

Tango de los Muertos

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FADE IN:

A couple dances tango, but focus only on their shoes, his black suede and her red stilettos. They dance slow, languid, sensual, as if time stood still. Then the music stops.

INT. A JAIL CELL - NIGHT

A SCRUFFY MAN, 45, clenches the bars, screaming.

SCRUFFY MAN

Get me outta here.

The duty COP approaches.

COP

Shut up.

SCRUFFY MAN

He's dead. Get me outta here.

The cop peers to a MAN who appears all of 110 years old, lying dead on the floor.

COP

Holy Christ.

INT. THE JAIL CELL - NIGHT (LATER)

A MEDICAL EXAMINER(ME) works on the body as the COP stands nearby. ERNIE, mid-40's, enters and sizes the situation.

ERNIE

Why bother Homicide with this?

COP

The guy we put in here wasn't a day over thirty. This ain't the same man.

Ernie looks to the ME, who shrugs.

ERNIE

Then who's this?

The cop shrugs. Ernie looks again to the ME.

ERNIE

Dead of natural causes anyway, no?

ME

Appears so. Autopsy will tell.

ERNIE

If something turns up, call me.

(to the cop)

What you have is a missing person-  
missing prisoner and you wasted my time.

COP

No one got in or out of here.

Ernie exits. The cop shakes his head in disbelief.

INT. RAUL'S DANCE STUDIO, BOTTOM OF STAIRS - DAY

MARISA, 40ish, Latin, glances to the top of the stairs.

TOP OF THE STAIRS

Marisa steps onto a well-worn dance floor. RAUL, mid 40's,  
black-hair-handsome, surveys her. He wears a gold watch.

RAUL

You can't be the reporter?

MARISA

And why not?

Raul moves, with a cat-like stealthness, toward her.

RAUL

Of course, why not. Life is such a  
delicious surprise.

He lowers the arm of a victrola onto a record. He extends his  
hand in invitation. Marisa, taken aback, does nothing. He  
holds her gaze, waiting.

RAUL

We cannot, until the lady accepts.

Puzzled, Marisa extends her hand. Their touch is electric.  
Raul envelopes her in a close embrace. He gently closes her  
eyes and then closes his to initiate a tango.

He guides her, she follows, as if in a trance. In perfect time,  
as the music ends, they finish in the center of the floor.

She opens her eyes, breathless. He smooths a lock of her hair,  
fallen into her eyes, back into place. He steps back, pleased.

RAUL

Is that not what you came for?

Marisa regains her composure.

MARISA

I'm to do a life-style story on tango.

RAUL

Everything I could tell you was  
contained in those three minutes.

The rest will just be talk.

MARISA

I'll need some talk for my story.

Raul offers her a chair and prepares two coffees.

RAUL

Then it'll be my pleasure.

She pulls out a notepad.

INT. CITY MORGUE - DAY

Ernie enters to find the ME working on the aged corpse.

ME

We've a problem.

The ME displays a mug shot of Jose Ortega, age 35.

ME

They locked up this guy, Jose Ortega.

He places the mug shot beside the corpse.

ME

The DNA matches one hundred percent.

The ME consults his report.

ME

He was a tango instructor.

ERNIE

Tango?

ME

Apparently they don't age too well.

ERNIE

But no homicide?

The ME shakes his head.

ERNIE

Well, you have a nice little mystery,  
but it doesn't concern Homicide then.

Ernie turns to leave.

ME

There is something else.

Ernie glances back as the ME produces a clearly expensive, vintage gold watch. Ernie shrugs as if to say so what.

ME

Look at the inscription.

INSCRIPTION

"Jose, mi amor. Contessa, Nov. 1944"

ERNIE

Probably his grandfather's.

ME

This body is as old as his grandfather.

Ernie contemplates.

ERNIE

Guess it wouldn't hurt to nose around.

INT. NEWSROOM - DAY

Marisa glances to a copy of her story marked 'FINAL COPY-APPROVED' as she dials her phone.

MARISA

My editor wants a little more research.

She holds her breath.

RAUL (VO)

Are you free tonight?

MARISA

Yes.

She exhales.

