

Tango

by Julia Mary Lichtblau

Elena is really showing now. She sits on a bar stool at the Café Gardel, the tango bar she and José run on the rue des Mauvais Garçons, caressing her melon belly and pointing out which customers need refills to the new Moroccan girl. The black dress she's wearing minimizes the bulk but accentuates her pallor. The Moroccan girl keeps screwing up orders, so Elena has to get up to fix things. Wobbling in her four-inch heels, she picks up glasses and switches beef empanadas for chicken with an apologetic smile that vanishes when she faces the kitchen. "*Inmigrantes*," she mutters, though she and José came to Paris from Buenos Aires only six years ago.

Last weekend, they danced a full program together. Elena scaled back her lunges and backbends, but that was the only choreographic concession she made to the baby growing inside her. She kept going till midnight at the *milonga* afterward. By the end of the evening, her hair was falling out of her chignon, a dark circle of sweat stained the overstretched satin over her dome of a belly. José told her to take it easy. "When people come to a tango bar, they want to think about sex, not babies," he said.

"Fuck them if they don't know there's a connection," she answered.

The next day, José asked Marie-France, the star of their tango classes, to sub for Elena at the next floor show. "For her sake—and the baby's, *bien sûr*."

The café has been their baby till now. They came to Paris when the Argentine peso crisis hit in 2002. Lucked into a gig with an exile from the Dirty War who had a tango bar. When he retired, they took the place over.

The house is filling up. Nathalie, a middle-aged student with a shoe-polish black bob, accosts Elena. She and her husband, Michel, never miss a *milonga*. “*Ma chère*, you're in bloom,” Nathalie trills. She reaches under the drinks tray Elena is carrying and rubs her stomach. “José was smart to get Marie-France to fill in for you... My God, you're enormous. How much longer? Two months?”

“Three.” Elena spits the word. Nathalie gets the message. Red-cheeked, she snatches her hand away and darts after her husband to claim the last two chairs at the regulars' table, where they're speculating about the baby's color. Milk-white, espresso, or café con leche? Elena has silky, ash-blond hair and fair skin, inherited from her grandparents, who left Alsace for the Pampas in the '30s. José claims his burled-ebony curls and brown skin come purely by way of Andalucía and Puglia, though his eyes have a suspicious Andean slant.

“Espresso stays dark, no matter how much milk you mix in,” Michel volunteers. He elbows one of the other men in the ribs. “Assuming, of course, it's his...*hein?*”

Who else's would it be? The kid will be gorgeous. Everyone agrees on that.

The men draw a collective breath as Marie-France comes out of the dressing room. She's wearing a midnight-blue dress, slit up the thigh. Her dark brown hair is loose. She stands by the stage, looking over the crowd, avoiding Elena's gaze. She slides a pair of silver bracelets up and down her bare arm, shifts her weight from one foot to another. With each shift, her dress cracks open, exposing a white blade of skin, then slides shut, hiding it. Michel wiggles his meaty fingers at her. Marie-France shoots back a brief, tense smile.

“Amazing. She shows up one day, and next thing you know, she's replacing Elena,” he says.

“Just until the baby comes.” Nathalie sounds indignant.

“Well, she studied at the Paris Opera Ballet School,” one woman points out.

“True *tangueras* are whores,” Michel says.

Nathalie, who's wearing spike-heeled tango sandals, kicks him under the table. "That was back in the '20s, *imbécile*..." He bends down to rub his shin and glares at her.

The band is late. Elena tries to catch José's eye. He's working the room. His narrow hips and high, sculpted, buttocks glide between tables. He kisses cheeks, pats shoulders, tells stories. José could make a stone weep for Argentina. He's only 35, but to hear him talk, you'd think he and Carlos Gardel hung out together on the docks of Buenos Aires back when.

The guitarist and accordionist troop in at last, huffing and puffing up the ladder-steep stairs. The guitarist, a cigar-colored man of about sixty, kisses Elena on both cheeks: "*Cómo estás, mi amor?*" he wheezes. "Sorry, we're late. Traffic was awful." He mock-gapes at her stomach. "*Tan gordita!* You got so big since I last saw you!"

