

Frenchness ... Not Just Food

French dancing in Dunedin

It is midsummer in the Dordogne valley. The days are hot and golden, the nights mellow and sweet on the skin. I am sitting outside the café in the village square in Trémulât, drinking cognac, smoking a cigarette, wearing the black and white sundress with the little bolero that the *vendeuse* in the shop in Bordeaux had pronounced *très chic*. It is ten in the evening on the *Quatorze Juillet, la Fête Nationale*, Bastille Day. It is thirty years ago.

First there are the fireworks. And then there is a band. And then there is dancing. I watch. Colette, the *coiffeuse* who cut my hair the week before, and complimented me on the grammatical accuracy of my French, courteously ignoring my limited vocabulary. Raphaël, the barman, who slipped me a free coffee on Saturday. The grumpy man behind the counter at the *Bureau de Poste*. Everyone is dancing. Except me. Not because I don't want to. Not because I feel restrained by my seventy-two year old mother and my six year old son. Not because I am a foreigner. But because I can't dance. Not this sort of dancing where couples spin happily together, not really tripping over each other's feet, or groups join up in long lines and snake their way through a series of steps which seem almost second nature. I can do the twist and rock and roll and the solitary gyrations to loud music in crowded rooms that passed for dancing in my student days. But I can't feel the beat of a waltz or a mazurka in my bones and let my body relax into a pattern where I can stop thinking and be drunk on movement and music.

So I don't dance. I take my two generations home and put them to bed and sit on the terrace and listen to the music from the square. What would have happened, I wonder. Would I have thrown caution to the winds, leaving behind forever house and cat and lover in New Zealand? Would everything have turned upside down? Or would I just have danced and had that to remember as well as the scent of the evening and the still warm air fingering my face?

Mine is a life where the times I have danced count themselves on my fingers and toes. Which is why, at the beginning of this year, I began attempting to train my body to move through the different rhythms and sequences of French dance. I am no better than I would have expected. Mostly I still find myself muttering to my feet and trying to verbalise what should happen. But just sometimes, like tonight, when I find myself running round the room, part of a chain of dancers in a fast *Gavotte*, or pacing elegantly in a slow *Rondeau*, or when I swing a little with the *Valse à 8 temps*, I get an inkling of what may happen.

Maybe I'll never be in France again in mid-July. But perhaps one day there will be a summer evening in Dunedin, a band playing in the Rotunda in the Botanical Gardens, and everyone will be dancing. And I'll be dancing too. There is still time for Cinderella to take her prince to the ball.

Marylin August from Les Belles Vilaines

Kate Grace teaches French dancing on Thursday evenings. Her vision is to get people dancing, lots of people. Some of the students are in their twenties, some are nearing retirement. Some of us could dance before, some, like me, have dived off the deep end, but none of this seems to matter. Kate just assumes that we will end up able to do it, and works away patiently, and amazingly quickly it all comes together.