



The *Lovers'*
TANGO

A
Novel

Mark Rubinstein

Preface

Tango, A Dance of Love and Death

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Milan Kundera said loving someone is not deepened by being a passive object of adoration, but by the sacrifices one makes for the beloved. We may be attracted to “perfection” but loving the imperfections, forgiving the other’s weaknesses, creates the deepest attachment.

We come to tango with great imperfections. Every devotee is challenged by the dance. It’s like learning a new language: a few basic moves form the vocabulary; a set of customs and grammatical rules define the moves; and whatever you express must work within the rhythm and mood of the music. And, of course, the flow and poetry of the movement comes from the partners weaving their nonverbal conversation.

Tango calls for mental, emotional, and physical cultivation. You must quiet your chattering mind, relax your nervous anticipation, and quell any fears of intimacy.

The partners’ roles have some deep atavistic appeal for a man and woman. The man navigates the floor, guides the couple, and sets the pattern and musical interpretation. His goal is to make

the woman look and feel beautiful, cared-for. The woman must be in tune with him, physically, emotionally, intuitively. Yet, she has freedom to decorate and embellish the rough outline set by her partner. Her task is to be beautiful and make him look beautiful.

Argentine tango emphasizes grace and intense connection. Physical positions are clearly defined to achieve the partners' most intimate connection.

The tango is not done by one's self, or for one's self, but with a partner, and with a feeling of sublimated seduction. Insecurities may be present. Self-doubt, defeat, and death are always just around the corner. The dance reminds us of these uncomfortable matters lurking just beneath a gorgeously glazed surface.

Tango music pulls us in with its sadness and beauty. It reminds us that suffering is part of life. Like blues and flamenco, tango music carries the soul of the oppressed, their love, their suffering, and their death.

Chapter 1

I realized everything would change the moment I saw her. But I could never have known the life I lived and loved would come to so disastrous an end.

It began fifteen years ago at a West Village party, when the sound system stopped John Coltrane's saxophone from crooning "You Don't Know What Love Is."

The sudden silence was odd for this maxed-out throng, gathered in an old brownstone, because this crowd—artists, actors, musicians, and writers—was always clamorous. Plenty of booze, coke, and weed made for stratospherically high spirits.

But when Coltrane's saxophone stopped midnote—leaving a wake of silence—the lights began dimming.

That was the moment my life changed.

Because that's when I saw her.

I didn't know her name. I simply saw a raven-haired, olive-skinned woman take to the dance floor. Her hair was drawn back in a bun, accentuating her strikingly high cheekbones. She had dark eyes, a sloping nose with flared nostrils, and luscious lips. Her crimson-red pencil skirt was slit high on one thigh, and she was so very Latin-looking, so sensuous.

The crowd edged to the periphery. I sensed many people knew her. A low-level voltage pervaded the room. This incredible-looking woman—Nora, I later learned—stood theatrically poised as a svelte Latin-looking guy slipped an arm

around her waist.

She held this conquistador's eyes hungrily, yet there was remoteness, too. I felt my pulse quicken. My knees weakened. She reminded me of Carmen in Bizet's opera.

Suddenly, voluptuous tango music swelled through the sound system.

The dance began.

She moved with intense feline grace. I was riveted by the arch of her back, by its lithe muscularity, by her toned, bare arms, exquisite legs, and the sheen of her bronzed skin. As they tangoed, her head-snaps were at one with the music, as she turned, swirled, and dipped.

I was consumed by the power of the dance. It was a dialogue of passion, a promise of something to come—the prologue of a love story.

Heat rose in my face, and my scalp prickled deliciously. I could have been watching a habanera at a lantern-lit café in Buenos Aires. My writer's imagination was working overtime.

Applause rocked the room when the lighting returned. As the woman disappeared into the crowd, I stood in a state of stunned silence, certain she was unattainable.

"Unbelievable, isn't she?"

A woman about my age—thirty, or so—looked up at me. She, too, had that Latin look—sensuous, pulsing with life. Yet, she looked partly Eastern European, too, maybe Polish or Russian. Her features were less delicate, more Slavic than Nora's. But there was that same black hair and dark, laughing eyes.

"What do you think?" she asked with a nod toward the dance floor.

"She's the most beautiful woman I've ever seen. And . . . expressive . . ."

