

Before Show Night by Milo Shapiro

Setting: A small home in Queens (a bedroom community outside Manhattan)

Time: 1947

Cast

Woman: Late 20s, attractive, wearing an outfit fit for a Vegas showgirl, ideally with some feathers. A New York accent, perhaps kind of nasal, would be nice. Think Adelaide from Guys and Dolls.

Man: 30s or 40s

Terry: Late 20s or 30s. Could be a man or a woman

The style of this whole thing is like a gangster movie of the 1940s, almost film noir and over the top.

CURTAIN

Woman is doing her make-up as she talks to a man on the phone.

Woman: So's I told her, "You broke my hat; you fix it." And she was like, "You backed into *me* and even if it was my fault, I don't know how to fix it. So, sorry."

yeah, I don't think that's really an apology, y'know? ...

aw, you're so sweet, baby. That's why I'm the lucky one, who got to marry you!

(she rolls her eyes so we know she's not as sincere as she sounds)....

Aw, okay, I guess you're lucky, too, then. ...

No, I can't this week. There's still so much I wanna do with this house...

Well, it may be ours now, but the way it's decorated, it still *feels* like your grandma still lives here...(giggle)

I know...I know...it will in time, baby...

well, of course I still love you...I think I said so on Thursday...

(possible makes a whistling sound, if that works?)

oh, baby, my kettle is boiling and it's whistling up a storm in the kitchen.

I'll see you at the club around 7:30, okay? ..love you, too!

She hangs up, making some physical gesture like a shudder to show that she hated being that nice to him. She goes right back to putting on make-up to show that there was no kettle. The phone rings. She looks at it, stands, and puts on a face of tragic despair, perhaps fake sniffing, before finally answering the phone.

Woman: Butterfield 5-0105 ... Oh, thank God it's you. No, he left for the club but...oh, it was terrible. *He's* terrible. I don't know how I got myself mixed up with such a man....let alone marrying him.

(she fake cries, looking at her watch in the middle of it so we know she's faking).

What?...Oh, I don't want to put you out of your way...on my corner?...oh, the drug store payphone?...

well, it would be awful nice to have your shoulder for just a moment, after such an awful spat with him... Oh, thank you, my love. Thank you! I don't know what I'd do without you!...

I'll unlock the door now that I'm safe. Come right up, but knock three times first so I know it's you!...

Thank you, my darling. I'll see you shortly...Oh, bless you. Bless you! *(crying)*

(The second the receiver is on the phone hung up, the crying stops. She hums or sings to herself with a little smile as she goes back to applying make-up. As she puts on lipstick, she stops, looks at a man's shirt thrown over a chair, and puts a little lipstick on the collar. The door knocks three times)

Woman: Just a minute!

(she puts eyedrops in both eyes to simulate tears, looks in the mirror, smiles at what she sees, then gets her look of upset-ness on for answering the door. On her way to the door, she stops and rubs the underside of her left wrist with her right hand, as if to make it look all red. Then finally answers the door.)

Woman: Oh, baby!

(she throws her arms around him. He holds her close)

Man: You're sure Tony's not around?

Woman: I'm sure. He just called from work and I could hear the music behind him, so I know he was telling the truth for once.

Man: For once? So he lies a lot?

Woman: Can't believe nothing that comes out of that man's mouth. I don't know how many other women he...

Man: Other women?

Woman: *(she pulls out the shirt)* Think that's Tony's shade of lipstick?

Man: That scoundrel! Always comin' across so chipper and keen at the club.

Woman: Oh, I know. I fell for it all myself. I never would have married the man that I see so clearly behind all that now. He was all gentle and sweet talking and buyin' me stuff

(Man looks away)

Oh, not like you. *(she turns his head back)* I know the gifts from you are all with sincerity. You could never be such a beast. Someone who would lay his hands on me.

Man: He didn't! Just now in that fight?

Woman: Oh, today wasn't a bad one. *(she turns her wrist toward him)* That probably won't even show much by the time I'm all in costume later.

Man: Don't minimize this, doll. Jeez, I could just kill him. Nobody should treat a lady like you like this.

Woman: I dunno. Sometimes he says I have it comin' to me 'cause I'm so stupid...

Man: You are not stupid! He's just a very bad man.

Woman: Some people have told me that...you're a very bad man, too. I don't want to believe it, but there's talk.