INT. RAUL'S DANCE STUDIO - DAY

Raul sips coffee as Ernie shows him the mug shot of Jose.

RAUL

Yes, he's a dance instructor here.

ERNIE

How old is he?

Raul consults the photo.

RAUL

Oh, I don't know, mid-thirties.

ERNIE

The medical examiner calculated he was over a hundred.

Raul pauses to consider the words.

RAUL

Was?

Ernie nods. RIA, 40, a Latin Aphrodite, bursts into the studio shouting in Spanish. Raul nods toward Ernie. She stops.

RIA

Buenos días, Señor.

She resumes her agitated Spanish with Raul. He points to Ernie.

RAUL

That's what the detective explained.

Ria looks Ernie up and down in his jeans, black T-shirt and cowboy boots. Raul speaks to Ernie.

RAUL

She says Jose is dead. As you see she's very upset. Jose was well liked.

ERNIE

Apparently not by everyone. He fought with a student who pressed charges.

Jose insulted the judge and got thirty days for contempt.

RAUL

You didn't say how he died.

ERNIE

Old age.

Ria catches her breath. Raul notes the mug shot.

RAUL

That's not possible.

Ernie produces the morgue photo of an old man. Ria gasps.

ERNIE

And neither is this. Something's amiss.

Ria goes off again in Spanish.

ERNIE

Could you tell her to calm down unless she has something constructive to say.

Ria stops in mid word to step directly in front of Ernie, eye to eye, toe to toe.

RIA

I speak perfect English and if you wish to address me, do so directly, as a gentleman.

Ernie returns her stare, matching her intensity.

ERNIE

Calm down..., Miss.

Ria steps back to eye Ernie, head to toe, then back to head.

RIA

I detect Latin blood. You don't speak Spanish? More important, don't know how to address a lady?

Raul appears to enjoy the confrontation. He says nothing.

ERNIE

My mother is Argentine. My father was what I guess you'd call a gringo.

RIA

I can't speak of your father. You are clearly gringo.

She addresses Raul again in Spanish.

ERNIE

How do you say, hablo un poco?

Still speaking to Raul, in mid sentence she addresses Ernie.

RIA

Idiot.

She finishes with Raul and exits. He sips coffee with a smile.

RAUL

I think she likes you.

Ernie glances to the aftermath of her wake.

ERNIE

I've a few more questions about Jose.

INT. THE MILONGA BAR - NIGHT

Marisa ascends the stairs to the dance floor. She pauses pressed to the wall looking for cover in the shadows.

A dozen couples move hypnotically. The women dance with eyes closed. The men step, the women follow. The men pause, the women embellish the moment with their footwork.

Raul dances tango with Ria. He spies Marisa and smiles.

AT A TABLE

Raul sits close to Marisa pointing out the intricacies of tango etiquette. He notes her absence of a notepad.

RAUL

You're not taking notes?

She points to her head.

MARISA

I'm putting it all down up here.

He touches his heart.

RAUL

This is where you must take your notes. Tango begins here.

The first thing is the cabeceo.

MARISA

Nod?

RAUL

Yes, the invitation to dance. See the men. They catch a woman's eye, then nod to the dance floor.

If she returns the gaze, the invitation is accepted. If she looks away, declined. No harm, no one's embarrassed.

MARISA

Ah. When I came to your studio. Your invitation to dance.



RAUL

Precisely.

Raul motions to BOBBY, 34, pudgy, nerdy. He stares at Ria, at a table with CONTESSA, 45, elegant, both sipping red wine.

TO RIA

She looks at both photos of Jose, young and old. She doodles the words 'Tango de los Muertos' on her napkin.

Contessa eyes her intently. One could mistake them for lovers.

BACK TO RAUL

Raul notes Bobby's interest in Ria.

RAUL

See how the woman avoids eye contact. She feels his stare and doesn't wish to even decline. The man should move on.

Politely leave the woman her space. Perhaps later she'll accept.

MARISA

She's so-

RAUL

-beautiful? Yes, Ria in my estimation, is the best milonguera in the world.

She makes any male lead look ten times better than he is. She's my best friend.

Marisa observes the affection in his face as he speaks.

MARISA

And the woman she's with?

