Salsa for People Who Probably Shouldn't

Matt Rendell

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To our mothers, Marlen and Anna

SALSA FOR PEOPLE WHO PROBABLY SHOULDN'T

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Entre Familia

(Ay Júlia) Ahora yo voy a bailar.
(Ay Júlia), Now I'm going to dance.
'Júlia', composed by yin Carrizo,
performed by El Gran Combo de
Puerto Rico

(Eleven years ago.)
Night falls fast over a crowded street in a foreign city. As the last of the light is sucked out of the sky, griddle trolleys take over the street corners, sizzling with scorched fat and beef entrails that unthread into the air the sweet-edged stench of rotting flesh just beginning to caramelise. You salivate involuntarily: if there were a chance of keeping it down, you might be tempted. It is that time of day.

'*Arreglo la de presión.*'

For hours the shout has filled the air, and what you hear is, 'I can cure depression,' although he's really offering to repair your pressure cooker. He's gone now, along with the street hawkers shouldering their great sprays of brooms and the men who walk miles each day with a pot of corn broth in each hand, calling '*Mazamorra!*' up at the apartment buildings. A cyclist weaves through the evening gridlock with plantains hanging from the handlebars. A taxi driver rests the hand he uses to grip a mattress laid across the car roof. Energised bodies shifting cargoes with any means to hand.

They, and the well-dressed office workers who ignore them, are mainly focused on the journey home, but you're tall enough and white enough to be obviously foreign in a place where most people are shorter and darker and where the few foreigners they see are sometimes up to no good,

so the glances thrown your way don’t always leave time for anything reciprocal. But, even in the darkness, black and white play too excitedly in their eyes to let their looks pass unnoticed.

Invisible speakers set somewhere among the stalls emit a recorded rhythm, the lilt of leathery hands with weight and warmth, hands and arms on which the forces of the physical world act, slapping a beat from an ancient drum, although no one pays too much attention. Close up, a brass section and vocals loom into earshot, then fade, and all that’s left is the contagious, cryptic drumming.

Which was when I noticed him shadowing me along the sidewalk. He had decided I wasn’t dangerous, which didn’t feel like much of a compliment, although I needed to think about that and he didn’t give me time.

‘You’re not from here.’

Not knowing quite how to reply and not wanting to appear defensive, I said, ‘No, I’m from England,’ which was more than I intended.

‘What do you think of Colombia?’

‘Enchanting,’ I said, without thinking, or thinking too much, which amounted to the same thing.

‘Where are you going?’

‘The metro.’

‘Me too. There’s a free concert at the stadium. Why don’t you come?’

I knew how I would have reacted at home. But this wasn’t home and I fought the urge to withdraw into myself. Even so, when I replied, ‘Why not?’, I surprised myself again.

His name was Diego and his reserve had been loosened by the liquor that still hung on his breath. He’d been arguing with his wife. It didn’t seem polite to ask whether he had started drinking before the fight or whether he had hit the bottle for the same reason he was going to the concert, the same reason he had approached the harmless-looking foreigner: to step for a few hours outside the everyday

precincts of his life. Either way, I thought, ‘Why not? A few stops out, some music, a few stops back. Nothing life-changing.’

Except that neither of us, it transpired, knew Medellín. Diego had moved here recently from Bogotá. I had come in on the early flight, although the early flight was late and I had swept across town and made a meeting in the nick of time, only to find it had been cancelled. So, my sensibilities doubly offended, I checked into a hotel off La Playa, failing to notice the tell-tale stains of swatted cockroaches on the walls, and, with little else to do, set off for the metro to see the city from the overhead train.

By the time I reached the platform I was with Diego.

Medellín’s overhead metro is spotless. Passengers talk to each other here and, if you eat or smoke, they will ask you in all politeness to desist. So, when Diego says we have to change trains two stations down the line, a young woman standing within earshot corrects him: ‘No, *señor*, you change at the next stop for the stadium.’

It’s courtesy, not flirtation, but in an instant Diego’s attention has shifted from me to the girl, dressed discreetly in jeans and a light jersey, heading home, not out, but beautiful.

‘*Gracias, negra*,’ says Diego, all charm.

