

*From the edge of  
the floor*

Peter Stickland

in collaboration with

Jenny Nolan

**77**books

Copyright © 2011 Peter Stickland

The author has asserted his right under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act, 1988 to be identified as the author of this work.

Published December 2011 by 77 Books.

**77books**

69 Osbaldeston Road, London N16 7DL.

[www.77books.co.uk](http://www.77books.co.uk)

Cover design by Dennis Mariner

This work is sold subject to the condition that it shall not by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, resold, hired out, or otherwise circulated without the publisher's prior consent in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition including this condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.

ISBN 978-0-9560121-9-7

A catalogue record for this title is available from the British Library.

For Albert Camus – who loved to dance

Somewhere someone  
is travelling furiously towards you

John Ashbery

My grateful thanks to Jenny Nolan and Andrea Parry who contributed memories from their childhood and adolescent years; such recollections are impossible to invent.

Jenny Nolan also contributed thoughts on dance etiquette and a text describing her feelings about the unspoken dialogue that takes place between dance partners.

Christine Fasse, rather than use her own recollections in response to my request for material, offered the memories that Albert Camus wrote about in *Summer in Algiers*.

Jenny Nolan features as the dancer in the book's photographs. They are stills from a film showing Jenny and her partner Daniel Raphael dancing to the Malandraca, a tango.

My thanks as always to  
Guillermo Rosenthuler



Happy Joe Luckey

Charlie Lawson

Annie Hegatty

Paula de Souza

Rosie Hart

Chico the pianist

Monica Goddard

Agnès Belmondo

Carla-Maria Pontin

Happy Joe Luckey





## Happy Joe Luckey

Happy go lucky Joe trusts cheerfully to luck and never worries about the future. In ancient cosmology and late adolescence, to be lucky is to be wise. Mostly, Joe's friends imagine his luck is something akin to foolhardiness.

Cinema critic, theorist of the French 'New Wave,' Joe loves being with those students who reign supreme in optimism, invent new theories with ease and conjure radical re-appraisals of the world with relaxed certainty.

## Charlie Lawson

Charlie argues with Joe. How can babies learn more, imagine more, care more and experience more than he. They agree about unexpected hands touching lightly while dancing.

Tonight, in a haze of alcohol, they talk of illicit seconds when hands come to rest deliciously on a partner's back, of sensuous fingers curving gently around other fingers.

Charlie admits to one childhood memory; the moving shadows of trees that street lamps cast on his bedroom wall. He doesn't talk of the picture that hung crookedly over the fireplace.

He preferred the picture at this odd angle; it seemed to add a sigh to the countenance of Our Lady of Sorrows. Raised by his aunt, he was ten when he met his mother at Vienna airport and carried her suitcase to the car.

His most memorable event on the dance floor was with a man. He stumbled, late one night, drunk and dirty, into a bar and was forcibly, but gently, swept off his feet. He didn't dare resist the insistent invitation.





## Annie Hegatty

Joe and Annie argue like siblings. How can a stumbling, erratic toddler know the profound truth of mortality simply because it has witnessed the death of a rabbit and what do you know about infant cognition or versatile understanding anyway?

Every child has well tuned imaginative resonance, highly efficient counterfactual thought processes and the ability to make inspired but accurate guesses; Joe knows this intuitively. He can make a very sad child laugh within minutes of meeting them.

Annie remembers a secret dark corner behind the garden shed where she experimented with insects. She meticulously removed the limbs of little creatures to teach them a vital lesson about life; one she doesn't quite understand - the rarer the beauty, the greater the delight.

During an operation, her heart stopped beating and the surgeon had to massage it to get it pumping again. Annie was captivated by the power of the surgeon's touch and annoyed by the well-wishers gathering at her bedside. Mostly she hid under the covers.

Obstinate and inclined to cynicism, it was some time before Annie engaged with life's possibilities. At her sister's wedding she whispered to the groom in slow, silky tones. "I will try to seduce you soon". Annie insisted her words were, "I will introduce you soon."

She didn't earn the nickname *Calamity* for being accident prone, but on account of her spontaneous, eccentric dance movements. While dancing a fox trot or waltz she loves to slip into ballet routines. Her intention is to impress, but mostly she bamboozles.

Joe and Annie are accepting of each other. Once she executed a fast sequence of half turns, ended up on the other side of the dance floor, stole a man from his startled partner and proceeded to dance intimately with him while biting affectionately at his ear.



