

A RED GLOW OF NEON

by

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FADE IN:

EXT. STREET - CANOPIED ENTRANCE TO RESTAURANT - NIGHT

Maître d' in rumpled tuxedo holds open door to restaurant as an employee in a white apron rolls out in succession two potted palms which he situates on either side of the door.

SUPER: "HOLLYWOOD, SEPTEMBER 7, 1926"

Employee goes back inside.

The maître d' lights a cigarette and looks up above the door.

He sees a large unlit neon sign that comes on with a STATICKY BUZZ and then blinks off and on, intermittently washing the street in a red glow of neon.

BACK TO SCENE

A cab pulls up and a couple gets out.

MOVE PAST the couple and ZOOM UP and ONTO a second-story window across the street.

INT. SMALL KITCHEN - CONTINUOUS

An apartment kitchen with a small stove and a wood icebox and a counter covered in small white tiles.

GLADYS BAKER prepares dinner for two.

She is 26, medium height, good-looking, with short, curly, copper-colored hair. She wears a sailor blouse and a skirt.

MONTAGE - GLADYS PREPARES DINNER

She pierces the skin of two russet potatoes with a knife before placing them on the wire rack of the oven.

Carefully places two steaks on the broiler pan sitting on the counter. Salts and peppers them.

Smashes a garlic clove on a cutting board with the knife and places it in a ceramic bowl. Adds vinegar, oil, salt and pepper and beats the vinaigrette with a fork.

Tears up part of a head of Iceberg lettuce and tosses it into a wooden salad bowl. Quickly cuts a tomato into eight wedges and tosses them in and then places the bowl in the icebox.

Fills two glass baby bottles with evaporated milk and places them in the icebox.

Opens the cabinet and retrieves a square-shaped pint of Canadian whiskey from a cache of four and sets it on the counter.

Takes off her apron and folds it and places it on top of the icebox.

INT. BEDROOM - CONTINUOUS

Gladys approaches the double bed.

Three-month old Norma Jeane sleeps in the middle of the bed, surrounded by pillows

Gladys kisses three fingers of her own hand and touches the baby's forehead with them.

INT. LIVING ROOM - CONTINUOUS

Sparsely furnished. A sofa, two arm chairs, a small dining table.

Gladys TUNES IN a cathedral style Silvertone RADIO that sits on a small stand.

ANNOUNCER (V.O)

This is KFSG and the Call Four
Square Gospel.

The voice of AIMEE SEMPLE MCPHERSON crackles over the radio.

Gladys listens for a moment.

MCPHERSON (V.O.)

We have no need to doubt God. God lives. God's word is true. God's word has been proven. Angelus Temple with its great multitude here tonight filled with hearts that know Jesus Christ as their saviour. Say amen. Know Jesus Christ as their healer. Know Christ as the baptizer of the Holy Ghost and believe in the coming of the Lord. Oh, thank God for the power of faith. (ETC.)

Gladys TURNS RADIO OFF and begins to take off her blouse as she leaves the room.

INT. SHOWER - CONTINUOUS

Gladys works up a good lather of shampoo in her hair.

INT. BATHROOM - CONTINUOUS

Gladys, wrapped in a towel, looks at herself in the steamy mirror above the lavatory. She likes what she sees.

INT. KITCHEN - LATER

Gladys wears a colorful slip-on frock and a string of beads.

She takes a small bowl of ice from the icebox. She stabs the ice a few times with an ice pick.

She places several pieces of ice in two glasses and returns the bowl to the icebox.

She pours two fingers of whiskey over the ice in each glass.

A SOFT KNOCK comes from her apartment DOOR.

INT. APARTMENT DOOR - CONTINUOUS

The door opens and C. STANLEY GIFFORD lets himself into the apartment. He wears a light weight cotton suit, a tie and a straw boater.

He is handsome, 28, with a pencil moustache.