"*Gordita?* You should know that's the last thing a pregnant woman wants to hear." Elena extends her slender arms. "Even the doctor says I'm too skinny."

The guitarist pats her cheek. "I'm pulling your leg, *bella*. Don't you know better than to take me seriously?" The accordionist, who's nearer forty, smiles out of the cigarette-free side of his mouth. The men lug their instruments and amps over to the stage and begin to set up. José pauses in mid-anecdote and telegraphs Elena a reassuring smile. Marie-France crooks a finger at him. He excuses himself and squeezes past the clutch of chairs to where she's waiting.

"*Ça va?*" Marie-France extends her long waist and neck like a cat about to be stroked. They press cheeks three times.

The guitarist twiddles a button on his amp. "*Listo, José.*" Show time.

José steps up to the microphone. "*Bon soir. Bienvenus. Bienvenidos al Café Gardel, el café de tango mas auténtico de Paris!* First, an announcement. Marie-France, my student, will dance with me while my wife, Elena, is out of commission." Everyone faces around. Elena waves like a little girl from her stool. Applause. House lights down....

Marie-France steps onstage. His palm on the small of her back, José guides her into a sultry, blue spot. The audience leans forward, as if it were looking through a keyhole. He takes her right hand, she lays her left on his shoulder. Elbows lifted, eyes locked, they inhale together, ready for the downbeat...

One-and-two-and-One... The lingering way Marie-France draws her thighs together in the *cruzada* hooks them from the first measure. She pivots. Flicks her head. The spotlight hits her taut neck tendon. She traces a quick series of *ochos*, figure-eights around José. His sweaty neck gleams.

The accordionist toys with the theme. José cradles Marie-France's foot between his. She extracts it, drawing her shoe up the side of his leg. José taught her all this.

The guitarist lets fly with a lightening arpeggio. The accordionist follows with a wailing solo, insistent as bedsprings. José darts his knee between Marie-France's thighs, flicks his foot and snares her calf with a *gancho*, a hook. He spins her out, brings her back, away, back. Marie-France slides into a long lunge that shows off her ballet lines. José pulls her up. She wraps a leg around his waist and sweeps her arm up and back, triumphant face to the audience. Cheers, whistles, bows.

Next, the accordionist gives them a cheeky polka intro with a funny, '20s feel. They press their cheeks together, tails wagging like roosters. Marie-France hams it up to José's straight man. The audience is laughing, egging them on.

The Moroccan girl signals to Elena that she's out of glasses. Elena slips off her stool and goes behind the bar. She bangs opens a cupboard door and bangs it shut. Heads turn at nearby tables. "*Merde*," she swears quite loudly. She stalks into the kitchen, heels clicking. Tack-tack-tack. The kitchen door swings behind her. Whomp, whomp. She emerges balancing a large tray of clinking, wobbling wine glasses on her shoulder, back arched to counterbalance the weight of her protruding stomach. She's going too fast to remember to step over the curl of loose linoleum by the bar, the one she avoids instinctively fifty times a day. Her heel snags,

she reaches out to grasp something with her free hand. The glasses shimmy, tilt, cascade over the edge, smash on the floor. José freezes in mid-turn. Marie-France stumbles into him. The guitarist slaps his palm over the strings and kills the music.

When the breaking ends, Elena is standing in a crystal ruin.

The Moroccan girl scurries over, pulling her curly hair into a wild halo. "Why didn't you ask me to help you?"

"Hand me that broom," Elena orders. Silent, transfixed, the Moroccan girl, the audience, and the performers watch the white wings of Elena's shoulder blades fold and unfold between the two black straps of her dress. The glass shards swish and clatter. Elena scoops them up by the dustpanful. The women in the audience wince each time she bends over, pressing the baby between her breasts and thighs. Finally the pile is just a patch of sparkly dust. Elena rests the broom on the bar. José nods at the guitarist.

They pick up where they left off, but they've lost the glow. The third number goes better. They build to their previous ferocity. People let the dance absorb them. Elena's back is still turned, but her haggard face reflects back into the room from the mirror behind the bar for anyone who wants to see.

