself* . . . dancing.

With that in mind, take seriously the instruction of the first lesson.  
Close your eyes. Listen. Let the music come inside.  
Any questions? No? Then let's consider the instructions."

With Giselle's gentle prompting, the class of beginners worked through the instructions, step by step - sitting, walking, listening, thinking.

At the end, sitting quietly in their chairs in a circle in the middle of the ballroom floor, it often occurred to these novitiates that if they were asked where they had been tonight and what they had been doing, they would have enthusiastically answered:

"Dancing. Me! I've been dancing."

Even though they had only walked around and sat in a chair with their eyes closed - just being *in* the music . . .



## The Circle Dance - The Novitiate's Tale

(1)

From his perch in the darkness of the balcony, Aristos paid close attention to Giselle's first dancing lesson.

*She didn't just throw them in, he thought.  
They didn't dance at all, but . . . they began dancing.*

"She's brilliant," he said to O'Malley.

"Yeah, and they'll all come back for lesson two. They trust her."

Aristos leaned over the balcony far enough to see the students chatting with one another. They seemed energized, pleased, and reluctant to leave the dance floor. Nobody was rushing away in scalded defeat.

*That could have been me, he thought.*

Instead of waiting until the ballroom cleared, he went down the stairs and found Giselle.

"Hi. I'm Aristos Joyce. I enrolled in your class, but . . . I . . . was too intimidated to get out on the floor.

Actually . . . I hid up in the balcony and watched.  
Now I'm sorry I did."

Giselle smiled. "I understand. It's OK. You're here now.  
Here's the instruction sheet and the CD.  
See you next week?"  
It was a question, not an insistent expectation.

"Yes. No matter what, I'll be here . . . in class. Promise."

\*

The first thing he did when he got home was to put the CD on the stereo and follow the instructions.

He sat in a chair, closed his eyes, and let the music in.

*I can do this*, he thought. *I can.*

(2)

The next week Aristos came to the dance lesson feeling as he felt the first time he wore a Scottish kilt in public - at a friend's Celtic wedding.

Awkward and embarrassed.

He had promised to do it . . . but . . . really . . .

He knew real men wore kilts. There was even an Asian guy who danced tango at the Century wearing a kilt.

He knew men became comfortable doing it . . . could go to war wearing a kilt . . . could even dance around together over sharp swords wearing kilts.

*Maybe I should have worn a kilt to the dance lesson.*

*You idiot*, he thought . . . *what the hell am I afraid of?*

"Dancing is a door," he said aloud.

"I can and will open and walk through that door.

And something fine will be waiting on the other side."

He took out his notebook and pen, and wrote down what he'd just said. He re-read it aloud several times.

Underneath his words he wrote, and underlined:

Tonight is the night!

(3)

“Tonight we’ll address tango,” said Giselle.  
It’s good to begin with what seems most daunting.  
How many of you have seen tango danced in a ballroom . . . a social setting . . . salon tango?”

A few hands were raised.  
Aristos did not raise his hand, even though he had already watched tango dancing at the Century. The teacher was asking questions and he didn’t want to risk being the one who answered - didn’t want to be noticed.

“How many of you have seen tango danced on TV?”  
All hands went up, even Aristos’.

“My guess is that for most of you tango is a romantic, sensual, flashy dance form. Sexy women in hot dresses, high heels, sexy men in black.  
That’s a stereotype.  
At its best it’s Argentine show tango . . . what you see onstage being performed by professional dancers.”

“But that’s *not* - I repeat - *not* what I’m here to teach.  
As a social dance, tango is much more subtle and accessible.  
Rather than talk about it, I would rather you see a couple dance in the way I hope you’ll learn to dance.”

“As I promised last week, I’ve brought a guest - two, actually.”

“Let me first introduce one of the finest tango dancers you’ll ever meet, my dear friend, Dulci-Maria Lorca.

As you must have noticed when she came into the ballroom using a white cane, Dulci-Maria is blind.

She doesn’t mind me pointing that out because she’s proud of what she’s accomplished and wants people to know that the blind can do almost anything they set their minds to do.

Her brother and sister taught her tango as she was growing up, and now . . . well, you’ll see for yourself.”





Dulci-Maria nodded and smiled.  
She is tiny - so petite she seems delicate, even fragile.  
Even so, she's a pretty, shapely young woman, with red-blond hair,  
and freckled white skin.

Her dress is conservative - basic black, with a flared skirt.  
Her white leather shoes have a thin black strap over the instep.  
The high heels of her shoes are crimson red.  
She sits holding her white cane . . . its tip is also red.

It's hard to keep one's eyes off Dulci-Maria.  
Because she can't see, people feel free to stare at her.  
She knows and understands.

"Now let me introduce her partner for tonight . . . another good friend  
of mine, Sergio Jarkovi. Another fine dancer, as you'll see.

His ability to lead is the envy of most male tango dancers.

In case you're wondering, Sergio is 89 years old.

He doesn't mind my telling you, because he's living proof that one  
can be a masterful dancer for a long, long time.

The Argentines would call someone like Sergio a *jubilado milonguero*  
- an accomplished older man still full of the joy of dancing."

"Enough of my talking.  
Dulci-Maria . . . Sergio . . . please."

Sergio stood, his posture straight.

He is a short, stout, dignified man, with tanned skin, and white hair.  
Tonight he is wearing a double-breasted grey pinstriped suit, white shirt, red  
silk tie, and plain black, well-polished tango shoes.

The music began - a *vals* - a tango in waltz time.

(4)

Sergio walked across the floor to stand in front of Dulci-Maria.

Gallantly, he took one of her hands in his, and kissed it.  
He said something that caused her to smile and then softly giggle.

She stood, parked her white cane against her chair, and followed him out onto the dance floor.

Still holding onto her hand, Sergio slowly turned her to face him.

By just this much the students sensed they were not watching a stodgy old guy and a fragile young blind woman.

These two were the real thing: tango dancers.

Sergio pulled her gently toward him, let go of her hand, and she stepped into his embrace, first placing her right hand in his left, then, as he moved his arm around her back, she moved chest to chest with him, lifted her left arm up into the air, and let it fall on his shoulder like a butterfly landing.

She tucked her head alongside his cheek, and closed her eyes.  
The close embrace of Argentine tango.

The music was already playing, but they still did not move.

Sergio subtly shifted his weight from left to right and she followed, connecting them both to the music.

He stepped left, then right with the music, and led them in walking - some slow steps, a pause, and then simple figures, allowing Dulci-Maria to cross and uncross her feet. They seemed to float across the floor.

The students watching didn't know the names for the graceful steps.  
All they knew was that the two people and the music were as one.  
Nothing fancy, nothing flashy, just a man leading a woman in tango.



Beautiful, elegant, refined, and very romantic.

When the music stopped there was a moment of silence.

Dulci-Maria stepped back, took Sergio's face in her hands, touched her lips lightly to his, and he led her back to her chair.

The students applauded and shouted, "More, more!"

When the applause ended, Giselle said, "That's tango."

"If that's what you want to do . . . and I hope so . . . if that's how you want to look and feel when you do it . . . and I hope so . . . then you've come to the right place."

\*

*That's what I want to do*, thought Aristos.

*That's how I want to feel when I do it.*

*And she . . . is the one I want to do it with.*

*Dulci Maria . . .*

A beautiful woman . . . a beautiful dancer . . . who came alone.

And she was blind.

For once a woman who would not see him as someone to take care of. She would need him to take care of her.

*Oh my god . . .*

(5)

Giselle looked thoughtfully around at her circle of students.

She walked over to Aristos, offered her hand and said, "Mr. Joyce, will you please help me?"

Aristos sat still, lost in thought, staring at Dulci-Maria.

“Mr. Joyce?”

“I’m sorry. What did you say?”

“Please help me with a demonstration.”

*Dance? . . . with you? . . . now? . . . but, but . . . ohmygod . . .*

What could he do? What could he say?

*You idiot . . .*

He wiped the sweat off the palms of his hands on his trousers and meekly took hers, more like a reluctant child than a cooperative adult.

Giselle led him to the center of the circle.

Her firm grip on his hand let him know there was no retreat.

“All you need to do,” she told him, “is hold my hand and walk around the circle with me, listening to the music. You’ve done this alone at home.

This is not about mechanics or technique - only about your spirit.”

Slowly, Aristos relaxed as he walked.

At the end of the music, the other students applauded.

“You’ve been doing your homework, Mr. Joyce,” said Giselle.

“You’ve been listening to the music - I can tell by the way you walk.”

Aristos smiled feebly and nodded.

“Now I will show you the embrace.

Stand still and straight, and hold up your hands as if you were calmly surrendering.

Now drop just your right hand to your side.

As I walk up closer to you, put your right arm half way around my back . . . about half way between my waist and shoulders.

There. This is called the *frame*.”



Now I'll put my right hand in yours, move closer and lightly place my left hand and arm on your shoulder.

This is called the *open* embrace.

Sergio and Dulci-Maria danced in Argentine *close* embrace - something that will come naturally to you in time."

"Let's go through just that a few times again, Mr. Joyce."

They moved in and out of open embrace three times.

The last time, as they stood embraced, Giselle said softly to Aristos, "Take a deep breath. Relax.

And when the music begins again just walk forward in a circle like we did before. You've seen it done. You can do it."

The music began.

Aristos froze.

*You idiot . . .*

He could not . . . would not . . . did not . . . move.

*I can't . . .*

"Try. Please just walk forward two steps," Giselle whispered.

He did.

"Please keep walking," she whispered.

He did.

And he kept walking, as Giselle whispered, "Yes, good. Yes, good," with each step.

When the music ended, the students applauded again.

Aristos still held Giselle in the embrace.

"You've just danced your first tango, Mr. Joyce."

Aristos still held Giselle in the embrace.

“You can let go now, Mr. Joyce.”

When he released her, Giselle saw that Aristos had tears in his eyes.  
She thought he was relieved.  
She could not know the truth.

He had come to a door in the wall.  
Turned the handle  
And found the door unlocked.  
The tears were those of relieved exaltation.  
He had actually danced.  
If he had worn his kilt he would have danced a jig.

Dulci-Maria could not see his performance.  
But she, too, somehow knew he had danced.



## Marisol's Tale

(1)

From her table in the darkness on the edge of the dance floor, Marisol Machado watched the tango lesson with empathetic amusement.

She remembered when she was a beginner.

She watched Aristos Joyce suffer through his first tango with more pity than amusement. She had never talked with him, but she knew who he was - the house lawyer who wanted to be a playwright.

*He'll never be much of a tango dancer*, she thought.

\*

Marisol is a journalist writing feature stories on international travel and culture for an ambitious Spanish magazine.

*Dos Mundos* is unique. It is published in a bilingual mix of Spanish and English - to appeal to an upper-class clientele primarily in Spain, Argentina, and the United States.

Marisol Maria Machado is a Spanish name.

But she is not Spanish - except by cultural heritage. Born and raised in Santa Fe, New Mexico, her father's family name could be traced to Spanish colonists who settled the region when it was part of the Viceroyalty of New Spain in the 17<sup>th</sup> century.

But her mother and father were more Anglo than Hispanic.

Marisol was the only one in the family who spoke Spanish, which she learned first from friends and then in high school and university classes.

From an early age onward her passion was dance - beginning with ballet and moving through the stages of modern dance into flamenco.

Unwilling to commit to the rigors of being a professional dancer, in college she shifted to social dance in all its forms - swing, salsa, and finally, tango.

She went to Spain for her senior year abroad. And stayed.

Her mother was an editor for a newspaper in Santa Fe, and it was natural for Marisol to pursue a career in journalism. *Dos Mundos* seemed like a perfect fit. Her mother advised her to start at the bottom - any foot

in the door was sufficient. Marisol began as a general flunky for the travel section of the magazine.

And then Fate took a hand in her career.

One night in Madrid, at a *milonga*, her managing editor saw her dancing tango. A *tanguero* himself, he danced with her. He was most impressed. And the next day asked her if she would like to cover the world of tango for the magazine.

And so it came to pass.

Marisol had written about tango in Argentina, Japan, France, and Finland. She had submitted a new proposal to her editor - a series on tango in the United States - beginning with the West Coast.

There were many festivals, including a major one in Seattle, Washington, where her research showed that tango was happening somewhere every night of the week.

The famous Century Ballroom in Seattle offered lessons, practice sessions, a Tango Cabaret, and regular dances.

She would begin her research at the Century.

Her editor accepted her proposal.

\*

The day before she left Spain for her new assignment in the United States, Marisol's editor gave her some final advice:

"Senorita Machado, many journalists make the same mistakes and fall by the wayside early on. First, they become personally or emotionally involved in the stories they're covering, and in losing objectivity, they lose credibility."

Yes. Marisol nodded, took out her notebook, and began writing.

"The second big mistake they make is to cover lack of information with imagination. That's a nice way of saying they make up facts because they don't do their homework."







*Not Me.*

“And the last big common mistake is interjecting commentary and opinion where only information is required.”

*Right.*

“In sum, the basic rules are:

Always be objective.

Always get the facts.

And leave fiction to the short story writers, and opinion to the critics.”

*Check.*

“You’re a writer for a Spanish cultural magazine, Miss Machado.

We have a reputation to uphold. Our readers don’t want to know about your most intimate personal experiences. They want to know where and how to have experiences of their own. They want to know what they would never find in a guidebook.”

*Got it.* Marisol had a filled two pages of her notebook.

“And . . . I hesitate to mention this . . . but I know that you have become a very accomplished tango dancer . . . it is . . . how shall I say . . . your personal passion. And you are . . . both single . . . and attractive.

This is a volatile combination.

Please remember your job. Writing comes first.

Take care that you write as well as you dance.”

Marisol blushed and smiled.

“I’m sure you’re fully aware of these things. I wouldn’t have given you the assignment if I didn’t think so.

And, by the way, I’m impressed that you took notes while we talked. For a good journalist, *every encounter* is an *interview*. Never forget that.”

(2)

That very evening she went to mass at her neighborhood church,  
Our Lady of the Angels. She did not believe in angels, even if they existed.  
She thought of them as large white moths that hovered around like plump,  
heavenly busybodies.

Marisol was cultural Catholic, not a devout Christian.

She had her doubts about God.

What she had learned about God in catechism classes as an adolescent  
only confused, annoyed, and terrified her.

She did believe in Fate, however, though its shape was vague.

Unlike God, Fate seemed to look after her without her asking.

She knew it could not be summoned or compelled.

Could not be predicted or explained.

Fate could only be acknowledged and accepted.

But she trusted Fate.

And so far she had found Fate compatible - bringing her more positive  
surprises than negative ones. Fate was both a teacher and a provider.

She also thought Fate had more than one face - two at least - "My  
Ladies," she called them - Lady Luck and Dame Fortune.

When she knelt in church she did not pray - she bowed her head and  
lifted her thoughts to the Ladies.

She let them know she hoped for safe travel.

She wished for success in her work.

She wished that she would not only work, but dance well and often.

And . . . she wished that there would be a man in her life.

So far she had experienced what she thought of as *men-in-training*, as  
if the Ladies had decided she must work through unsatisfactory experiences  
before she could recognize the right man.

Still, she wished . . .

*So be it*, she said to herself as she kneeled in her pew.

She closed her eyes.

*Dear Ladies, I will wait. Amen.*

(3)

In Seattle, Marisol made an appointment with Hello Silverman to introduce herself. When she asked for Hello Silverman, she was told to look around because Hello might be anywhere - arranging tables in the ballroom, dancing in a rehearsal, tasting in the kitchen or the bar, mopping a floor, replacing a light bulb, or even in her office - which is where she was now.

Ushered into a tiny disorganized office, Marisol presented her credentials to a friendly, energetic, boyish woman who never sat down. Two cell phones often rang at the same time, but Hello Silverman did not answer - just paused to notice the numbers - and kept talking to Marisol.

“Sorry, incoming . . . and, and, and . . . where was I? Oh, yes . . . delighted, my dear, just delighted,” said Hello Silverman.

“Be my guest. You can have the run of the place. I’ve got a crazy day - all my days are crazy - we’ll have to find some time to talk longer later - but I’ll get you introduced to some of my people who know almost as much about the Century as I do.”

“Let me see . . . let me see . . . you need to know Oscar, the doorman. He more or less manages the ballroom and he knows everybody.

Then there’s Buck, our regular DJ who also does sound and lights for everything that happens in the ballroom and the rehearsal spaces.

And . . . who else?

Sorry, incoming . . .” She jabbed at the cell phone keys.

“Well . . . where was I?”

“You mentioned Oscar and Buck.”

“Yes . . . and . . . I guess you’ve got to talk to Frieda, the head bartender . . . she knows a lot about everything that goes on here.

Frieda’s very . . . how shall I say . . . talky . . . probably talks too much . . . but she’ll have stories.

Lots of stories.

And opinions.”

“And then . . . oh yes . . . you have to know O’Malley, our security officer and night watchman. He’s really special. Father O’Malley, we call him. You’ll see why.

And . . . and . . . oops, sorry, incoming . . .”

Hello Silverman paced up and down in the small space.

“That’s probably enough. No . . . I’ll see that you meet some of the dance instructors, too . . . Giselle for sure.

There, that ought to get you off and running. OK?”

“Wonderful! I couldn’t ask for more, thanks.”

“Great! Gotta run . . . get back to me if you need anything, anytime.”

With that, Hello Silverman dashed out the door, leaving Marisol in the tiny office. She noticed that there were two dachshund dogs curled up under Hello’s desk, and two other people in the cramped space, working at computers and answering phones.

“Is Hello Silverman always like that?” asked Marisol.

“Hi - I’m Johnson - and, yeah, that’s standard for Hello. We call her Silverman the Cyclone - the Queen of the Multitaskers.

There are fifty employees at the Century, and she can do anything any one of us can, and often does - as well, or better.

“She just gave you a Gold Pass, by the way - full backstage access. Not everybody gets one - take advantage of it.”

“Thanks,” said Marisol, “That’s what I plan to do.”

(4)

When exploring the life of the Century Ballroom at night, Marisol took her editor’s advice to heart and extended its implications to her working uniform. Downplaying her personal style, she wore the semi-universal clothes of her generation:

Sport shoes, jeans, wide decorative belt, and a T-shirt - usually plain black, bearing no advertisement or social commentary.

In this attire, women of almost any age could go almost anywhere and not attract much attention. Contemporary cultural camouflage.

She wore her hair twisted up and unadorned except for a plain barrette. No makeup. The final touch was wearing reading glasses, either on her nose or pushed up and back over her hair.

She thought this outfit gave her a serious, but uninviting appearance, declaring she was not there to dance.

The tools of her trade included a small backpack containing a laptop, a small digital voice recorder for interviews, a cell phone, and a digital camera. And, of course, several notebooks - large and small - and several pens. For more personal items, a small black shoulder bag sufficed.

She wished she could find room for a pair of high-heeled tango shoes or at least all-purpose dance sneakers . . . just in case . . .

Tempting . . . but . . . No.

Just before she left for the Century Ballroom for the first evening, she inspected herself in the hall mirror of her apartment.

*The well equipped journalist*, she thought.

She laughed.

*They'd never recognize me in Santa Fe.*

She frowned.

*And nobody . . . will ask me to dance.*

(5)

Simply said, Marisol Machado quickly found a home-away-from-home at the Century Ballroom. She was welcomed by the employees and teachers because they liked telling stories and she listened well.

Moreover, beyond her journalistic interest in them, she liked the staff and the feeling was reciprocal. Friendships formed with Frieda, Buck, Oscar, and O'Malley. She became part of the working family of the Century.

Even when she went to Portland and San Francisco to explore the tango scene in those cities, she returned quickly to Seattle.  
Nothing compared to the Century Ballroom.

Remaining committed to her role as a working journalist, Marisol had avoided the temptation to dance.

And then . . . Angel Amaya began coming to the Century.  
When she saw him she thought she knew why Fate had made her wait.  
Angel Amaya made her want to dance.

The next move was obvious: ask him for an interview.

But Aristos Joyce beat her to it - Aristos, with his notebooks.





# The Notebooks of Aristos Joyce

(1)

Aristos Joyce always carried a notebook and a pen in his pockets. For as long as he could remember, he had been a note-taker.

And a list-maker, as well.

Not only lists of a mundane nature - “Things To Do” and “Things To Get” - but lists of things he saw, music he heard, places to visit, unusual names, and odds and ends he found in the street. Endless details.

His habit served him well when he became an attorney.

To serve his new profession as possible playwright, he bought six new notebooks. Black, leather-bound, reporter-style Moleskines - unlined paper.

In these he wrote with a calligraphic-nibbed fountain pen - black ink.

He meant to keep his promise to his father and take play writing seriously.

The notebooks were a sign of his good intentions.

The notebooks were rapidly being filled.

He not only wrote in them, he read and re-read them as a way of keeping ideas and themes active in his mind.

He was always surprised when some random note led to further thought or a lovely conclusion.

“Polishing stones” was his term for revisiting his notes.

The notebooks contained the condensed elements of the train of thought he hoped to ride all the way to a final station - in this case, a play about dancing.

Each time he began a new notebook, he copied these words on the first page - lines sent to him by his father:

*“There is nothing more notable in Socrates than  
that he found time, when he was an old man,  
to learn music and dancing, and thought it time well spent.*

- Michel de Montaigne

(2)

*(Recently Aristos re-read these items from his notes several times.)*

Lines overheard:

“Tango is Tai-Chi for two, Aikido for two, yoga for two, a flowery combat for two - danced to music.”

“Tango is a three-minute romance and lifelong love affair.”

“Tango is a ritual of encounters and separations.”

Mitchel Mitchel - comedian - a regular at the Century:

“I’m sick of following my dreams. I’m just going to ask where they’re going and connect with them later.”

Thought:

When people talk about tango they use words like passion, fear, desire, longing, yearning, sorrow, exile, anguish, and love.

No other social dance is thought of in these terms.

Lines:

“Tango is a Way in the world, a state of mind, an art, a religion, and an addiction. It’s a syndrome, a gestalt, and . . . something else . . . I can’t remember.”

Line:

“Those two don’t move much when they dance tango.”

“Right. They stand still . . . and earth moves.”

Quotation:

“There’s a big difference between being captured and surrendering.”  
(Who said that?)

“If you say you’re going to take Vienna, take Vienna!” (Napoleon)  
If you say you’re going to dance tango, dance tango. I said that.

Lines - various:

“He dances with his feet in buckets.”

“He dances like he’s got three legs.”

“She’s all shoes and perfume - otherwise she’s a cow.”

Lines:

“I’ve just been ravished on the dance floor!”

“You mean molested?”

“No ravished. Don’t you know the difference?”

Line:

“Tango is a conversation with legs.”

Notes:

Tango is a mode of transportation.

Tango is vertical seduction.

Tango is a three-minute love affair.

Tango is a Way - no less than Zen or yoga or religion.

## Viajero Exilado - The Nomad's Tale

(1)

Aristos became a regular fixture of the life of the Century Ballroom. On almost any given night, that's where he wanted to be, especially late in the evening. He would sit in an out-of-the way spot in the ballroom, in the balcony, in a rehearsal studio, and often in the bar.