"She's my sister, Nora."

"Yes, there's a resemblance."

"That's the best compliment I've heard in years," she said, extending her hand. "I'm Lee. Lee Walsh."

"Bill Shaw."

"Would you like to meet her?"

Was this a hallucination? A surge of excitement ramped through me.

"Of course. But I . . ."

"The only *but* is that she'll eat you alive."

"I'll take my chances," I said, wondering if perhaps I was dreaming. Yes, I'd had luck with women, but this seemed beyond possibility.

"I'll be right back," she said, and melted into the throng.

It occurred to me, despite all the women I'd known, I felt like a callow high school kid—uncertain, nervous. I belted down the rest of my scotch, feeling its warmth spread through my cheeks.

When the sisters approached, I was actually quivering with anticipation. I momentarily felt light-headed.

In her stiletto heels, Nora was my height. Close up, her eyes—large, dark, and liquid—roamed over me. I felt I could lose myself in the depth of her gaze.

"Nora Reyes, this is Bill Shaw," Lee said.

As I grasped Nora's hand, tingling coursed through me. Her hair glistened in the overhead light. Her nose swept down to those flaring nostrils. And her chin was full, with a plump underbelly—soft and inviting. Her skin appeared moist; I inhaled deeply, her essence filling my nostrils.

Her eyes moved brazenly over me. I felt exposed, vulnerable. Yes, Lee was right: I was being devoured by this gorgeous woman.

"I'll leave you two alone," Lee said, and was gone.

Coltrane's sax sang "All or Nothing at All." A delicious yearning seeped through me, and I knew I'd always remember that night.

"Tell me, Bill," Nora said. "Have I made a mistake all these

years, avoiding these West Village get-togethers?”

“You’ve done the right thing.”

“And, tonight? Coming here?”

“The right thing, again.”

She laughed. “I suspect so.”

“Hopefully, your suspicions will be realized.”

She laughed with an open mouth. Her teeth were perfect. Her lips were sensuous, bow-shaped, pliant, and moist-looking. I felt an insane urge to press my lips to hers, to taste the wetness of her tongue, to feel her flesh against mine. It was a craving so intense, I thought for a moment I would clutch her in my arms, press her to me, and feel her heat.

“That was a beautiful tango. Argentine, right?” I said.

“Yes. There are different types.”

“Just a guess,” I offered, staring into her bottomless eyes.

“A very good one,” she said, as her finger brushed my cheek. My face burned.

“I could teach the tango to you.”

“I’d like that.” My body thrummed “Are you a professional dancer?”

“No, an actor.”

“Have I seen you in anything?”

“Not unless you watch the soaps. I’m in *The Burning World*. But tell me what *you* do, Bill.” She moved closer.

“I’m a writer,” I said, hoping not to sound like every fool at this gathering.

“Really? You look like a . . . a cop.”

I laughed self-consciously. I’d been told this so often, I felt I should have an honorary badge.

“Yes. You’re tall and well built. You have a strong face. And those eyes. Such a deep blue. You look very . . . rugged. I like that in a man. And a writer—brains *and* brawn,” she said, canting her head.

"You're embarrassing me." My face felt flushed.

"No, I'm not. You love it," she replied, poking a finger into my chest. "Have I read anything you've written?"

"Only if you read crime fiction." My God, did I sound like I was bragging? "I wrote *Fire and Ice*."

"*Fire and Ice*? Isn't that a movie?"

"Yes."

"About a serial killer?"

"Yes. It was adapted from the novel."

"Now I'll have to read the book. I'm an avid reader. You wouldn't be looking for an editor, would you?"

"I've never thought about it, but that could be arranged."

"Bill, we can arrange anything we want," she whispered in my ear.

"How about we arrange to go to dinner?" *God, where did that come from?* It had slipped out. My legs were turning to liquid.

"Where will we go?"

"There's a lovely Spanish restaurant on Charles Street . . . El Charro," I said, afraid she might think I was patronizing her.

"That sounds great. And then what?"

"Then . . ." I was at a loss for words. My throat tightened.

"I'll bet you live near the restaurant," she said with laughing eyes.

"I live on Charles Street, a garden apartment in a brownstone."

"Right near the restaurant?"

I nodded.

"That would be wonderful," she said, grabbing my arm.

