

STORYTELLER

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SETTING: ballroom dance studio. This room is dark from evening twilight and low lights. Red velvet decorations. Chairs lined up against the wall. One wall is mirrored.

OPEN: *Marla enters the studio, wearing her long coat, clutching her purse in her hands. She stands in the middle of the room, sighs, and closes her eyes, begins to move to imaginary music with an imaginary dance partner. Tony enters and watches. She comes to a rest. He walks over to her quietly, takes away her purse and reaches his arms around her to divest her of her coat. Her eyes remain closed.*

TONY

Closer. *(Marla steps forward. He walks around her slowly. Her anticipation can be felt. He pulls her into his arms and begins to dance with her)*

MARLA

What? No music? *(Tony pulls out a remote control and big band music from the forties floods the room. They dance)* I am a flapper--no, no not a flapper. I am elegant, with upswept hair and a tight militaristic dress. Red red red lipstick and my last pair of stockings, well mended. I dream to be an Andrews sister but tonight, at the USO dance I don't just meet any sailor. I meet...Rhett Butler and I know from the first that although he is infuriating, he titillates my senses. All my senses and as he holds me in his arms, I know I will do everything to damn the war effort and spend the rest of my life with him. *(Tony spins her and she stumbles and lands on her butt.)* With him, I forget everything--nothing in the world matters but him. I slip and he gently helps me to my feet.

TONY

They pay you money to write like that?

MARLA

I pay you money to dance like this. Come, help me up Tony.

TONY

(lights a cigarette as he looks down at her) Shlock

MARLA

Trash. Garbage. Porn. Sexist. Boring. Antiquated. Chauvinistic. It still sells. Now? *(Tony pulls her up)* The Rainbow Room. His lean body is clothed in a tuxedo. I am

MARLA (Cont)

being danced around the floor in my black taffeta dress.

Under the soft lights my skin glows like the pearls he gave me earlier that evening. He charms me-- *(Tony pulls her close to him and dips her, but does not let her up.)* with soft touches at the back of my neck, my cheek. *(she begins to get uncomfortable in the dip).*

TONY

Keep your balance. I've got you.

MARLA

He is..he's--let me up.

TONY

Get back into it.

MARLA

Tony? Darling, I'm much better at this standing upright, not hanging here. Please. Is this part of the lesson? Let's dance.

TONY

C'mon.

MARLA

(Chris enters and watches). Oh Tony, you dark swarthy smooth-hipped virile--

CHRIS

Hello everybody. Tony. Marla *(kisses her cheek while she's hanging in Tony's arms).* Looks like you've started without me.

MARLA

(Tony pulls her up but still holds her)

Christopher. I was beginning to think you wouldn't come.

CHRIS

Ye of little faith-- would I miss this?

MARLA

How am I supposed to know? You are late.

CHRIS

I rushed to get here. Christ, Marla, I'm not even five minutes late.

MARLA

Bad day at the office dear? Offer the lady a cigarette Tony. Won't you?

TONY

Last one. Here. *(Takes it out of his mouth and sticks it into hers before she can react. He walks over to the stereo system and turns it down)*

MARLA

Quite the rake is he not?

CHRIS

(pulls the cigarette out of her mouth) I'm not up for this.

MARLA

(kisses him lightly on the lips, then leans back and releases smoke from her mouth) Oh, Christopher...Thursday night, 8:00--what is written down in our his and her palmpilots--Tony.

CHRIS

Mine says "meet Marla." Lets go home.

MARLA

We said here.

CHRIS

Marla, I can't think of anything I'd rather not top off a day like today with more than sliding all over the floor with Mr. Smooth Shoes.

MARLA

Watch out, you're not being fun. I'm feeling...I'm feeling rejected. Angered because I'm making an effort and you're refusing to participate.

CHRIS

I'm refusing? It's just too much, Marla. Don't start in on me tonight.

MARLA

You wanted to spend more time together--quality time? You wanted to do things together. You and me.

CHRIS

One. Two. Three.

MARLA

Getting a little possessive dear?

CHRIS

Should I?

MARLA

Oh yes, I've taken a swarthy Italian lover, but just for a little more excitement I've decided to have him teach the two of us ballroom dancing. Just for kicks. You can't dip alone, Christopher.

CHRIS

Then dance with me. At home. You and me. No Tony, just us.

MARLA

We paid for the lessons.

CHRIS

And you got here early to have a little private instruction, is that why you don't want to leave?

MARLA

I'm supposed to be the one with the imagination for ridiculous torrid love affairs.

CHRIS

It hasn't stopped at imagination before.

MARLA

Not fair. You're creating miserable little fictions for yourself to believe.

CHRIS

This time. And where do the ideas for your books come from anyway?

MARLA

(pause) And on top of it all, we must learn to dance, Christopher. We look so silly at weddings and charity functions smiling and sitting, sitting and eating, eating and chatting.