Notebook in hand, he would put a small sign on the table in front of him that said, *Writer at work - Please do not Disturb*. He laughed when he thought about putting up a sign that said, *Attorney at Work*. He was trying very hard to think like a playwright when he was at the Century.

When he came to a stopping point, he would put his sign away, and inevitably someone, their curiosity aroused by the sign, would come over and talk to him, which is exactly what he had hoped would happen.

Or else, if he had noticed someone who particularly interested him, he would get up and approach them, introduce himself, explain his purpose, and offer to buy them a drink if they would talk to him.

No one ever refused him.

His experience reinforced the truth that most people have a story to tell and will gladly tell it if asked.

And stories abounded at the Century Ballroom.

\*

One night he was sitting at a table in the bar, already drinking wine with a young man he knew only as Angel. A recent addition to the life of the Century, Angel came almost every night. He was a talented dancer, had an outgoing personality, and was often at the Century when Aristos was there.

"You promised to tell me your story sometime," said Aristos, pen and notebook at the ready. "How about now?"

"Well . . . yes . . . I will . . . but I don't promise to tell you the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. Nobody does. Nobody can. We create ourselves. Everybody is as much fiction as fact, don't you agree?"





“I do, but before you continue,” said Aristos, “let me first tell you about something that often happens when I ask people to tell me their story. It fits with what you’ve just said about fiction.”

“Please do.”

“I tell them not to worry about how factual their account is. I think that life is mostly fiction. I’m also an attorney, and often find that the truth is hard to come by. Hence courts and judges and trials by jury. Everybody creates and recreates themselves and their story. When I say that, people will usually reply that it’s not true for them.

“Then I’ll ask: So what do you tell your mother about your life when you talk to her on the phone?

What do you tell your children about your childhood?

How does your resume for a job compare to what you tell your therapist?

What do you tell someone at a dance - someone you don’t know but are attracted to - and how does that compare to the person you see in the mirror when you get up in the morning?

When I ask those questions, they usually blush . . . and smile like someone caught with their hand in a cookie jar.

“For me, life is theater. That’s a very old idea, but it still holds true. My grandfather and father, who spent their lives in the theater, have repeatedly said that to me, and I’ve come to accept their view.

We are the playwright, the director, the actor, and, when you think about it, our own audience.

We go about the world in roles and costumes.

Consider all the different ways you dress in a day, a week, a month.”

Angel lifted his glass, sipped his wine slowly, set down his glass, and smiled. “Well, if you look at it that way, of course . . .”

“That’s the way I look at it.”

“We will get along well, Mr. Joyce. That is also my view.”

“Then begin. I won’t ask many questions.

You lead . . . tell me whatever you want me to know.”

(2)

“First, what do I do? Everybody asks me that.  
You want a category? Artist.  
I’m an artist. I compose pictures.  
Of what?  
Of things that are both real . . . and imagined.

“I’m a teller of tales . . . a *narrador* . . . a *fabulistor*.  
My stock in trade is fiction.  
I paint what people imagine but cannot see themselves.  
I paint what people *want* to see.  
You understand?”

Yes, Aristos nodded, as he filled a page of his notebook.

“Let me tell you about my name.  
Listen . . . it’s Spanish . . . a long one, as is the custom, but it’s very  
important to me . . . and it will tell you much about who I am.

Angel Joaquin Ceferino Gemenez FitzRoy Amaya.  
Pronounced: *An-hel Wakeen Seferino Hemenez FitzRoy Amaya.*”

“Let me get that down right - say again, slowly . . .”

“Angel - Joaquin - Ceferino - Gemenez - FitzRoy - Amaya.  
Pronounced: *An-hel Wakeen Seferino Hemenez FitzRoy Amaya.*”

“Got it,” said Aristos.

“All these were given by my mother and father when I was born.  
I will tell you a story about each name.  
But you can call me Angel Amaya . . . *An-hel Ah-mah-ya*.  
American girls just call me Angel - *Ain-jel*.”

He paused, sipped his wine, surveyed the young women leaving the  
bar for the ballroom across the hall, nodded, smiled, and sometimes winked.

“Where was I? . . . Oh yes, my names.  
My mother was English . . . Amelia FitzRoy.  
But she wanted to be Spanish . . . to become a flamenco dancer.  
My father was Spanish, from a middle-class *Gitano* family - Gypsy  
blood - but not of the unsettled tribe that travels in caravans.  
He wanted to be English and respectably bourgeoisie.  
Happens all the time, doesn’t it?  
How strange it is that we want so much to be other than we are, while  
someone else wants to be what we already are.

“So . . . they met in midair . . . each on the way to becoming  
somebody else. Ha!  
My father was going to England.  
My mother was going to Spain.  
They crossed paths on the coast of France . . . at Calais.

“A big storm had delayed all transportation . . . his boat couldn’t cross  
the Channel because of high waves and wind, and her train couldn’t leave  
because of fallen trees and high water across the tracks.  
They were forced to spend twenty-four hours in the same station.  
Directed by fate, they sat down on the same bench to wait.”

“Then what happened?” asked Aristos.

“Romance. Of course! What else? Romance!  
They were young, attractive, single.  
They met . . . or maybe I should say they collided.  
They spent twenty-four hours talking together.  
Even when the boats and the trains finally could leave, they stayed.

“Love had captured them . . . delicious, impossible, crazy love.  
They spent five days together in Calais . . . neither one wanting to let  
go . . . but neither one willing to reverse course and go with the other.  
Still . . . finally, they parted . . . that, too, was their destiny I think.”

(*Pause . . . he looked into his wine glass, lifted it, drained it, smiled.*)

“Nine months later . . . I was born.  
Out of romance into romance . . . so it is my nature to be romantic.”

Aristos laughed, lifted his eyebrows, waited - *Go on* . . .

“Stop me when you’ve heard enough . . .

“My parents never married, never lived together.  
But they never broke their ties, either.  
I spent my childhood living first with one and then the other.  
In Spain - Seville - with my English mother.  
In England - London - with my Spanish father.  
Back-and-forth became the pattern of my life.  
Home was where I was at the time.

“And . . . you know . . . as strange as it may seem . . . it was a  
wonderful life. No regrets, ever. I still love them both dearly.  
I became bilingual and bicultural.  
My parents’ lives gave me permission to find my own way and to  
become my own man.  
My mother wanted me to be as free as she was.  
My father wanted me to be as honorable as he was.  
And so . . . in my own way . . . I am both.  
I think of myself as a respectable wayfarer.”

He refilled his glass, looked at Aristos for any sign of boredom.

“More, Senor?”

“More, please, continue.”

“OK, then I will tell you about one curious part of my name.  
Ceferino Gemenez Malla is the name of the patron saint of all the  
Gypsies in Spain.  
In real life he was an undisciplined nomad for forty years.  
Then he became a priest, a defender of the rights of his people, the  
Gypsies, and finally, a martyr in the Civil War.

“A free man . . . a worthy man.  
Nice to have that imbedded in my name, yes?  
Something to live up to.  
A challenge to my very existence.  
And permission to first live forty years as a wanderer before doing  
something useful.  
That part is still also in my cards! I still have time.”

“What about Fitzroy?”

“The FitzRoy part is also curious.  
It was a name given to the illegitimate sons of royalty . . . the king’s  
bastards. A matter of, shall we say . . . ambiguous pride.  
FitzRoys were often sent off to the colonies to make their way . . . to  
earn their legitimacy.  
The name fits my story, don’t you think?”

Aristos nodded *Yes* while filling another page of his notebook.

“The Angel, Joaquin, was an emissary sent from Heaven to protect  
beautiful young women from predatory men . . . a guardian angel.  
My mother told me that.  
She gave me the names to prime my destiny.  
Ah, but there is no evidence whatsoever in scripture or ecclesiastical  
history of such an angel.  
I know. I have researched the matter.  
It seems that my mother made it up - a fiction.  
But I like the idea.  
It is a responsibility to live up to.  
And I will not let her down.”

Aristos laughed. “Keep going.”

“You might ask: How do I make my way?  
Money? It is a reality, no?  
As I said, I’m an artist.  
From birth, but also with professional training.  
What do I paint? Anything.

When I travel I take gentle advantage of the pride of the rich.  
I search out and draw and paint yachts, mansions, horses, prize cattle,  
racing cars, dogs - anything wealthy people possess.  
Anywhere rich people are, I set up my easel.  
Very quickly my work is noticed, and just as quickly commissioned,  
done, and paid for.  
Often I'm even invited to go sailing or to spend a few weeks in a  
country estate or a city penthouse as a guest. Nice, no?  
It's easy to make enough money to live well enough."

Angel turned solemn. Unsmiling now, brow knitted.

"Let me be . . . *claro* . . . very, very clear.  
I am not one of the moneyed rich.  
I do not wish to be one of them.  
I don't judge them, however.  
Rich people are no different from the rest . . . a mixed bag like the  
human race in general . . . except they are willing to pay my way.  
It's simple . . . I'm useful to them and they are useful to me.  
It's a fair enough bargain, no?

"But as for me . . . as for me, I have something they do not have.  
I am rich in my freedom.  
I am my own horse and saddle.  
Three months of work follows three months of adventure wherever  
my inclinations lead me. That's my rule.  
I'm a one-man caravan . . . that's me . . . a traveler . . . a vagabond . . .  
a gypsy . . . a wanderer . . . a *viajero exilado* - a traveler in exile . . . an artist  
of life.  
My mother told me to remember that my only security is my courage  
and my talent.  
In that . . . I trust her."

He gazed across the bar, across the hall, into the ballroom.

"Would you like to go in to dance?" asked Aristos.

"Soon, but not yet. Let's finish the wine."



“Besides your art, what else do you do, Angel?”

“How do I spend my time?”

“Yes.”

“Sometimes I write poetry . . . but not very well.  
I also write songs and play guitar . . . but not very well.  
And I dance.  
At that I’m OK - even pretty good sometimes, if I may brag.

“That’s my passion now - dancing . . . any kind . . . anywhere.  
In that I have my mother’s example and her blessing.  
She became the flamenco dancer she wanted to be . . . still dances and performs and teaches.  
But I’m also not as good at that as I wish to be . . . not yet . . . not a master of any dance . . . just an enthusiast . . . a permanent student.

“In Argentina I danced tango and salsa.  
In Brazil, samba.  
In Houston, Texas, the two-step, waltz, and line dance - cowboy style.  
Here, in Seattle, I want to learn American West Coast swing.  
And dance tango whenever I can.

“Why? I like the company of those who dance.  
It’s the best way to meet new people in a new city.  
I’ve never had a really bad time dancing - mostly fine times.  
A traveler who dances always has friends.

“And women . . . women always appreciate a man who dances.  
Have you also found that to be true, Aristos?”

Aristos laughed. “Not yet.”

(3)

After a long pause in Angel's monologue, Aristos said "More?"

"More? No, no . . . that's enough about me.  
If you insist on more, I would start telling you stories.  
And that would take awhile.

"Besides I want to go in and dance. After that I will tell you more.  
But first you must buy us another bottle of wine and ask them to serve  
us in the ballroom. Ask for another glass, too.  
If all goes well, we shall have company at our table.  
Beautiful company."

"Who?"

"Lean over here where I am.  
Look just inside the door.  
See the girl in the green dress and green shoes?  
She was in the bar for a while.  
I've been watching her.  
She's new. I have not seen her before.  
She's not much of a salsa dancer, but she wants to be.  
She's trying very hard.  
And she's beginning to despair.  
Perhaps we can help."

"*You* can help," Angel, "not me. Remember, I'm not a dancer . . . yet."

"So you say, Mr. Joyce. So you say.  
But I . . . do not . . . believe you.  
No, Mr. Aristos Joyce. I really do not believe you.  
Come with me. Watch.  
Order a bottle of wine . . . and *three* glasses."

And so saying, Angel got up and walked out of the bar, across the hall  
and into the ballroom toward the girl in the green dress, who was already  
sitting down and beginning to remove her high-heeled green shoes.

Aristos followed along, stopped just inside the Ballroom door, sat down at an empty table, and watched Angel approach the girl in the green dress. She had removed both of her dancing shoes and was about to put them away in her dance bag. She seemed finished for the night.

She looked up when Angel approached.

Whatever he said, she laughed, and whatever he said next hit home. She laughed again . . . and gestured toward her bare feet.

Angel was quickly down on one knee, slipping her shoes on her feet.

*The Prince courting Cinderella*, thought Aristos.

Angel adjusted the buckles, patted both her feet lightly three times as if endowing them with dancing power, stood up, extended his hand and, instead of dancing, led her to the table where Aristos sat waiting - with a new bottle of wine . . . and three glasses.

*He's about as smooth a mover as I've ever seen,*" thought Aristos.

*If that's what it means to be a guardian angel to young women, he's good at it. His mother would be very proud.*

"Mr. Aristos Joyce, may I present my new friend. Her name is Cha."

The girl in the green dress smiled and extended her hand.

"Hello . . . Cha . . ." said Aristos. "You're as lovely up close as Angel thought you were from a distance. Welcome. Please sit down with us."

"She's an actress trying to learn salsa for a role in a play," said Angel.

Aristos looked up, his eyes met hers.

"Oh, really . . . an actress?"

"Yes," she said.

He was becoming interested in actors - to cast in his play. It was a backwards way to write - to find the actors first - but it was one way - and the way he had decided to proceed.

“Interesting,” said Aristos. “I’ve been looking for an actress for a play I’m writing, but she’s supposed to be a dancer. Are you a dancer . . . Cha?”

“When I need to be, I will be,” she said.  
Her tone said it was a conviction, not a hope.

(Pause.)

“And you, Mr. Aristos Joyce, are you a dancer?” she asked, looking him straight in the eyes without turning away.

“Not yet . . . someday.”

“When will someday come?”

Aristos did not answer.  
He smiled as if his smile was a sufficient reply.  
But it meant he wasn’t sure . . . someday . . . soon.  
More of a hope than a conviction.

“I’d be interested in talking to you about your play,” said Cha.

Before Aristos could respond, Angel took Cha by the hand.  
“First, dance. Talk later,” he said, and led her away to the floor.

\*

The remainder of the evening was a blur - a puzzle to be sorted out in the light of another day.

Angel had acquired a new dance project - Cha.  
Cha had acquired the attentions of Angel.  
Aristos had met an actress.  
The actress had - perhaps - applied for a part - without directly asking.  
The rest would unfold.

The question Cha had asked lingered in Aristos’ mind on his way home, and remained when he settled down in bed to sleep.

“When will someday come, Mr. Aristos Joyce?”

Aristos envied Angel's style - his talent, his dancing, his easy way with the girl in the green dress.

*I wish I could be like that.*

*You idiot . . .*

Aristos got up.

Sat on the edge of the bed, holding his face in his hands.

*OK, I want to learn to dance.*

*OK, I want to try to write a play.*

*And . . . yes . . . I want someone to . . . what?*

*What about Dulci-Maria . . .?*

"It's that simple," he said aloud, and laughed.

*Not simple, he thought . . . just fundamental.*

Turning out the light, he lay down and fell asleep.

Aristos always slept well when he knew he had shifted from wrestling with a vexing problem and had decided to do something about it.

(4)

Marisol was in the bar while Aristos and Angel had their long conversation. She had been sitting on a stool talking to Frieda, the bartender, when the two men came in.

"What do you suppose they're talking about?" she asked Frieda.

"Who cares? I'll settle for just getting a chance to look at Angel. He's a beautiful man, don't you think? Delicious!"

"Attractive, yes. I'd like to interview him."

"Interview? Ha! You're not blind, Marisol. You think he's as hot as every other woman here does. You just want to meet him . . . just to get acquainted? Ha!"

"Maybe . . ."

"No maybe. You'd jump at the chance if he asked you to dance."

“He’d never ask me.”

“Not the way you dress, but we all know that’s a disguise.”

“What do you mean?”

“We’ve got eyes, Marisol. You’re not fooling anybody.

You’ve got what it takes - the basics - you’re young, nice body, pretty face - you just hide all that. If you came in your war paint and party clothes, Angel would notice.

And we think you’re a dancer, too - I’d put money on that - I’m clairvoyant, you know.”

“What makes you think that?”

“It’s the way you walk - the way you move your feet when tango music is playing. Oscar says you come to work in invisible tango shoes. And Buck says you know more about tango music than he does. When are you going to stop fooling around and get all dolled up and dance?”

“I’ve got a job to do, Frieda.”

“And a life to live, Marisol. Look at him . . .”

At that moment Angel was walking out of the bar into the ballroom.

Followed by Aristos.

And, at a discreet distance, Marisol.

She stood watching from the doorway as Angel attended to the girl in the green dress and then took her to meet Aristos.

She moved to her usual table in the darkness on the edge of the floor and watched as Angel danced salsa with the green dress girl.

He made her look good as a dancer and happy as a companion.

*What a charmer. He’ll take her home, I’ll bet on that.*

Not wanting to know the rest of the story, Marisol went home.

\*

Marisol lay in her bed.

Thinking.

*Damn, I’m tired of being responsible . . .*

*And I’m tired of not dancing. . .*



*And I'm really tired of being alone . . .*

*Angel Amaya . . .*

Addressing Lady Luck and Dame Fortune aloud, she said:

“Dear Ladies, if he’s part of your plan, please get busy!”





## Aristos' Tale - The Next Steps

Another night of instruction for the dance class.

Almost 9 o'clock.

The tango lesson ended, followed by the *practica*.

It, too, was almost over.

Aristos was still on the dance floor.

Giselle, the teacher, took his hand once again.

"Well, Mr. Joyce, it seems you've come out of hiding.

From the balcony onto the ballroom floor.

I've been watching.

You've at least *walked* tango with every woman in the class. You might not call it dancing, but I would.

Bravo!

I hope you're not sorry I chose you to help me introduce embrace and walking?"

"No, I'm very grateful. You did the right thing. It worked."

"Then come dance with me - there's one more song.

All you have to do is embrace, walk, and when I say *pausa*, stop and I'll do the rest - *figuras* - a decoration or two with my feet.

I bet you'll know when to walk again.

Trust me."

Aristos replied by bravely lifting his left hand and moving his right toward her in the frame leading to the embrace.

"Very nice," she said, as she moved into his embrace.

"*Ohmygod . . .*" he said to himself over and over.

He kept looking down to make sure he was not going to step on Giselle's feet. *You idiot . . .*

When the music ended, Giselle stepped back from Aristos and silently applauded.

“You’re going to be a fine tango dancer, Mr. Joyce.  
If you’ll buy me a drink, I’ll tell you how to continue with tango, and give you something to take home.”

“How can I refuse an offer like that? Come on.”

They sat at a table near the bar.

“Mr. Joyce,” said Giselle, “put your hands flat down on the table in front of you and keep them there.

Trust me. I have a good reason.”

“I will if you’ll stop calling me Mr. Joyce.  
Call me Aristos . . . please.”

“Aristos . . . I understand that you’re an attorney and a playwright.  
I assume you type - use a computer keyboard in your professions.”

“Yes.”

“Do you use all ten fingers and type without looking down?”

“Yes. I took lessons when I was in high school.  
Standard mechanical typewriter in those days.  
Big sturdy thing - like learning to ride horseback on a draft horse.  
You had to type more than sixty words a minute - with a cover over your hands so you couldn’t cheat by looking down.  
I hit seventy-two words a minute and could probably do even better than that now with a computer keyboard.”

“Do you ever think about it now - ever look down?”

“No, never. Why do you ask?”

“Keep your hands where they are.  
I’m going to cover them with a napkin.

Look at the menu. And start typing - Go!"

Aristos' fingers rippled under the napkin - all ten in action.

"Bravo! I bet you typed it perfectly."

"Actually no.

I was typing what I was thinking.

That's what I do best, not copying a text."

"And what were you thinking, Aristos?"

"I was thinking that I don't quite know what this has to do with tango, but in the meantime, I'm having a really good time."

Giselle laughed and whisked away the napkin.

She pointed at an invisible computer screen and said, "Perfect."

"Aristos, learning to dance tango is like learning to type.

The goal is to come to a point where you don't think about it . . . and don't look down . . . ever.

*Cabeza arriba!* is the Spanish admonition - Head Up - it's what the Argentine teachers say to their pupils over and over.

And that's what I say to you: *Cabeza arriba!*"

Aristos smiled. *Caught*, he thought, remembering their dance.

"For a long time typing is just a matter of acquiring skills, Aristos.

It's often maddening in the beginning, but if you decide from the beginning to do it right . . . to use all ten fingers . . . even then it takes time and patience and practice.

But in the end it's worth it, as you now know.

The really good typist learns to use *all* the keys, *and* the shifts *and even the numbers* . . . without having to look down.

If you begin on your own and start typing with hunt-and-peck - using only the index finger on each hand, you'll still be able to type.

And if you keep it up you will do it faster and think you're competent. But you are not efficient and never will be.

You're fooling yourself.

Once you have the hunt-and-peck habit, you'll never take time to learn to type right. It's a trap. A dead end.

I bet you've seen this happen with your colleagues, and, alas, I see it too often in tango. Learn a little, dance a little - but not ever well.

What I've said applies to becoming an accomplished tango dancer.

Your success so far is very important. Admirable.

But it will tempt you to become a hunt-and-peck tango dancer.

Take my advice - work on basic fundamentals - learn the frame and the embrace - learn to walk - learn all the social niceties and graces - read the history - and, above all, listen, listen, *listen* to the music whenever you're alone. And walk to the music while you're listening.

And - finally - I urge you to go to Argentina at least once if you can.

There are important things to be learned there - a culture you need to experience - that cannot ever be found in the Century Ballroom."

"I don't know - I had a bad dream about Buenos Aires," said Aristos.

Giselle smiled.

"The reality will be much better, but before we talk about Buenos Aires - and I could do that for hours - let me finish the business at hand.

Approach tango like you would typing . . . knowing it's something you want to do the rest of your life . . . and that you will get better at it as long as you keep learning.

I know people who have been dancing tango for forty years and they still take lessons, especially when visiting masters are in town.

Becoming a tango dancer is like taking up yoga or tai-chi or any other inner discipline that has an outer expression.

And sooner or later . . . at some lovely moment . . . some fine night that you will never, ever forget . . . you will realize that you are dancing without thinking . . . without looking down.

The best tango dancers are like my friend Gerard, the amputee.



Remember what he said:  
It's not just something you do with your feet.

Remember Dulci-Maria and Sergio, who showed you that tango is about something you allow yourself to become, not just a dance you do. It's a commitment to total immersion in the dancing."

"I understand," said Aristos. "I always think too much, analyze too much. Now I need to . . . just dance . . . until I stop thinking . . . and get it inside me . . .

Giselle, do you give private lessons?"

"Of course. In my studio.  
Here's my card. Call me."

"No, I . . . might not. Do you have your appointment book with you?"

"Yes. In my purse."

"Check your schedule . . . you tell me when to come."

"How about Tuesday or Thursday at one?"

"Put me down for both."

"Done. And . . . if you're really going to get serious about this . . . before you come, get some fine tango shoes that fit really well. You know what I said in class. Go to Mario's - he'll know what you need."

"One more thing, Giselle."

"Yes?"