I’m suddenly uncomfortable. Colombian men use the term *negra* all the time as a term of endearment for women, even those whose skin tone is not at all dark. The light-hearted use of a word that could easily cause offence probably creates an air of confidence. All the same, it’s not a word I could ever use. Too many cross-cultural complexities: man, woman, English, Colombian, white, black.

As I ponder the tragic sweep of history, Diego moves fast, steering the girl round to the topic of an evening out. ‘Are you going to the concert?’

She isn’t. She’s been at a work do and she’s going home.

The exchange draws to an end but the train comes to a halt before the next station, so Diego has another shot. ‘Come with us.’

‘I don’t know you.’

‘I don’t know *him*.’

All this time, I’ve been gazing rather deliberately through and past and over her to convey the impression that I haven’t really noticed her, but when Diego says ‘*him*’ he means me, so, not entirely failing to pull myself together, I mutter something like, ‘I’ve got nothing else on,’ and smile.

Diego tells her I’m German, which I think is a reference to skin colour, not nationality, although I correct him anyway, with more emphasis than the occasion really demands. It’s as well I do. It’s just what’s needed to break the ice. We’re all smiling now, and Diego says, ‘Let’s all go to the concert, then we can take the metro home.’

The girl agrees and, together, we head off to the stadium.

By the time the concert finished, the metro had closed for the night. Diego was fairly far gone, gripping the woman I now knew as Viviana by the hand and strafing her with drunken compliments. He was insisting on a taxi to a nightclub but I was tired and un-streetwise, and I didn’t want to get into a fight over a woman, so I let them get some way ahead and hailed a passing taxi. I called out, ‘I’m in the Villa de la Candelaria in the centre. Call me if you like. You’re the only people I know here,’ before driving off.

Two days later, incredibly, reception put the call through. Incredibly, because Viviana had every reason to be angry with me. There’d been something protective in her decision to come with us to the stadium. She’d wanted to keep an eye on me. She had also hated the music: songs of social protest sung by and for radical students and white-skinned intellectuals. None of the Afro-Caribbean warmth her tastes required. But she’d put up with it for me and I’d repaid her by abandoning her, not realising she didn’t have the cash to

pay for a taxi. She'd made it home, just, no thanks to me, by climbing in next to Diego, giving the driver her address and leaving Diego, who was too drunk to object, to pick up the tab. The following day she had told her family about her evening. It was her mother who encouraged her to make sure I'd made it back in one piece.

She was one of those women who seem to contain their countries. There was a slowness to her, a refusal to rush I initially took for a variety of shyness. It was only much later I understood it as a deeply rooted style of being. She moved from her centre, the spot below the navel where gravity acts on the body mass, the place where changes of direction, weight shifts and spinal fluidity begin, beneath the deep breathing apparatus. It was the movement of someone with a clear sense of who she is. Perhaps that was why I was drawn to her.

Twice that week, I visited the flat she shared with two brothers and her mother, Marlen, with whom, I discovered, she also shared her upright carriage. Their looks and languid body language flowed down the maternal line. They had the same handwriting and couldn't be told apart on the telephone. Expert in the rhythms of dialogue, they would talk from the moment they arrived home after work until bedtime. Vivi's brothers would come in, eat, go out again or disappear upstairs, but when they came back to the kitchen the conversation would still be in full flow. Strangers to that wonderful womanly facility for speech, they'd ask, 'Still talking? What do you talk about?'

They talked about their day, was the answer. Vivi had earned the best matriculation mark in her school, then her father had left home so she had paid her own way through university, getting up at five to fit in work and study. She'd gone out to work to bring money into the family home, managing a busy office, ten things at a time, four years distributing industrial dyes, three years with a US

multinational. There'd been no time for unrealisable ambitions or adolescent rebellions. Her moral education was also severe, given that Marlen was a social worker who held parenting sessions for poor and displaced women, helping them with the skills needed to raise decent children in deprived areas that had been devastated by drug-related violence.