CHRIS

Stop thinking about appearances for once. So we'll look silly.

TONY

You ought to be used to it by now.

CHRIS

I don't pay you for sarcastic remarks.

TONY

With my compliments, Mr. Forrester.

MARLA

I wish you hadn't thrown away my cigarette Chris. Tony? Show me that step again? *(he takes her in his arms)* Besides Christopher, ballroom dancing is so romantic. I may even *(Chris echoes these words)* write my next book about it. Oh, Christopher, maybe we know each other a little too well? One more turn around the floor, Tony. *(He swings her around for a moment.)*

TONY

One, two, three. One, two, that's it. You're following my lead beautifully. *(He turns to Chris, takes him in his arms and they begin to dance)* Loosen up. One two three. One two three. Somebody hasn't been practicing. Feel the music.

I'm trying. CHRIS

I know. Spin. Good. One two three. TONY

This isn't working tonight. CHRIS

Where are you? TONY

Tony's Danctasy. Red plush chairs. Neon sign. Make your reservation two months in advance. CHRIS

Somebody's not trying either. One two three. One two three. Mr. Forrester--perhaps some different music? TONY

I don't know. *(Tony pulls out the remote control, click)* No, not this. CHRIS

One minute. *(he walks to the back. Chris picks up his coat,leaving)* TONY

You might as well enjoy yourself. MARLA

I can't. I'm trying. CHRIS

Pretend I'm not here. MARLA

Are we doing this together, Marla? CHRIS

We will. *(she reaches out to touch his cheek, but doesn't know whether to complete the gesture)* Thanks for staying. MARLA

I quit the firm. CHRIS

Damnit Chris! We agreed you were going to wait. MARLA

I couldn't. They'll be calling me any day now with a solid offer. Then we'll be in movie heaven. CHRIS

Pipe dreams. You didn't have to quit. MARLA

I couldn't write one more thirty-second spot about feminine deodorant if you paid me. CHRIS

They were paying you. It was a matter of time before you got another account. MARLA

CHRIS

This is a matter of time too.

MARLA

It's always been a matter of time. Can't you see they're just keeping you on a leash?

CHRIS

It's a good screenplay.

MARLA

I'm sure the firm will take you back, Chris. Take some vacation time then go back.

CHRIS

It's done. Be happy for me.

MARLA

I can't be. You're going to get hurt, Chris. And you're making me watch.

CHRIS

Let's sleep in tomorrow?

MARLA

I've got an appointment.

CHRIS

Oh.

MARLA

Christopher, damnit, do not pull a guilt trip on me---

TONY

(to MARLA) Madame. (they begin to dance)

MARLA

I am in Vienna and I spin around the ballroom in the arms of Sigmund Freud.

TONY

(stops dancing and stares at her) I know enough about people.

MARLA

I'm sure you do. What you must think of us, Tony.

TONY

I think you're not concentrating. Follow my lead. *(begins to dance again)*

MARLA

It must be very intriguing, exhilarating to be exposed to an endless parade of people looking for you to teach them a little something and give them satisfaction. You peek into their lives. *(dance, dance, dance)* What did little boy Tony want to be when he grew up?

TONY

What did you?

MARLA

Oh...a dancer, a stewardess, a world traveler, an Indian Princess, a lady in waiting, a cowgirl--

TONY

Never the writer of romance novels, always the star--

MARLA

I envy you.

TONY

Of what?

MARLA

You dance above it all.

TONY

Don't you, romance lady? One, two, three, one-two-three. Closer.

MARLA

I'm so tired of fictive lives. I'm a creator and you an observer, Tony, only you get to touch flesh and blood. I reach out--for air.

TONY

An observer looks on. I don't stand by.

MARLA

I can cook up a great story but its all whimsy. Little fluffy pieces of whimsy I create. Real life is much more -- real

TONY

You've got real to go along with your fantasy. What about your charity parties, dresses, cab rides downtown? They aren't real? Your books are real, you can feel them--its just the story, the characters--their life's what's intangible.

MARLA

I should be dancing with Christopher. Into his arms. Air.

TONY

(lets go of Marla and picks up Chris) That's more like it. Where?

CHRIS

At a party.

TONY

O.K. Whose?

CHRIS

My party. Thrown just for me.

TONY

And you're...?

CHRIS

I'm dancing. I'm celebrating. Celebrating my success.

TONY

One two spin, Good.

CHRIS

You see, I just won the Academy award for best screenwriting. So that's who I'm dancing with. Me. Me and my Oscar. We make such a lovely couple. And people, the whole party is applauding because it was my first movie and I won. And best director, best actress. Best best best. So Oscar and I are dancing by ourselves.

TONY

Good

CHRIS

And everyone watches from the sidelines. With real smiles. The hostess has something between her teeth--spinach from the little triangles they're serving. But she doesn't know and she's smiling.(Tony picks up Marla)

Mrs. Forrester--

TONY

Marla.