"Do you think . . . that I might . . . I mean . . . would she . . . would Dulci-Maria dance with me . . . even as a beginner?"

Giselle smiled.

“Of course. Everybody wants to dance with Dulci, and she will dance with anybody, including beginners. She’s a very graceful, kind human being. Would you like me to put in a word with her for you?”

*Ohmygod.*

“Not yet,” said Aristos. “Not yet . . . but soon . . . soon.”



# The Tale of the Shoes

(1)

Aristos remembered the shoe lecture.

Giselle said, "Please consider my shoes."

She turned slowly in a circle, extending one foot and then the other to show her shoes from all sides.

She walked around in front of the class circle as she continued:

"The right shoes are essential in tango, and these shoes of mine are important tango shoes, even though they are clearly not the beautiful high heels you see on serious dancers at *milongas*.

These are plain black leather with a wide, two-inch-high heel.

They have a closed toe, a wide strap over the arch - with a buckle.

The soles have a layer of suede leather on them - that's so they will slide smoothly, but not slip. Notice how comfortably I walk in them."

She considered her shoes and laughed.

"As you can see, these shoes are well worn and a bit scuffed up. They're old friends now . . . very comfortable . . . giving me firm support and confidence when I teach.

I trust these shoes.

They are shoes to learn in and practice in.

Shoes to wear and not worry about . . . shoes to keep your mind on how you dance, not on how you look.

Ladies, take my strong advice - let these be your first tango shoes.

The fancy dress high heels will come when you're ready to dance in them. Wait. Trust the basic blacks."



“What about men’s shoes?” asked a student.

“I was just getting to that. I have a pair in my dance bag.”

“Like these,” she said, holding them out for the class to consider.

“Men may begin with the same shoes they will dance in.  
Plain black leather, standard heel, flexible suede soles, like these.

Good quality and a good fit are essential in shoes.

Don’t go cheap - and do take time to get the right fit.

I know a man who buys two pairs of different sizes just so each shoe fits each foot just right.

While very fancy shoes for men are available in many colors . . . and in reptile skins and all that . . . with higher Cuban heels . . . even boots . . . and sneakers . . . I personally think straightforward and classic is best.

If you really want to know all about shoes, spend some time talking to the dancers who wear them.

Tango dancers love to talk about their shoes.

They’ll tell you how important shoes are and where to buy them for yourself when the time comes.

And . . . the time will come.”

Giselle smiled.

The students smiled.

*Tango shoes. Yes!*

(2)

Aristos wanted to research this matter of tango shoes.

He had his teacher’s views.

Now he wanted to talk to dancers.

He noticed three women sitting together in a row of chairs at the very back of the Century Ballroom.





Three blondes in sexy black dance dresses.  
He had seen them before on the ballroom floor.  
They were competent dancers - mature adults - though they were now laughing and giggling like teenagers.

When he approached them he saw they had several pairs of fancy tango shoes spread out on the floor, the table, and on the chairs around them.  
They were taking turns trying on the shoes.

Aristos introduced himself, his profession, and his purpose.  
“If you don’t mind my asking, what’s happening here?”

“We’re exchanging shoes . . . we all brought a bagful.  
We wear the same size, and we went together on a mission to Buenos Aires and shopped up a storm in the tango shoe stores.  
We all had shoes made, and they’ve just arrived.  
And now we’re sharing them out.”

“It’s a female thing, you know - guys would never do this.”  
They all giggled again.

“Tango’s really all about the shoes, you know.”  
Laughter.

“Why are shoes so important? Tell me about tango shoes.”

“For one thing, it’s not what you think.  
It’s not just a girly-girly fashion thing, like it sometimes is with regular dress-up shoes. I know we’re giggling and having fun, but tango shoes are way more serious.”

“We all have the same story - and it’s a pretty common story in tango.  
We’ve been friends a long time.  
We’re in the middle years now.  
We got bored.  
We took yoga and Pilates together. More boring.  
So we decided to take dance lessons. Not boring.”



They all laughed again.

“So, we signed up.

Showed up in our grey hair, sweats, and sneakers.”

“No makeup, either. Just three frumpy broads past their prime who wanted to get out of the house and move a little to music.”

“And we *loved* tango. *Ohmygod!* Did we love tango!

So then we went to our first tango festival.

And the first thing we did when we got there was buy real tango shoes. Three pairs each. In for a nickel, in for a dollar.”

“And then the dominoes fell. If you wear the shoes, you’ve got to get a dress to go with them, right? And if you’ve got the dress, well you’ve just got to do something with your hair and your makeup.”

“And lose a few pounds to fit in the dress you bought.”

“Dresses - plural.”

Laughter.

“Then there’s a need for an upgrade in perfume, and your old jewelry won’t do - new earrings at least - several pairs. Manicures, and while you’re at it, pedicures and toe polish to go with the shoes that started the ball rolling in the first place.”

“And suddenly, there’s a new you. All because of the shoes.”

“You start going to real *milongas* and another festival or two, and word gets around that you can dance, and, well . . . life is never the same.”

“Buenos Aires . . .”

Laughter.

“Don’t misunderstand.

All three of us have pretty good marriages and aren’t looking for trouble . . . no affairs - that’s our rule - we watch out for each other in that.



But I said to my friends more than once . . . just wait . . . the husbands will notice . . . and sooner or later they'll want in on a good thing."

"And have they?" asked Aristos.

The women exchanged solemn looks.

"Well . . . not yet . . . maybe. But we've got a plan . . ."

"But what about the shoes themselves?"

"Women love shoes.

You know that. That's a given.

But high heels worn for tango are something special.

They're not street shoes - not made for walking or standing. Whatever their design, they've got to be secure on your foot while you dance."

"And balanced forward, so that when you dance - always on the balls of your feet - they're comfortable - and so it's equally easy to step both forward and backward.

You don't use the heel much when you're actually dancing."

"The soles are softer than the usual dress-up high heels - you've got to really *feel* the floor . . . and the soles have suede on them.

And you never wear them except to dance tango."

"The best ones are made of good-quality leather."

"But the really, really *hot* ones . . . even if they don't even last one night . . . are made of satin and lace . . ."

"And snake skin . . . lizard skin . . . fake leopard skin . . ."

"And they have rhinestones and bows on them . . . they're like . . . like . . . foot lingerie . . . *ohmygod!*"

"And besides all that, they're so pretty, so sexy, so . . . cute!"

Back to giggling.



“What about men’s tango shoes?” asked Aristos.

“We’ve learned that the best dancers have the plainest shoes.”

“And even if they’re shined up, they still look used - danced in.”

“If there’s something flashy about a guy’s tango shoes, it’s not a good sign of the kind of dance you’ll get.”

“The best male dancers focus on dancing *with* you . . . and *for* you . . . and making *you* look and feel good.

When we come away from a *tanda* that’s gone well, we say ‘He gave me a good dance.’

It’s like he gave me a special gift.”

“That’s really true.

If a guy *dresses* to call attention to himself, he’ll *dance* to call attention to himself, and I wouldn’t want to dance much with him.”

“There are nerdy guys who come casual, with their shirttails hanging out. They’re also not usually big on personal hygiene, or else they go overboard with aftershave and cologne.

Smell’s important when you dance close.

They may even be flashy dancers, but they think dancing’s just dancing. No way. They don’t get it.

Tango is a culture, a style, a way of thinking. And if they’re not hip to that, I’m not dancing with them.”

Nods all around.

“But men really do pay attention to a woman’s shoes - not just because they’re sexy or pretty.

More than once I’ve had a man tell me he knew I’d be a good dancer just by the quality of my shoes.”

“Any special secrets that go with the shoes?” asked Aristos.

All three reached for their dance bags.





“Well, we carry a little stiff wire brush - like this - to roughen up the suede on the bottom - to keep it from getting slick - you need enough surface to have some traction . . . some control . . . so you don’t slip.”

“There’s a special problem with floors.

You can control everything else - clothes . . . shoes . . . partner . . . style . . . whatever, but you can’t control the surface of the floor.

Some floors get really sticky because the venue doesn’t take care of it and keep it clean and smooth.”

“That’s never a problem at the Century.”

“Right. But lots of other places, the floor is a challenge.

So in your dance bag you carry something that has a mix of cornstarch and talcum powder in it.

Here’s mine - it’s just a salt shaker.

You can *tune* the floor.

You discreetly sprinkle a little on the floor in front of you.

Then you rub the soles of your shoes in it, and you’re off and dancing without sticking.”

“How many pairs of tango shoes do you have?”

Giggles again.

“All together, between us, we’ve got . . . maybe . . . sixty pairs.”

“Really? Sixty pairs? That’s a lot of shoes,” said Aristos.

More giggles.

“A lady *never* has enough tango shoes!”

“Or tango outfits!”

Laughter.

“Do you dance tango, Mr. Joyce . . . Aristos?”

“I wish . . . I could simply say . . . Yes.



I want to. I'm taking lessons now."

"Well, just let us know when you're ready."

Feeling he was being sized up like an unripened fruit, Aristos rose, thanked the three ladies, and went his way.

Informed.

And even inspired.

*Shoes*, he thought. *Time to see Mario . . .*

\*

As he walked out into the hallway toward the bar, Aristos stopped, took out his notebook, and wrote:

"The Shoe Ladies - not to be dismissed lightly - a sample of serious yearning - transition and transformation - from anxious, middle-aged beginners to self-respecting, accomplished dancers. They're alive again!"

*Could be me*, he thought. *Could be me . . .*

## The Bus Driver's Tale

It's almost two o'clock in the morning.  
The Century Ballroom is closed for the night.  
Even the kitchen crew has washed up and gone home.  
The janitor has finished cleaning the ballroom and checked for the inevitable Remainders - those patrons who have stayed behind somewhere in the darkness - for some reason or other.

From time to time a totally bombed drunk will be found peacefully asleep under a table in the bar or up in the ballroom balcony.

And sometimes a couple will be discovered semi-disrobed in a stall in the ladies bathroom, overwhelmed by the urgent desires of the flesh.

Or someone doesn't quite make it completely down the stairs and just sits there, immobilized - sick or unhappy - or simply perplexed by the contradiction between the hopes they came to the ballroom with and the experiences they've actually had.

Very few nights end without O'Malley having to call a taxi to take away the Remainders - these victims of excessive joy, outrageous passion, and debilitating confusion.

But not tonight.

"All clear," said the janitor, and O'Malley let him out the side door and locked it behind him.

Just as he turned away, someone rapped on the door.

Peering through the glass, he saw a man in a bus driver's uniform holding up a pair of high-heeled, blue-and-silver dancing shoes.

O'Malley unlocked and opened the door.

"What's up?"

"Hey, I'm Eddie. Number 6 bus. I pick up across the street.

A young lady got on my bus a while ago - a bit juiced up, I think.

She sat down in the back of the bus and started crying.

Bawling, actually. She really came unglued.



I gotta drive, you know. Doing social work is not my job.  
But I kept an eye on her, and after a while she pulled herself together.

She rode all the way around my route. When we got back here, I told her we were back at the stop for the Century.

And she came up and stood by me and said she only lived five blocks away and would get off there.

I guess she only wanted to ride around alone and think.

Well, when she started to get off, she put these shoes down beside me and said she wouldn't ever need them again.

And before I could talk her out of it, she got off and was gone.

Guess she'd had a bad night at the ballroom.

She must have been dancing at the Century, and these are really swell shoes. And I thought maybe she'd change her mind and want the shoes back. So. When I came around again, I thought I'd drop them off here.

Will you take 'em?"

"Sure," said O'Malley. "And thanks for the good deed.

You're probably right. People leave shoes behind all the time - for lots of reasons. And they usually want them back, sooner or later."

O'Malley switched on his flashlight and turned the beam on the shoes to look at them closely.

"These are expensive shoes, Eddie. First Class.

Don't look like they've been danced in much.

I think I saw someone wearing them, but I can't remember who for certain . . . though there was a girl in a dress about this same color of blue around for awhile tonight - in the bar talking to Frieda."

"Maybe she'll come here looking for them," said the bus driver.

"Maybe, maybe not. She abandoned them on your bus, remember?

But, you never know. I'll keep an eye out, and if she shows up, I'll have a nice surprise for her.

And maybe she'll tell me why she left them on the bus. You can be sure there's some drama behind this. Tragedy or comedy? It's hard to say."

## The Tale of Hello Silverman

“Everybody says Hello Silverman has stories I should hear, but every time I see her she’s busy - always in motion. She never stands still long enough to talk. What should I do?”

Marisol is in the bar talking to Frieda, the bartender.

“Well, that’s Hello. Think about it this way - you’ve been interviewing Buck and Oscar and O’Malley, and talking to me. In a way, what we’ve told you *are* her stories. Everything that happens in the Century Ballroom includes Hello Silverman in one way or another. It’s all about her.

To tell you the truth, I don’t think she would really tell you stories - not the kind the rest of us will. She’s very, very . . . discreet.”

“You must know stories about her. Ones she wouldn’t tell.”

“And I wouldn’t tell them, either. That’s a no-go zone for me.”

“Then I’m at a dead end. She’s too busy, and nobody else will talk about her. And I don’t feel comfortable following her around and taking notes. What am I supposed to do, Frieda?”

“Well, one possibility is to talk to her uncle. An old Jewish guy - Izzy Zilverman - retired from doing something with show business in New York. He comes in from time to time, sits at the far end of the bar against the wall, eats his dinner, and goes out to watch dancing before he goes home.

He’s a little shy - and probably lonely, too. If you like, I’ll tell him about you. And if he likes, I’ll introduce you.”

“Please.”

\*

“What would you like to know, Miss Machado?” asked Izzy.

“I’m a journalist, so facts would be welcome. Let’s start there. What would you like to tell me? Anything would be useful.”



“I’m not very talky, and she’s a very private person.”  
“Everybody seems to protect her.”

“And she protects everybody. Everybody trusts her.  
That’s a fact. Write that down.”

“More?”

“She grew up in New York, surrounded by a show business family - actors, producers, singers. It’s a Jewish thing in New York, but I suppose you know that.

Even as a kid she was managing little musicals with her friends - family entertainment. She was always the mainspring that made it happen, and I guess nothing much has changed - look at the Century Ballroom.

She went to a university drama department and came out knowing more about stage managing than anything else.”

“And after that?”

Then she worked in the professional theater, but social dancing was her great love. You know, Hello is a good dancer and a good teacher, but she wanted more than performing and teaching dance.

She wouldn’t say it this way, but I think she’s an impresario at heart in the grand tradition - wants to make it all happen - for other people - not just herself. It took a lot of guts to open the Century and then a restaurant, and now it’s expanded all over this building.

I don’t know where it ends. Seems like a new space and a new program opens every month.

She’s strong, determined, and has the energy of four people.

And she’s got heart, too. Most of her employees have been here a long time, and it’s mostly because she sets a standard - hard work, strong commitments.”

“You really admire her.”

“Yes, indeed. Speaking of courage, she’s an open and avowed lesbian - came out early, when it wasn’t easy.

I admire her determination to make the Century a place that welcomes all dancers, whatever their sexual orientation.”

“Does she have a partner?”

“That’s over in the personal realm. I’ll just say that love never comes easy to strong personalities, does it? More than that I don’t want to say.”

“Is Hello Silverman her real name?”

“It fits her, don’t you think. Up front, colorful.”

“You’re very protective of her, aren’t you?”

“She’s my niece. I love her.  
And she loves me.  
That says it all.”

\*

“So, Miss Machado - Marisol. Did you find out what you wanted to know - any stories?” asked Frieda.

“Yes, some facts . . . and his affection for Hello - but no stories.  
I know I wish I had an uncle like that.”

“You ought to ask him about himself sometime. Then he’d tell you stories out of the old days in New York. I hear he knew everybody in show business. He’s really got tales to tell.”

“Maybe I will, but I need to focus on tango and the Century . . . and on me.”

“Did you say, ‘and me’?”

Marisol nodded.

“I’m going through a confused time, Frieda. I’m caught between my

job and my . . . personal life. I wish I had a fairy godmother to talk to.”

“Ah,” said Frieda, “I’ve got just the person for you. Let me get her card out of my purse.”

“Here. It’s the business card of *Tanya, the Tattooed Psychic*. I’ve been to see her myself, and she’s always right on. She reads tarot cards, but I think she’s just very wise and perceptive on her own.

Don’t even think about it, just go see Tanya.

Tell her I sent you.

If you don’t learn something important, I’ll buy you drinks on the house for a month.”

“You’re serious.”

“I am. And so is Tanya. Trust me. Go.”

# The Disc Jockey's Tales

(1)

(Buck, the DJ, again.)

“No, I’m not working the tunes tonight.

Tonight I’m just the sound engineer . . . the equipment guy.  
It’s tango night, and we got a guest disc jockey in - all the way from  
Bway-Nos-Airees Ar-Gen-Teen-Ah! The real deal!

These guys don’t really do all that much when they come - just bring  
me a bunch of CDs that are already programmed in *tandas*.  
And I just stick ’em in the machine and tweak the volume.  
They get to dance or hang out and talk tango with the civilians.  
They’re imported *personalities*, not just disc jockeys.  
Add some spice to the tango stew.

Sometimes these Argentine DJs are pimping for tango travel package  
tours, or else working for a tango shoe company on the side. You never  
know . . . they gotta eat, too, I guess.

Still, having anything or anybody from Argentina around adds an  
exotic touch for the dancers, but the music is pretty much the same.  
It’s still gotta be danceable and recognizable.

See, tango dancers like predictable music - stuff they know.  
Maybe in Argentina the lyrics are important, but they’re always in  
Spanish and they don’t translate very well.

When you read them in English it sounds a lot like country-western  
heartbreak to me - mostly unrequited love and how bad it all feels.  
Here, nobody knows the words - it’s just about the music.

No, I don’t really mind not having to pick the music.  
Tango’s a special thing all its own. You really gotta know the history  
and the styles of the orchestras . . . almost like knowing classical music.  
And some of the really greats - Piazzola is one example - aren’t so  
good for dancing, just listening.



And then there's the other end of the spectrum - *neotango* - or *tango nuevo* - a lot of that's pretty hip and hot, but it's electronic, and most of the American dancers who dance traditional Argentine style don't like it, and will complain if we play it.

Americans want to be *milongueros* - classic salon tango dancers.  
It's their fantasy.

Argentinians are more broad minded.

But, hey, it's their dance and they can do it however they want, right?

You really have to know your stuff to program a tango evening.

I've always got some pretty traditional CD sets ready to go if I'm the fallback DJ for the night, but, to tell you the truth, I'm flying pretty blind when it comes to tango.

(2)

"Do I tango? Me? Come on, man.  
No, I don't dance it, myself.  
But . . . you know . . . I'd really like to . . . I really would.  
I like being around the people.  
Pretty cool . . .

Tango nights bring out a special crowd.  
For one thing, most come looking pretty classy . . . pretty dresses . . .  
and pretty shoes . . . the best and most beautiful high heels you'll ever see.

And a lot of guys come in suits or at least coats and ties.  
You don't see that anywhere anymore - funerals and weddings and  
courtroom appearances - that's about it for suits for guys.

Like I say, it's a classy crowd.  
And well behaved. They don't drink much.  
O'Malley says tango nights are a night off for him.  
Never any trouble.

Another thing that interests me about tango nights: the spectators.

See that table over by the stairs . . . young guy and three older women? They come to everything tango . . . dances, performances, cabarets, the works - you name it, they're on board.

But they never, ever dance.

Very respectful, too. They don't talk much when dancing is going on. They watch.

I bet they know as much about tango as anybody.

And they're not the only ones.

There's three or four other tables of regular watchers over by the door and some up in the balcony.

One of them said to me once that it's not true that it takes two to tango. It takes two dancers and spectators - somebody to watch. Witnesses.

And I buy that.

Tango dancers *like* to be watched . . . probably won't admit it . . . but that's what I think and see.

But why not? What harm in that?

If you're looking swell, and what you're doing is nice to watch, and you're good at it, then you might as well be appreciated.

Nothing wrong with spectator sports.

I like to watch baseball, but I don't play or even want to.

There's one other group of regulars who don't dance . . . but not because they don't want to.

Look around the room.

You'll see some older women . . . well dressed and tango-ready.

Usually sitting alone.

Right clothes, right shoes, right attitude.

And they know all about the *cabaceo*. That's the direct look a woman gives a man if she'd like to dance with him.

They throw it, but nobody catches it.

Hardly anybody ever asks them to dance.

And still they come again and again.

It's kinda sad, you know . . . I call them The Widows."





(3)

There's one exception.

See that grey-haired woman dancing with the young dude?  
Over there on the far side of the floor.

She's a very elegant dancer - really knows her stuff and can hold her own with anybody. Even some of the visiting Argentine professionals ask her to dance when they're around.

Must have been a real babe when she was young, but . . . now . . .

The guy she's dancing with now is actually her nephew.

They come together, he dances with her a *tanda* or two, and then he goes off to dance with women his own age, leaving her alone.

By tango custom two things have happened: her skills have been on display, and since she's sitting by herself, she's clearly available.

And she usually gets dances the rest of the evening.

When she throws the *cabeceo*, men catch it.

I don't know her, but I like her.

If I could tango, I'd ask her to dance.

That lady has it figured out, and she has a plan, man.

Tango is about the dancing - and she's worked out a way to dance.

The rest of The Widows just sit there . . . feeling frustrated and sorry for themselves . . . waiting for something to happen.

Throwing the *cabeceo* that men ignore.

See those three blondes at that one table?

Always come together without any partners.

But they're a real party, those three.

They laugh and talk to everybody and have a hell of a good time and always end up with a bunch of people sitting at their table and staying until closing time. They're like three social directors on a cruise ship.

And they dance pretty good, too.

They've come a long way.

I remember seeing them when they showed up for beginners' lessons  
- pretty plain and tacky - like they were going out to work in the yard.

Now look at 'em.

Babes.

Nice women, don't get me wrong.

But look at them.

Babes, now.

And I'd dance with 'em in a minute . . . if I could dance.

On the other hand, it's a different deal if you're an older guy.

Look out on the floor and you'll see.

Old guys - with young ladies.

If an old guy is a gentleman, good dancer, dresses sharp, and is a *milonguero*, the young women will gladly dance with him, anytime.

They'll throw the *cabaceo* his way like a spear.

And he's right there on it, too.

The young ladies want to be given a good dance - that's all - and the *milonguero* wants to give a good dance - that's all.

Works out, you know?

The older women usually get to dance only if they come with a partner. Ha. Or bring a nephew.

That's life, I guess.

I gotta go to work.

If you want some interesting stories about tango dancers you ought to talk to Oscar, the doorman sometime, and you really need to get to know Frieda, the bartender.





# The Bartender's Tales - Frieda

(1)

Questions:

Who is soft and round . . . ?

With green, curly hair . . . ?

An encyclopedic memory for names, faces, facts, and drinks . . . ?

A laugh that could disarm a terrorist . . . ?

A talent for gossip . . . ?

And a heart of gold . . . ?

Put that question to any regular customer of the Century Ballroom and they would immediately answer, "Frieda, of course."

Frieda is the beverage manager at the Century Ballroom.