## Paula de Souza

Joe lives opposite the dance hall, waiting patiently for nightfall. His late afternoons are marked out with well timed cups of tea. As twilight follows day, his yearnings summon him to his future when the prologue to his happiness begins. Tonight a precious moment of exceptional beauty will occur.

Paula also waits patiently. As a child she had a woolly elephant called, Baa. It was always Baa who got hungry, tired or upset. He often interrupted long journeys because he needed to visit the loo. When anything in life went wrong it was Baa, her charming, sophisticated companion, who willingly took the blame.

Paula played a game with her school friends. When one of them winked an eye to another they went into the spare room. Sometimes they kissed before returning. They never spoke about what they had done until the following day when both the boys and the girls boasted extravagantly about their experiences.

One night she attempted a *renverse* - a bending of the body, performed during a turning step to create the dizzying illusion that she's momentarily off balance. Either her partner wasn't ready or she didn't communicate her intension properly. They stumbled and landed in a collapsed heap on the dance floor.

Before Paula could write she invented stories with characters who could talk non-stop. Later, she had a son by a man who left when she was pregnant. She wrote everything that journalism demanded and then met Martin, a boy she had kissed in the spare room of her friend's house after school.

Martin, a disillusioned writer with his nose in a book and his head in the clouds, had been reduced to taking a series of menial and unsatisfying jobs. The day he met Paula he was given the sack for poor timekeeping, but as luck would have it, their chance encounter changed everything; it brought them love.

While Joe is preparing himself for a night on dance floor, Paula phones, inviting him to a celebration. She and Martin have been commissioned to write a musical. Joe declines the offer; feeling in his bones that life has something special in store for him tonight. His mind boggling oddness surprises him.



## Rosie Hart

The love Joe finds on the dance floor is a secret love. Dancers rarely make their feelings known. Their attention is on physical things; the rhythm of the music, the success of a step or the beauty of a movement. The secret fragrance that comes from unashamedly tiny offerings needs neither question nor definition.

Joe reaches the dance floor and stands bathed in red light. It takes time for his eyes to adjust. Dark profiles whirl like silhouettes in a magic lantern show. He gazes at a tight blue dress on a dancer and watches as she throws back her head to calm a partner who is pressing ever closer with the energy of an embrace.



Elaborate decorations of abundant colour cover this oasis of exuberance, this hall of excited sensuality, this treasure trove of secrets. How many liaisons have occurred behind the ornate proscenium with its frescoed scenes of embracing figures caught in acts of delicate and restrained caress?

The woman in the blue dress is Rosie Hart. As a child she had loved the feel of silk and had always carried a fragment in her hand. Mostly she rubbed it sensuously across her lips. If a new person entered the room, she would offer them her piece of silk. The memory of this surprises her and makes her laugh.

One night a man, placing his hand upon her thigh, told her she would be sexier if she wore stockings. Later, the thought of it either made her feel excited or angry and her hidden feelings for men followed a similar alternating pattern of delight and revulsion. More often than not she chose the wrong man.

Rosie's ambition is always to move perfectly in unison with a partner; two bodies dancing as one. Once she danced with a tinker who had a beaming smile, read palms and danced slower than the rhythm of the music. He delighted in long drawn out movements that were impossible to predict.

Rosie repeatedly lost partners; she regarded it as her fate. When Joe heard she had given up dancing and was pining away in her room, he ran to her, knowing she could easily inflict pain on herself. He arrived like a thunderbolt to pull her out of the quagmire. A diet of tears had been her main source of sustenance.

You are completely stuck, Rosie Hart; your limbs have become rooted to the floor. Why must you always perform like a flower, turning forever on its stem to face the singular Sun? Be daring, use your rosy heart and send fresh glances darting out across the dance halls. Rosie turned over a new leaf.



## Chico the pianist

Joe, thankful for small mercies, doesn't long for things outside his grasp. Free of cynicism, he protects his rich bounty of generosity by refusing to use biting comments about other people's failings. These traits are a practiced art with Joe, as they are with Chico Pirelli. Together they shared a passion for innocence.

Before he could read, Chico read the bible. Carrying the huge book under his arm, he read to anyone who would listen. The stories were either his invention or tales he had previously heard. It's rare to find a boy with a striking affinity for narrative structure and a highly tuned sensitivity to lyrical patterns.

A remarkably gifted child, with a huge talent for the piano, Chico's genius for playing the instrument left him before his teenage years were over. One night he became deeply attracted to a young female singer while standing in the wings waiting to accompany her. Neither of the two youngsters could go on.