It seems to me now that those long evening exchanges were part of the simple assimilation of experience, where wisdom lies. Marlen was a woman of charisma, adept in the negotiations that take place as men, women and children teeter together over the abyss of incompatibility. She kept a ready supply of cautionary tales that could raise a smile, calm anxieties and smooth the way to modesty and reason. She told me the story of a large woman who used to beat her much smaller husband so often and so severely it scandalised the neighbourhood. When she grew ashamed and mended her ways, her husband was dejected. It was only when she beat him, he said, that he knew she loved him. Between people from such different worlds, so strangely hewn to the same sharp edges, at times such strangers to themselves, how could the barriers dissolve and love ensue? With Marlen, everything had this same sense of fun and mystery.

During my first visits, Vivi put on a tape of her favourite music, which was also her mother's. A background drumming, with bursts of colour from the trombones and trumpets, and an almost operatic voice singing songs that were also stories, accompanied the conversations between the three of us. And although it seems strange now, it didn't seem at all odd then to sit there with my future wife and her mother, being vetted, as you would probably have to call it, because I suppose it was a test of some sort, not of my Spanish or sense of rhythm, but as if my response to the music would tell them something they needed to know before our relationship went any further.

I remember we stopped to listen to a funny song about a lazybones who spends his days apparently preparing to go to work, without ever leaving the house, and I had to ask them to repeat lines I couldn't understand, and Vivi got up and danced with a tiny French poodle named Kiwi who stood on his rear paws and evidently knew a lot more about salsa than I did.

I'd been visiting Colombia regularly for five years. I'd produced a television documentary and the beginnings of a book which gave a semblance of purpose to what was never in reality more than a baffled searching, the real scope of which might well have been the avoidance of things I had no words to describe, things I probably had with me all along. I suppose there was also the vague intuition that your life can become visible to you if you take enough distance from it.

When I was there, the street choreography seeped into me through the pores. It seeped out again, sadly, when I left, and leaving had become part of the work I did – going out into the world, gathering what fragments I could and coming home to shape them into written form. I thought it was the responsible thing: to distance myself from brute experience then burnish it until it glistened with objectivity. But childhood memories were involved, too, of the vicarage I grew up in and my maternal grandfather, a reader of Hebrew and Greek, disappearing into his study to write among leather-bound books of strange alphabets on tissue-paper pages. A withdrawal from physical reality into the world of the mind.

Dance had been low on the agenda when I was growing up in the battlefield of British family life that was the 1970s. My grandparents knew the pleasure of two gently interlaced bodies moving together in time, but I never saw them dance, and pair-dancing had gone out of fashion before my parents ever got together. My mother, when she was a teenager in Liverpool, went to the Cavern and probably

shook to The Quarrymen before they became The Beatles, but that was before I was born and by the time my memories begin we were a one-parent family and she had no one to dance with anyway.

It certainly wasn't something my generation had much time for. Dance steps sounded too much like being told what to do. We went in for spontaneous, improvised, delirious, ad hoc and, for some, more adventurous than me or just more reckless, drug-induced self-expression. We were too busy hanging loose, too caught up in our own identities to dance properly. So, as a ten-year-old, I flailed the occasional limb at the school disco, and as a teenager I pogoed and head-banged a bit, and that was about it, before I grew into one of those people whose sense of personal space extended several feet in every direction and in whom the slightest physical contact, in a rush-hour train with a fellow traveller, for instance, produced something close to panic. The sort of person who burbles 'Sorry' in the event of a near miss when no actual physical contact has taken place.

*

I sometimes wonder if it was an instinctive, unconscious desire for some sort of therapy that drew me to salsa. In about 1981 three of Cuba's most famous bands began to take annual residencies at Ronnie Scott's Jazz Club, packing the place out: Irakere, led by a piano virtuoso named Chucho Valdés; the Arturo Sandoval group, led by Irakere's former trumpeter; and the island's most popular band, Juan Formell's Los Van Van. I went to see them all every year, but I either stood in the crowd at the back or sat at a table near the stage. It never occurred to me to dance.

Five or six years later, with a group of friends, I became a regular at a night club near old Street in the City of London. It was called the Bass Clef and they had started holding a Latin night on Fridays. There was a DJ and the occasional

band called Picante or Palenque with musicians like Roberto Pla or Chucho Merchán. There were a few Latin Americans among us, although, since most of the City's Spanish-speaking Caribbeans were cleaning office floors through the night for less an hour than we were paying for our Tequila slammers, there were probably more of them playing than dancing.