She's responsible for the inventory, the staff, and the mood of the bar.

She's also the chief bartender - on duty the busiest five nights a week.

After seven years on the job she has become *information central* when it comes to what's happening at the Century. Customers and staff are drawn to confide in Frieda, and Frieda returns the favor.

If you want to *know* something, ask Frieda.

If you want something *known*, tell Frieda.

Often people with hair dyed red or blue or green are as extravagantly expressive in their clothing or with their bodies - tattoos, piercings, and elaborate makeup - dressed in Goth or Gypsy or combat attire. The message is contradictory. As if they want to both say *Look at me* and ask *What are you looking at me for?* It's a sharp, edgy attitude.

But that's not Frieda's style.

The deep green, curly hair is her only fashion distinction.

No tattoos, no piercings, no costumes or jewelry.

Modest, minimal makeup - lipstick only - orange.

Her standard uniform dress is conservative - a black shirt, with a white apron over a long, full black skirt - black leather clogs on her feet.

If pressed, Frieda would admit that the purpose of the green hair and orange lipstick is to keep people's attention on her face and off her butt.

Frieda's figure is distinctly pear-shaped - small top, big bottom.

Those who've seen it agree on the fact of the matter.

Frieda has a magnificent ass.

One reason she is a bartender and not a waitress is that being behind the bar in the semidarkness hides her butt, about which she is painfully self-conscious. Hence the long, full skirt - always.

She would dearly love to dance, but "With my ass? Never!

"I keep all the action above the bar and above my waist," she says.

And she adds, "Besides, tending bar is a profession, not just a job, and what the customer can see and hear at bar level is what matters."

"A good bartender is a good entertainer. I can juggle three shot glasses in the air, pour two different drinks at the same time, tell jokes, and settle bar bets with a collection of almanacs and encyclopedias I keep on the back bar.

"A good bartender needs a good memory. After two or three times, I'll know your name and your drink. I'll dare you to stump me with the contents or name of a cocktail. If I lose, and I sometimes do on purpose, we'll have a laugh and I'll pour you another on the house. And you'll be back for more."

"A good bartender is a people person - collects stories and passes them on - not malicious gossip, mind you - just what's happening - *who* is spending time with *whom*, and *who* needs congratulations or sympathy or company. You not only have to listen, but pass on what you hear. People trust you to do both, actually.

People say I'm a matchmaker. It's true. I put people together."

Patrons say Frieda's like having your favorite maiden aunt tend bar.

The word maiden is applied because Frieda, as far as anyone knows, has never had a man in her life - no boyfriend, husband, or lover.

It is her great sorrow.

"With an ass like mine, what man would have me?" she asks.

But she doesn't want to talk about it.

"My ass makes me cry," she says, "so don't bring it up."

\*







“Here’s your martini, Mr. Aristos Joyce, but it’s not the usual. I think you should try a new gin once in a while. This one is Gin Blue - flavored and colored with iris petals - with a tiny purple pansy for decoration. It’s a magic martini. My creation. Try it. If you like it, pay me. If not, it’s on the house and your usual Bombay Sapphire with a twist will be on the way.”

Aristos had not yet sat down at the bar. Frieda had seen him coming and “went inventive” as she describes her reaction to this man, one of her favorite regular customers.

“Frieda, if you pour it, I’ll drink it. You’ve never led me astray. Why should I ever order? When you see me coming, pour. I’m in your hands.”

“I’d like to get you in my hands, Mr. Aristos Joyce.” She laughed.

“Oh, Frieda, stop it!”

“Sorry, I get carried away. I wish some man would carry me away.”

“Frieda!”

“OK. Change of subject.

So, Mr. Aristos Joyce, how’s the dancing coming? Can you tango yet? I see you working hard at it. Taking private lessons, too.

When I asked Giselle, she said there’s hope for you, *if* . . .”

“What does she mean, ‘*if*’?”

“You know, it’s what she tells everybody - *if* you’re in it for the long haul and not just dancing for cruising - dancing until you find a date - then there’s hope for becoming a *tanguero*.”

“Right. I like this martini, by the way.”

“You changed the subject.”

“Well, what’s wrong with both dancing and cruising? Yes, I want to dance - to tango. And yes, I’d like to have a regular companion - one who dances tango. You’re not the only one who gets lonely, Frieda.”

“Let’s not talk about loneliness,” said Frieda.

“OK, but if you want to know the truth, I’d like to dance with Dulci-Maria and maybe with that new girl, Cha, the actress who always wears a green dress. Maybe some chemistry would happen, and . . . who knows?”

“Would you like me to put in a word for you?”

Aristos laughed. “Why else would I tell you, Frieda?”

“Aren’t you supposed to be writing a play, Mr. Aristos Joyce?”

“Ah . . . that . . .” Aristos said, and turned his attention to his martini, swirled the drink in the glass. “Am I supposed to eat the pansy?”

“You changed the subject again, Mr. Aristos Joyce.”

“Well, Frieda . . . trying to write a play has done just what my Father said it would. It’s given me a focus - made me look at the life of the Century Ballroom as if it was theater. And it *is* theater. The actors and actresses, the plots, the sets, the costumes, music, lighting, the audience - its *all* here.

Only . . . to tell you the truth . . . it’s not becoming material for a play I’m writing . . . it’s becoming a play I’m in. Coming here is like walking onstage. It’s not what I expected, Frieda.”

“Hold the thought. I’ve got some customers at the other end of the bar. Don’t go away. I’ll come back and tell you some things you ought to know, and tell you a story . . . for your . . . play.”

Aristos finished his magic martini.

When Frieda returned, she brought him another.

This time it had a tiny orange marigold flower floating in it.

“Don’t eat it,” said Frieda. “Probably poison. It’s just for color.”

They both laughed.

“Now then, Mr. Aristos Joyce, people say I’m clairvoyant sometimes. Maybe. Who knows? Maybe it’s just intuition, or maybe I’m a witch. Ha. Anyhow, as an amateur semi-psychic I will give you three perceptions.

As a friend I will give you a suggestion, and finally, as a bartender, I will tell you a story.”

“Go on . . . I’m all ears.”

“First perception, top card off the deck, face up: Dulci-Maria is not for you. Trust me. I see more than you see, and know more than you know. We’ve talked a lot. Open your eyes. Look around. Think again.”

“I didn’t want to hear that, but I trust your insights.”

“Second perception, second card off the deck, face up: Forget about Cha, the girl in the green dress. She’s really young - she’s an actress - and, she’s talked a lot to me. Trust me, she’s not in your league.”

“Well, OK, and, besides, Angel Amaya has already staked a claim on her. You didn’t mention that. He got there first.”

“Maybe . . . maybe not,” said Frieda, as she moved down the bar to attend to another patron.

“Third opinion?” asked Aristos, when Frieda returned. “How about some good news?”

“This one will probably blow your mind, but keep in mind what I said about Dulci-Maria: I see more than you see, and know more than you know. That’s a bartender’s advantage. And you may not think what I tell you is good news - just a surprise.”

“Ok, so surprise me.”

“Here comes the card: You should consider the journalist who works for that Spanish magazine as a possibility. You’ve seen her around, but you probably don’t even know her name. It’s Marisol Machado.”

“What! Frieda! You must be pulling my leg. That wispy little hack who’s always sitting back there in the ballroom at a table in the dark, buried in her computer and notebook? The one with glasses, no makeup, and street-trash style? She looks like a clerk in a drugstore.

She doesn't even dance!  
No way. You must be out of your mind, Frieda."

"No, Mr. Aristos Joyce, it's you whose mind is not working.  
You're not looking or thinking.  
But I am. I know her. I've talked to her many times.  
She drinks champagne, if you ever need to know."

Aristos rolled his eyes.  
Muttered to himself. *Ohdeargod*.  
Laughed. An uneasy laugh.

Frieda put her hands on her hips. "Listen to me, Mr. Aristos Joyce. I dare you to strike up a conversation with her. I dare you. If sparks don't fly between you, the drinks are on the house for a month."

"You're serious, Frieda."

"Damn right I am. Trust me. And the cost of the booze comes out of my paycheck, so I'm not fooling around about this."

Aristos was speechless.  
He could only stare at Frieda in silence.

"You were going to give me a suggestion," Aristos said.  
*Yes!* thought Frieda, who called out, "Rita, cover the bar for me for a few minutes, will you? I need to finish a conversation."

"You know I sometimes really do think I'm psychic - in touch with paranormal phenomena. What comes to me scares me, because I don't know what to do with it. It may only be that I have good hunches. Call it informed inspiration, but even I'm amazed how often I'm right.

Still, I'm an amateur compared to someone I know. She's the real deal, not just a fortune teller. She's a professional psychic who has a PhD in psychology and was a Jungian analyst before she became a psychic. I've consulted her several times. She's amazing - always right on.

Her name is *Tanya, The Tattooed Psychic*.  
Here's her card. She reads tarot cards.  
And my suggestion: Consult her at least once."

“Frieda, I don’t . . . I’ve never . . . really . . . a tattooed psychic?”

“I know. You’re probably the last person who would take a tarot card reader seriously, but you’ve also got an open and inquisitive mind. You would at least find the experience of meeting her interesting.

And I bet that you would find her way of looking at the world provocative. Go see Tanya. Tell her I sent you.”

“Frieda . . . I . . . don’t know what to say . . .”

“Then don’t say anything. Just do it. If you don’t find it an amazing experience, I’ll pay you back what you paid her. I mean it. I just feel there’s something important at stake here. I *know* it. If I’m wrong, no harm done.”

“And if you’re right?”

“Then . . . your life is never going to be the same, Mr. Aristos Joyce.”

Aristos stared at her, shaking his head, smiling.

“Now, Mr. Aristos Joyce, I also promised you a story,” Frieda said, “but it’s a long story and you’ll have to come back around closing when I’ll have time to tell it. Don’t forget to come - it’s important.”

“I’ll be here. Promise.”

Aristos got up off his bar stool and walked slowly toward the ballroom across the hall, where salsa dancing was underway.

Instead of going in to the dance, he turned left, went down the stairs, and out into the night to walk around the block and think.

*Dulci-Maria - No?*

*Cha - No?*

*And Marisol what’s-her-name? Really?*

*And Tanya, the Tattooed Psychic - tarot cards?*

*I don't know . . . I just don't know . . .*

*And what if Frieda's right?  
Will my life never be the same?*

*Should I feel sorry or pleased . . . scared or excited?*

*Is this theater or is it real . . . or all the same?*

(2)

Closing time.

Nobody in the bar except Aristos, Frieda, and the janitor.

“How about the story you promised, Frieda?”

“Coming right up. How about a nice glass of Malbec, and we go sit over at a table?”

Aristos had never seen Frieda away from the bar, and had never sat at a table with her socially - friend to friend.

She came around the end of the bar carrying a wine bottle and two glasses, and walked toward a table in the far dark corner of the room.

Aristos followed.

“I know you're looking at my ass,” she said over her shoulder.

True. It was hard not to notice the size of her butt, even in a skirt.

“What can I say? It is . . . magnificent.”

“That's the nicest adjective anyone's ever used - thank you.”

“I heard that a large butt means a large heart, which you have.”

“You made that up, but I appreciate the effort. Sit down.”





“Let me pour for a change,” said Aristos, taking charge of the bottle.

“A man could get into trouble treating me like a lady.”

“Oh, Frieda . . .”

“OK. Thanks, just the same. Ready for the story?”

“Yes.”

Frieda lifted her glass to Aristos. “This story is just for you.”

“It’s about two people who came into this bar from time to time.

She was a professional basketball player for the Seattle Storm.

Tall, of course, but really well proportioned for her size.

Beautiful face. Electric energy in everything she said. She moved like a panther, which is a good comparison, because she was *black*.

I don’t mean in the African-American racial sense. I mean black, the color - the blackest person I ever saw. Ebony. Beautiful.

And when she flashed her smile and showed her white teeth, and laughed, she lit up the bar - and between the two of us we could get everybody at the bar laughing. She was a sister with a champagne soul.

She wanted to learn to dance.

But she was so much taller than any of the men that even the few guys who asked her to dance found it just too awkward and didn’t ask again.

She handled it pretty well - said she’d learned to live with being a freak - and maybe someday she’d find somebody her size to dance with.

When the team was in town she’d come in to the bar and then go out and watch the dancing for a while, and then come back to the bar to talk.

She never complained, but the situation always made me sad.

We had something in common. Made me think about my fat ass and the things people couldn’t do anything about, even if they wanted to.

The lady had a brain and a spirit - she read books and went to church.

She wanted a husband and children - a family.

The person who lived *inside* the body was not the same as the body.

You know what I mean?”

“Yes. I think that way about myself sometimes,” said Aristos.

Frieda smiled. *Got the fish on the hook*, she thought.

“Keep her in mind while I tell you about another customer.

This guy was from Sweden.

A gymnast. Small, white, blond, and a body to die for.

He competed internationally and won a bunch of medals. And then he and two cousins put together an act and got hired by one of the units of Cirque du Soleil. Toured Asia and the Middle East. Then his unit went first to Vegas and then did a U.S. tour.

This guy had really seen the world. Spoke a bunch of languages.

He came in here to dance when the Cirque came to town - came to tango because it goes late. All the ladies wanted to dance with him because he was so pretty. But for all his athletic ability, he wasn't much of a dancer.

The Cirque took a monthlong break after the Seattle shows.

And so he would regularly come to the Century, watch dancing, and come in here, sit at the bar until closing. We got acquainted.

You know what he really wanted? A wife and family.

He wanted to settle down. Own a house. Read books. Go to church. But given his profession, his nomadic life, it was out of the question. His body had him locked into a life - for all his freedom, a prison.”

Frieda drank her wine and watched Aristos' face.

“Now wait . . . don't get ahead of me and think you know where I'm going, because you don't.”

“I'm still listening - go on . . .”

“From what I knew of those two people, I thought they should at least meet each other. They had so much in common. They wanted the same things. But the chances of their being at the Century at the same time were slim, and I thought they'd never meet.

But late one night it happened. They came to the bar at the same time.

She sat way down there at that end - in the short side of the L - and he sat way down there at the other end. They couldn't help noticing each other. I saw them looking.

*It's Fate*, I thought.

I spoke to both of them - told them I'd like to introduce them.

They looked at each other some more while I tended bar.

I swear I could feel some electricity moving between them.

But all they saw was the obvious.

*Big black woman - little white man.*

And I couldn't get them to move.

I kept saying 'Trust me - you might at least become friends.'

But they wouldn't let go of what they saw and consider what they couldn't see - what might be *inside*.

They both missed a great opportunity to at least know a fine person."

Frieda turned her wine glass around and around in her hands before she lifted it to drink. Aristos could see tears welling in her eyes.

"That's the only time . . . a couple wouldn't trust me.

I cried when they got up and left - as alone as when they came in."

"And then what happened?" asked Aristos.

Frieda stared out the window into the rainy night.

"Nothing. That's it. That's the story. I haven't seen them since."

"And the point is . . . ?"

"Isn't it obvious?"

"No. Tell me."

"Marisol Machado. The unthinkable . . ."

"Oh dear God, Frieda. You can't mean . . . yes you can.

I suppose you've been talking to her, too.  
Haven't you?"

Frieda smiled.

"Trust me," she said. "Think about it. Take another look. Trust me."

*Ohmygod . . .*







## Coming and Going - The Doorman's Tales

(1)

Oscar, the doorman, is a first cousin of Buck, the disc jockey.  
A tendency toward monologues runs in the family.

\*

“Yep, I’m Oscar - this is the main intersection . . . I’m the main man.  
Everybody who comes and goes at the Century passes through this  
door sooner or later . . . employees, customers, students, and performers . . .  
And there’s a lot of slosh back and forth between the ballroom, the  
bar, and the restaurant . . . all through this one door . . . all the coming and  
going . . . goes by me.  
And every night that the door is open . . . I’m right here.

My job is like being a one-man airport.  
This is the check-in desk, the information and security office, and  
customs and immigration.  
I’m the crisis manager, complaint department, traffic controller, and  
the lost-and-found clerk.  
You name it, I cover it.  
And if I can’t handle something, O’Malley becomes the main man.

Sure, it gets pretty frantic sometimes . . . on busy nights . . . crazy!  
But I like multitasking, handling the pressure, being the go-to guy.  
And when it comes to people watching, it’s a blast!  
I could write a book about what I see coming and going.  
If you want stories, I’m the guy to talk to.

I suppose I need to be careful - respect confidentiality and people’s  
privacy - so I won’t give you names or be too descriptive.  
The regulars wouldn’t like it if I did, that’s for sure.  
Hello Silverman would be on my butt, too . . . probably fire me.  
‘Discretion’ is her middle name.



The best stories are always the wacky ones, of course, but I want to first say that we get a lot of great people here. And I mean it.

They come dressed up, they eat and drink . . . but not to excess . . . because they come to dance.

They behave themselves, are generous to the staff, and go home at closing time in good spirits.

They're always nice and polite to me.

I even get tips!

And then . . . there are the wild cards - the whack-a-doodles.

I like to say that the representatives of the Nut Squad of the world are evenly distributed, and we do get our fair share.

And some people do come more to . . . how shall I say it politely . . . do *more* than just dance . . . you know what I mean . . .?

We try hard not to encourage a meat-market atmosphere, but . . . well, you know . . . a lot of single people come to a dance hall, and you can't keep them from looking for company . . . or action.

Men and women and dancing and booze are a juicy mix, right?

Anywhere.

Anytime.

Anything's possible."

(2)

"You want some good stories?

Let me think . . .

Well, there's this guy from Argentina who comes up to the States for shows from time to time.

Professional stage-tango dancer.

Terrific performer, I'll give him that.

He's kinda short and stocky, but sexy-handsome - and he knows it. Elegant dresser, too - a one-man fashion show.

He'll also show up for regular *milongas* while he's in town. Most performers don't come offstage and dance with the civilians, but he does.

He'll dance a four-tune *tanda*, then leave the hall with the lady he's been dancing with - only the hot ones, mind you.

He's so smooth he's slick.

The women ought to know better, but . . .

He'll be gone a while. Come back through the door. Alone.

Get cozy with another partner. And back out the door *with* her.

And back later *without* her.

He's gone off with as many as three different ladies in one evening, and then left with one more at the end of the evening.

I don't think he's taking them off for a prayer meeting or Bible study.

He must be some stud.

For a while I didn't know where he was taking the ladies.

Turns out he rents a big black stretch limo and has it parked on the back side of the lot across the street. How do I know?

Stay with me, you don't know the half of it yet.

One night when he's coming and he's going, he doesn't come back for a long time. Meanwhile I hear lots of sirens, and some of the dancers are over by the windows watching what's going on across the street.

Turns out that his mother - I kid you not - his *mother!* - who is from Argentina but lives here - his mother found out about his love life.

She thought it was shameful and disgusting and told his current performance partner about the limo. Ha. As if she didn't already know.

So his mother and *her boyfriend* parked their car next to his limo. They brought the dancing partner along, too, and the three of them sat waiting for Limo Lover Man to show up.

And this time when he came out, he had two - you heard me - *two* hot *chicas* with him - for a threesome I guess, and when they were banging it up in the limo, his mother, his dance partner, and the mother's boyfriend yanked open the doors of the limo and charged in like an assault team.

Surprise!





Wait, wait, it gets better.  
Turns out that the mother's *boyfriend* had more than a casual acquaintance with the two hot *chicas*, who recognized *him*.

Yes! Can you see it?

'Osvaldo, sweetheart! What are *you* doing here?'

'Osvaldo! How do you know these bitches?'

And I guess all hell broke loose in the limo and the parking lot.

Screaming, yelling, and running amok.

They say the mother dented the hood of the limo and cracked two windows of her boyfriend's car with her *purse*! And then she chased her boyfriend and the two *chicas* into the gay bar down the street and out the back door into the alley, swinging her purse over her head and screaming.

And the next thing you know the police arrived in three squad cars.  
Woohaa!

And would you believe it, the Latin dude at the center of all this manages to beat it - he got away - while his mother chased her boyfriend.

Later, O'Malley found the Latin dude in the men's room in his t-shirt and pants, without any shoes or socks, nose bleeding, and scratches all over his face and arms. Sopping wet, too - it was raining to beat hell outside.

Senor Limo Lover barely escaped in one piece.

Oh, dancing can be dangerous sometimes."

(3)

"I'll tell you one more story before I open the doors for the night.

Another story from the edge - a Century Ballroom special.

And it's actually connected to the first one.

Every Friday night we have Out Dancing.

It's meant to be an evening for the homosexual community in general - male or female or whatever - pick your category and come dance.

Usually more lesbians come than gays, but a lot of straight dancers



show up, too, because there's all kinds of music . . . two-step, swing, country-western, waltz . . . just about everything - even some tango.

Everybody is welcome.

It's a party crowd . . . lots of fun.

As an aside, I'll tell you my theory.

I think it takes a real act of courage to say to the world, 'I'm gay.'

And once a person comes out - openly acknowledges their sexual identity as *not heterosexual* - it gives them courage in other ways, and they're a lot more open to everything, including other people's identity.

Very accepting and tolerant - as long as it works both ways.

Out Dancing evenings have an easygoing atmosphere.

I'm not gay, but this is the night I always enjoy most.

The people who come are dancers first of all.

I call them the Straight Gays.

We don't attract any hard-core, flamboyant, outrageous types.

There are bars and clubs elsewhere that appeal to that.

On the other hand . . . ha . . . the world is not all black and white, is it?

And sexual identity isn't all divided clearly between straight and gay, is it? Lots of variations, right?

And that leads me to my story. You may not believe it, but I swear to God and all His Angels that I'm telling the truth. I have witnesses, too.

Like I always say, you got men and women and dance and booze . . . anything and everything is possible . . .

It's the way the world is."

(4)

"There is this *person* - a regular. I say 'person' because I didn't know if the person was male or female or both or neither - and I'm still not sure.

I want to be respectful here.

I know that the person comes to the Century dressed as male some nights and as female on others . . . and even *ambiguous* sometimes . . . could be an *either* . . . or a *none*.



This person is medium-size, young and slender - very attractive face.  
Easygoing personality.

As a woman, pretty.

As a man, attractive.

And as either, always very tastefully dressed.

Now this is what really amazes me - the person dances the woman's part of any dance so well you would never think anything other than female. Dancing backwards in high heels as a tango *follow* - beautiful.

I'm sure there are male partners who never know.

They couldn't do what she does, either.

Like I say, the same person also comes dressed as a male.  
Conservative dresser, but stylish.

And dances the male lead just as well, with just as much skill and confidence as when dancing as a female.

Not many women can do that - lead well.

And when the person comes in an *ambiguous* outfit on Out Dancing nights - *boyish* is what I'd call it - the person dances with the lesbians, lead or follow.

Amazing.

I thought I'd see a pattern sooner or later - a preference for being male or female, depending on the dance.

But, no, he/she came both ways for all dances.

And that takes talent - believe me.

But this person came and went by me every night, and it's my job to check IDs, so I got the picture early on, even though you can't really tell anything much from the person's name and picture on the driver's license.

Still, your driver's license identifies your sex.

And the *person* is male, according to the State of Washington.