RAUL

Ahhh, Contessa. That's another story...

Bobby gulps his beer and stands up. Raul shakes his head.

RAUL

Watch.

Bobby heads to Ria's table and stands resolute.

RAUL

Never approach a lady's table uninvited. The invitation and acceptance should occur without a single word.

TO RIA

Ria glances to Bobby and demurely declines. He insists. She glances to him with a subtle shake of her head.

Contessa offers to dance with him. He refuses, intent on Ria. She finally extends her hand, waiting to be escorted. He hauls her to the floor and assumes close embrace.

TO THE DANCE FLOOR

Bobby moves clumsily, but she covers his mistakes, somehow making their dance look graceful.

TO CONTESSA

Contessa spins the napkin around to read Ria's musings:

'Lives pass away, Life is immortal.  
Lovers die, Love is eternal.'

A smile crosses her lips as she looks to Ria.

TO RIA, ON THE DANCE FLOOR

Bobby's hand slips lower on her back. She opens their embrace, but Bobby clutches her tighter, pressing her breasts to him.

TO RAUL

Raul reaches to his forehead, grimacing.

BACK TO RIA

Ria slaps Bobby's face without disrupting the other dancers. She heads toward her table. Bobby follows, grabbing her.

BOBBY

So you're too good for me?

Only then does she unleash her fury in a torrent of Spanish. Some men escort him away.

INT. AN ATTIC - NIGHT

Wind buffets the rafters as Ernie sorts through old phonograph records. A victrola and box of old B&W photos sits nearby.

ROSA, 70's, proud, pokes her head through the attic opening.

ROSA

What are you doing up here?

ERNIE  
Thinking about him.

ROSA  
Your grandfather?

He nods. She pauses, then clambers into the attic.

ROSA  
What brought this up?

ERNIE  
I was in a tango studio. They had the  
old records. Got me thinking.

She takes the photos, leafs through them, settling on one.

ROSA  
He danced tango like no one. My mother  
had no choice, but to fall in love.

She extends the photo of his grandparents.

ERNIE  
Did you learn to tango?

Her eyes grow wistful, distant. The rafters creak.

ROSA  
Of course. Mother said a woman  
should know how to tango.

Tango reveals a man's soul. It  
leaves no secrets.

ERNIE  
Why didn't you teach me Spanish?

She thumbs through the records, taken aback. More wind.

ROSA  
What is it Ernesto?

ERNIE  
Nothing.

She places a record on the victrola.

ROSA  
I raised you. I know you. Your  
eyes say something else.

ERNIE  
Would Carmela forgive me, if...?

ROSA

If?

He looks toward the victrola as she cranks it.

ERNIE

I intended to wait until more time had passed, if ever at all. I don't know...

He glances overhead to the force of the wind.

ROSA

Father taught me to tango to this one.

She lets the music set a tone between them.

ROSA

You deserve happiness. Carmela would've insisted that you move on.

He considers her words as the wind blends with the song.

ROSA

She's dead. It's tragic, it always is, but it's done.

ERNIE

I thought I must honor her memory.

ROSA

At this point, it's self-pity, not grief, that you honor.

He picks up another photo of grandfather and a different woman.

ROSA

If you're seeking my blessing I approve. If Carmela's, don't.

She gathers herself to descend the attic stairs.

ROSA

Dinner is ready, your nieces are waiting.

He nods, eyes to the photo, focused on the woman's face. He squints to study her features, wind shaking rafters overhead.

INT. RAUL'S DANCE STUDIO, HIS OFFICE - DAY

Ria and Raul converse animatedly in Spanish. He sips coffee.

An old, ragged playbill with Ria and Raul as leads for Tango de Los Muertos leans against the wall.

RIA

Maybe it's time we find a new home.

RAUL

Is it because we lost Jose?

RIA

I don't know, maybe. I saw you with  
a new one last night.

RAUL

Jealous?

RIA

You know I'm not. Just asking if  
it's wise.

RAUL

Why won't you love?

She lowers the victrola arm to one of the old records.

RIA

How is it that you shed them so easily?

She sits, he walks behind her to massage her shoulders.

RAUL

Should we have tried harder?

