

Highly Commended

Tango

by Mike Corbett

The grey bird stood. Tall and still in the water. Neck taut. Head erect. To cast least shadow. A yellow eye. Fixed. Alert to the tiniest movement. She could feel the breeze. Intermittent. Ruffling the grey feathers. Bending the reeds. Nudging the water through soft grasses. So it shimmered. Like gold in the evening haze.

She began to wake. Slowly. Relieved it was not with a start. As so often happened. She came to gradually. Her waking dream had been peaceful. Thank goodness. Yet, still tense. Expectant. She could feel her heart beating. She relaxed in her chair until her breathing grew calm. Turned her face to the light that fell through a chink in the curtains. It was evening in her world too. Time to get ready. To prepare. Physically and mentally for the night ahead. Soon, it would be time to dance.

Camilla was a dancer. 'Milly' for short. Though it hurt her now to remember that name. She danced at *'El Café del Paraiso'* (*'El Paraiso'* to the patrons - *'El Café'* to the dancers!). Had done for many years. Ever since Maria Emilia - her 'Milly' - was born. She needed the money. She was on her own. Milly's father long since gone. In search of 'fortune and fame' ('women and wine' more like). No one would have her then. She was used goods.

Second-hand. She had to rely on herself. But she was still young. Her body firm and strong. And she had a natural ease and rhythm when she moved. So one day she pinned up her hair, put on her make-up and her best dress, walked boldly down the street, into 'El Café' and asked for Thiago.

'I want to dance', she said. Thiago had looked her up and down, she remembered.

'You're hired', he said.

That was long ago. The café was busier then. Classier too, in that it didn't have the shabbiness that came with age, neglect and a general lack of resources. And she did well. Made a reasonable living. Supported herself, with a little left over for occasional treats or luxuries. But it was dancing, mind. Just dancing. No more. A partner for three tunes together (a *tanda*). A brief collaboration governed by the strict etiquette of the particular dance. Waltzes. Milongas. Chacras - for those who had come down from the hills or in from the country. Of course there were regulars - and indeed favourites - where a certain rapport developed. Through conversation, or coffee, or even complimentary styles. But any connection, such as it was, existed only within the café.

On the street, on Sundays or festival days, if a dancer happened to meet one of the regulars, it was marked by only the merest glance or nod of acknowledgement. Sometimes not at all. It was not intended to rebuke or offend. It was simply not the element in which their acquaintance could survive.

There were others of course. Trouble-makers. Men who were intoxicated. Men who wanted more. Men who were angry - over a lover who abandoned them or a woman who refused their advances. But, on the whole, they were rare. And Thiago and the regulars ensured that such incidents, although always intense, were mercifully brief. So Camilla's days were a

strange mixture of energy and lethargy, of society and solitude, until she finally kicked off her shoes at the end of an evening, stretched out her legs on the sofa and waited for her bath to fill.

Of course, not everyone had a high opinion of the dancers. Moralists, church-goers and maiden aunts looked upon them with a certain disdain. Wives regarded them with suspicion. They, more than anyone, knew the weaknesses of men (the failed dreams, the hopeless desires). And they knew the artfulness of women. So the truce between the dancers and the community was fragile. But it held – for the most part.

There had been little love in Camilla's life. None, certainly, since Milly. Occasionally, she recalled the gentleman who had lived in the building opposite. Perhaps it was her imagination but she felt there was... well, if not affection, at least a connection between them. Or the possibility of one. He was an older gentleman, with sad eyes and a kind smile. He seemed to be in frail health, as he often took a late breakfast on the balcony and stayed there through the afternoon, to enjoy the heat of the sun. She knew that, sometimes, he would watch her from across the way. Going about her chores, making herself some tea or just sitting, listening to the radio. She didn't really mind. It was the closest thing to company. Once, coming back from the store, she had sensed he was looking down at her on the street below. She looked up and, instinctively, raised her hand to wave. He gestured with his paper and smiled in acknowledgment. But just then his sister appeared from the shadows. Remonstrated with him. Then wheeled him back inside. He did not re-appear for several

weeks after that. And when he did, she fancied he seemed subdued. Defeated. She did not think he watched her anymore. And she made sure to keep her distance.

So, Milly had always been, would always be, the only true love in her life. It seemed she thought about her all the time. Either actively remembering moments they shared together - or doing her best to keep them from her mind. One way or the other, acknowledged or suppressed, she was with her every day. Accompanying all her thoughts and activities. Some of these were expected. Regular. Part of the daily cycle. Like in the evening. Running her bath before returning to the café. Adding oils to the water to soothe her aching muscles. Lavender. Chamomile. She would stare at the droplets clinging together - refusing to disperse or dissolve. And she would think of Milly. Her beautiful skin. Soft. Flawless. How she bathed her so carefully. Allowing the water to drip from her fingertips. Along her arms. Across her belly. Her sudden jolts at these new sensations. Days had become weeks by then. Their first tender routines just beginning. But weeks would not become months. They had told her that from the start.