That night was the beginning of the end of everything.

Chapter 2

It would be another night of booze-soaked gloom since Nora's funeral.

A goddamned funeral, only fifteen years after that magical night in the West Village. Feeling depleted, I was sipping more Johnnie Walker when the intercom's buzzing jangled in a burst of static-like sound. My heart seized. Then coldness seeped through my chest. Wondering who'd bother to visit so late in the evening, only a few days after Nora was buried, I plodded unsteadily to the foyer.

When I picked up the receiver, the doorman announced, "Mr. Shaw, some policemen are here to see you."

A shiver slithered through me. Had they come because of what Nora said before she died? Her last whispered words ran silently through my head.

Recalling those words at that moment, a hollow sensation leaked its way through me.

"Send them up," I heard myself say. My stomach was somersaulting.

I made my way into the kitchen and dumped the rest of the scotch into the sink. My hands felt weak.

Why are the cops here? This can't be good. Something's terribly wrong.

A short while later, murmuring came from the hallway. Then, the sound of feet on the carpet.

A brief pause.

The doorbell rang.

Opening the door, I saw a middle-aged guy with broad shoulders, wide face, and a flattened nose. A younger man stood behind him. "William Shaw? I'm Detective Phil Kaufman, NYPD," the older one said, flashing his badge. "This is Detective Don Cirillo. May we come in?"

Do I have a choice? When cops ask permission, they're donning a mask of civility, but it's bullshit.

In the living room, I plopped down in a love seat opposite the sofa where the detectives sat. Cirillo, a tall, angular guy, peered at the framed ink etchings on the wall—stuff Nora loved and bought in various SoHo galleries. Kaufman took a small pad from his breast pocket, flipped open the pages, and eyeballed me.

"Mr. Shaw, we need to wrap up the investigation into your wife's death."

Investigation? What in hell is this about?

"Look, guys, I told the doctors everything."

The room swayed. My head felt fuzzy, as though I would faint. *My wife's death . . .* It still seemed unimaginable, beyond belief.

"There are still some questions," Kaufman said.

"Questions? What questions? Nora died from MS and her blood thinner, the warfarin. The doctors said—"

"We know what the doctors said, Mr. Shaw. But we need to clear up a few things."

Cirillo stared at a framed, glossy, black-and-white photo of Nora from her acting days. Was he ogling her? Was he aroused by her? I felt like slamming a fist into his gut.

"Mr. Shaw?" Kaufman said.

I turned to him.

He said nothing, just stared at me.

"I'd be happy to help, Detectives," I said, focusing on Kaufman. "But I'm exhausted. How 'bout we talk tomorrow morning and—"

"I suggest we go to the precinct now, Mr. Shaw."

"Why not here?" I glanced at the clock on the credenza: 10:04. My bones ached and my head throbbed. Not the time to talk to cops.

"I'll explain at the precinct, sir."

Cirillo scanned the bookshelves, the Kashan rugs, the furnishings; his gaze rested again on Nora's photo. My chest tightened at the hungry look in this young punk's eyes. I nearly choked on fumes of anger.

"I'm not sure I want to do this." My voice sounded weak in my ears.

"It's your right, sir. But it would be better to go now."

There was a vague yet discernible hint of threat in Kaufman's tone. Or was my mind playing tricks on me? I hadn't slept for days and was half in Johnnie Black's booze bag. Despite my scotch-addled brain, I sensed danger. Was I imagining something ominous?

About to refuse Kaufman's strong suggestion to go to the station house, I realized if I sent them away, I'd cogitate endlessly, far into the morning. I'd be left with a knifelike level of worry—even fear—about what the cops were after, and the night would brim with tension and turmoil. And, I'd be alone with my emptiness. I'd just guzzle more Johnnie Black. And still, sleep would evade me. My thoughts would swirl in a never-ending spiral of doubt and rumination—wondering if things could have been different. If only I'd been able to keep Nora alive for even a few more months.

But it was too late. It was all over.

The days of hope were gone.

With Nora dead, was there any purpose to my existence? I was forty-five years old, yet felt like I was dying a slow, tortured death.

And maybe that would be best: to die—just as my beloved Nora did.

Chapter 3

I hadn't been in Manhattan's 19th Precinct since interviewing Detective Ed Hanson for my last crime novel, written five years earlier. It might as well have been a century ago.