I remember preparing to take my first step on the apparently solid dance floor when – *boom!* – the bass, anticipating the downbeat with a punch, jolted the earth beneath me and knocked me strangely off balance, and suddenly I was plunging through a rush of sound and movement into the tropical storm of Caribbean classical music. Then, *bam!*, just as suddenly, the bass was back with something solid under my feet. And so it went on, *boom!*, the ground speeding away, then *bam!*, rushing back to find me. It was like a funfair ride. There were many rhythms but it was the bass, speeding ahead of the pulse and then relaxing almost too far to let me catch up, that commanded me to shape my body to the this exhilarating shifting sound-scenery.

The music I found so captivating derived from the folk genres of the Spanish-speaking Caribbean, which had been mixed together and given a driving, urban feel. Recorded by mostly New York-based bands in the 1960s and '70s, and marketed aggressively under the catch-all label of salsa, it was ten or fifteen years old and already had an aura of nostalgia.

How people danced to it depended on where they came from. In Latin America, revellers fused together movements from local folk dances, Mexican movies and films of the New York clubs into improvised interpretations of the music. Until the teaching industry mobilised itself, there was no such dance as salsa; you simply made it up as you went along. Except, of course, that, where I came from, dance didn't

really figure in people's lives, so there wasn't much raw material to make it up with.

That pattern of deep punches that forestalled the downbeat, then paused until the following measure had a name: *tumbao*, 'fallen over', 'wrong way up'. In Central American slang, *tumbao* also meant 'duped' or 'robbed', as in 'you fell for it', as if the beat had been stolen and had turned up somewhere unexpected, putting you suddenly out of kilter. In the first verse of the song '*Pedro Navaja*' by Rubén Blades, the anti-hero is described as walking *con el tumbao* – with the swagger, the lilt – *que tienen los guapos al caminar* – that marks him out as a street thug. And, as every fighter knows, it's the blow you don't see coming that floors you: it punches the mind towards delirium, shocks the body into movement, steeps the senses in rhythmic blows, beats the spirit towards demonic possession, a cultic obeisance to a higher will.

My gait marked a simple rhythm, despite the sense of peripheral drift affecting otherwise simple movements. It was like walking in a fast-flowing river or with my eyes turned skywards as clouds rushed past overhead. The landscape moved, the horizon shifted, the thing I called 'I' was suddenly elsewhere and the 'me' I discovered existed only in relation to the sound and motion on the dance floor.

While most of our group made our personal, if rather similar, interpretations of the music, alone as part of the crowd, embracing nothing more sentient than a bottle of beer, the Chilean boyfriend of one of my fellow students guided her through a succession of semi-embraces, spicing their movements with the lightest notations of a tendency towards a kiss. I probably thought of it as salsa, although it was really *cumbia*, a Colombian dance that had caught on in Chile in the 1950s and reached Britain 20 years later, brought by émigrés fleeing Pinochet. A dance displaced twice in as many generations and washed up on an English

shore by a wave of Latin American immigration in the 1970s. It had a dreamlike quality. I found it irresistible.

Soon afterwards, the musicians boycotted the Bass Clef over wages and conditions, and the place closed. It reopened under new management and there were no more Latin nights, but, while they lasted, for those of us with a student grant to squander on London ticket and bar prices, it was magnificent.

Across the water, the Generalísimo was still in power and continuing his contribution to the political violence that was rife across Central and South America. In London, solidarity campaigns had sprung up to lobby Parliament, pressure the media and raise public consciousness. I joined thousands on sponsored bike rides to help the cause, and attended smaller, more earnest bashes for El Salvador or Nicaragua in church halls and people's homes with concerned university lecturers and radical students, plus a few migrants and refugees who must, at times, have felt like laboratory specimens. I had no idea how Central Americans handled hellos and welcomes. The English organisers, true to local practice, handled them rather badly, with no introductions or outstretched hands or welcoming smiles, but nor were there enough people present to allow you to go unremarked. It wasn't at all clear whose etiquette rules applied or what the appropriate language was, although I spoke little or no Spanish at the time, so I didn't have much choice. I tried drifting casually into conversation with whoever was closest but little came of it. There was always the unspoken suspicion that the next man's concern or involvement might not be sufficiently informed or profound or authentic, although not knowing salsa was part of it. Not that there was that much actual dancing. But there were also at these gatherings occasional immigrant couples who, when the music started, entered that enchanting, itinerant embrace,

momentarily in their own world, surrounded by an aura of suspended childhood. I made a mental note.