(pause)

Man: I've always been straight with you, doll. I'm not gonna lie. Not everything in my life is on the up-and-up. You don't get diamonds like this from just runnin' a bakery *(he flashes a ring)*.

Woman: An' I'm not one to judge! It's a tough world out there. Sometimes a man's gotta do what a man's gotta do!

Man: You got that right, baby.

Woman: Like maybe with Mickey the Mouth.

(pause)

Man: What you know about Mickey the Mouth?

Woman: What I **know** is nothin'. What I hear in the club is....probably nothin'?

Man: This ain't a topic for ladies.

Woman: You're right, baby. I'm not trying to push. An' what I said about gifts from you...well...you know there's no way I'd have started up with you if Tony had been treatin' me all nice, like you do. You make a girl feel...

Man: Pretty?

Woman: Respected.

Man: Oh...yeah...respected.

Woman: And valued. I get enough of men tellin' me I'm pretty at the club to last me till I'm 70. But you make me feel safe. Important. Special.

Man: You are, doll. *(he pulls her close)* All of those things. I wish we could always be together. I'm so tired of havin' to sneak around with you. I want you on my arm wherever I go.

Woman: Oh, to dream like that.

Man: Why does it have to be a dream? He's a creep. Leave him and be with me.

Woman: I...can't. He's... *(starts to cry again, pulling away from him)*

Man: He's...what?

Woman: He's got...pictures.

Man: Pictures?

Woman: Terrible, terrible pictures. Of me. From an awful night. I can't say I'm not a little to blame with my drinking that night but...

Man: But *he* took the pictures.

Woman: Yes. I didn't even know. Or maybe I did, it's all a haze, with whatever he had me drinkin' but I didn't remember it even happened. Till one day when I dared to show a little backbone to him and he laughed an' I says what's so funny and he says, "You ain't never leaving me or everyone and your mother's gonna see these!" And he reached into a drawer and pulled out the photos.

Man: That scum!

Woman: I was horrified. I screamed. I tore them up, of course, but he just laughed so I know those ain't the only copies.

Man: Oh, my darling.

Woman: Don't feel bad for me. I brought this on myself.

Man: No!

Woman: I'm not a proud woman. But regardless, there's no leaving him. He's got me...as long as he lives.

(pause)

Yes. As long as he **lives**.

(pause again, as catches her possible implication and he looks up into her eyes)

Man: Lola, are...are you suggesting what I think you're suggesting?

Woman: *(feigning confusion)* I...I don't know what you mean?

(pause)

Man: So...if something were to *happen* to Tony, you'd be free.

Woman: *(feigning shock)* Rico! No!

Man: Let me think.

Woman: No, Rico! You can't!

Man: He's a very bad man, Lola. Some men just shouldn't...be.

Woman: But this! Oh, I've never even *thought* of such a thing.

Man: But you'd be free.

Woman: Well, yes, but...

Man: And would you miss him?

Woman: No! Not at all.

Man: No one would.

Woman: Except his whores.

Man: That creep.

Woman: But you can't. I can't risk losing you.

Man: There are ways.

Woman: Yes, but there's another thing.

Man: What?

Woman: If it looked suspicious at all, the photos might still get out.

Man: You think he gave them to someone else?

Woman: I'm certain. From something he said once.

Man: Confound him!

(pause)

Woman: Unless...

(pause to let that hang)

Man: Unless?

Woman: Unless it looked like such an accident that whoever had the photos *couldn't* suspect that I did anything to set it up.

Man: okaaaaaay...

Woman: Like a bar fight. Something I couldn't have set up.

Man: Yeah, that makes sense. Things got out of hand.

Woman: Maybe even self-defense.

Man: Yeah.

Woman: But I couldn't ask that of you, Rico. You couldn't live with knowing you'd killed another man...

(pause)

...could you ?

Man: If the man were that stinkin' Tony. If I knew he was hurtin' you. And keeping you locked up like this...

Woman: ...away from you.

Man: Away from me.

Woman: Well...

Man: Well?

Woman: It...would be nice to have a fresh start.

Man: Right?

Woman: What if you started making serious passes at me? Getting all handsy. Right there at the Copa?

(say the next two lines much like the song)

Man: At the Copa?

Woman: Copacabana.

Man: I knew where you meant. I meant, right there? So publicly? After being careful for so long?