Even with concessions to modernity, an interrogation room still looked the same. When the door closed, the air seemed sucked out of the enclosure, as though it was a vacuum-sealed box. Soundproof cork covered three walls. Words sounded dull, stifled, as though my ears were clogged. The one wall not cork-lined was cinder block, painted a bilious green. The room had an odd smell—of sweat, damp cement, and cork, all melded with fear. A recessed fluorescent light cast a sickly yellowish aura onto a laminated tabletop. A small camera was perched high on a wall. No one-way mirror like in the old days.

When I was a crime reporter, I'd watched interrogations, but I'd never been the one being questioned. My body pulsed with anxious anticipation—and a gnawing sense of dread seized me.

I sat in a gray metal chair as Kaufman perched his considerable bulk in front of me. Cirillo sat behind the oak-laminated table to my right. Inhaling Cirillo's cloyingly pungent cologne, I wondered if the detectives could smell scotch on my breath. How could they miss it?

For the first time, despite my booze-addled daze, I noticed Kaufman's tweed sport jacket, gray slacks, and cloth tie. He projected a hard-boiled streetwise look—the guy was maybe fifty,

had a shaved head, was wide shouldered and bull necked, and had the flattened face of a barroom brawler.

Cirillo was tall and thin, in his midthirties, obviously the junior partner. He wore a tapered blue suit—expensive looking—and a pastel-blue shirt with a red silk tie. His dress was sharp in a calculated sort of way. He had dark, slicked-back hair and the ferret-faced look of a young punk. He was pure Brooklyn—Bensonhurst or Bay Ridge. Reminded me of Christopher from *The Sopranos*. I'd met his type a million times back in the day.

"We brought you here, Mr. Shaw," said Kaufman, "because of a procedural change. We now video everyone we question."

"I don't have to talk to you," I said, wanting to establish I knew the game. Years of crime reporting and writing crime novels taught me plenty about the criminal justice system. It was heavily loaded against the suspect, no matter what the Constitution said.

But was I a suspect? If so, of having done what?

"You can leave if you'd prefer," Kaufman said.

"This is an interrogation, isn't it?"

"If you wanna call it that," Kaufman said. "The recording's for your protection and ours. So if you have no objection, we'll proceed."

"Go ahead, Detective," I said, knowing I could walk out in a heartbeat. But my legs ached and I felt so beaten, it was just easier to get it over with.

Kaufman pressed a button on a console. "This is Detective Philip Kaufman of the NYPD Homicide Division, 19th Precinct."

Homicide Division? A bolt of fear nearly threw me back in the chair. My hands clenched involuntarily.

Noting the date and time, Kaufman continued, "I'm here with Detective Donald Cirillo and Mr. William Shaw, husband of the decedent, Nora Shaw. We're recording this interview. Are you aware of that, Mr. Shaw?"

"Yes."

"Mr. Shaw, we're questioning everyone . . . you, the doctors, your wife's sister, the home health aide, Nora's friends. You aren't obligated to answer any questions, and you can have an attorney present if you want."

"Are you reading me my Miranda rights?"

"No. I'm just making sure you're fully informed."

"Am I under arrest?" My mouth was parched and my eyelids began drooping. Far too much booze mixed with a deadening sense of despair, not ideal for a police interview.

"No, you're not under arrest. You know that, sir. You've written scenes like this."

I closed my eyes, just for a moment.

"By the way, I've read your stuff. Very authentic, and gritty, too. In fact, I know you talked with Detective Ed Hanson for your last novel. He's gonna retire, cash in his chips, and move to South Carolina," Kaufman added with a half-smile.

Was Kaufman trying to establish some crap-ass rapport, tickling me with some friendly banter—trying to open me up a bit? All with the recording going, nonstop, taking it all in.

Detective Tactics 101.

"Mr. Shaw, technically, your wife didn't die of natural causes. The autopsy showed a very high level of the blood thinner warfarin in her system."

Jesus, is this why they hauled me in?

A pang of panic shot through me. The room tilted. Suddenly and drastically. Yes, Nora's level of blood thinner was high when she died—it often spiked for no reason over the years of her illness.

"Nora was bedridden, right?" Kaufman said.

"Yes," I heard a thin voice reply.