At the bigger fundraisers, there were live bands. Central American mothers with toddlers swayed to the music beside embarrassed English husbands trembling half-heartedly in attendance. Even those doggedly determined to shine in public mingled the visible strain of going the whole hog with a distinct awareness of doing something deeply foreign. The sheer intensity of our respect for the particularities of other people's ways of life imprinted on our faces the hazy smiles of amateur actors who quote but never quite become their parts.

I'm not sure how much of a danger all this posed to Augusto Pinochet. I felt threatened enough to enrol in evening classes at a dance academy near Euston Station. This was long before today's proliferation of lessons. The early enclave of salsa education to which I gravitated was called The Place. I was barely out of my teens and hopelessly tongue-tied with women, and part of the attraction, apart from the overarching politics, of course, was the prospect of weaving my limbs into those of a pulsating female body or two.

The only thing was, until the decisive moment, I hadn't given much thought to the prospect of getting extremely close to a member of the opposite sex and making sustained eye contact. I knew no language of flirtation that would allow any affection thereby kindled to survive our unremitting gaze. There was every danger my initial glance would decay into something exposed and shivering. The life of the eyes was too raw.

There were other deficiencies: an inability to move body parts without looking at them, or to stand in proximity to another human body without going into generalised muscular spasm. My shoulders were tense and my elbows clenched to my sides. I shambled around, unconscious of the co-ordination of my clothes or the condition of my hair,

perhaps because etched into the scattered contents of my personality was a resistance to style and elegance, deposited there by members of my lineage who had torn down rood screens and stained-glass windows because surface elegance was a godless distraction from deeper realities, and who duly regarded dance as a lewd, groping, pestiferous vice. What was I thinking when I involved myself in an activity in which these things really, genuinely mattered?

My class, sure enough, had more women than men. It was 1989 and lambada was in the air: the song was in the charts and our teacher was a Brazilian woman who added the sort of full-on sensuality that was a long way from the make-believe quality I'd glimpsed in my classmate's *cumbia*. There were moves I found frankly embarrassing, especially given the presence of a slight, curveless thing in a tiny orange lambada-style skirt whose hem rose more than it fell, driving the few men in the class to distraction. But she turned out to have a steady boyfriend, and the midwifely calls of 'Hips forward', 'Bend your knees' and 'Don't forget to breathe' had the effect of stifling the call of the erotic. The classes were too slow for me anyway, too group orientated, nowhere near *foreign* enough, so, although I was still desperate to learn, after three or four sessions, I dropped out.

Then two things happened. The first took place in Colombia, years after those first lessons but still before I met Vivi. I visited a bar in Pereira, in the heart of the coffee-growing region, and watched workers trudge out of the night, some scraping mud from their boots, and move towards a dance floor already crammed with thickset, paired-off frames. There they merged into salsa's gentle role play of concealment, detection, false revelation and rediscovery. Each space was filled with more heaving human matter than seemed plausible although the impression was not of mass but of weightlessness. The bodily submission to

rhythm and melody, each gesture matching an inner release, shook off the day's burdens.

I thought I recognised dancers who descended more deeply into the music than others. It wasn't that they were more elegant or rhythmic, or showed the lightness of touch of the professional dancer. They had something harder to define – the ability to respond in dance to each change of musical colour, each pun or threat or amorous declaration of the lyrics. There was a sense of a world behind the world: rituals of touch and distance, steps, words, notes, opening out on to something inexhaustible.

I would have liked to let my body mingle with theirs but I had been brought up not to be taken in by such enactments. I had or feigned no belief in role play, my own or other people's. In any case, as a foreigner in a provincial town, local perspectives on my presence pressed on me there, and the dance floor represented not a *Saturday Night Fever*-style platform for showing off but the promise of anonymity, a shedding of self. The dark enticing rhythms of the Afro-Caribbean might have given me somewhere to hide, a background to merge into – if only I'd known how to dance.

The second thing that happened to me was meeting Vivi. The more I learned about her, the more Colombia's passion for music and dance imposed itself. Movement and rhythm were tied to lineage, inheritance and the land.