MARLA

Marla. *(he closes her eyes gently)*

TONY

Oh.

MARLA

I am your tall handsome stranger. You want to know me.

TONY

Where are we?

MARLA

We are in a dark cafe. It's hot. And you've stopped for an iced coffee on your way home. From --a charity function. I watch you from the bar. You are elegant as you wait, but you see me, all right, at the bar, because I don't mind if I stare. You look at your nails, scratch the polish, looking up to hope I'm not there. But I toast to you and the next time you raise your eyes, I'm not sitting on that stool anymore.

TONY

Where?

MARLA

You spend your drink thinking about me. You don't want to leave because then you'll be leaving me. You don't want to hail a cab that will take you away. You look for me as you walk out of the bar. The cab door is opened for you by a tall dark stranger.

TONY

You.

MARLA

I take you to your house. You want me to follow you in. I kiss your palm on the walkway. I touch your mouth as you pull out your keys. I leave you at the door.

TONY

Not at the door.

MARLA

I don't even say goodbye.

TONY

Don't walk away like that.

MARLA

You don't know if I'll come back.

TONY

You come inside.

MARLA

TONY

I may not return.

MARLA

You follow me in.

TONY

You may never see me again.

MARLA

You follow me in. *(Tony steps back)* You follow me in. You follow. Tell me. Tell me.

TONY

I'm gone. But I know where you are. I can find you. But you can't find me.

MARLA

No.

TONY

I'll be watching you.

MARLA

No! No. You can't turn this into some kind of third rate horror movie.

TONY

I can do what I want. Maybe I'll come back.

MARLA

It can't end in a maybe. Maybe you'll bring a knife? Maybe you'll stalk me for years?

TONY

I'm the storyteller.

MARLA

But I'm involved.

TONY

As are all characters.

MARLA

You take me to the door.

TONY

And leave you.

MARLA

No.

TONY

My story.

MARLA

You take me in your arms and kiss me deeply. I look into your eyes—

TONY

Trash.

MARLA

And see behind them, a sensitive--

TONY

What? A sensitivity that you'd never seen before in a man's eyes? Love enough when no words have been spoken that you know that this man will be your lover for the rest of your life? I take you in my arms, sweep you off to the bedroom.

MARLA

That's it. *(he grabs her and kisses her violently. She pushes him away. He is amused)*

TONY

After I fuck you, I snore. After we wake up, I burp, I fart, I spend two hours greasing my hair before your mirror. We don't have anything to talk about. So much for your tall handsome stranger. *(Tony pulls out a pack of cigarettes and lights one)*

MARLA

I thought ---

TONY

This is the last cigarette. Christopher? *(they dance)* How's Oscar?

CHRIS

Oscar is beautiful and golden all over.

TONY

And you dance only with him.

CHRIS

Yes.

TONY

Why?

CHRIS

Because he's all mine. They've all started dancing now

TONY

Marla too?

CHRIS

Marla too.

TONY

Tell me. What you see.

CHRIS

He's tall and dark, virile, smooth hiped.

TONY

She's in my arms and I lead her around the dance floor.

CHRIS

She's in your arms. And you're dancing and her heads tipped back. She can see your eyes. And she can't stop looking into them. She can't stop feeling drawn to the tall dark man who she knows nothing about. Nothing. Only that he holds her close. And that's enough.

TONY

Then what?

CHRIS

I don't know.

Finish the story. TONY

The lights dim. I go home with Oscar. CHRIS

And they all live happily ever after? TONY

The end. CHRIS

Finish the story, Chris. Finish TONY

No. CHRIS

She's in my arms. *(he pulls Chris into his arms begins dancing him around the floor)* And you're dancing and your head's tipped back. See my eyes. Look into them. You know nothing about me. Nothing. Only that I hold you close. TONY

(breaks away) Chris is--I am dancing too. CHRIS

With Oscar. *(pulls him back)* TONY

With my leading lady. She's tall and her blonde hair cascades down her back. It falls over my hand and I can't keep myself wrapping it around my fingers so I can control that she looks into my eyes and her mouth approaches mine. She has red moist lips.*(Tony draws Marla in and the three of them dance)* CHRIS

You're at a party. TONY

My party. CHRIS

It's crowded. TONY

So many people. Hello. MARLA

A party for a man who stopped doing what he should do and started doing what he's dreamed of. CHRIS

Oh how are you? You look wonderful. MARLA

You're dancing. TONY

I'm dancing. MARLA

I'm dancing. CHRIS

TONY

With who?

MARLA AND CHRIS

With you.

(They dance for a moment more. Tony steps back to leave the two of them together. They can't. They stop, look at one another, pick up their coats and leave separately. Tony lights another cigarette, pulls out the remote control and the music shuts off)

The End