"Had an irregular heartbeat, right?"

"That's right."

"And you gave Nora her warfarin by an IV setup each

morning, correct?”

“Yes.”

“Because she couldn’t swallow pills, right?”

“She couldn’t swallow anything.”

“Because of the MS, right? She was paralyzed.”

“That’s right.” My throat constricted. I thought I’d choke. I was assaulted by the image of Nora lying—shrunk and withered—in the hospital bed in our living room.

“And she was taking prednisone for the MS, right?”

“Yes.”

“And prednisone mixed with the warfarin made her bleed even more easily, yes?”

“We all knew it . . . Dr. Radin and—”

“And you prepared the IV warfarin, yes?” Kaufman asked. His eyes crawled over me.

Cirillo sat like a sphinx.

“Yes. Like Dr. Radin instructed me to.”

Jesus, I sound so defensive.

“That would be Dr. *Daniel* Radin, her internist?”

“Yes.”

“And when did you give Nora the warfarin?”

“At six every morning.”

“You’re sure of that . . . six a.m.?”

“Yes. Absolutely.”

“Now, you went to Starbucks that morning, right?”

“Yes.”

“At around seven?”

“Yes.”

“And you did that every morning?”

“Pretty much.”

“Why so early in the morning?”

“Because I’d begun another novel . . . on my laptop.”

“Why not write at home?”

"Because Nora's aide would get in at seven. She'd rattle around in the kitchen, turn on the radio. So I'd work at Starbucks until the library on 79th Street opened; then I'd go there."

"So you'd leave Nora with Roberta, the aide?"

"Yes." My heart fluttered. A dull pain bored through my chest.

"Did you meet anyone at Starbucks in the mornings?"

"At Starbucks? No." My legs flinched involuntarily beneath the chair.

"Mr. Shaw, are you seeing anyone?"

"Seeing anyone? What do you mean?"

My head shook back and forth. I squinted at Kaufman.

"What do I mean? Romantically is what I mean."

"No. Not at all."

"You sure about that?"

"Yes, of course."

My stomach eddied.

"Mr. Shaw, the tox report showed excess warfarin in Nora's system. Forgive me, but we know she was a burden for you, so we—"

"A *burden*? How fucking dare you?" My blood felt like it was bubbling in my veins.

"Are you saying she wasn't?"

Heat rose to my face.

"What the hell are you taking about, Detective?"

"The cost of her upkeep, the home health aide, the doctor visits, the medicines . . . and you had no insurance coverage. That wasn't a burden?"

"I don't like what you're implying, Detective."

"What am I implying, sir?"

Blood pulsed like a piston behind my eyes.

There was a long silence. The overhead fluorescent buzzed.

"You're writing a new novel, aren't you?"

Sudden change of subject. Basic interrogation tactics. Throw the

suspect off balance. Suspect? Me?

Kaufman's lips formed a thin, bloodless line.

"Care to give us a little summary, Mr. Shaw?"

"Summary?"

"Of the novel?"

"Not really."

Where was this bullshit going? *Assassin's Lullaby* was a story about a hit man hired to kill a woman. Nora asked me to write something, anything—as a present to her. It was a gift.

"Been writing it on your laptop?"

"Yes."

Kaufman jotted something in his notebook, looked up, and said, "Mr. Shaw, have you deleted anything from your laptop?"

"No."

"Don't delete a thing. We need to examine it."

"You'll have to get a search warrant, Detective."

He nodded and jotted down something else.

I felt my chin quivering. My God, it wouldn't stop.

I felt light-headed. My heart began a stampede in my chest.

"Mr. Shaw, is there anything you're not telling us?" Cirillo piped up.

"I don't believe this bullshit."

I reached into my pocket and whipped out my cell phone.

"We're through talking," I said, pressing a speed-dial number.

Chapter 4

The buzzing fluorescent light in the interrogation room cast a yellowish glow on everything. My eyes stung, so I closed them. I was blighted, completely enervated. I felt like dropping off to sleep. I heard chairs scraping, smelled Cirillo's cologne, and knew the detectives were leaving the interrogation room. I sat in a fog, knowing they'd be watching me on CCTV and recording everything. My ass ached from the metal chair, but I wasn't going to budge. I was beyond caring.