Woman: One final time. And it's not like we'd be admitting to what's been going on. I'd be actin' like I don't hardly know you and don't like what you're doing.

Man: So that he gets all jealous.

Woman: And sees red. He's got such a temper and he's so protective over me.

Man: So we start to fight, but...

Woman: And that's when you pull the gun.

Man: The gun?

Woman: Yes! And he's too close to you to run away, so of course he's going to run toward you to try to move your arm.

Man: Right! And once he's really close, I pull the trigger.

Woman: Except that it was self-defense on your part, because he was coming at you with the knife!

Man: He did? Where did a knife come from?

Woman: The one I'm gonna drop in front of him when I run over to his side when he's shot. The one that already has his fingerprints on it because it IS his knife from his workbench.

(pause)

Man: You just...thought of all this...just now?

Woman: Of course! I didn't know you were going to suggest killing Tony tonight!

Man: Oh. Yeah. Right. But wait...all those people. Too many witnesses.

Woman: No, that's exactly what we need. To make it so clear that this was just a spontaneous bar fight. That I couldn't have set this up, especially with a man I've never been seen with. One who has a rough reputation on the streets. And where no gun was out before that, so no one could have seen this comin'.

Man: Damn!

Woman: And to all see me weepin' and wailin' and pickin' up the knife and cryin':

(super dramatically, holding invisible knife)

'Why, Tony? Why did you have to charge at him with your knife?'

Man: Because you're a witness, too!

Woman: The most convincing one...the one they're going to believe when I say, under oath, that it was my jealous husband's fault, not some guy I just see around the Copa sometimes.

(pause)

Man: Where you gonna hide the knife?

Woman: In my stocking. Held by my garter. No one would see it because of my skirt.

(pause)

Man: Are we really doin' this?

Woman: I...no...no, I can't ask this of you. It's too much. I'm not worth it.

Man: Don't say that.

Woman: Well, what can I say? Life with Tony is hell, but it's my hell. Only you can decide if havin' me by your side is worth this. This is your call. You have to be okay with it. I'll just go along with whatever you say, like a good girl.

(pause. He looks at her. He looks at her wrist and touches it gently. She winces in fake pain)

Man: Tonight.

Woman: Tonight???

Man: Tonight.

Woman: You'd...you'd need your gun.

(he flashes it)

Oh!!!

Man: Like you said, baby, it's a *(no pause as she joins him:)*

UNISON: tough world out there.

Woman: No one's ever been this kind to me before, Rico.

Man: It's about time someone was.

(he kisses her. Possible sight gag: she counts to five on the fingers of one hand before pulling away on five)

Woman: You should go. I need to get ready, as if it were any other night. You can't be seen here, tonight of all nights. And we don't want to arrive close to the same time.

Man: I'll get there at 7, long before your call time.

Woman: You're so smart! And make a show of buying drinks, so it's believable that it'd lead to you pawing at me, but don't actually drink them. You need to be all sober for this.

Man: I can hold my liquor just fine.

Woman: Your call, then. *(walking him to the door)* So long as THEY all believe you've had a few.

Man: I can't believe it. After tonight, we'll finally be together.

Woman: Well, remember, I'm going to have to play the grieving widow for quite some time. But after I end up testifying on your behalf, it'll be believable that I might come to visit you some, to get some closure...

Man: ...which I'll need too after this terrible ordeal...

Woman: ...and lo and behold, over time, we fall in love.

Man: People will talk.

Woman: Only about us ending up together. The knife scene and the fight between you two will be too authentic.

Man: And all those witnesses to back it up.

Woman: Just as you planned it.

Man: Yeah.

Woman: Till then. *(another kiss)* I love you with all my heart.

Man: *(beaming)* Me, too, baby. Me, too!

(Phone rings)

Woman: You better go! It could be Tony.

Man: Love you! *(staring to exit)*

Woman: Love you madly! *(closes the door and going to answer the phone)*

Butterfield 5-010--Terry!!!...No, your timing is perfect. He just left. Where are you? ...Where?...The drugstore payphone? *(laughing)* ...Doesn't matter why. Just a coincidence. Come quick, but use the back door to be sure you don't run into Rico....okay, bye.

(She hums or sings to herself as she returns to the make-up table; possibly, the chorus to Minnie the Moocher?)

Terry: *(entering unannounced, startling Lola)* Hey girlie!