Awkward glances changed to drawn out gazes filled with longing. The couple were holding hands, feeling the electricity between them, when the compare announced their entrance and then something broke. Chico mislaid his certainty at that moment and he lost his delight in musical structure into the bargain.





To fulfil a desire for magical connection, Chico took up tango and fell in love while dancing with Amelia. At the end of each dance they clung together until the music struck up again. Amelia's lips gently skimmed his with kisses and this brought the Latin out in Chico who danced like an Andalusian gypsy.

Chico imagined that Amelia couldn't keep up with his expressive, virile dance, but at the end of the evening, he learned that Amelia was in danger and had to keep a low profile; a thing she couldn't achieve if he was intent on dancing the *Farruca* like a wild gypsy. Chico couldn't imagine that peril was stalking her.

While playing honky-tonk piano to an unappreciative audience of drunks, Chico was interrupted by Amelia who begged him to hide her. He directed her to duck behind the piano as two men entered and grilled the barman. Chico was greatly relieved that everyone, out of loyalty to him, refused to mention Amelia.

Next morning Chico awoke in his apartment with Amelia at his side. Outside in the street the two men from the club were waiting for her. The couple escaped by climbing out of the window. To keep her safe, Chico took Amelia to his sister's house up-river and travelled to see her whenever he could.

Their love blossomed. One winter's night a storm turned into a gale and as Chico was attempting to stop his car from swerving on the black ice it spun off the road and careered into the river. He tried to swim back to the bank, but the river was too cold and his strength failed him. He never arrived.

The next day Amelia, in despair, cast herself into the river to be with Chico forever. Joe organised a ball in honour of the much loved couple. He wrote on the invitation that women would be free to invite men to dance and men would be exempt from the usual outmoded etiquette of dance invitation.

It never made sense to Joe that men were expected to make eye contact with a woman and gesture towards the dance floor before inviting her to dance. That night women grabbed men and men accepted. At Joe's bidding the band struck up an Andalusian *Farruca* and he danced like a wild gypsy.



## Monica Goddard

When the light of the first star appears in the sky, Joe's heart turns to face a night of romance. He never tires of the sweetness that the twilight time leaves on his lips and he never questions the furtive delight that the stars create for him. For Joe, the evening is the real dawn, when life awakens new energies.

Monica introduces her presence with a hand on Joe's shoulder and a kiss on his cheek. Joe's life blood thrives on such close proximity. With an eye for sensual riches they watch the dancing and wait for signs of Eros at play, for tiny flickers of emotion that might confirm lively electricity between bodies.



As a child, Monica had a toy dog the size of a sock. It was called *Wowo*. Threadbare, with his stuffing leaking, he had no ears, no eyes, no nose and only half a stitch of black cotton for a mouth. *Wowo* looked after *Fluffy*, a rabbit with squeaky ears, a round nose, both eyes and a full, soft, squishy mouth.

Monica was teaching a man the salsa when his leg gave way and he tumbled to the floor. Once back on his feet the man began to laugh; he laughed real hard, like he would never stop. Then he began to cry; dry wrenching sobs of misery erupting silently. Monica coaxed his recovery, but he offered no explanation.

When Monica and Joe dance tango they appear to be sharing passionate kisses. Joe smiles when Monica whips her foot in, prior to throwing her leg out to the side and turning. This unpredictable rogue movement, a frequent action in tango, adds independence and drama to the female role. *Asi se baila*.

Monica's intimacies are misadventures and her unlikely partnerships give her no comfort. One day Joe bought her a magical necklace. "Throw it into the sky when you feel sad," he told her. "The gems will grow ever brighter until they turn into stars and then you can make a wish." Monica had hysterics.

Monica not wanting to accept a partner, roots around in her handbag, takes off her shoe and strikes up a conversation with Joe, who asks what is wrong. “That man dances like a corpse. Women don’t dance like the dead, they like their bodies to get hot from dancing. Men like that are only after kisses.”

Good technique allows the transfer of feelings. Bad technique leaves lines of communication crackling, like poor radio reception. If a man is shy, the woman might entice him out of his shell. If he communicates arrogance or boredom, then she’ll reflect that feeling back to him with increased hostility.

Monica watches David dancing with a new woman. She pursues him at every dance, but he flies from her swifter than the wind. David is in love with himself; his sole delight is to play teasing games on the dance floor. When women are attracted to him, he spurns them, taking no thought of the charge he elicits.