His movements seem carefully rehearsed, as if an abrupt motion might cause his good looks and Hollywood demeanor to suddenly fall off of him and onto the floor.

He relishes his baritone voice.

C.

Gladiola?

INT. KITCHEN - CONTINUOUS

C. comes into the kitchen.

Gladys hands him a glass of whiskey.

He embraces her and kisses her on the cheek.

C.

Where is she?

GLADYS
 (tense)
 On the bed. Where else?

INT. BEDROOM - CONTINUOUS

C. cautiously leans over the bed.

Norma Jeane is now awake and looks at C.

She is intermittently bathed in the red light of the neon sign.

C. takes the baby's foot in his hand.

C.
 The big bad wolf would sure like to
 eat these little toes.

Gladys appears in the doorway with her drink and leans against the jamb watching him.

C. (CONT'D)
 The big bad wolf would sure like to
 eat these little toes. Yes, sir.

INT. LIVING ROOM - CONTINUOUS

C. follows Gladys into the living room.

GLADYS
 So how was it?

C.
 I couldn't get near the church.
 There was a sea of people.
 Thousands.

GLADYS
 Who'd you see?

C.
 Chaplin, John Barrymore, Keaton,
 Pickford and Pola Negri. That's the
 fourth time I've seen Negri in
 person. She sent four-thousand red
 roses.

They sit on the sofa.

GLADYS

I still can't believe Rudolph
Valentino is dead.

C.

It was a spectacle. Believe me.

GLADYS

(changing subject)

I hope I did the right thing taking
Norma Jeane for a month.

C.

You'll get to know Norma Jeane and
you'll give the Bollenders a rest.
Don't worry your pretty head about
it, Gladiola.

INT. LIVING ROOM - DINING TABLE - LATER

C. eats smoothly. A forkful of steak followed by a forkful of
potato followed by a forkful of salad.

Gladys eats slowly.

C.

Delicious, Gladiola. Delicious.

GLADYS

Thank you.

C.

This Canadian is the best whiskey
to hit L.A. in years.

GLADYS

Some of the girls at Consolidated
gave me a dozen pint bottles for my
birthday.

C.

Prohibition is nonsense. Volstead
has actually increased alcohol-
related problems. They're up a
thousand percent.

GLADYS

Maybe it's because so many people
drink hooch.

C.

You know, I'm getting bored at
Consolidated.

(MORE)

C. (CONT'D)

Anyway, I've always considered my work there as temporary. Until I work my contacts, get a screen test. Maybe eventually a studio contract...

GLADYS

There's a big difference between getting a screen test and signing a studio contract.

C.

Listen, pictures are going to talk soon, and that's good for me 'cause if there's one thing I have it's a voice.

(points fork at Gladys)

It wouldn't hurt you to move up at Consolidated. Get out of the cutting room

GLADYS

I make a decent living as a film cutter.

C. moves his head from side to side as he chews as if to avoid disagreeing with her.

Gladys takes a bite of steak and watches C.

MONTAGE - C. DOES ALL THE TALKING

Wags his fork in the air.

C.

At lunch the other day at Musso's Chaplin stopped by my table to say that he had also enjoyed the kidneys.

Takes a sip of whiskey.

C. (CONT'D)

D.W. Griffith's name won't be on anyone's lips in twenty years.

Gestures with his glass.

C. (CONT'D)

Harlow's great. But there's a new lady in town. Anna Riswold from Norway. They say she's gonna be even bigger.

Leans toward Gladys as if in confidence.

C. (CONT'D)

Rumor has it Valentino wanted to die because his films were getting lousier and lousier.

(leans closer)

I don't care what they say, Rudy was a lavender.

Caroms onto a new topic.

C. (CONT'D)

So, Trudy Ederle swims the English Channel. Well, fifty-one men had swum it before her. But she bested the fastest of them by almost two hours. What I'm saying is that maybe women are holding back. Maybe women can do everything better than men. How could a woman do something two hours faster than fifty-one men? It's gotta be something constitutional.