Sitting in a haze, my thoughts drifted back to a day when Nora and I had been married for two years. I sat beneath the ailanthus tree in the back patio of our town house apartment—the one I'd been renting when we first met. Nora emerged through the French doors. Her face was pale and drawn.

"What did Dr. Buckman say?"

"I have endometriosis," she murmured. "You know what that means?"

"Not exactly."

I stood and took her in my arms. She was shuddering.

"It means I probably can't get pregnant," she whispered, burying her face in my chest. "It's been two years now. Dr. Buckman didn't sound optimistic." Her tears soaked my shirt.

I had to admit, I felt a secret swell of relief. Though we'd been trying for two years, having a child would change our lives. Most of all, I'd be forced to share Nora with another being. As much as

I tried shoving it away, I felt an undercurrent of jealousy.

"But we want children," she whispered.

"Nora, we didn't get married just to have children. We want to *be* together. Not having a baby doesn't lessen us." I pressed my face to her hair. Her fragrance filled my nostrils. "Sweetheart, what we *have* counts, not what we *might* have."

"Oh, Bill, your writing keeps you going."

"No, Nora. *You* keep me going. And you have your acting."

"And I learned something else this morning," she said. Her voice quavered. "They're writing my part out of the soap." She began trembling.

I was stunned. They were writing her out of the soap? And learning she couldn't get pregnant? Two major blows in one day. My thoughts raced for something to say. How could I lessen her pain, assuage her losses?

"Honey, you've had plenty of other offers."

"Lee says I should go to LA, try to get some film work."

"So, we'll go. I can write anywhere."

I tried picturing a life in the Hollywood Hills, Bel Air, or Santa Monica—where the so-called beautiful people lived. Where we'd be surrounded by wealthy, influential men: movie magnates, producers, fat-cat moguls, movers and shakers, the power elite. There'd be handsome actors and charismatic directors who'd be drawn to Nora like iron filings to a magnet. My possessiveness and nascent jealousy were never very far from the surface. Could I deal with the avalanche of challenges a Hollywood lifestyle would bring?

"But I love our life here," Nora murmured, "the theater, our friends, my sister, your brother, Charlie, and your mother's such a darling. And I'd miss this little apartment. I love coming home and finding you banging away on your laptop."

"Honey, there's plenty for you in New York—television, theater companies, and you love the workshop."

She shook her head as tears funneled down her cheeks.

I guided her to the bedroom where we lay down on the bed. I held her in my arms, kissing her cheeks and eyelids as she cried softly. I caressed her back and shoulders, tried to comfort her, told her how much I loved her, and tried conveying how my world orbited around her and nothing else. I whispered to her, saying I'd do anything to make her happy.

We lay there for hours, holding each other.

I kept repeating, "Nora, you're all I ever wanted in this life."

The cozy three-room Charles Street apartment was our street-level version of heaven. With its chestnut beams, stucco ceilings, and stone fireplace, it was perfect. The walls were covered with bookshelves and knickknacks. We'd furnished the place with eighteenth-century Federal and Georgian-style pieces. The kitchen had an exposed brick wall and a window looking onto Charles Street.

On spring and summer days, the patio with its shade-giving ailanthus tree was our private paradise. I'd write at a bridge table with my laptop and the day would flash by.

I'd finished the first draft of *Wolf at the Door*. Nora had begun editing my manuscripts.

"Remember when I offered to be your editor?" she asked.

"Of course I do. It was the night we met."

She was a fabulous editor. She could streamline my prose, improve the novel's pacing, find inconsistencies in the story—and her actor's ear for dialogue was uncanny.

"So what do you think?" I said, as she finished reading the manuscript.

"Truthfully, the dialogue isn't how people really talk." She propped her elbows on the table. "Bill, I have an idea. Why don't we act out the dialogue, see how it sounds."

"You'll turn me into an actor," I said, laughing.

“And you’re turning me into an editor.”

“You know what’s happening here?”

Her eyebrows rose. Those Spanish nostrils flared.

“The scripts are becoming as much yours as mine.”

I got up and circled the table, feeling closer to Nora than ever before.

She stood and we embraced. The feel and fragrance of her skin was deliciously overwhelming.

“Let’s tango,” she whispered.

“Yes. It makes me feel so close to you.”

So close, I could never imagine being without her.