And you know . . . I had no idea how many people beside me knew the whole picture. They must have had some clue, but . . .

Nobody ever talked to me about it.

Not even an employee . . . not a single one - not even Frieda.



Not surprising, of course . . . we're pretty much live-and-let-live here at the Century. Pay your tab, behave yourself - no problem.

I wondered if even O'Malley with his sharp eyes picked up on it about the time I did. But I never asked him, and he never brought it up.

And if the person knew I knew, well . . . nothing was ever said.

And then one week . . . well, here's the rest of the story."

(5)

"Oh, I should first say that the person always came alone and left alone. There are attractive people who give off sexual vibes and one thing usually leads to another . . . but not in this case.

No couple-up action . . . none that I ever saw, at least.

Anyhow.

I'm tired of using *person* - and I can't say the real name, so I'll just use 'Jack' and 'Jacqueline' from here on.

You'll know at least what role was being played at the time.

The situation gets confusing enough from here on.

'Jack' comes on a Sunday afternoon for waltz.

A tea dance.

Older, more sedate crowd, especially women.

They usually have a live orchestra, which I like.

They appreciate a younger man who can waltz, so Jack gets in a lot of dancing. He's good.

There's a rehearsal for a tango show later that afternoon, and guess who comes early . . . and just happens to watch the waltzing.

You got it.

The dude from Argentina - Senor Limo Lover, himself. Yes!

Looking for action.

He doesn't notice 'Jack,' but 'Jack' notices him.

You see what's coming?

Wait for it - don't get ahead of me . . .

So then 'Jacqueline' comes on Tuesday for salsa, looking really fine  
- tasteful blonde wig, in a spangly gold dress slit up to here.

Not over the top - just very salsa.

Great legs, too.

She dances.

And Senor Limo Lover is around, on the prowl, watching.

He doesn't dance salsa much, but he likes to watch the ladies dance,  
and salsa dances are good hunting grounds.

So he paid a lot of attention to 'Jacqueline.'

You still think you see what's coming?

Whatever you think, you're probably wrong.

'Jack' shows again up on Thursday night.

Swing dance night.

Senor Limo Lover checks in, too.

The next thing I know the two of them are sitting at a table together,  
laughing and clearly scoping out the ladies.

It's an all-ages night - no booze - so a lot of college girls - even high  
school age - come to dance. Believe you me, some pretty delicious young  
women are out there whipping it around to swing music.

And 'Jack' and Senor Limo Lover are all eyes.

They talk . . . get real friendly.

I can tell.

'Jack' asks a few of the young ladies to dance, and he can dance  
swing, let me tell you.

Senor Limo Lover just watches.

He doesn't swing - not the dancing kind, anyhow."



(6)

“Friday night there’s the tango cabaret, with ballroom dancing after.

‘Jacqueline’ comes to the show, wearing a black wig, black dress, and looking very high class. Sits at a table - alone.

After the stage show, Senor Limo Lover puts the moves on her.

They dance. Senor Limo is impressed and fired up.

You can tell he wants her, but she won’t leave with him.

She excuses herself, and passes by me going out the door.

A little while later ‘Jack’ comes in.

I don’t know where he changed clothes - probably in one of the dressing rooms connected to the rehearsal hall.

He goes over and sits down at the table with Senor Limo Lover, who no doubt starts running his mouth about ‘Jacqueline,’ what a hot piece she must be, and what he has in mind to do with her in his limo.

I can tell because Senor Limo Lover is laughing and ‘Jack’ is not.

He’s just smiling.

Meanwhile, Senor Limo Lover keeps looking toward the door.

Where’s ‘Jacqueline?’

Sitting right beside him, of course. Ha!

Senor Limo Lover gets up, goes looking for her in the bar and restaurant. He comes back and asks me if I’ve seen ‘Jacqueline.’

What can I say?

No, of course. I’m not giving anything away.

Meanwhile, ‘Jack’ has left the ballroom, too.

And, sure enough, in a little while here comes ‘Jacqueline’ again.

I’m not making this up - it happened just like I’m telling you.

She goes straight back to the table, where Senor Limo Lover puts the moves on her, takes her by the hand and pulls her after him, right by me at the door, and down the hall toward the back stairs, headed, no doubt, for his the limo parked across the street.

Suddenly, I hear a cry of pain from somewhere out in the hall.

I run out to see, and here they are.

‘Jacqueline’ has Senor Limo’s hand and arm twisted way up behind his back, and her other hand is pulling the back of his pants up hard and sharp - so high they must be crushing his privates.

Every time she jerks up, he yelps in Spanish, ‘*Mierda, mierda, mierda!*’ as she frog-marches him further down the hall.

And - get this - his toupee has fallen off in the hall. He’s bald!  
Funny. Ha!

And not only that, he’s carrying a gun, and it’s fallen out, too.

When I ask if I can help, she says, ‘Yeah, find O’Malley and tell him I’ve got a job for him - a gun in the house.’

To make a long story short, O’Malley takes over, ejects Senor Limo and bans him from the Century permanently. Guns are forbidden.

Exit Senor Limo Lover.

And . . . and . . . ready . . . wait for it . . . here’s the punch . . .

It turns out that O’Malley has known about Jack-and-Jacqueline all along. Why? They work for the same security company. Yes! They haven’t been working together at the Century, but still, they know each other.

O’Malley says he/she is really good at operating undercover at big deal social and celebrity events - as either ‘Jack’ or ‘Jacqueline’ - or I suppose, as was the case the night of the big hoo-ha here - both.

Despite the surface softness and fragility, he/she often packs a concealed weapon, and is good enough at martial art to teach it.

A tough dude underneath the soft surface.

O’Malley said Senor Limo’s lucky he didn’t get his arm broken or lose permanent use of his private parts.

And after that?

Jack-and-Jacqueline still come to dance.

And in the coming and going we never talk about who or what he or she is or what happened or why.

Live and let live.

As it should be, don’t you think?”



## Tales Told by Tango

(1)

Aristos is walking through the ballroom in the early evening.  
He stops below the DJ's control station, which is perched against the wall a few feet higher than the dance floor.

Buck is already at work, choosing music for the evening.

Aristos holds up two sheets of paper.

"I've got something I'd like you to read.

It may be funny.

It may be dumb.

But you'd be a good man to test it on, given what you know and think about tango."

"Hand it up - bring it on. What is it?"

"Here - it's a parody of tango lyrics.

I wondered what the English translation for tango lyrics might be.

In Spanish the words felt so romantic to me.

After reading through several hundred English translations, I thought differently. I came up with this - a summary."

"I'll read it."

(2)

*Maria, Mi Corazon - a tango vals*

Lyrics and music by Osvaldo Manchego - 1937

Translated from the Spanish by Roberto Suipacha

Here I am out in the night.

Just out of prison.

Standing in the falling rain.

My mother turns her back on me.

My dog won't come when I call.  
My boss fired me for crying.  
My landlord makes me sleep in the hall.  
And Maria won't come to her door.  
And let me in.

Chorus:

My heart cries for you.  
My soul dies for you.  
You only tell lies to me.  
They say you've run away.  
Maria, where have gone?  
Come back, come back.  
Maria where have you gone?  
Come back.

The darkness is darker now.  
I have no friends or money.  
No place to lay my head.  
The police will arrest me again.  
I will lie down here and die.  
Maria will find me tomorrow.  
She won't take me in.  
Just kick me when she passes by.  
Oh, Maria, come to me.

Chorus:

My heart cries for you.  
My soul dies for you.  
You only tell lies to me.  
They say you've run away.  
Maria, where have gone?  
Come back, come back.  
Maria where have you gone?  
Come back.



Maria, I'm bleeding  
From my heart, my soul  
My nose, my mouth  
My ears . . .  
All my orifices are bleeding.  
Maria . . .  
Come back.



(3)

Buck laughed while he read the parody.

“I wanted a couple of more verses, but I couldn’t go on,” said Aristos.

Buck laughed again, and handed the lyrics back.

“My sentiments exactly.

Every tango lyric I’ve read in English sounds like Johnny Cash or Merle Haggard or Hank Williams wrote it.

Don’t get me wrong. I like those guys and their music.

It’s just that everybody thinks tango is so high-toned and sophisticated, you know. Great art and all that.

But it came out of the lives of ordinary people - poor people - the people way down at the bottom.

The music may be really sophisticated, but the words are not great literature - just about real life, in the words of real life.

The basic tango story is the same old same old - love is a pain in the ass. In Spanish or English or any language you speak.

Love’s a pain in the ass.

And, oh how we *love* that pain - it hurts *so* good.”

“What should I do with this thing?”

Buck gave him a serious look.

“Well . . . if you really want my advice . . . I’d keep it to myself if I were you. All those tango types would probably be annoyed if they read it.

They don’t want to know.

They wouldn’t think it was funny.

There’s not a lot of humor in tango, you know.”

“I’ve noticed,” said Aristos. “I’ve never heard a tango joke.”

“Neither have I - tell me if you hear one.”

## Meanwhile . . .

Aristos and O'Malley are sitting together in the balcony.  
No reason for their being together except comfortable companionship.

Like many others at the Century Ballroom, Aristos had found that O'Malley was much more than just a security officer with a cop mentality.  
O'Malley had great stories to tell - and Aristos was an eager audience.

Moreover, there was depth and wisdom in the man - and he had *heart* - a sense of compassion for people and the way the world worked.  
He wasn't called "Father O'Malley" as a joke.

O'Malley's job was to be alert - to keep his eyes open - to observe the details of life at the ballroom - and to see beneath the obvious surfaces.  
And what he saw in Aristos was a man in transition.

To be sure, O'Malley recognized Aristos' legal skills and competence.  
He was good in every aspect of the law as required by the Century.  
Aristos Joyce did his job - and O'Malley valued that.

But O'Malley was interested in the man he saw almost every night.  
The man who was fumbling away at learning to dance tango.  
The man who was fumbling away at relationships with women.  
And then, there was this *writer* business.  
It seemed like a cover to O'Malley - a disguise behind which Aristos' real agenda was being worked out.

"So, how's your novel, coming?" asked O'Malley.

"It's not a novel. I'm trying to write a play - a piece for the theater. I grew up in that world. My father and grandfather never went far from the stage. Acting, directing, singing, dancing . . . whatever. My grandfather finished his life as a stage manager, and my father teaches dramatic arts in a college. But none of that for me. I'm just working on a play."

"Will I ever get to see your play onstage?"

“I doubt it. My father made me promise to try to see the life of the Century Ballroom *as if* I was a playwright. He said that looking at this world through the lens of the theater with a creative eye would focus my attention in a way that casual observation would not.”

“And, so . . .?”

“He’s right.”

“But if you are going to all the trouble to do the work I see you doing, why not really write a play that could be performed? Or why not write a novel?”

“Well, for one thing . . . to tell you the truth . . . I’ve slowly realized that I’ve become an actor in the theater that already gets played out here every night. I’m way too involved now . . .”

“I’ve noticed that,” said O’Malley, smiling.

“And for another, the theater or the literary publishers would not want what I would write. As corny as it sounds, I want a happy ending - even though happy endings make me uncomfortable.”

“Why’s that?”

“There aren’t any happy endings, O’Malley. Everybody suffers and dies at the end of *The Play*. That’s not just the theater, that’s life.”

“But in the meantime . . . there are happy *in-the-meantimes*, aren’t there?”

“That’s what I hope . . . what everybody hopes.  
But happy endings don’t sell plays or novels or movies.  
We’re drawn to violence and tragedy and horror.  
I don’t want to write about dysfunctional families, mental illness, racial conflict, drugs, vampires, torture, aliens, or the bitterness of unrequited love.  
But that’s what sells. If I want to be upset or terrified or depressed, I don’t need to go to the theater. Reading the front page of the morning paper is enough . . .”

“How about a musical - Vampire Tango?”

O’Malley laughed at the thought.

“You might be on to something, but I couldn’t write it.”

“How about ‘The Night of the Living Dead at the Century Ballroom?’

Or ‘Alien Tango.’ We’ve had a few evenings here like that.”

“O’Malley . . .”

“Or something really edgy - ‘Rape, Incest, and Cannibalism at the Century Ballroom’ or ‘The Spy Who Came In From the Cold and Learned to Tango’ or ‘Tango With Animals’ or . . . ‘Tango Moves for a Psycho Killer’ . . .”

“O’Malley . . .”

“Or ‘Dancing With Scars’ or ‘Tango Tales of Murder, Revenge, and Terror’ or ‘I Lost My Head at a Tango Dance - a Tale of Ritual Sadism.’”

“O’Malley, give it up. Crap like that would probably sell. But it’s just *not* what I’m going to write.”

“How about . . .”

“O’Malley, stop it.”

“Just trying to help. Maybe we ought to get Frieda in on this. Bet she’s got some great ideas. ‘I Lost My Fat Ass at Tango.’”

“O’Malley, that’s enough. I’m serious. You’re not helping. You just don’t understand.”

“Sorry. Just trying to lighten things up a little. I do understand, though. You are too serious. Lighten up a little. Sure, the theater is full of tragedy, but there’s comedy in theater, too. Why not write a comedy?”

“No, no, no, and again no, O’Malley . . . you’re off on the wrong track. And

I know about comedy - I just wrote a parody of tango lyrics in English. Just for fun. Even Buck thought it was funny. But that's a sideshow."

"So what will you do with all this note-taking and observing? Don't you want to have something to show the world when you're finished? Do you at least have a plot? Can't you imagine the play onstage?"

(Silence.)

"O'Malley, I haven't said this to anybody . . .

But I trust you.

I'll tell you the truth . . . it took me awhile to see it . . . but it's the truth.

(Silence.)

This business of writing a play is a way of living my way into a new chapter of my own life. It's a personal drama now . . .

My real life, not an imaginary one.

What I'm doing is a mode of transportation - moving me from being a lawyer who can't dance . . . to one who can. From being a man who thinks he may be unlovable . . . to a companion worthy of love.

I'm not just fooling around.

I want a . . . a . . . dare I say it . . . a happy ending, or at least a happy *in-the-meantime*, as you so eloquently put it.

About that . . . I am serious.

I'm not trying to write it . . . I'm trying to live it . . .

Do you understand?"

"Yes . . .

Been there . . .

And missed the bus . . .

But that's a long story for another time."

"I'd like to hear it."

"I'm not sure I'd like to tell it . . . maybe sometime . . . but not now."

“Promise to tell me.”

“Maybe . . . but, meanwhile . . . look . . . it’s show time.”

The music had begun.

The dancers moved out to dance.

“Yes,” said Aristos, looking down at the ballroom floor, “Meanwhile . . .”



## Taste Test - The Tale of Dulci-Maria

(1)

At the end of the evening's *practica*, Aristos went outside for a walk to sort out what was happening to him.

*Now what?* was becoming his mantra.

He went around the block twice, and by the time he came to the entrance to the Century again, he was in a mood to talk.

*Try the bar*, he thought.

"Frieda, have you seen Angel?"

Frieda leaned on the bar with both elbows and sighed.

"Oh, yeah. *Oh . . . , yeah*. I saw Angel. I *love* seeing Angel. I could *fall in love* with Angel."

"You and half the women here. But have you seen him tonight?"

"Yeah. He came in and sat down beside The Nose and bought her a drink. And they talked and talked."

"The Nose?"

"Yeah, you know, the blind woman - the tango dancer. Dulci-Maria.

We call her The Nose because she *knows* more about wine than anybody. She's amazing.

You can give her any glass of wine, and just by smelling . . . just by *smelling* it . . . she can tell you what kind of grapes it comes from.

She never misses."

"That's quite a talent."

"It's more than a talent. It must be a special gift.

She's a professional sommelier, you know.

That's what she does for a living."

"I didn't know that. You mean she works in an upscale restaurant - most sommeliers do."



“Nope, she’s at Dominguez & Lorca - the big wine importer and distributor - I think she’s maybe even a partner or something.”

“What does she do there?”

“Tastes wine, I guess, but she also designs wine menus for restaurants. Hello Silverman had her choose all the wines for us when we opened the new bar and restaurant.

There’s not a single wine she picked that I can’t recommend, either. And they’re all affordable, too.

Like I say, the lady really knows her stuff.”

“Is she still around? I wanted to ask if she would dance with me.”

“You didn’t trust me? Remember?”

“I did, but I’d still like to have just one dance with her.”

“Usually you’d have to wait in line.

Everybody wants to dance with her.

But not tonight . . . no . . . I don’t think so . . .

Your friend Angel beat you to it.

When the dancing started in the ballroom he asked her if she wanted to go in and dance, and off they went. That was a while ago.

She wasn’t using her cane, either.

She folded it up, put it in her purse, took his arm, and off they went.

God, I wish it was me instead of her.

Just once, you know . . . just *once* . . . it should be my turn by now.”

Aristos had stopped listening.

He looked across the hall into the ballroom.

*Angel, the smooth mover, picks off the best dancer in the house.*

And he left the bar for the ballroom to see for himself.

(2)

Aristos looked around for Angel and Dulci-Maria.

Not there.

He went up into the balcony.

“O’Malley, have you seen Angel or Dulci-Maria?”

“They danced, and then they went out the back door of the ballroom.

I bet she wanted to show him the wine cellar.

She has a key, you know.

She’s our unofficial sommelier.”

“Sure I know - Frieda just told me.”

“Frieda knows everything,” said O’Malley.

“Well . . . maybe.”

Aristos watched the dancing for a while, and went back to the bar.

“If you’re looking for your friend Angel,” said Frieda, “he came back in with The Nose . . . she wanted him to sample a wine she likes.

She took him back into the cellar to get it.”

Frieda leaned over the bar and whispered to Aristos, “And then . . . here’s a secret . . . and then . . . she took him home with her.”

“What?”

Frieda laughed and leaned back, enjoying the surprised look on Aristos’ face.

“Yes! And I know . . . I know . . . I shouldn’t tell you that.

But I warned you. I just knew something was up.

And that’s what happened.

I was standing right in front of them at the time.

*She asked him to take her home.*



I just knew she would.  
Everybody underestimates Dulci-Maria, but she's strong.  
She thinks a lot about what she wants.  
And when she makes up her mind, she goes after it.

So, as I said, she asked him - and away they went.  
He took her home.  
Wish it was me instead of her . . . just once."

"Does she do that often?"

"Nope. That was a *big* surprise.  
Her cousin usually brings her and comes back to get her.  
Nope.  
This is the first time I've ever seen Dulci-Maria leave with a guy.

I don't blame her.  
I would have taken Angel home with me, you know what I mean?  
Maybe he wouldn't notice my big ass in the dark."

"Oh, Frieda."

(3)

"They say you're a handsome man.  
I can't tell.  
Are you?"

Angel laughed.  
"Ah, well . . . I owe my looks to my mother and father.  
It can't be helped. Not my doing."

Dulci-Maria laughed.  
"You're being modest. I like that.  
The employees at the Century talk about you a lot.  
They know *all* about you . . . or think they do.  
Half of the women would go out with you in a heartbeat.



Probably some of the men, too.”

“Well . . . if you say so . . . but I’m not gay and not looking for flings.”

“They’ll be sorry to hear that . . . but I’m not.  
I’ve been paying a lot of attention to you - in my way of watching.”

(Silence.)

“What else do you know about me, Dulci-Maria?”

“I know that you’re a very sensitive dancer.  
Not just good . . . thoughtful and trustworthy.  
You don’t treat me like I have a handicap.  
That’s very important to me.

And I’m not always comfortable in accepting the lead of someone I  
don’t know. It usually takes a while to connect.  
But with you, well, the dancing says it all, doesn’t it?  
We dance easily together . . . we fit . . .  
That can’t be denied . . . or ignored.”

(Silence.)

“Ah, well . . . I owe my dancing sense to my mother.  
She’s a flamenco dancer, but she dances tango, too.  
She danced with me when I was growing up, as if it was as ordinary  
as learning to ride a bicycle.  
She taught me how to ride a bike, too.  
I haven’t forgotten what she taught me.”

Dulci-Maria smiled.

“You’re attractive in other ways, you know.  
When one is blind . . . then the other senses compensate . . . smell . . .  
touch . . . taste . . . hearing . . . are what we count on.  
You *smell* good to me . . . like sweet limes and pine.”



“Maybe it’s my after-shave or the turpentine I use in cleaning brushes  
- that’s piney - or maybe the soap I use to clean up after painting.”

“Maybe . . .  
I have a very sensitive nose.  
I notice the things you suggest, plus I recognize the unique smell each  
person has . . . the smell of your natural skin.  
Whatever it is, it’s distinctly *you*.  
I would know you now by smell alone.”

“Well . . . I . . .”

Dulci-Maria put a finger to her lips and took his hand in hers.

“Wait, there’s more.  
Touch.  
My arm feels happy in yours when we walk together.  
It fits there just right.  
When I lay my hand and arm on your shoulder while dancing, I don’t  
sense any tension . . . I just feel the muscles and tendons moving smoothly.”

“Nobody has ever mentioned that before . . . I wonder . . .”

“Wait, I’m not finished . . .  
When I first put my hand in yours in dance embrace, your hand was  
warm, not sweaty, as is often the case with anxious men.  
And your grip was simply reliable, not tight.  
You have an embrace I can count on.”

“You really notice a lot . . . would you like to know . . .”

“Wait, wait - one more thing and I’m done.  
Let me tell you what I hear.  
Your voice is kind, gentle, and confident at the same time.  
Your voice has laughter in it, even when you’re not laughing.  
It makes me want to trust you.  
And . . . take care of you.”

“I don’t know what to say.”

“You don’t have to say anything . . . I just wanted you to know that even though I can’t see you . . . can’t judge you by how you look . . . I have learned a great deal about you in other ways.”

“I still don’t know what to say . . .  
You mentioned all the senses except taste.  
How do I taste?”

Dulci-Maria laughed.  
“I don’t know . . . yet . . .”

(4)

(Silence.)

“Dulci-Maria, you’re very . . . how shall I say . . . blunt . . . forthright, open . . . assertive . . .”

“That’s my style, Angel.  
And it’s also the privilege of the blind.  
People pay attention to us out of kindness and allow us more latitude  
- almost like they would for a precocious child.

We don’t threaten people, I think, and so candor is acceptable.  
So I say . . . why waste their time?  
Why not speak my mind?  
What do I have to lose?”

“It saves a lot of small talk, that’s for sure.”

“There’s one more thing.  
The blind have a long history of being seers . . . and prophets . . . and poets . . . and singers. And there are many famous blind musicians.  
People think we have special powers . . . that we know things other people can’t perceive . . . and, in a way it’s true.

We know we have to rely on the senses that other people aren't usually consciously aware of.

Angel, I can tell more about you in absolute darkness than you can tell about me in the full light of day."

"Wow . . . I'll have to think about that . . ."

"Please do."

(Silence.)

"You must find it easy to attract men, Dulci-Maria.  
You're lovely . . . surely you know that.  
You pay close to attention to the person you're with.  
And you're a gifted dancer.  
They say men line up to dance with you."

"Yes. Because I'm blind and single, men think I'm vulnerable.  
They want to take care of me.  
But even though they have the power of sight, I don't think they really *see me*, Dulci-Maria.