The maternal line of her family came from the Chocó, Colombia's poorest, blackest region, overwhelmingly populated by the descendants of slaves brought in colonial times from Central Africa and the territories now called Nigeria and Ghana to work the gold mines. The Bantú, yoruba, Ibo and Akan inheritance of the Chocoans left them with a seemingly inexhaustible reservoir of rhythmic body movement.

Vivi's great-great-grandmother was a strong, black Chocoan woman called Colomba, whose daughter marrieda

Spaniard named Cosme Damián, a police inspector in a Chocó village called Valencia, who was also a spectacular dancer. He was ambitious too, so, in the 1930s, when the plan to build a highway to connect the interior to the Pacific was announced, Cosme set off upwards and eastwards through the dense forest, sensing an opportunity.

Amonth into his journey, he stumbled on a place towering with palm trees. Most of the Chocó suffers 24-hour heat and humidity, but this was 3,575 feet above sea level. At night, a mist descended on the forest, meaning no mosquitoes, meaning in turn that it would be the perfect stop-off point for the road project and then a trading post for the migration that would surely follow. So, on 19 March 1938, the Feast of St Joseph, he founded a town there and called it San José del Palmar, or Palmar, for short. Snakes came slithering in from the trees, and, as Cosme didn't like to kill them, the other settlers called him the snake charmer.

The snake charmer's daughter, named Colomba after her grandmother, attracted the attention of a merchant named Sigifredo from Antioquia, the region whose capital was Medellín. He had nous and a salesman's way with words and he was a typical Antioqueño: hardworking, adventurous, self-reliant, commercially shrewd. He started buying maize and cocoa from producers around Palmar and loading them on to trains of mules for the journey over rough ground to the town of Cartago. He returned the same way with food, medicine, cloth, shoes, crockery: everything the settlement needed.

Although Sigifredo was from a Conservative family and Colomba was a Liberal, they never argued over politics, despite the tensions in the country which led to violence even before the assassination in April 1947 of Jorge Eliécer Gaitán, the Liberal presidential candidate.

Too dark-skinned to have been accepted by the ruling elite, Gaitán had polarised the nation, flaunting crooked, outsized teeth, sweating profusely, even foaming at the

mouth as he delivered inflammatory speeches to huge crowds. Music and dance were integral to his presidential campaign: not the delicate *bambuco* of the ruling classes, but *porro*, a genre of dance music full of Caribbean flavour, one of the precursors of Colombian salsa. The white ruling class of both parties disapproved.

The political violence reached Palmar in 1949. Colomba escaped the machete by hiding under the houses and then making her way inland with her children. Marlen was three years old, and the memory of crawling through body parts, and of going to collect water and finding corpses bobbing in the tank, stayed with her for the rest of her life. Years later, excavating to improve the sewers, they found bones from the mutilations and killings. There were months when neither of Marlen's parents knew whether the other was alive.

Sigifredo and Colomba eventually had ten children together, Marlen being the second born, and, when peace returned, Colomba imposed her considerable charisma over those who met her, with the patience and collectedness of mind of an ancient African ideal. She organised the choir in the San José del Palmar chapel. She sang beautifully and played boleros on the church harmonium. Black maids filled the house with their singing voices, and Marlen listened to music in the stockroom of her father's general store, where peasant farmers sat among sacks of coffee, cocoa and maize, and the music of a station called Radio Sutatenza rang out from the town's only wireless and mingled with the pungent smells. She liked to slip out in the evening to dance, which was why Colomba had to cover for her when Sigifredo noticed their daughter's absence.

When Marlen was sent away to study in the departmental capital, Quibdó, even Sigi couldn't isolate her from music and movement. Marlen learned *cumbia*, *porro*, *merecumbé* – a mixture of *merengue* and *cumbia* – and *son chocoano*, intense dances signifying contact with the earth and its

gods. They gave shape to her life and led her to love and the birth of her three children.

Marlen shared her mother's qualities. They were both unflinching in their moral strenuousness, but also sympathetic to the imperfections of living and full of motherly kindness towards life. Their deep Catholicism, their guardianship of religion in their family homes, made me think of ancient household shrines under feminine protection.