Even as David flies he charms Monica, but there is nothing she can do to win his heart. Monica, beside herself with jealousy and seized with desire for him, steps across the dance floor to insist on the next dance. He accepts, but he moves in a haughty fashion and wears a pained expression on his face.

Monica gazes into his eyes, as bright as stars. She studies his lips, full and enticing. She wants to kiss them. Why does she take too much pleasure from his lips? Why do his eyes rob her of her vision? He turns his head away, delaying not one moment to catch her gaze or listen to any imminent entreaties.





## Agnès Belmondo

Joe is an artist; his medium the expression of beauty in all its complexity. He wants life to be in proportion to the beauty born in his imagination. He thinks of his performances as manifestations of truth. Agnès, like Joe, has wagered on the flesh for most of her life. She assigns no place in her adventures to nostalgia.

Agnès, full of beans, is a born comic who sees dance as a primitive occasion to triumph. A world renowned film maker constantly on the lookout for exuberant opportunity, Agnès is rich in style and simple in plot. She's also a rebel with extraordinary visual insight and wonderful narrative virtuosity.

Recently, finding a gun on the floor of a hired car, she pretended to shoot gulls as she drove by the harbour in Marseilles. Seeing a police car in her rear-view mirror, she stepped out innocently and gazed at the view. They arrested her. Friends had to bale her out, insisting she was neither a gangster nor insane.

Agnès, remembers nothing from her infancy, yet she recalls every taste and smell of her youth in Algiers. After swimming she sat on the beach licking the salt crystals that covered her arm's downy hairs and when there was no tap water to wash with she happily tasted her day's swimming all night long.

Beside the beach was a dance hall where teenagers danced after swimming. Agnès wanted to place her lips on the nape of their necks to taste the delicious salt crystals there. On seeing one spectacularly beautiful young man coming out of the sea, she imagined her head had been emptied by the sun.

She wanted to express her gratitude, but had no idea who should receive her appreciation. She thanked the sea, the sun and the land, so generously blessed by the Gods. In bed that night, Agnès realised that the absolute could present itself out of the most insignificant of things. She was ten years old.



One of the striking features of the fandango is that dancers periodically speed up and then come to a sudden halt. Joe and Agnès aren't watching the dance, they're gazing at a woman standing perfectly still on the edge of the dance floor. Despite the warm night she is wearing a heavy coat that is decades old.

Agnès skips off to dance the fandango with Charlie. Springing through the air, she lands on her front foot; leaving her back foot raised out behind. The longer she holds this position in a freeze, the more Charlie laughs. Joe has meanwhile become transfixed by the woman in the old coat; she hasn't moved a muscle.

Agnès, returning to Joe, asks why he isn't dancing. Joe directs her to the woman standing frozen, gazing at the dancers from the edge of the dance floor. No one has approached her since she entered the hall. Many sigh and cast puzzled looks in her direction. "Ask her to dance," Agnès directs him.

"How old is she?" Joe asks and expresses his doubt that she will dance with him. He wants to be close to her, for he suspects there's a tear in her eye. Despite an eagerness to verify this, when Agnès encourages him further he insists that the woman should be left in peace. Suddenly, he declares he will ask her.

There's resolution in Joe's expression, yet he stands immobile. Rarely has Agnès seen such indecision in him. She turns Joe in the woman's direction and gives him a push. Joe walks as if he's sleepwalking. He moves round the edge of the dance floor towards the woman. A great many eyes are upon him.

As Joe approaches the woman it occurs to him that he was born for this performance. Having nourished a dedicated vocation for proud display, this occasion is going to be his finest. He realises now that his choice to spend life's precious hours among moving bodies rather than inquisitive minds is fully vindicated.



## Carla-Maria Pontin

Carla-Maria has tears in her eyes. She has no inkling that Joe is heading in her direction. He knows that if she refuses his invitation, no amount of persuasion is going to change her mind. He imagines she is nursing back to life something that died in her years ago. He has no idea why or what he will say to her.

Carla-Maria does not retrieve memories. Her life has been dedicated to making this fact unquestionable. When Carla-Maria first stood on two legs she wanted to dance. With her feet firmly rooted to the floor, she bounced up and down to music. Her mind has forgotten this, but not her body.

Flora arrived when Carla-Maria was two. Her mother became ill, her father deserted them and baby Flora soaked up all the attention. Carla-Maria started life with jealousy and anger as her predominant feelings; both were directed at her sister. By the time she was five, she was responsible for the family's wellbeing.