Milly's darting eyes might never pause in recognition of her face. But she would recognise her voice. Its tone and timbre. She would know her smell. Warm. Sweet. And, above all, she would recognise her touch. For, while the other senses need more time to develop, touch is the first to be fully formed. She had read that during the months of pregnancy, when she avidly gathered all the information she could about her baby. And if touch was the most developed of her senses, then this would be how she would connect with, comfort, show love to, her daughter.

So, cradling her in the valley of her arm, she would trickle oils and water over her tiny body and give herself up completely to these moments. The closest intimacy they would ever share. One that, even as it was happening, was escaping her grasp. Like water. Falling through her fingers.

At other times it hit her unexpectedly. Out of the blue. Triggered by a random, unanticipated event or exchange.

‘Tango means ‘I touch’’, he said. He was just a youth - with a downy moustache to prove it. ‘In Latin’, he added awkwardly. Hoping to impress. But she was already lost. Drowning. Spinning. Headlong into the vortex. She clung to him. To concentrate. To survive. He was bashful, she remembered. Embarrassed by the heat of her body. But she held him tight. She dared not let him go.

She had learned over the years to live with the fear. To manage the sheer panic that struck at such times. She was not always successful. But mostly she got through without a complete collapse. Now she would have to get through again. Soon she would have to dance. To put on a performance. And she needed to prepare. To make an effort. It was Thursday, after all.

Thursday night was ‘Tango Night’! An attempt by the owner to inject a little glamour (not to mention extra takings!) into the week. To be fair, most people made the extra effort. Thiago wore what could kindly be called a ‘vintage’ tuxedo. The regulars had a shave. Tried

to find matching jackets and trousers. The dancers, well, they had no choice but to go the extra mile. Old tango dresses were buffed up and revived. Seams were adjusted or repaired where the fabric had become too tight or restrictive for the wearer. Tango shoes were polished bright (or, at least, as bright as old leather would allow). Sometimes a scarlet ribbon or flower was threaded through the hair. A final flourish. To recreate a hint of old-style glamour. It fell far short of the halcyon days. That's for sure. But it provided relief. A welcome, if transitory, illusion of promise. Of passion.

But the tango is not a dance for young lovers. Those in the first flush of romance. No. Tango is for those with a crack in their heart. A fracture that will not heal. Those lost at sea. Who need something to cling to. To save them from the abyss.

She returned to the bathroom to continue her preparations. Not long now and it would be time to leave. She opened the cabinet above the sink where she kept her make-up. She was surprised to find it almost empty, save for a neglected compact and one or two sorry-looking items. She needed to replenish her supplies! Nevertheless, she reached in for her favourite lipstick. The one she wore every Thursday night. She twisted the base and waited for the stock to emerge. She closed the cabinet door to use the mirror. And cried out in alarm.

For a moment she thought that someone had crept up behind her. Unawares. An intruder. A thief. Or even a ghost. Finally, she realised it was her own reflection that had startled her. The face of an old woman. Lined and furrowed. The definition and vigour of youth all gone. Skin pale and waxy. Hair grey and unkempt. A smear of scarlet by her chin from when she jerked her hand away.

The rush of adrenalin left her drained. She felt the nausea rise. The fear and panic return. She had come closer than ever this time. To dressing up in her threadbare clothes. Opening her apartment door. Negotiating the tenement stair. Going outside! An old lady. Half-painted. Half-dressed. Wandering the streets to the consternation of all. Trying to make her way to a club that no longer existed. Please God, she prayed. Don't let it come to that.

She stretched out her arm and leaned against the wall. To steady herself. Gradually, her breathing became calm again. More measured. She shuffled back towards her chair. Gripping the wide arms to ease herself down into the seat. Grateful for the support the old piece offered. What could she have been thinking? That she was still young? Still beautiful? Still a dancer? But more and more it was easily done. The memories. The fitful sleep. The dreams. No conversation, no company, to keep her grounded. Only phantoms from the past. *'Madre de Dios'* she whispered. *'Ten piedad de mi...'*

Then she closed her eyes. Turned her face towards the last of the sunset. And searched for a place where she might feel at peace. She looked again along the shoreline. Hoping he might still be there. Poised. Like a dancer. Waiting. To soar above the shimmering sea. Beyond the dim horizon. To hold her. Fast. In the arc of his embrace.

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