Don't misunderstand . . . I'm grateful for their kindness and attention.  
They mean well.

A handicap either inhibits you or gives you courage, and once you take the road of courage, you can be as strong and independent as you dare.  
Most men don't realize that.

And most, I find, are needier than I am.

Being blind and deciding to live out in the world as fully as possible is like being gay and deciding to be out in the world as just who you are.

People are a little unnerved by expressions of strength they don't possess themselves.

I have a good life.  
I have a career and a good job and good friends.  
I lead an active social life, even though I don't date much.





I'm not searching for Mr. Right to complete my life.  
I go to *milongas* and festivals to socialize and tango. That's all.  
Up until tonight I've come and gone to dances without a date or a partner, thanks to my cousin, who is always pleased to be my chauffeur."

(Silence.)

"So why did you ask me to take you home?  
Why me? Why now? Why so suddenly?"

(Silence.)

"Really, Angel . . . I'm surprised that you ask.  
But it's not a sudden decision, I assure you.  
More than that I'm not ready to say.  
It depends on how you taste."

(Silence.)

"Do you need this light? I don't," she said.  
She reached for the lamp beside the sofa.

"Allow me," said Angel, and turned off the light.  
"I want to know how you look in the dark."

Dulci-Maria laughed.  
"Touch me," she said.

(5)

The next evening, Aristos found Angel in the bar of the Century Ballroom, alone. Angel was sitting on the barstool at the far end of the bar, leaning against the brick wall, and staring moodily into his glass of wine while turning it around and around and around in his hands.

"Angel, if you don't mind my saying so, you don't look so good.  
Is something wrong?"

“In Spanish we say *desconcertante*. It means perplexed.”

“Dulci-Maria?”

“Yes. Dulci-Maria. I suppose you know she took me home with her last night. I suppose everybody knows by now.”

Angel looked sharply at Frieda, the bartender, who quickly turned her back and tidied the liquor bottles displayed on the back of the bar.

“And so?”

“I wasn’t expecting that.

I would not have asked her to my place.

That’s not what I had in mind when I asked her to dance with me.

She’s not a pick-up type - way too classy.

I respect her too much.”

“That’s obvious. But you went home with her.”

“Not only did I go home with her, I was still there at breakfast.”

“In English we say you were blindsided or blown off course.”

Angel sighed.

Fiddled with his glass.

Drained it.

And held it up in the air in the direction of Frieda, who had been watching Angel with wine bottle at the ready.

“And is the unexpected wind the sign of a storm or a strong fair breeze in a new direction, Angel?”

“That, my literary friend, is exactly the question.”

“Angel, I’m surprised,” said Aristos, putting his hand on Angel’s shoulder. “You, of all men - the free-living nomad. A man of the world. Mr. Spontaneous, himself.

A lovely, exceptional woman takes you home for the evening after a dance, and you spend the night having, I hope, a fine time together.  
And now you're blown off course?"

"It isn't what you think . . ."

"What was it?"

"It was being there . . . for breakfast . . ."

"Did she look bad in the morning light?  
Is she a bad cook?"

"No. I don't know how she looked. We had breakfast in the dark."

"Before sunrise?  
With the lights off?" asked Aristos.

"No. Before we got out of bed she asked me to wear a blindfold.  
She wanted me to know how a blind person experiences mornings and food, so she tied a handkerchief over my eyes and showed me how to find my way around the kitchen and the refrigerator just by touch."

Angel sighed.  
Drained his wine glass again.  
Held it up toward Frieda.

"I had never held a grapefruit in my hand and smelled it, or cut it with a knife and squeezed it and smelled the juice and the rind on my hand.  
The same with the coffee beans.  
The same with the bread.  
And the blackberry jam.  
We even washed up the dishes that way.

Mother-of-god! Aristos, how much you miss because you can *see* everything . . . because you think you already know everything there is to know about something as ordinary as . . . breakfast . . ."

“And then?”

“She made me keep the blindfold on. And led me to the bathroom, where she first scrubbed me down in the shower, washed my hair, and then helped me into her Japanese soaking tub.

The water smelled like sweet lime, and there was incense burning - pine. After a while she helped me get out of the tub, dried me off, took me back to the bed, told me to just lie there and she would come back after her bath and tell me a story.”

“And . . . ?”

“I don’t know, actually. I fell asleep.

*Asleep!* My God! At a time like that . . .

And the next thing I knew she was taking the blindfold off my eyes. She was dressed.

Said she had to leave for work, but I could stay as long as I wished and leave when I wished - and come again - if I wished.”

“And . . .”

“She kissed me and left.

And then I got up and dressed and I left.

I didn’t even look around her house - I just left . . . like a man who wasn’t supposed to be there.

I walked around the rest of the afternoon in a daze.

*Desconcertante.*

And now I’m here.

And still . . . in a daze.

Don’t get me wrong . . . I’m not unhappy.

I’m *crazed* with happiness.

It was the most beautiful evening and morning of my life.

I swear it.

But *she* took care of *me*!

It's always been the other way around for me.  
And Dulci-Maria is . . . blind!"

Aristos smiled. "And now you, Angel, you are, too . . ."

"What do you mean?"

"Blind . . . as in *love is blind*."

"No, no . . . don't say that."

Angel put his arms on the bar, his face in his hands, and mumbled,  
"What am I supposed to do now? What am I supposed to do?"

"Dance," said Aristos. "Close your eyes and dance."

Aristos looked up at Frieda.  
She smiled and said silently, *I told you so*.

In reply, Aristos took the business card of Tanya, the Tattooed Psychic out of his pocket and held it up for Frieda to see.

"Does that mean you're going to see her?" Frieda asked.

"Yes, tomorrow."

"Wonderful! Aristos, let me make something very clear to you. Tanya is, in a unique way, a member of the Century Ballroom community. Most of the people who work here consult her. She's an invisible part of the staff, influencing what goes on here in a big way. Even if you don't get anything for yourself, you'll never understand the Century Ballroom if you don't spend time with her. No joke. I'm serious - pay attention to Tanya."

"Yes," said Aristos. "Frieda, I hear you. And I will."

## The Tale of Tanya, the Tattooed Psychic

Out of what he pretended was merely open-minded curiosity, Aristos made an appointment by phone with Frieda's psychic adviser.

But, in truth, any lead to his future was welcome, and, who knows...?

Out of innate skepticism for the occult, he gave a false name when he called - William Jones - his grandfather's real name. In this electronic age, why give a psychic any advantage?

Aristos considered the business card in his hand.

*Tanya - The Tattooed Psychic, PhD  
Tarot and Paranormal Science*

*If her occult talents match her academic qualifications, I'll be amazed.*

Her office was on the second floor of a brick building in Seattle's historic Pike Place Market. The sign on the door simply said,

"Tanya - By Appointment Only."

No obvious doorbell.

Aristos hesitated before knocking.

*What's behind the door?*

He imagined exotica - the environment of a Gypsy fortune teller - darkness - candles - incense - sitar music - a crystal ball - and a swarthy female wizard dressed in flowing robes - at best a credible charlatan - at the worst, a flamboyant spook with bad teeth.

*Oh, Frieda, what have you got me into?*

He knocked.

The door was opened by a tall, slender, pretty woman.

Short black hair, crimson lipstick, wearing a basic black sleeveless dress that displayed the only truly remarkable aspect of her appearance.

All the exposed areas of her skin - from her neck down, including her arms and legs and feet - were elaborately tattooed.



She smiled.

“It’s a full-body tattoo in the classic Japanese style.”

“Forgive me for staring,” said Aristos.

“I would be surprised if you didn’t notice. If I didn’t want you to see, I would wear clothes that cover the tattoo. It tells you something about me.”

“What does it tell me?”

“I like your question. Please come in. I’m Tanya.”

“And my name is . . .”

She stopped him with a finger across her lips.

“I know who you are, and it would be helpful if you let me guide our time together and not volunteer any information.

Wait for me to ask, please.”

Gently admonished, Aristos was ushered into an anteroom.

“Let me place your jacket on that hanger, and, if you don’t mind, please remove your shoes and place them on that shelf.”

Aristos complied, while noticing that Tanya was barefooted, though the tattoos covering her feet had at first seemed like exotic footwear.

“Come,” she said, and he followed her into an inner room, notable only for its simplicity. Cream-colored walls without decoration. A large oriental rug. A small table covered with a dark green cloth.

Beside the table were two identical chairs - dark brown leather - classy - comfortable. And the only light in the room was the warm, soft afternoon light coming in from an overhead skylight.

Aristos glanced around the room.

*No couch, he thought. Nothing burning, either.*

Tanya smiled.

“Not exactly a Gypsy fortune teller’s tent, is it?”

“No, not at all what I expected.”

“Good. That’s what we’re going to consider - the expected as it relates to the unexpected.”

Aristos stared at her - trying to be polite about it - but staring.

Before he could ask, Tanya said, “And yes, I do have an earned doctorate in psychology - University of Chicago - and yes, I have training and certification as a Jungian analyst. My continuation down that path led me to becoming a practicing psychic.”

“Well, I was just wondering . . .”

Tanya smiled.

“Wondering is appropriate.

Now it’s my turn.

I’m wondering about you.

I’ll begin by asking a question. Your answer will give me a deeper sense of your presence and where we might go together.”

Aristos moved forward in his chair, alert and defensive.

As an attorney, he was accustomed to taking depositions - gathering information from participants in a lawsuit before trial - outside of the courtroom - as a way of discovering information pertaining to the case.

It was a one-way, adversarial process.

He was the inquirer - the investigator.

The objective was factual truth.

Now he found himself on the other side of the situation.

*Is she going to depose me?*

*And is truth her objective?*

“You may relax. This is not an exam - *whatever* you feel like answering will be acceptable and useful - to both me and you. I’m not your therapist, analyst, or adversary.

I’m on your side.

I can be your guide into places you may have never traveled.

The journey really depends on you, not me.”

*Oh, well, then,* thought Aristos, as he sat back in his chair.

“Before I ask, perhaps I should tell you that the realm of the psychic is an alternative frame of reference for reality - a language of access.

No doubt you’re familiar, perhaps even comfortable, with dreams, coincidences, music, mathematics, languages other than English, poetry, quantum physics, theater, dance, and religion. All are metaphors - each a finger pointing at the center of being human and alive.”

“Yes, of course.”

“So, then, you already know about and are familiar with a number of ways of accessing and describing the many facets of existence.

Perhaps you will become open to my way. One path is the use of tarot cards. They can open a door into a world of the spirit for those who trust them, and at least provide a new set of metaphors for those who are skeptical. Do you understand?”

“Yes. But I don’t know anything about tarot.”

“Good. The test is not in the vehicle employed for transportation, but in the journey it takes you on and the destination you achieve.”

“That makes sense to me.”

“Good, then let’s continue.

I’ll begin with what is not really one question, but more a line of questioning. You may decide how to answer and how much to say.

What most concerns you now? What area of your life would you most like to know more about . . . and what would you most like the cards to guide you in doing?”

Aristos sat silently.

*The hard part - how much should I say?*

He spoke softly, as in a confessional with a trusted priest.

“Well . . . I’m *trying* to learn to dance tango . . . but I don’t know if it represents a short-term interest or . . . a more important, long-term commitment . . . is it just a dance . . . or a new way of going about my life? I’m not very good at it, but I seem to be determined to continue . . . and . . .

(Silence.)

And . . . I’m beginning a new creative endeavor . . . trying to write a play . . . and I want to know if I should continue. Is this a dilettante’s affectation . . . or part of a career change . . . will I be successful . . . or should I give it up?

(Silence.)

(More silence.)

And . . . I’m lonely . . . I wish I had a companion . . . someone to go home with after dancing . . . even a true love, whatever that means . . . and I’m confused about the possibilities . . . and I guess . . . that’s enough . . .”

He smiled sheepishly, surprised at how forthcoming he had been.

“Good. That’s strong material. Let’s consult the tarot.”

From a drawer in the table Tanya produced a deck of cards.

“Without any unnecessary explanation I will begin in a very simple fashion, shuffling this deck of tarot cards, asking you to cut the deck several times, spreading them out facedown on the table, and asking you to choose any five cards - leaving them face down.”

When that was done, Tanya collected the five cards and placed them face up, one at a time, on the table, with three cards down the middle and two cards on either side of the middle.

She studied the cards intently.

“This card in the center is called *The Hanged Man*. It refers to your present situation and is an auspicious card in this central position.

The card on its left is called the *Ace of Wands* - it refers to past influences.

This card on the right of the middle is called the *Page of Cups* - it refers to the future

The card at the bottom is called *The World* and it refers to reason.  
And the top card is called *The Chariot*, referring to potential.”

“My mind is already swimming,” said Aristos.

“That’s understandable. It’s not necessary that you know a great deal about tarot or know the meaning of each card.

It’s enough for you to know that I do.

Tarot has a long, long history, and there’s an extensive body of literature about it. It can consume a lifetime, but that’s not required.

You may find you have an affinity for tarot, and study it yourself - even learn to consult the cards on your own. But for now, in this first time together perhaps it’s best that I simply tell you what I see in the cards - how the spirits speak to me. And you will judge for yourself.”

“Agreed.”

Tanya studied the cards again, sat back in her chair, closed her eyes, and placed her face in her hands.

(Silence.)

She took a deep breath, opened her eyes - looked intently at Aristos.

“The cards speak of paradox.

The answers to your questions will be found both within you, and in the world outside you. Connecting the two is essential.

The questions you ask mask the *deeper* questions you conceal.”

“Which are?”

“You want to know if others will find you acceptable if you don’t become a master at your chosen dance. Will your own pleasure in the dance suffice? Or is the approval of others your real desire?

You want to know if you fail as a playwright that someone you care deeply about will still admire you for trying. You fear competing with someone you love and respect.

(Silence.)

And most of all . . . you want to know if you are *lovable* - if you will be judged lovable by someone you want to love. You are afraid that if someone deeply knows you, they will not love you. Or even want to.

In sum, despite being a success in the eyes of the world for many reasons, you fear failure and rejection . . . and thus you've rarely allowed yourself to fail at something important or taken big risks in endeavors outside what you think of as your strengths and abilities.

This is the present - the way things are - but the future is promising.”

Aristos looked down at the cards.

Tanya pointed at the middle card. “*The Hanged Man* is the most important card there. Notice that the man is not suffering or being punished, he is simply hanging upside down in a relaxed pose. He is considering the world from a radically different position, suggesting that the way he has always perceived things may be unproductive, if not wrong.

The spread and location and meaning of the cards say that you have permission to change your point of view, and if you do, you will have affirmative answers to your questions.”

“Can you be any more specific?”

(Silence.)

“Dancing will be your way, and you will dance as well as you desire. You will continue dancing.

(Silence.)



Your viewing the world as a playwright will give you a useful place in the theater of the world.

You will continue writing your part in the play of that theater in whose repertory you already have a place.

(Silence.)

And the answer to your question of being lovable is not yours to give. It will be given by the person who seeks to love you.”

“Who? Someone I already know or haven’t met yet?”

“Someone you already know but have not really considered.”

Tanya sat back in her chair as if exhausted from her efforts.

After a few minutes of silence, she smiled and looked at Aristos with eyebrows lifted, as if asking, *Well?*

“Wow! Amazing. You’d have to know a lot about me to say all that. But, then I suppose that you really *do* know who I am. Frieda must have told you a great deal about me.”

“No. I’ve not talked with Frieda. And I never talk with anyone about my clients - before or after I spend time with them. That’s a professional standard no less firm than that which one’s personal attorney holds. You understand.”

“How did you know I’m a lawyer?”

“Are you not?”

Aristos smiled sheepishly again.

“Yes, I’m a lawyer - and acting it.”

“Is it not the case that part of your training and professional skill lies in the ability to read a jury, a witness, or a judge? Are not some of your colleagues so competent at this that they seem almost . . . clairvoyant?”

“It’s an acquired skill - from long experience.”

“Or perhaps . . . they, too, have the *gift*?”

“Maybe. I guess good teachers and physicians are like that too. They, too, have a gift. I see what you’re getting at. And that’s how . . . you . . .”

“May I observe that you are moving the conversation away from your response to what the cards have spoken. Shall we leave it at that for now, or would you care to talk about your response?”

“You’re really good, Tanya. You’re right. I’m avoiding talking about what you said because . . . I’m afraid . . . that I’ll get all emotional . . .

*Afraid* - there’s that word . . .

So I shifted into lawyer mode. And you nailed me.

The truth is that what you told me really shook me up . . . made me anxious . . . and excited . . . and . . . even . . . happy.”

Tears welled up in Aristos’ eyes.

He sat very still without speaking.

“Yes? And . . . so? “

“What you’ve said - what the cards suggest - confirm my real desires. I want to . . . no, I *will* keep on dancing . . .

I *will* keep writing a play - from *inside* the theater, not outside.

And I will try . . . no, I *will* open myself to the possibility of being . . . lovable . . . and take the risk of someone else being the judge of that.”

“Do you have someone in mind?”

“Yes, you must know that.”

“Perhaps. But I will only open a door. It is said that Spanish is romantic - the language of love. Do you speak Spanish?”

Aristos laughed. “You *are* good! Not yet, but I’ll work on it.  
It may come in handy . . .”

(Silence.)

Tanya rose from her chair.

“This is an appropriate place to pause - I hope you will come again.”

“You must know if I will or won’t.”

“I don’t predict the future. If I did and was good at it, I would play the stock market and go to the horse races with more confidence than I do.

No, I only said I *hope* you will come again.

We’ve only really begun . . . life goes on . . . things change . . . the cards always have something to say. *You* might want to know *you* better.”

“Yes. And I’d like to know *you* better.”

Tanya smiled.

“No, I never date or socialize with my clients.”

Aristos laughed, looked sheepish again.

“You *really* are good.”

Tanya smiled one last time.

“I’m also a woman, you know.”

“I’ve noticed.”

“Goodbye, Mr. Aristos Joyce.”

Aristos stopped dead in his tracks.

*What?*

“Your name is in the liner of your jacket.

And I’ll know your name for certain if you’ll give me a credit card or write me a check to pay for your session.”



## Apilarse

During a dance, especially in tango, under the best of circumstances - despite everything moving smoothly on the dance floor - even when the dancers are experienced and good at maintaining space between couples in a counterclockwise line of dance - a clot of dancers will develop in one place for no obvious reason.

It's like an unanticipated traffic jam on a highway on a clear day in good weather. Those who study road traffic call this an *amorphous pulse*.

It just happens.

The Argentine tango slang for this is *apilarse* - a pile up.

On this particular evening at the Century Ballroom, an *apilarse* is about to happen. But not entirely out on the dance floor.

Freeze frame. Look around. Notice those present:

Aristos Joyce, the attorney, aspiring playwright, dancing novice.

Angel Amaya, who has come to eat dinner, socialize, and dance.

Cha - the actress, who has come to both take a dancing lesson and, if possible, make a connection with Aristos Joyce . . . or Angel Amaya.

Dulci-Maria Lorca, who has come to help Giselle teach tango.

Sergio Jarkovi, the *milonguero*, who has come to dance.

Marisol Machado, who is present as a journalist writing about life at the Century Ballroom.

And O'Malley, the security officer, in the balcony, who has come to watch dancing and later, work.

All are at the Century Ballroom on the same night at the same time.

An *apilarse*.









# The Diver's Tale

(1)

Angel has been sitting in the balcony during the *practica*, eyes glued on Dulci-Maria, who is out on the ballroom floor with Giselle and her women students, practicing some of the fine points of following in tango.

Because he's sure she can't see him, Angel feels comfortable putting his elbows on the balcony rail and, holding his head in his hands, staring down at Dulci-Maria, following her every move.

"She's beautiful," says O'Malley, sitting beside Angel, "and it's amazing what she knows and can do, even though she's blind."

Angel sighs.

He is like a man who has walked back and forth, out to the end of a high diving board and back to the platform.

*It's a long way down.*

*How deep is the pool?*

*You can break your neck hitting the water after a bad move in the air.*

And this dive is not compulsory - it's free form - a diver's choice.

*To dive or not to dive?*

"I thought you were . . . you and Dulci-Maria . . . were . . . kinda . . . you know . . . *together*."

Word gets around. News from the Frieda Broadcasting Network."

Angel sighs again.

*To dive or not to dive?*

(2)

The *practica* ends.  
Almost everybody leaves the floor.  
Most will stay for the dance, but for the time being there is a break  
between the *practica* and the *milonga*.

Only one person still remains out on the ballroom floor.

Dulci-Maria.  
Alone.  
Without her cane.  
In an emerald green dress and shoes.

“Beautiful,” says O’Malley again.

Angel moves away from the balcony rail, sits back in his chair.

*To dive or not to dive?*

Dulci-Maria turns to face the balcony, walks a few steps to the center  
of the dance floor, and looks up - right where Angel has been watching.

“She’s looking for you, Angel,” whispers O’Malley.

“She can’t see me.”

“That’s a matter of opinion.  
Look at her, my friend.  
She knows you’re here.  
Somebody probably told her.  
Don’t be naive.  
I bet she’s known you were up here watching her all along.”

Angel moved back to the balcony rail.

Dulci-Maria was still looking up.



She lifted her arms in embrace and raised her eyebrows in invitation.

O'Malley nudged Angel.

"That's a *cabeceo* if I ever saw one.

She's asking you to dance, Angel."

Angel stared down at this remarkable woman, standing alone on the ballroom floor, holding out her arms . . . and herself . . . to him.

"Come on, Angel, what are you going to do?" asked O'Malley.

Angel laughed, stood up and put his hand on O'Malley's shoulder.

"Dance," he said. "O'Malley, she is my destiny . . . my fate.

I'm going to dance."

And with that, Angel Amaya dived - plunged heart first, headlong into the pool of the rest of his life.

His mother would have approved.

### (3)

Aristos sat down in a chair on the edge of the ballroom.

The *practica* had gone well.

Every time he practiced tango his confidence increased.

He had even mustered the courage to ask Dulci-Maria to walk around the floor with him to a *vals*.

*What a lovely woman*, he thought.

*She's so vulnerable, and so strong and confident at the same time.*

*Angel is a lucky man.*

When the *vals* had ended, Aristos said, "Dulci-Maria, come have a drink with me before the *milonga* begins."

"Thank you, but I have something else I need to do. Maybe later."

“Is Angel here?”

“Yes. Up there in the balcony.”

Aristos looked up at Angel.

“How do you know . . . can you see that far?”

“No, Giselle told me. I expected he would be watching.”

“What’s he doing up there?”

“He’s waiting for me.”

“Will he come down and dance with you?”

“With all my heart, I hope so.”

Aristos saw tears in her eyes.