Carla-Maria took Flora to nursery, hung up her coat, changed her shoes and settled her in before going to school. One morning, angry, frustrated, she neglected her sister crossing the road. The infant was hit by a car and instantly killed. Carla-Maria, tears in her eyes, cursed the desolation of her dismal inheritance.



Carla-Maria wasn't held responsible, but she blamed herself. She rarely spoke; never laughed and avoided other children where possible. For twenty seven years she looked after her sick mother in recompense for the terrible accident she caused. Nothing she did fulfilled her penance or wiped the slate clean.

Life was a starving and demanding giant that could never be fed enough to stop its cries for sustenance. Carla-Maria, fearful and gloomy, buried her mother two days before she turned up at the dance hall. Yesterday Carla-Maria restored her mother's old ball gown. It hasn't been out of the wardrobe in thirty years.

This dress, a mass of sequins and lace, newly, if awkwardly sewn back together, lies beneath Carla-Maria's shabby coat. Nobody ever stands on the edge of the dance floor. Dancers either sit at tables, placed behind an elegantly wrought balustrade or they sit on soft benches arranged around the perimeter walls.

Carla-Maria watches the dancing and studies the hall. The colossal lights, hanging down from the ceiling like Hollywood chandeliers, are great clusters of star-filled delight that seem to point an accusing finger at the tragedy of her wasted life. You are guilty of hiding all signs of love throughout your finest years.



The abundant drapes rising up over the assembly of lights into the elegant dome, these swathes of cloud reaching up to the heavens, invite Carla-Maria out of the hole she has spent her life in. As the dancers whirl past she wipes away tears that trickle down her cheek. She's aware that her knees are tingling.

Carla-Maria is now working more intensely than at any time since she was five. Her tears are born of joy and the look on her face is elation. She is re-charging her batteries, taking in the world; assessing and guessing if these dancers are also shaking off the disturbances and frustrations of their lives.

Instinctively she recognises that it's the predisposition of dancers to move in unison with other bodies, to perform in unity at the hub of civilisation. The inference that dancers can take in pleasure as a single unit frames the possibility that she might unite her divided self in their collective world.

Here there's a glimmer of imminent release. She had danced as an infant and it was miraculous. Might she be reborn here on this dance floor, lift herself out of her arduous, unremitting struggle to stay alive, out of the oppressive anxiety that has filled her days, and become a magical child again?

## Happy Joe Luckey

Joe gives the impression that being alive is easy - all it takes is a visit to that place of dance where a pulse might coincide with the throbbing of another's heart and the job is as good as done. This is a deceptive parody. If there's a truth behind Joe's actions, it's 'never evade love.' Never evading love is not easy.

Joe needs no pious declarations to describe the intense spirituality of Carla-Maria's delicate up and down movements. Any words he might find would simply shroud the ecstasy of her actions in obscurity. Meanwhile, she is fashioning the thought that fruit is rewarded with sweetness after months of bitterness.



Nothing ever comes to Joe unaccompanied by sorrow; there are no exceptions to this rule. Carla-Maria imagines an angel of death gliding gracefully into her bedroom displaying an impressive pair of wings. Smiling at him, she unbuttons her shirt. Henceforth she will never be afraid to die alone.

Joe offers Carla-Maria his hands. She opens her arms wide, allowing her coat to fall. Every dancer stands perfectly still, watching, as Carla-Maria takes Joe's hands and very slowly shuffles one foot forward and then the other. Her movements cause Joe's primitive life to glow with intensity.

Brief encounters and chance occurrences may be ephemeral, but they can also be noble, like gifts of abundant moisture from the virile earth. The life of a sensualist is not a path of illusion. By bending his knees, Joe wills Carla-Maria's talent for pleasure to blossom. She knows bliss is close at hand.

Joe is not expecting a dance to occur. After shuffling forward Carla-Maria stops and with a broad smile assumes the countenance of one who deserves a reward. By this performance she's communicating a thing that's close to poetry; carrying out an extraordinary act of justice that is long overdue.

When all eyes are directed at Carla-Maria she hears the word indulgence. Reticence is about to engulf her. Is she now entangled in the carnal existence of dancers? Joe reads what's gaining the upper hand and whispers. "Let your action start at the heart, move it quickly to your back, then send it down your legs."

Carla-Maria's knees bend and straighten just as she had done as a child; the physical beauty of her movement is like a lavish gift. This is her redemption, the action that will change her life, the move she has hung her dreams on. It's the motion that causes her heart to know a love that is well beyond the realms of legend.