Woman: Jeez, that was fast. You startled me. And after the conversation I just had! My heart is going a mile a minute.

Terry: So, tell me! How'd it go?

Woman: So much better than I ever expected. Not only is he in, but he insisted it be tonight.

Terry: Tonight?!?

Woman: Tonight! I thought this was something we'd be working up to, but if he's ready, I don't want to give him any chance to change his mind.

Terry: He bought the knife thing?

Woman: Hook, line, and sinker.

Terry: So tell me again how it's gonna work, now that you've worked out the details with him.

Woman: Just as he thinks. Everything according to the plan he thinks *he* came up with.

Terry: Except...

Woman: Except...(switching into sad, doe-eyed look) "Rico, baby, I just don't know how it happened. As soon as you pulled the trigger, I started running toward you all and reached for the knife and it wasn't in my garter! It was awful! I found it later backstage. With all the dancing, it musta fell out and I didn't feel it happen. So I ran to Tony's side and when I felt nothin' there, there was nothing for me to hold up....and I got all confused...and all I could do was scream for help!"

Terry: Will he buy it?

Woman: God, I hope so. He could be dangerous, even from jail. I'm going to have to do my best to testify from the stand, "It looked like Tony had fire in his eyes. He could be so jealous with me when Rico had only just put his hand on my bottom. I know Rico didn't mean nothin' but the way Tony looked, Rico musta

really thought that Tony was going to kill him to have pulled out a gun. And I could see that Rico didn't pull the trigger till Tony was right on him."

Terry: But the jury isn't going to buy that shooting him was justified self-defense, if there's no knife.

Woman: Nope. Rico DeSalvo is going to be in jail for a long, long time.

Terry: Doesn't bother you?

Woman: Please. Do you have any idea how many people are buried because of Rico? He may have been set up on *this* one, but he'll be serving time for a fraction of what he's done.

Oh, I'll visit him in jail for a while, putting on a whole to-do about how awful it is that it went down wrong and how I miss him...bake him cookies or whatever...so he won't be suspicious. But my visits will start to spread out and eventually, he'll get the, "Rico, I have to get on with my life" speech. And that party'll be over.

(They chuckle)

Terry: And Tony?

Woman: *(more soberly)* What about him?

Terry: Was it really that bad being married to him?

(pause)

Woman: Tony's a nobody. Charming behind a bar, but not enough brain matter to fill a shotglass. Every night in this place with him felt like a week. Constantly after one thing and not very good at it. The only thing Tony had going for him was his Grandma's cash and a house in Queens. *(gesturing around her)*

Terry: Which goes to...

Woman: ...his grieving widow. *(they chuckle)*

Terry: That reminds me. Been meaning to ask you. With all he inherited from his Gramma, why was he working as a bartender at the Copa?

Woman: Sanford, the owner is 66. He's gonna move to Florida in a few years. I convinced Tony it'd be good to buy the place then, and they talked about it. But I said he needed to work there first to learn the business.

Terry: Okay, but why'd you keep dancing?

Woman: Have you forgotten what's happening tonight?

Terry: Oh...of course.

Woman: As for Tony, oh, everyone'll put on a big show about missing him, but he'll be forgotten in three months. Or he *would* have been, but I'll see to it that he's not forgotten.

Terry: What does that mean?

Woman: It means that, every Saturday night, probably for years, I'm going to be sitting at that bar, looking all broken apart and lost without him, like I lost my marbles from the trauma.

Terry: Geez, that's morbid.

Woman: *(paused, pondering)* A bit, yeah. But it's what it's going to take to make sure no tongues wag after I surprise everyone by defending Rico at trial for my safety.

Terry: Or if anyone finds out you visited him.

Woman: Exactly. Small price to pay, toasting a couple of Highballs a week to the memory of Tony.

Terry: How long before I can move in?

Woman: Just long enough for my crazy Saturday night act to alienate anyone who might have ideas of coming out from Manhattan to visit me in Queens. And if anyone asks...

Terry: I'm the caretaker for the poor shattered Lola. Can't believe it's all finally here. Damn!

Woman: *(grabbing what she needs to leave)* You gonna be there? Sitting way down on the bar watching?

Terry: Wouldn't miss this for the world.

Woman: Then come on! *(heading to the door, where they kiss)*
It's show time!

(they exit. music cuts to just before the lyrics start on Copacabana)