C. likes the sound of that word.

C. (CONT'D)

Constitutional.

Pours more whiskey into his glass.

C. (CONT'D)

It's only a matter of time, Gladiola, until Hollywood becomes the intellectual center of the world.

INT. DINING TABLE - LATER

Gladys and C. finish their dinner.

C. takes his last bite of chocolate pie.

C.

Good chocolate pie, Gladiola. Not as good as the one they serve at Lester's but good chocolate pie.

C. wipes his mouth with his napkin and then places it on the table.

He makes a show of patting at his jacket in search of cigarettes.

GLADYS (O.S.)
I have cigarettes in the kitchen.

INT. DINING TABLE - LATER

C. flicks ash into an ashtray.

GLADYS
You never talk about us, C. You never talk about the baby. And when you talk to me it's like you're crossing a stream, stepping carefully from stone to protruding stone to avoid splattering your trousers.

C.
I'm sorry, Gladys. I have run on.
(taking a quick drag)
So tell me. How are you?

GLADYS
(hesitantly)
C., I'm terrified of becoming mentally ill.

C. immediately regrets his question.

C.
Mentally ill?

GLADYS
There's like a black fungus in my family tree.

C.
For example?

GLADYS
My mother lives across the street from the Bollenders.

C.
So?.

GLADYS
On my last visit she was yelling at someone in her backyard who wasn't there.
(looks at C.)
(MORE)

GLADYS (CONT'D)
 My father died of general paresis.
 (lowers eyes)
 Schizophrenia ultimately destroyed
 my brother Marion.

C.
 (impatient)
 Looks like you'll be crazy for
 sure.

He looks around the room

C. (CONT'D)
 That throbbing neon sign would
 drive anyone mad.

GLADYS
 You don't think it could hurt the
 baby, do you?

C.
 Neon? It's harmless. Besides, she's
 only going to be exposed to it for
 a few nights.
 (stabs cigarette out)
 By the way, I heard something about
 silver nitrate making a person go
 mad like mercury with hat makers.
 Another reason to get out of the
 cutting room, Gladiola.

C. stands.

C. (CONT'D)
 A perfect meal, Gladiola. I hate to
 run. There's a fellow owes me
 twenty dollars.

C. finishes his drink and sets the glass on the table.

GLADYS
 C., you promised me we would talk.

C.
 Later, I promise.

GLADYS
 You bastard, you said we would talk
 about the baby.

C. begins backing out of the apartment his hands held high as
 if he were at gun point.

C.
 Later, later, later.

He closes the door softly behind him.

GLADYS
 (to empty room)
 Jack took my other two babies away
 with him when I was nineteen.
 (cries)
 To Kentucky.

INT. KITCHEN - LATER

Gladys is morose and drinks whiskey, her face streaked with tears.

She is intermittently bathed in the light of the red neon sign.

In a sudden outburst of anger, Gladys slams the glass down on the counter and it breaks, cutting her finger.

She holds her cut finger under running water.

She improvises a bandage from a piece of torn fabric.

As she leaves the kitchen she looks back at the counter.

She sees the shards of broken glass and the blood.

INT. BEDROOM - LATER

Gladys lies next to her baby. She wears Chinese pajamas.

The baby's face is intermittently bathed in red neon.

GLADYS
 (slightly drunk)
 Some day soon, Norma Jeane, we will
 be together.
 (caresses baby)
 In a house.

The baby's face is intermittently bathed in red neon.

GLADYS (CONT'D)
 Not a fancy house. But it'll have a
 porch. And a porch swing. A white
 porch with a shiny gray floor. And
 a flagstone walk leading down to a
 gate and a white fence.
 (MORE)

GLADYS (CONT'D)

With red flowers all along the
walk. Roses. Yes, there will be
lots of roses.

The baby's face is intermittently bathed in red neon.

FADE TO BLACK:

THE END