RIA

We had our time. Affection is a  
better lover for us.

He kisses her hair.

RAUL

Does he still haunt you?

She glances to the music. He steps away to start a dance step.

RIA

This was his favorite. Do you wonder  
who made the right decision?

RAUL

He went there. Fate led us here.

RIA

But to continue it?

Contessa enters, noting the music, eyes downcast. She steps  
beside Ria, who strokes her hand with affection.

RIA

We're all sad about Jose.

CONTESSA

Thank you, but it's been many years  
since we were in love, although...

Ria glances to Raul, still stepping in time to the music.

RIA

Yes, true love never dies.

CONTESSA

I guess that's the question, does  
Love conquer all, even time?

The music skips a beat, finding a scratch on the record.

RIA

I believe Love is eternal, only the  
lovers die.

Raul interrupts, attempting to redirect the conversation.

RAUL

We still have each other.

RIA

For how long?

She looks to the old playbill.

RIA

I want to give the world something.  
A gift of our pain.

Contessa also eyes the playbill.

RIA

I will resurrect Tango de los Muertos.

RAUL

It's best left in the past.

RIA

The same could be said of us. Yet  
we're here.

Contessa arches those elegant eyebrows. Raul pauses.

CONTESSA

Resurrection? It's only fitting  
that the dead would dance.

RIA  
There will be a new Tango de los  
Muertos

Raul, outnumbered, can only glance to each woman.

INT. RAUL'S DANCE STUDIO - DAY

Ria directs rehearsal with a dozen DANCERS. Ernie ascends the stairs to the studio. She eyes him in the mirror, but subtly ignores him. Ernie steps into Raul's empty office.

INSIDE RAUL'S OFFICE

Ria stops at the door to watch Ernie examine the playbill. He notes her presence and they eye each other cat-like, neither breaking the silence. Finally,

ERNIE  
Looking for Raul.

RIA  
Out.

ERNIE  
Had a few more questions about Jose.

He motions to the playbill.

ERNIE  
You?

RIA  
It was long ago.

He cocks his head at Ria's image in the playbill.

ERNIE  
You haven't aged a day.

RIA  
What do you mean?

ERNIE  
You're just as beautiful.

She raises an eyebrow before narrowing her eyes. Indicating his black T-shirt.

RIA  
What do you wear besides that?

ERNIE

I have a white one.

She measures him with her eyes.

RIA

I must get back to work.

She rejoins the dancers, barking instructions. Ernie watches for a moment, then a corner of the playbill, obscured by dust, catches his eyes.

He wipes the dust away to reveal the date, 'November 15, 1944'. He considers the date, frowning, then steps out to the floor.

ON THE DANCE FLOOR

Ernie watches off to the side. Ria ignores him as she guides the dancers. She casts the male lead aside in disgust.

RIA

No, it's like this.

She demonstrates a sequence which brings her close to Ernie, who stands frozen.

RIA

(to the dancers)

Then like this.

She moves in a circle, using Ernie as a prop, her movements sinewy, seductive, her arms nearly brushing his body.

The dancers note the interplay and glance to each other, puzzled. She stops and only then finds Ernie's eyes.

ERNIE

Just had one more question.

She moves away from him to re-engage the dancers.

ERNIE

This Saturday afternoon.

She continues working with the dancers, ignoring him. Then,

RIA

Yes?

The dancers glance from her to him.

ERNIE

A family event.



She moves toward him again, the dance has become just them. He spins to keep facing her, heart facing heart.

ERNIE  
I thought you might like to come.

RIA  
And why might I?

ERNIE  
Traditional Argentine family reunion.

Her eyebrows note the word.

RIA  
And what would you know of that?

ERNIE  
Not me, my mother.

RIA  
Su madre?

ERNIE  
You might share something in common  
of Buenos Aires.

She dances unresponsive.

ERNIE  
If you're busy— it was just a thought.

He disengages and steps toward the stairs.

RIA  
Mi caballero.

Ernie stops dead, his back to Ria.

ERNIE  
I thought I was gringo?

RIA  
You're still gringo.

He glances to her in the wall mirror, where they lock gaze.

RIA  
Pick me up here.