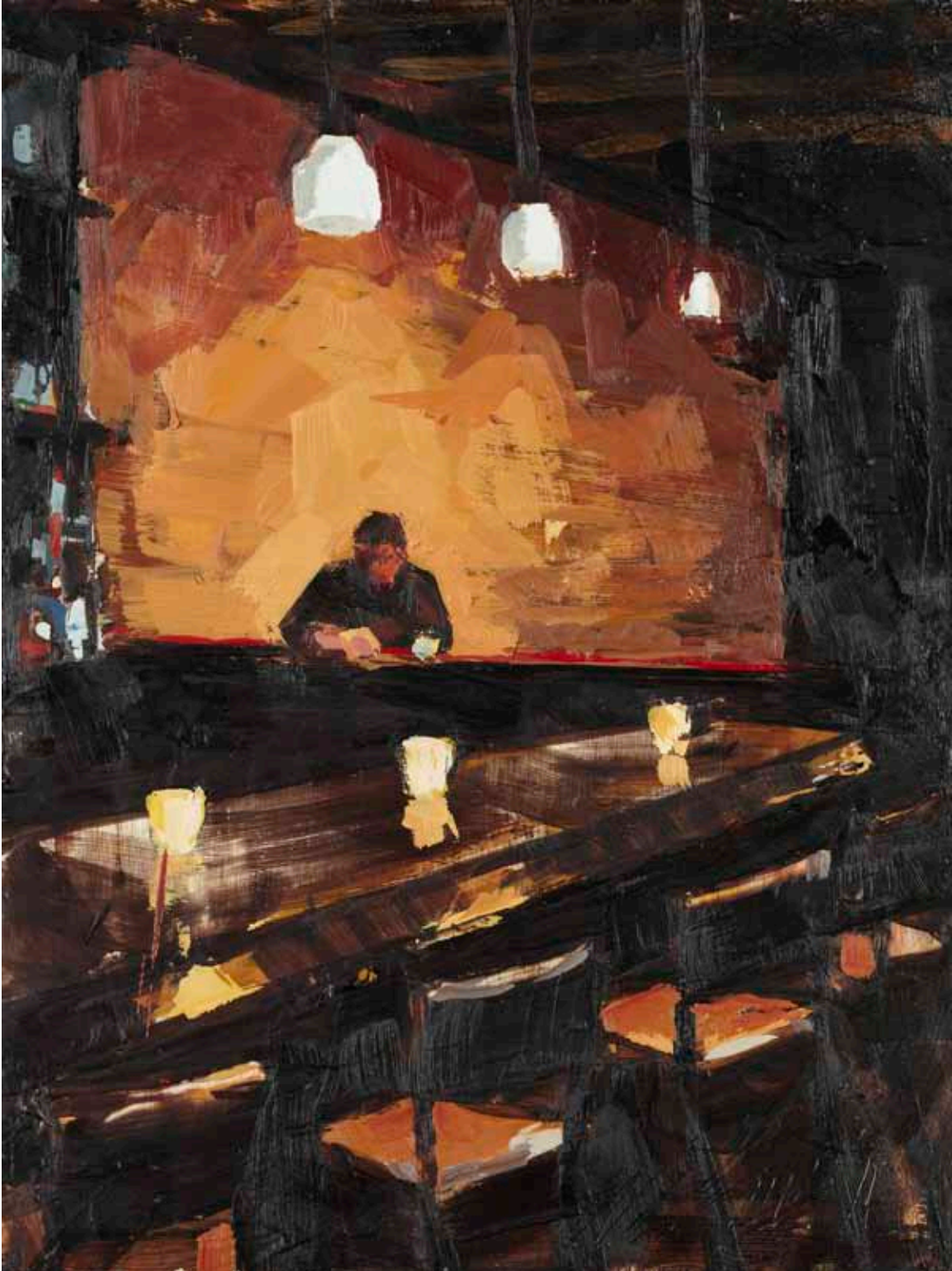
*And so do I*, he thought, knowing there was nothing he should do now but go to the bar, have a drink, and talk to Frieda.

Even though he guessed at what would happen next - knew what he hoped would happen next - he did not want to be a witness.

Happy endings made Aristos uncomfortable.

If asked, he could not - or would not - have said exactly why.





## The Tale of Tango, No - And Tango, Yes

(1)

While the beginners' tango class was in progress, Marisol had sat back in her chair, prepared to take notes.

*There's that lawyer again . . .  
Dances like a man in full armor . . . and he's scared to death.  
Poor man.*

Aristos persevered.  
For a man in armor, he was at least determined.

*He needs help . . . I could show him a thing or two . . .  
God, I'd like to be dancing instead of writing about it.*

But Marisol stayed put.

Even though her thoughts and notes were straying from her task.

*Nice face . . . nice eyes . . . smiles like a little boy . . . charming,*

By the end of the *practica* she had more thoughts about Aristos than she had notes on the tango and the Century Ballroom.

*I feel sorry for him . . . but he's trying . . . he's out there giving it his best shot . . . and he even tried dancing with the blind woman . . . and she's really good . . . what's his story . . . he's actually a good-looking guy . . . even if he can't dance . . . what should I do . . . just go over and say hi? . . . wait?*



(2)

The regular *milonga* begins.  
Couples move onto the floor, embrace, and dance.  
Marisol is restless, edgy, uneasy.  
She stretches and yawns.  
She closes her notebook and laptop.  
Puts her reading glasses away.  
She gets up. Sits down. Gets up. Leans against the wall.  
And finally walks over to stand by Oscar, the doorman.  
But he's too busy to talk.

As she stands alone by the entrance door, she responds to the music and the dancers on the floor - nodding her head and moving her feet in time with the music.

“Do you dance tango, Miss Machado?” asks Oscar.

“Oh . . . well . . . yes . . . I'm afraid so.  
But I'm not here tonight to dance.  
I'm here doing my job as a journalist.”

“Well, if you ask me, you look like you're dying to dance,”

“You could say that . . . no argument from me.”

“Anybody in particular catch your eye?”

“No . . . yes . . . no . . . yes.”



(3)

At that moment, Sergio, the *milonguero*, walked up, coming from the bar into the ballroom, ready to dance. “Hola, Oscar.”

“Hey, Sergio, this lady is a journalist from Spain writing a piece on the Century. Her name is Marisol Machado.

She’s a dancer, too, and wishes she could be out on the floor.  
Marisol - this is Sergio Jarkovi.”

Addressing her in Spanish, Sergio said, “Ah, Senorita Machado, what a pleasure. I have been told about you. I also am Spanish.

And I say that it is permitted to both write *and* dance.”

Marisol replied, in Spanish, “Hola, Senor *Milonguero*.

I admire your dancing.

I would be honored to dance with you, but . . . but . . .”

“Ah, Senorita, I know you are going to say that you are not dressed for dancing tango. I admire your respect for the traditions.

But I say if you feel like dancing, then you must dance.

This is the Century Ballroom.

How you look is not as important as how you dance.

I invite you - just one dance. Do not let your countryman down.”

“Come,” he said, holding out his open hand.

“Don Sergio, you are most gallant . . . a true *milonguero*.

But I didn’t bring my dancing shoes . . . to avoid temptation.”

Sergio smiled his most charming smile.

“Then, Senorita . . . let me tempt you. You *shall* dance with *me* . . . barefooted. Will you do that? Can you do that?”

Marisol smiled and took his hand.

“Try me.”



# The Tale of the Dance Beyond the Dance

(1)

Aristos wanted to talk to Frieda - to tell her all about his encounter with Tanya, but Frieda was too busy to talk - “Maybe later,” she said.

*Just as well, he thought. Tanya wouldn't have approved.*

When Aristos returned to the ballroom, the *milonga* had begun.

*First tanda, third song, he thought. I'm catching on.*

Out on the floor he could see Angel and Dulci-Maria dancing in close embrace, as if they were welded together. She had her cheek next to his, one hand on the back of his neck, her eyes closed.

Even Angel closed his eyes from time to time.

They danced beautifully together.

*Well that settles that, thought Aristos.*

*Frieda and Tanya and the cards were right.*

Looking around, he saw many of the regulars . . . and one irregular. A casually dressed young woman - jeans, black t-shirt, and bare feet. *No class, thought Aristos.*

*Oh. It's the journalist. Marisol Machado.*

Without her glasses, her long hair down, he had not recognized her.

And she was dancing with Sergio, the mighty *milonguero* himself.

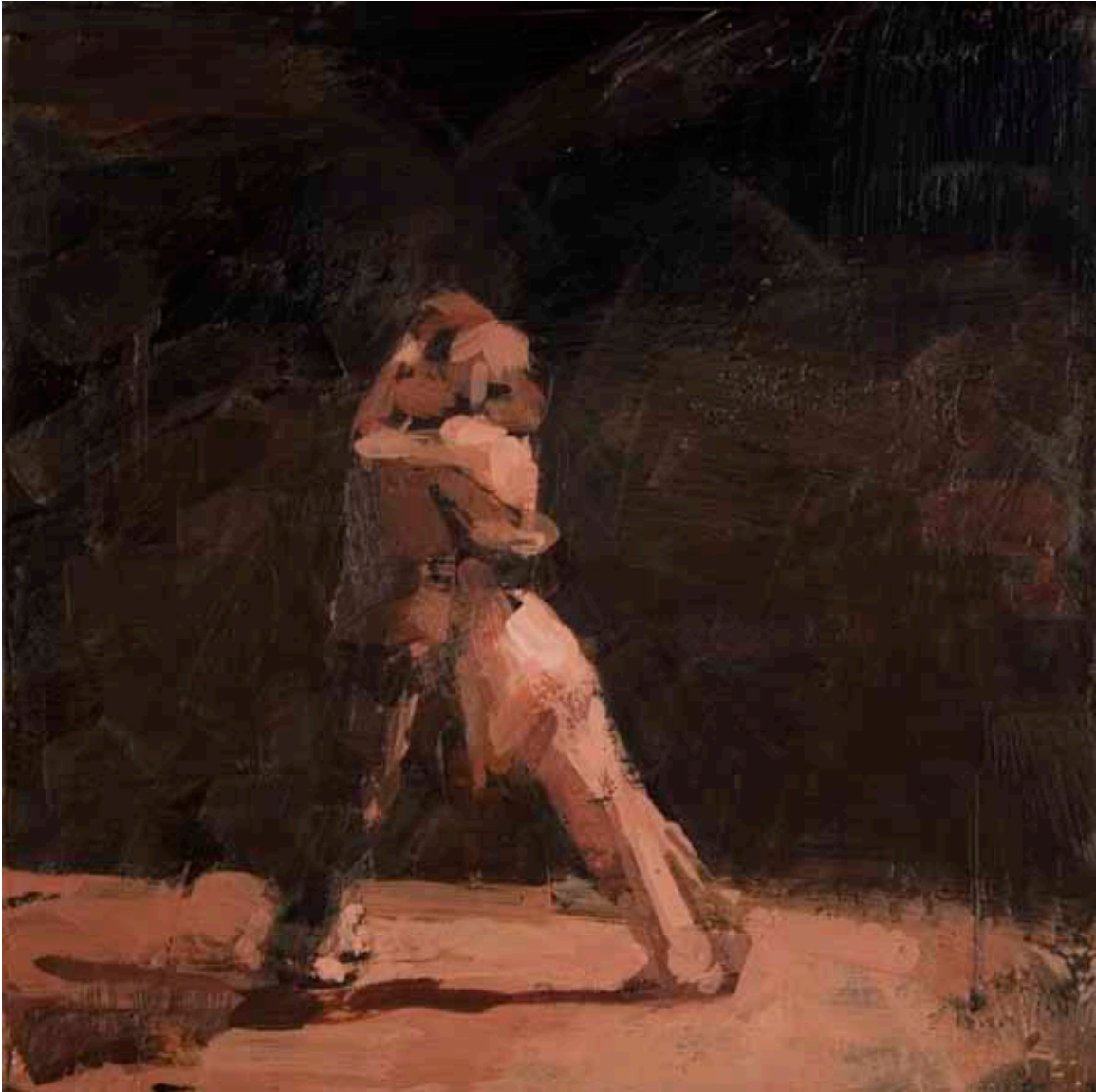
*What the hell?* thought Aristos.

He watched them dance.

*Well, whatever she is, she can really tango. She's good!*

Aristos got out his notebook and pen, and walked over to his best source of information, the doorman.





“Oscar, what’s the story with Sergio and the barefoot princess?”

“Wait - here comes the *cortina* - the *tanda* is almost over . . . he’ll bring her back this way, and you can ask them yourself.”

The couple came closer.

Marisol saw the look on Aristos’ face.

No escape now.

*Well, so much for journalism*, she thought.

She came straight up to Aristos and Oscar.

“Aristos, this is . . .” began Oscar.

“I know.”

“Marisol, this is . . .”

“I know.”

“You two know each other?”

They both laughed.

*Not yet*, thought Aristos.

“We both know Frieda,” said Aristos.

“And Frieda knows us,” added Marisol.

“Well that explains everything,” said Oscar, “carry on.”

(2)

“You are a seriously good tango dancer, Miss Machado. I haven’t seen you dance before,” said Aristos.

“Thank you. It’s the first time I’ve danced at the Century. I’ve been determined to concentrate on being a hard-working journalist. But when



Sergio asked me to dance, well . . . you just cannot say no to him.”

“Are you sorry?”

“Oh, no!”

She glanced at Sergio.

“I’m . . . elated. I’d dance with him anytime - and I’d even feel free to throw him the *cabeceo* now.

But . . . I’m in a quandary. I really should be sticking to my job . . . and I also *really* want to dance . . . and have a social life.

I get carried away when I start dancing and don’t want to write.

My editor warned me this could happen. And so . . . it has.”

“I don’t understand. Why can’t you do both?”

“It’s a long story.”

“I’m interested in long stories.”

“I know - you’re writing a play and looking for material.”

“Frieda told you? And I suppose Tanya, too.”

“Frieda and everybody else who works here knows about you. Not much is a secret at the Century Ballroom. As for Tanya . . . I don’t think I want . . . to talk about that . . .”

If time ever really does stand still, it’s in a moment like this.

(Silence.)

Aristos started the hands of the clock moving again.

“Would you like to hear my version of my long story?”

“Yes, I’d like that. Let’s adjourn to the bar and place ourselves in the care of Frieda.”



Gallantly, as Sergio might have done, Aristos offered his arm.

Marisol took it.

As they walked away, Oscar overheard Aristos say, "We may need more than one drink. Mine's a *very* long story.

Maybe a bottle of red wine?"

"How about a bottle of fine champagne? My treat." said Marisol.

"We'll have a long story contest . . . and I've got all night."

As they walked toward the bar, Aristos thought,

*She's been to see Tanya . . . when?*

*Before or after me?*

(3)

Frieda saw Aristos and Marisol coming, arm in arm.

*Whoopy-do*, she thought, and prepared their way.

"Rita, clear the corner table by the far window. Check the flowers and make sure they're fresh. I'll wait on the customers myself."

"Your table is ready," she said to Aristos and Marisol, as they approached the bar. "Best table in the house," she said, pointing.

As they sat down, Frieda came with a tray - a bottle of red wine - and a bottle of champagne. "This is an Argentine Malbec - Bodega Catena. And here's a bottle of Spanish cava, the champagne of Spain - Freixenet."

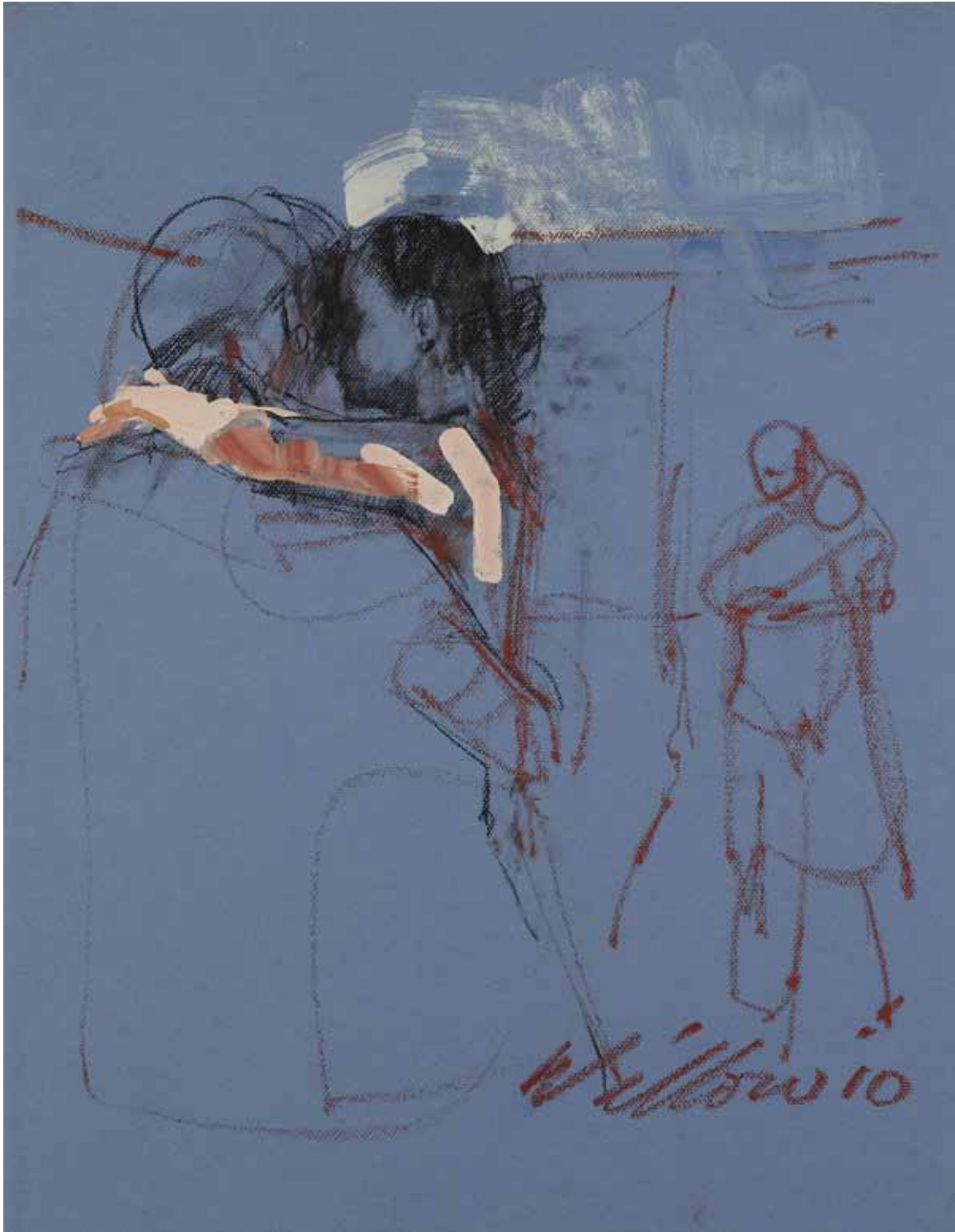
"Two bottles? Four glasses, Frieda? Who's joining us?" asked Aristos.

"Nobody. Two champagne glasses and two for red wine. Your tastes are different, but you might like to try both.

You don't have to drink it all."

Marisol considered the wine labels. "This is pretty pricey stuff."

"The best. It's on me - my pleasure, believe me," said Frieda.



With that, Frieda turned away and walked back toward the bar.  
“Stop looking at my ass,” she said, over her shoulder.  
They laughed.

Their eyes were not Frieda, but on each other.

Aristos poured a glass of red wine.  
Marisol poured a glass of champagne.  
Silently, Aristos passed his glass to Marisol.  
And Marisol handed her glass to Aristos.

“Salud,” said Aristos, as he lifted his glass, “To long stories.”  
“Yes, salud.”

They each drank from the other’s glass.

(4)

Frieda kept an eye on Aristos and Marisol.

By the end of the evening, thanks to her attentive care, they had shared two orders of French fries flavored with truffle salt, a plate of calamari, and most of the wine.

And talked nonstop, sharing life stories.

As closing time fast approached, Marisol tapped on Aristos’ jacket pocket and said, “I notice you’re always writing in your notebook. Do you ever share your notes?”

“No, not yet,” he said. “Would you like to see?”

“I’ll show you mine if you’ll show me yours.”  
She giggled a champagne giggle. “Don’t take that the wrong way.”  
“But I will,” Aristos said.  
And they both laughed.

“Notebook, please, Aristos.”

Aristos took out his notebook and began looking through it.

“Start here - with some of the most recent stuff, including what I wrote last night.”

Marisol put on her glasses and began to read.

\*

From Sara, waitress:

A fat guy got way too happy one night - stripped down to his underpants out on the dance floor. Not on Out Dancing night either - salsa night. Danced pretty good - hard to watch, though.

What happened? Not too sure.

Ask Frieda - fat man in underwear ran through the bar on his way out?

Frieda - laughed - said “Whoopy-do!”

Oscar, the doorman, story:

Two punked-out young chicks - Goths - all in black leather - with piercings and tattoos - “loose screws” - probably into some weird drugs - maybe just up to mischief. Charged up the back steps, ran down the hall - and through ballroom door - screaming: “Run for your life the end is near!”

O’Malley took over - calmed them down - even took them to wherever they lived - in his own car.

From Buck - Disc Jockey:

Black Rastafarian “dude” came to the ballroom door. Said he was looking for God. And Oscar said, cool as you please, “Aren’t we all. I think He was here, but He’s probably just left.”

Told the dude God was needed at the police station up the street, and the dude might check in and see if He was still there. Rasta man was pretty



cool, too. Said, “Thanks, if he comes back, tell him Jawan was asking for him.” (Buck was standing right there - heard it all.)

Overheard:

“He dances like a man ineptly rowing a small boat in a pond.”

Story: several versions.

The night either one or two ladies took off their bra and panties and left them in a paper bag in the ladies’ room.

Later they went back into the loo about the same time - came running back out, one of them screaming, “You’re wearing my panties, you bitch.”

All dancing stopped.

Story: multiple versions.

Really beautiful young woman - gorgeous blonde - Playmate material - came to salsa in “less-than-a-dress.”

Something happened between her and her partner - suddenly the top of outfit came off? fell off? was torn off? Uncertain.

She’s standing out there with “the finest pair of hooters I’ve seen in a long time” (Buck) - not even covering herself - screaming at boyfriend.

She claimed he pulled a strap too hard on purpose - he claimed she dropped her top on purpose.

“Nobody seemed offended - least of all the men.” *Macho, macho.*

Couple got a round of applause as they exited dance floor.

Frieda: “She took off her top in the bar, too. Called O’Malley. He put a spare tablecloth around her shoulders and called a taxi.”

Line:

“If Audrey Hepburn danced tango, that’s the way she’d dance.”

Line:

“It never gets dirty or nasty or mean here at the Century Ballroom - mostly hilarious. Sometimes sad.”

Sad story sample:

Older couple - regulars at tango and swing - she had a stroke - couldn't walk or speak - he brought her one night in her wheelchair - both dressed up like they were going dancing - just sat at a table and watched. He fed her chocolate cake and champagne - a little bit at a time.

(Haven't been seen for awhile. Did she die?)

Line: (One that could be a long story...)

“She always buys her own perfume. How sad.”

Doors: Random thoughts.

Never slam or kick a door. It damages the door and you.

There's always a back door. Isn't there?

“His body went through the door, but not his mind.”

A door-to-door salesman peddling wares.

A door-to-door missionary selling hope.

A foot in the door.

Every door is both an entrance and an exit.

Doors that are closed are not necessarily locked, and may be opened.