The guitarist gives the cue to wrap up early. The accordionist makes a "Wha...?" face. But, the guitarist is boss. They find an ending. José finishes a series of *ochos*; spins Marie-France. The turns take her away from him. He pulls her into a tight embrace, her back to him. Half-turn. He makes a cradle of his arm behind her. The satin falls away as she unfolds a lean-muscled leg. The musicians hit a last violent chord. She flings her head back. Her trailing hair forms a bridge to the floor. Bravos, whistles, applause. The dancers take their bows. José kisses Marie-France's hand. Someone throws a rose. José picks it up and hands it to her. More bows. More cheers.

The guitarist raises his eyebrows at José. José nods, "O.K., O.K.," and grabs the microphone "*Merci, merci. Gracias.* Sorry for the little interruption. Everything's fine. Thanks for your patience. We're going to take a break... Then we'll open the floor for dancing."

Marie-France daubs her face with a handkerchief. The regulars and her friends surround her, a little diffident at first because of Elena, but eager to acclaim her success. Laughing, she begs them not to hug her, she's so sweaty. She does extend her cheeks for kisses, however. José looks distracted, but stays to collect his share of accolades.

The guitarist heads back to the bar. Elena is ferretting out the few last shards. She parks the broom and pours him a glass of red wine before he asks. "He's coming," the guitarist says. When he sees José making his way back, he takes his wine to a table where he can watch.

José rubs his hand over his black curls. "What the hell were you trying to do?" he says. His velvet bass has an edge that carries over the hubbub. People have to pretend they're not listening. "Couldn't you have asked someone for help?"

Elena bends over with a grunt and picks up a scimitar-shaped slice of glass she missed.

"I asked you a question." José bears down on Elena.

Elena's skin looks green under the bar light. "I didn't want to."

"Have you gone crazy?" José fights his voice down to a low growl.

José takes her elbow as if to draw her out of the corner she's backed into. She slaps his hand away. Smack. José tries again. Elena's free hand darts toward his face, the scimitar-shaped piece of glass between thumb and forefinger. He seizes her wrists just before the point grazes his face.

The sinews of her biceps stand out as she braces against him, her swollen belly between them. He flattens her hands against the plaster wall. "*Suélrame!*" she screams. "Let me go!"

"Call the police!" someone yells.

"*C'est fait*," the guitarist answers, a cell phone to his ear.

Marie-France stands to the side of the stage, bare arms folded tight across her chest. This wasn't what she bargained for evidently. What did she bargain for?

Heavy footsteps resound on the stairs. Two, pale, close-cropped heads rise over the threshold, young gendarmes in their dark blue

pants, light blue shirts. José lets go of Elena. She slides down the wall to the floor, a pale, bulbous rag doll.

The gendarmes size up the scene. "What's going on here? Who called?" The guitarist raises his hand.

Nathalie's husband pipes up. "*Scène de ménage*." Marital spat. The closest gendarme gives him a contemptuous look. He knows a jerk when he sees one. He turns to José.

"What happened? *Hein, monsieur?*"

José raises his hands, the international gesture of resignation. "My wife had an accident. Some glasses broke." He extends his hand to Elena. She lets him pull her up.

"*Madame?*"

Elena just shakes her head. She's licking her lips as if she desperately needs a drink of water.

The guitarist is embarrassed. "Little squabble. Everything's fine, now, it seems. Sorry to have bothered you."

The gendarmes aren't convinced, but no one is really hurt, and nothing's damaged, so they roll their eyes and clump down the stairs.

The audience mills, still gripped by the tension. The show's over, and no one wants to dance. Marie-France retreats to the dressing room. José is talking to the accordionist, who judging by his expression, is telling him Elena will get over it. José keeps his back to her. After all the time, they've spent dancing together, sensing the space between them, he doesn't have to look at her to know she's leaving.

Elena collects her shawl and purse from under the bar. Her ankles are so wobbly, she has to grasp the back of a chair to keep from losing her balance. She stops at the guitarist's table and kisses him on both cheeks. Gestures that she's fine. No, she doesn't want anyone to come with her.

At the top of the stairs, she pauses like a mountaineer assessing a cliff. Clutching the banister, she feels for the top stair with one foot, then the other. A line of blood trickles down the inside of her thigh and passes the hem of her dress.