This was Vivi's inheritance, although she learned to dance not in Palmar, nor even in Medellín, high in the mountains, but in her father's home city, Cartagena de Indias, the yellow-walled citadel town where the conquistadors once stored their loot before shipping it back to Spain, in the heat of the Caribbean coast.

Among the Costeños, dance was a long-ripened generational rite, a taken-for-granted part of development through which, at a certain age, children continue their developing relationship with their own bodies and those of others. Walking but not yet speaking, perhaps not even two, Vivi had danced with her cousins after meals, half-guided, half-bullied by her father's mother, Julia Carmona, a happy woman, always laughing, always dancing, with a husband who never danced in his life yet fathered nine children, all male, all expert on the dance floor. Vivi's father Luis – Lucho – was the eldest. He and his brothers left the coast to study in the high-altitude inland cities of Bogotá, Cali and Medellín, but, whenever they returned to the coast, it was to take on their cousins in all-night dance competitions. Their contests weren't about acrobatics or tying their companions in knots, but about the angle of a hat, the slant of the shoulders, the effortlessness of a turn, the coolness of a mask. Lucho and orlando, the second son, won every time.

The goal of all this activity wasn't technical mastery or the acquisition of a large repertoire of figures, but something altogether harder to define called *sabor*; a good dancer was

sabroso or *sabrosa* – tasteful, we might say, although what this actually meant wasn't something you could fix in words. It was one of those things you just *knew* when you saw.

So, to Vivi, dance was part of the welter of ordinary undistinguished things she did without ever asking how or why. It let her sense and enact and relate to things in a way spoken language couldn't come close to. It wasn't something she had beliefs or doubts about or framed in too many words.

After meeting her, I spent the week in Medellín and we met two or three times. I left to carry on my interviews elsewhere in Colombia, but I returned a month later to work on both my book and our relationship. At the end of our second week together, we kissed. Then I flew back home to England.

Four months later, back in Medellín, I rented a flat for a couple of months and settled in to write my book. We saw each other every day and, on my next trip to Colombia, a year to the day after we met, we married.

We honeymooned in Cartagena de Indias. One day we boarded a *chiva*, a reconditioned Chevrolet truck with wooden seating for 30 or 40, and toured the attractions. The driver, a huge black man with long hair he wore plaited and beaded, tipped his head rhythmically to music resounding from an immense sound system mounted before him. He collected his passengers' fares with an outstretched arm, without breaking his concentration. His posture suggested a man admirably comfortable in his skin. I imagined he received no more than small change for his services, but he seemed so fully himself that he could take the world as it came, free of the urge to take more from each moment than each moment has to offer. And I imagined that salsa had something to do with it; not just a momentary distraction from his circumstances, but – what? – a set of values, a way of being.

I was reading too much into him, no doubt. All the same, I thought, blessed with his temperament, I would have stayed. I was comfortable in Colombia, whatever I thought I was doing there. Instead, after our week in the sun, we returned to reality. Meaning, of course, reality for me.

We flew into winter, landing at Heathrow one morning in January. On the flight, British Airways had upgraded us, so, for the first and perhaps the last time in our lives, we had boarded an airliner, turned left and ordered champagne. When we disembarked, the first impact of Vivi's new life hit her. She had never thought of leaving Medellín, her family and the merging of identities that united her to her mother. Her lungs had never taken in air this cold. And she was suddenly embroiled in one of those fractured families that are no less typically English for being scattered halfway around the globe.

Days after arriving in London, we were on the move again, to meet the rest of my dispersed family at my father's home in Australia. After that second leg of our honeymoon, we returned to my family home in Harwich, on the east coast, to settle. To call another country home must have jarred with her. So must confronting the persistent idea, held with great warmth and well meaning, that difference is surface deep and that beneath it lies universality, and that universality, basically, means England and the English, whose values and way of life were not merely the expression of a set of commonly held desires and preferences but in some larger sense the obvious and necessary values of humankind.

I don't know how much I helped. Coping with my own culture shock in Vivi's country was incomparably easier than responding to hers in mine. I lacked the skills and probably the sensitivity too, when what to Vivi was almost opaquely alien was to me so familiar I could hardly see it was there. There were friends who, with the best of intentions,