If you know there is a door in the room of your life, you must open it and go through. Otherwise you will only be forever arranging and rearranging the furniture in the room in which you live.

Song Lyrics:

If you love me still, will you love me moving?  
Will you love me as the changes come my way?  
If you love me still, will you love me moving?  
Will you love me when the changes come to stay?

Love me still, love me moving.  
Love me as the changes flow.  
Love me still, love me moving.  
Hold me fast, love me slow.

Who wrote the song?

\*

“This is great stuff,” said Marisol. “I could never use it as a journalist, but it’s what I really want to know about a place like the Century. It’s what’s really going on all the time, all around me. It’s theater.”

Aristos looked away from Marisol for the first time and stared at the brick wall behind her. There were six more notebooks about life in the Century Ballroom. He had listened to them, witnessed some of them, and played a part himself in some of the scenes.

*Would she want to read them?*

Looking back at Marisol, he said, “I think so, but I can’t seem to write a play about it - I think I’m too much a part of the cast now. I suppose my life has become one of the Tales of the Century Ballroom.”

“There is a big difference, isn’t there, between writing about dancing and actually dancing. Don’t you agree, Aristos?”

“Yes, that’s for sure.”

“What about doors? Which side of your door are you on, Aristos?”

“Closing time,” shouted Frieda from the bar, as the lights went up.

\*

*Now what?*

The question was in the mind of both Aristos and Marisol.

As they rose to leave, Marisol said, “Aristos, forgive my being forward, but all things considered, I wonder if you . . . would ask me for a date . . . for dinner and dancing?”

“Dinner, yes, but Marisol, I . . . don’t really . . .”

“Yes you do. I’ve seen you. It’s good enough for me. Attitude counts. And tomorrow night is Out Dancing night at the Century. Ask me, come on.”

He remembered what he had written in soap on his bathroom mirror:

*Whatever became of me?*

*What am I waiting for?*

*Dance!*

“Then . . . yes . . . I invite you.”

“Goodnight . . . *please* . . .” implored Frieda.

# The Tale of the Magic Cloak

(1)

*buzz, buzz, buzz*

“Who’s there?”

A voice from an apartment building security system intercom.

*Who is here?* wondered Aristos. *Who am I . . . now . . .?*

The voice from the intercom again:

“Aristos, if that’s you, and you’re standing down there thinking about the deeper meaning of my question, knock it off, you silly man.

The door’s open.

Come on up.”

*I guess she, at least, knows who’s here,* he thought.

Boldly, he swung the door open and walked through it.

*Another open door,* he said to himself.

(2)

*I have a date with Marisol.*

*A man-asks-woman-out date - or was it the other way around?*

It’s the first time he’s done this since he-can’t-remember-when.

Dinner and dancing - a dress-up occasion, for certain.

At the Century Ballroom.

When the elevator door opened, he saw Marisol at the far end of the hall, standing in the doorway of her apartment.

She beckoned to him to come.

*The door is still open,* he thought.

He stood still, enjoying the moment.

He was still standing lost in thought when the automatic elevator door closer activated, moving the door in front of him like a curtain drawn sideways at the end of the first act of a play.

Marisol saw the panicked look on his face and his sudden disappearance as he lurched for the elevator control panel.

Too late.

She only heard a faint “goddammit” as the elevator moved on to another floor.

As it happened, the elevator went up one floor, a pizza delivery man got on, and the elevator returned to the first floor before Aristos could gain control of the elevator or himself.

*Try again.*

When the door opened this time, Marisol was still there - laughing.

“Just run for it,” she cried. “I’ll come and get you.”

She met him halfway down the hall and took his arm in hers.

“I brought you flowers,” said Aristos.

“Where are they?” asked Marisol.

“Goddammit! I dropped them in the elevator.”

Aristos wheeled and ran back toward the elevator, which was long gone by now.

The exit to the building’s stairs was right by the elevator.

In a flash, Aristos was through the door and down two flights of stairs to the lobby.

*You idiot!*

He pushed the Up button - five times.

Waited. No elevator.



*Maybe it went back up to Marisol's floor.*

*Stairs*, he thought.

*buzz, buzz, buzz* - the apartment intercom again.

"Yes, Aristos, where *are* you?"

"Miss Machado, this is not Aristos.

This is Fred, the apartment security manager.

I have a man here who says he's a friend of yours.

I caught him on the security cameras running up and down the stairs.

He says he's just trying to deliver flowers.

Do you know him?"

Laughter came peeling out of the intercom.

"Miss Machado, this is not funny."

"If you only knew . . . It's all right, Fred.

Sometimes Mr. Joyce gets nervous and loses control of his mind temporarily.

He's troubled by doors.

Do us all a big favor and escort him up the elevator and all the way to my apartment."

"Yes, I'll do that."

"Oh, and Fred - does he have the flowers with him?"

"No. But I do have somebody's flowers. A pizza delivery man gave them to me when he was leaving. He found them in the elevator."

"They're for me, I'm sure. Ask Mr. Joyce.

But you hold on to them until you can deliver them and him safely to my door."

“I suppose you want to know what’s going on. It’s a stupid story,” said Aristos to Fred, “but she thinks it’s funny.”

“Keep ’em laughing,’ I always say,” said Fred.

“Ladies love to laugh. Do you want to carry the flowers?”

“Me? After this clown act I’ve just pulled off?

No way. They’ll never get there unless you carry them.”

Fred laughed.

“Come on - I’ll deliver you and the flowers.”

Aristos meekly followed.

*You idiot.*

(3)

This was not exactly the impression Aristos wanted to make on his first real date with Marisol.

After the evening at the Century he felt at ease in her company, as if he had known her for a long time.

He didn’t expect this - a case of nerves enough to unmoor him from his usually reliable ability to function on a social occasion.

But, in fact, he was not so much nervous as excited.

When he had phoned her to finalize their date details, she said, “I’m going to make a good dancer out of you. I promise.”

*She might, he thought.*

*Maybe waiting is over.*

(4)

When Aristos and the flowers had been safely delivered to the still-laughing Marisol, she said, “Sit down, calm down, and I’ll find something to put these beautiful roses in.”

As Marisol came back through the door, Aristos held up his hand.

“Stop right there.”

“Why?”

“I just want to look at you, now that I’m calm and focused again.”

She laughed.

“Just stand there for a moment - don’t move, please.”

Marisol’s hair was down, loosely curled - with a red rose from Aristos’ bouquet pinned on one side.

Minimal makeup - only bright red lipstick accentuated the fine Latin features of her face.

And her red dress emphasized her shapely figure.

“Wow! You sure don’t look like the woman I met at the Century.”

“That’s my disguise for working. Minimal me.

This . . . this is the real me.”

Marisol placed the bouquet of red roses on the coffee table in front of Aristos. She stepped back, smiled, and broke out laughing again.

“What’s funny?”

“You . . . and the elevator . . . and . . . the flowers . . . and . . .”

She laughed herself into near hysterics, tears running down her cheeks - a loose, free, contagious laughter that infected Aristos, who was soon laughing with as much abandon.

“You crazy, crazy man,” she said. “I love you!”

“What did you just say?” asked Aristos, suddenly serious.

“I only said . . . I only meant that . . . I . . . it’s just that . . . I meant . . . I could . . . well . . . I think you are . . . *lovable*.”

When Marisol used those words, “I think you are lovable,” Aristos felt the inner locks to his heart unlatch. It was as if a curse had been cancelled. A door . . . thrown *wide* open.

He had always thought he was not and would never, ever be lovable.  
And wished otherwise . . . and now . . .

Marisol Machado said, “I think you are lovable.”

*She said that.*

*Does she know what she said?*

*Does she mean what she said?*

The wordsmith was at a loss for words.

“Thanks.” was the best he could do.

Marisol lifted Aristos’ chin and said, “Look at me. Are you OK?”

“Yes . . . I’m feeling . . . lovable.”

“Get used to it, Aristos,” she said, and lightly kissed him, first on one cheek and then the other.

“Get used to it.”

(5)

“Come on, we’ll be late,” she said. “We have a reservation. I’ll get my coat.” From the closet in the hallway Marisol fetched a garment and held it up for Aristos to see, front and back.

“I haven’t looked at this closely for a long time,” she said. “And I haven’t ever worn it.”

I bought it in Santa Fe a long time ago to wear for a special occasion someday . . . and perhaps . . . that would be tonight.

This was once what the Mexicans call a *serape*.  
It has a history, but only *it* knows its story.  
I wish it could talk . . . at least whisper.

It began as a man's serape . . . hand woven . . . cotton and wool . . . but it was split it all the way down the front to make it more of a coat or cloak - now it's a woman's costume.

I love its colors . . . faded from use . . . they remind me of the end of a desert sunset.

These hand-made conchos are sterling silver, and the amber beads tied to the ribbons hanging from the centers are the real thing.

The opening around the neck is reinforced with this soft, buttery yellow leather - deerskin dyed with saffron."

Marisol turned the cloak around.

"And at the center of the back is the final touch - this colorful square of embroidered tapestry with this black silk tassel hanging from it.

In fact, every detail about it is high quality - not just decoration, but a respectful amplification of its basic beauty.

Somebody went to a lot of trouble to make something lovely out of what was probably an ordinary item of clothing in common use in its day. I could imagine adding something to it myself."

"Enchanting. And I like that idea," said Aristos. "You, adding your history to it."

"Shall I wear it tonight? Is it over the top for the Century?"

"There's not much that's over the top at the Century.

Yes, please wear it. It has a certain quality of . . . magic, you know . . . like a good fairy's cloak," said Aristos.





“It might turn a frog into a princess,” said Marisol.

*It has*, thought Aristos. *It has*.

(6)

Friday night. The Century Ballroom.

Aristos and Marisol are at the bar.

“Hey,” Frieda said, pointing at Marisol, “Don’t I know you?  
You remind me of a Spanish journalist who hangs around here, but  
she’s not nearly as hot as you are . . . looking *very* good, my dear!  
And I love the cape or whatever-you-call-it.  
That’s Wow!”

“Thanks, Frieda.  
The journalist is off duty tonight.  
She’s not working - she’s dancing.”

“Well, sic ’em dawg! And look at what you dragged in with you.  
Reminds me of that writer guy - the one with the ready pen and notebook.  
But you can’t be him - look at you - suit, tie, shaved . . . and smelling good!  
Where’s your notebook?”

“Didn’t bring it.  
The writer’s off duty, too,” said Aristos.  
“He’s not working . . . he’s . . .”

“. . . going to have a fine dinner and dance,” said Marisol.

*And after that?* wondered Frieda.

(7)

It's Out Dancing night at the Century Ballroom - intended to welcome the gay community, but everyone else as well. It might be called Open Dancing because so many styles of music and dancing are performed.

Some tango and salsa, but mostly swing, country-western, two-step, Lindy Hop, and waltz - even a little rock and roll.

*Well, well, well . . .* thought Oscar as Aristos and Marisol came in the ballroom door. *Will you look at them!*

"I didn't think you two were gay."

"Well, we are. Not in the usual meaning of the word," said Aristos.

"What meaning do you have in mind?"

"Lighthearted . . . effervescent . . . and happy."

"Very happy," said Marisol.

"We've come . . . to dance," said Aristos.

"Congratulations!" said Oscar.

"And welcome to the best dance night at the Century."



(8)

Aristos and Marisol sat down at a table on the edge of the dance floor.

“Wow!” said Marisol. “Look at that!  
Some of those swing dancers are as good as I’ve ever seen.  
Look at those two. Watch. That’s fancy stuff.  
I’d like to try some of their moves.  
Come on, Aristos.”

“Marisol, I’m not . . . really . . . ready for this.  
Please don’t ask me to dance . . . like that.  
I don’t think I . . .”

“Aristos, you drive me crazy. You’re always talking *about* dancing  
and *thinking* about dancing as if it was algebra. Your mind smothers your  
soul and paralyzes your feet.

Look at me. Listen to me.  
Dancing . . . is hugging . . . while walking . . . to music.  
Say that.”

“Dancing . . . is hugging . . . while walking . . . to music.”

“Do you know how to hug?”

“Yes . . . of course.”

“Do you know how to walk?”

“Yes . . .”

“Do you respond to music when you hear it?”

“Yes . . . but . . .”

“Then, damn it, Aristos, that’s all you need to know to dance.  
Dancing is hugging while walking to music.

Write that in your damned notebook.”

Aristos smiled, knowing he was caught in her lovely trap.

Marisol took both of his hands in hers.

“Look at me,” she said.

“Aristophanes Joyce, *trust* me.

Not tonight, not suddenly, but sooner or later you’ll dance everything and anything, anywhere - if you’ll just *trust* me . . . you’ll be a good dancer.

Just tell me you’d *like* that to happen - that you’ll *try*.”

Aristos looked steadily into Marisol’s eyes.

“I trust you. I will try. I promise.”

“Notice what’s going on out there on the floor.

You have to take an objective view.

In tango class you’re already doing things harder than two-step and waltz. The only thing between you and being out there is . . . you.”

“Now then,” said Marisol. “Stand up, hug me, walk to the music . . .”

And before he could think about it, Aristos was out there - on the dance floor with Marisol - awkwardly trying to two-step while hugging.  
*You idiot.*

She turned her face to look into his eyes.

He was still afraid - she could see it.

She pulled him closer - “*Breathe in,*” she whispered.

He inhaled.

Marisol pressed her face close to his.

“*Breathe out,*” she whispered.

He released his breath - his nose and mouth almost touching hers.

As he exhaled, Marisol breathed in.

“*Again,*” she whispered.

He inhaled - the breath that once was hers passed into him.

In rhythmic time now, they breathed the life of one another.

In . . . out . . . in . . . out . . . back and forth . . .

Now . . . they were holding each other's breath.

The DJ played a Merle Haggard tune - "The Highway Is My Home."  
A slow, simple two-step. One . . . two . . . one . . . two . . .

"Now," said Marisol. "Shall we keep dancing?"

"Yes."

And they did that.

"If the words were translated into Spanish they'd be a tango tune."

"Pay attention, Aristos, stop talking and dance. One . . . two . . ."

"Yes, Ma'am. One-two, one-two, one-two . . ."

The music ended.

Marisol and Aristos remained embraced - breathing into one another.  
They walked hand in hand to their table and sat down.

Aristos was euphoric.

"I can't believe I did that."

"Believe it. You did.

And you are going to waltz, too."

"Tonight?"

"This very night."

*I stopped thinking about what I was doing, he thought.*

*And I didn't look down. I never looked down . . .*

"One-two-three, one-two-three," he said, tapping the table.

"Bring it on."





(9)

Later, at the bar for a nightcap, they held hands and sat in silence.  
When Frieda set the two glasses down on the bar, the bottom of one cracked off. "Sorry, I'll get another one."  
"Don't bother," said Aristos. "One will do."  
"You're sure?"  
"He's sure," said Marisol.

\*

"Marisol, forgive me for bringing this up, but aren't you supposed to be writing about all this for your magazine?  
Will *we* be included in your article?"

"Aristos, Aristos . . . will you stop thinking so much.  
Yes, I'm supposed to report on the Century - the deadline is next week. But we . . . well, I guess I'm on the verge of breaking all the rules of objective journalism.  
My editor would not approve . . . if he knew I . . . we . . .  
No, we're not in the article . . . even if I get it done.  
But you . . . you . . . *are* a major distraction."

"Any regrets?"

"None whatsoever." She held their glass to his lips. "None."

"More wine? You sure you don't want another glass?" asked Frieda.

"Wine, yes. Another glass, no," said Aristos.

"I have a question for you, Mr. Author," said Marisol.  
"Aren't you supposed to be writing a play?"

"Well . . . Yes. Once I might have called this . . . just doing research."

"And now, what do you call it?"

Aristos held their glass to her lips.

“I call it . . . dancing . . . living.”

“Take me home, Aristos,” said Marisol.

“Gladly.”

“Whoopy-do,” said Frieda.

“What did you say?” asked Marisol.

Frieda laughed. “Just . . . whoopy-do.”

“And that means?”

“Oh, I don’t know . . . it’s just . . . a happy thought . . . when nice things are happening. Goodbye and have a great night.”

Aristos and Marisol exchanged glances.

Aristos took her by the hand and led her out of the bar.

*Wish it was me*, thought Frieda.



## The Tale of the End of Waiting

(1)

“Let me do the elevator this time,” said Marisol, laughing.  
And they were still laughing as Marisol opened her apartment door.

“Come on in and sit down. I’ll be right back.  
You’ll find a bottle of champagne in the kitchen in the fridge.  
The tango dancer’s fuel. You’ll have to acquire a taste for it.  
We probably don’t need any more booze, but open it anyway.  
It’s a special night, don’t you think?  
And put some tango music on, will you? There’s probably already a  
disc in the CD player.”

Aristos nodded, smiled, did as he was instructed . . . and waited.

When Marisol returned she was still wearing the magic cloak.  
She had put on her red tango shoes.  
But her cloak was no longer open - it was fastened in front.  
The sleeves and skirt of her dancing dress were no longer evident.

*What’s she got on underneath?*  
*Maybe . . . nothing . . . ?*  
*Ohmygod . . .*

“Please stand up, Aristos,” she asked. “Indulge me.”  
He stood.

“Come over here in front of me - and bring the champagne glasses.”  
As a man entranced, Aristos managed to comply - without spilling the  
champagne or tripping over his own feet.

“Aristos, I want to teach you how to make a certain tango move.”  
He could only nod.  
*Yes.*





“Now, put your left foot in front of you, pointed toward me.”

*Yes.*

She placed her right foot alongside his.

“Now step forward and put your right foot alongside mine - trap it.”

*Yes.*

“In tango, this is called *el sanguchito* - the sandwich.

It’s an intense, momentary connection . . . with deep implications.”

*Yes.*

“Now hold your champagne glass in your right hand, hook it through my right arm, and drink from it at the same time that I drink mine.”

*Yes.*

“Look into my eyes.”

*Yes.*

“Withdraw a little and pass your glass to my left hand as I pass mine to yours.”

*Yes.*

“And now . . . Mr. Aristophanes Joyce, dancer . . . kiss me.”

He did not move.

“Don’t think about it - just do it.”

And he did.

Stepping back away from Marisol, Aristos looked at her in silence.

At last he said, “Marisol, It’s *my* turn to tell *you* what to do. Put your glass down. And stand where you are, just as you are. Don’t move.”

*Yes.*

“Shall we dance?” he asked.

“Yes . . .”

“This is called the Close Embrace - my first time,” he said.

“Yes . . . I know . . .,” whispered Marisol.

(2)

Midnight.

As they were falling asleep in her bed, Marisol said,  
“Feliz Navidad, Aristos.”

“Marisol, it’s not Christmas, it’s April.”

“You’re thinking again, Aristos.”

“Jingle bells, jingle bells, jingle all the way . . .,” he sang.



## Closing Time - The Night Watchman's Tale

(1)

Three o'clock in the morning  
The Odd Fellows building is locked down.  
O'Malley, the night watchman, has made his rounds.  
"All's well," he calls into the silence. "All's well."

The Century Ballroom itself is dark except for illumination from outside - slices of street light shining through gaps in the velvet window curtains decorate the empty dance floor.

O'Malley carries a plate of sandwiches and a glass of milk fetched from the kitchen of the restaurant.  
Ham and cheese on rye bread. A pickle.

He crosses the stillness of the ballroom and sits down at the best table in the house - center, facing the stage.

Settling back into his chair, he looks out across the empty space . . . and opens the imaginary cabaret in his mind . . .

"Waiter, I'll have a bottle of Malbec - Dona Paula - 2004.  
Two glasses.  
The nice crystal ones.  
Please decant the wine when you bring it."

When the wine is served, and two glasses poured from the decanter, O'Malley glances across the dance floor to a table where *She* sits, waiting.

*She* looks directly at him, opens her eyes wide, and smiles, offering the *cabaceo* - the unambiguous invitation to dance.

He replies with his eyes, lifting his eyebrows, smiles, and without taking his gaze away from her, he rises, and walks across the dance floor with graceful, confident purpose.



He offers his hand.

*She* stands, places her hand in his. He leads her onto the dance floor.

They pause, waiting for the music.

It begins.

A classic tango in *vals* time.

He lifts his arms in the frame of an experienced *milonguero*.

She steps into his embrace, first taking his left hand in her right, then moving close to his chest, letting her left hand and arm float lightly down to rest across his shoulder.

Settled.

Ready.

They move subtly - to enter the music.

He leads her in a slight shift of weight from left to right to establish their connection. As the music rises, the tempo becomes clear.

Dance.

Nothing fancy at first - walking, pausing, then walking to the cross, then *la mordida*, another pause allowing her to make calligraphic *figuras* with the toe of her shoe, and walking again. *molinetta*, *boleo*, *gancho*.

He knows all the steps.

Whatever he leads, *She* can follow.

They never look down.

*She* always wears a flowing, white, knee-length dress, and always the same red high heels with straps across the instep.

She always wears flowers in her hair.

Her perfume reminds him of spring.

He always wears a double-breasted, grey pin-striped suit, pale blue shirt, and black-and-white polka-dot tie.

His handmade tango shoes are plain black calfskin leather.

A man of taste and style - worthy of respect.

In the tango cabaret of his mind, O'Malley imagines that anyone who saw them would think how good they looked, how elegant their dancing. They would call him a *tanguero jubilado* - a classy, mature, experienced

man who dances with style and grace - one who always makes his partner feel beautiful . . .

And *She* . . . always . . . looks . . . and feels . . . beautiful.

(2)

But anyone who was actually present at this invisible *milonga* at three in the morning would only see one middle-aged man in a security officer's uniform . . . Father O'Malley . . . dancing alone in silence . . . in the dark.

When the music in his mind ends, he escorts his invisible partner back to her table, and returns to his table to eat his sandwich. And pickle.

To drink his milk.

And think.

Margaret often comes to mind. Lake Charles, Louisiana.

Margaret wanted him to take her dancing.

Margaret wanted him to stay.

But he was not a dancer.

And he was Navy, so went away to sea.

He knew what his real problem was.

He was shy. Simply said: Shy.

Military life and law enforcement gave his shyness a shield.

Shyness was a kink in his personality that led to solitude.

That's why he liked to work night shifts.

And why he never danced in public.

And now?

*Where is Margaret now? What would she think?*

*Would she still want to dance with me?*

*Aristos said that dancing is just hugging while walking to music.*

*Margaret probably knew that all along . . .*





As O'Malley walked through the darkness toward the kitchen to return his used dishes, he stopped, turned, and said to the empty ballroom:

“Goodnight . . . Margaret.”

As he walked on out through the ballroom door to make another round of the building, he recalled another line he heard from Aristos:

*If you love me still, would you love me moving?*



## Meanwhile . . . The Ongoing Tale

As in the beginning . . . so it remains . . . *meanwhile* goes on . . .

*It may be said that those who come to the Century are on a pilgrimage to a sacred place dedicated to the need to be loved, to be touched, and to be embraced by the deeply human event of moving to music together - the common desire to dance.*

*Stories unfold here - some are short, some are long, some stop.  
And others continue far beyond the frame of this recounting . . .*

*No matter who lives the stories or tells the stories . . .  
All are tales of the Century Ballroom.*