

Rhapsody for Rita

a short film noir

by

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INT. OFFICE NIGHT

Neon-lit rain snakes down the window pane. JOHNNY stares at it, as if looking at a vision beyond.

JOHNNY (VO)
 Sometimes I wonder, is it me, or
 is every man the same? When
 you're down, and weary, with
 nothing left to believe in,
 before you've even noticed, she's
 there . . . the ghostly lady of
 your dreams.

He is disturbed by a sound from the outer office. He crosses and opens the door.

In the semi-darkness is the silhouette of a young woman. He turns on the light; dressed only in a slip, and drenched to the skin, she is almost naked.

RITA
 Please. Turn it off.

After a flickering hesitation, he turns off the light.

EXT. STREET NIGHT

HARD SAXOPHONES OVER: a man's feet stagger through neon laced puddles.

SUPER: MAIN TITLES

He steadies himself against a street light, gasping for breath; he is DANNY, a bespectacled, middle-aged man in a dinner suit. A crimson stain spreads across his white dress shirt.

INT. RITA'S APARTMENT, BEDROOM NIGHT

CLOSE ON: Rita's lips reflected in a mirror – she is applying lipstick.

MUSIC IS CUT BY A BANGING.

Rita freezes. After a moment

DANNY (OOV)
 Angel Baby? Tell me you're
 there!

She tosses down the lipstick, and goes out.

INT. RITA'S APPARTMENT, HALL NIGHT

Rita opens the door. Immediately, Danny reaches towards her.

RITA
I told you not to come here.
(SEEING BLOOD) Oh, my god.

She pulls him in, closes the door. He gives her a beatific smile, as he holds a closed fist up in front of his face.

INT. OFFICE NIGHT

Rita and JOHNNY sitting in semi-darkness lit only by the street lights and flashing neon from outside.

RITA
And then he said ...

CLOSE ON: her closed fist, which she opens to reveal a cheap little green ticket with a number.

RITA (CONT)
...it's the ticket to your
dreams.

She looks at JOHNNY; he returns her gaze.

OVER WE HEAR LATIN MUSIC

INT. RITA'S APARTMENT, LOUNGE NIGHT

CLOSE ON: a record on the gramophone.

DANNY
Dance it for me, Rita. One last
time.

RITA
I can't, Danny. Not now.

DANNY
Please, Angel ...

THERE IS A THUNDEROUS BANGING ON THE DOOR.

FRANK (OOV)
Come on, Rita, open this door.

RITA
For god's sake, get out of here.

INT. RITA'S APARTMENT, HALL NIGHT

MORE BANGING; Rita, still wearing only her slip, opens the door a crack.

RITA
What the hell d'you think you're
doing? Disturbing a lady ...

Suddenly, there is the flat of a giant hand over her face, sending her reeling backwards. A tall, bony man, FRANK, pushes his way in, followed by two henchmen.

INT. RITA'S APARTMENT, LOUNGE NIGHT

The two henchmen barge in, but the room is empty, the record still playing. Frank follows with Rita.

RITA
Do you mind waiting, while I get dressed?

She goes to move off, but Frank holds her back; motions to the other two to look in the bedroom.

INT. RITA'S APARTMENT, BEDROOM NIGHT

The two henchman enter on guard, but then stop dead: the window is wide open.

FIRST HENCHMAN
Shit! The little fuck's flown.

He goes to the window, looks out, is about to return, when the other touches him on the arm, and motions to the floor. On the pale carpet is a trail of blood leading from the window to a giant wardrobe. The Latin music still coming from the other room, they creep towards it, slowly ease back the doors. Suddenly, gunfire blasts out from between the gowns.

INT. RITA'S APARTMENT, LOUNGE NIGHT

CLOSE ON: Frank and Rita, as they react.

DANNY (OOV)
So, who's the big shot now?

Frank pulls a revolver and moves towards the bedroom, as more shots ring out; Rita sees her chance — turns and runs.

INT. OFFICE NIGHT

CLOSE ON; the ticket lying on the desk — on it the number 315. JOHNNY splashes scotch into two glasses. Rita, with his trench-coat wrapped around her, and her hair slicked back, watches him.

JOHNNY
"The Ticket to Your Dreams" — you know how many they print, just like that?

RITA
Yeah, but this one's different — it's the winning number.

JOHNNY
You got a lot of faith, kid!

RITA
And you don't, huh?

He does not answer; hands her the glass. Their fingers touch.

RITA (CONT.)
Two slug, Johnny.

JOHNNY
What do you mean?

RITA
Two drinks and then you're gone.
I've seen you looking at me...

JOHNNY
You're a lot to look at.

RITA
If you'd had a little more faith,
who knows? I might've taken a
chance.

A BLAST OF SAXOPHONES: MUSIC CONTINUES OVER:-

EXT. SHOESHINE STAND DAY

CLOSE ON: A NEWSPAPER PHOTOGRAPH OF A BODY BEING PULLED FROM A RIVER; BESIDE IT THE HEADLINE, "PIANO-PLAYER SHOT DEAD".

As the music dies to a walking bass, we hear the soft buffing of brushes on leather.

JOHNNY
Says the stiff worked for a
honcho, called Osbourne
Henderson?

SHOESHINE
Oxfords, handmade.

JOHNNY
When he comes along, tell him I'd
like a chat.

SHOESHINE
You quite sure that's wise?

He gives Shoeshine a card with a note, and goes.

EXT. BASEMENT DAY

JOHNNY's polished brogues come into view; he crouches to peer through railings.

JOHNNY (VO)
 Suddenly, everything was
 different. There was promise in
 the air.

He comes down the steps towards a basement hovel; stops as he hears a haunting piano melody coming from within. The glass in the door has been smashed. He puts his hand through, and lets himself in.

INT. DANNY'S APARTMENT DAY

JOHNNY moves silently down the short corridor, and looks in to the one room; it is clear that it has been worked over, things scattered everywhere. A woman sits with her back to him, playing an upright piano. She suddenly stops, turns abruptly. She wears black-lensed glasses; he realises that she is blind.

JOHNNY
 Pretty tune.

LORNA
 My husband wrote it.

JOHNNY
 You were Danny's wife?

LORNA
 Who are you?

JOHNNY
 Just a friend of a friend.

LORNA
 He knew, you know? He knew he was
 going to die.

JOHNNY
 You mean he had a premonition?

LORNA
 He wrote me a letter saying that
 he was going on a long journey,
 and would never see me or the
 kids again. I didn't understand
 it. He was a caring man.

A tear runs down from behind the black lens. JOHNNY becomes aware of a photograph of Rita on the floor at his feet. He stoops to pick it up.

JOHNNY
 There's a picture here. Mind if I
 take it?

LORNA
 A picture's not much good to me.

JOHNNY

Tell me, was Danny a gambling man?

LORNA

Oh no; he was the careful kind.

JOHNNY

The number three-one-five — mean anything to you?

LORNA

(LAUGHS) Why, yes.

JOHNNY

It does?

LORNA

The thirty-first of May.

JOHNNY

Next week.

LORNA

Our wedding anniversary.

JOHNNY

(A BEAT) Then I guess, that was what was on Danny's mind when he died.

INT. OFFICE NIGHT

MUSIC: the photograph of Rita is propped up against the bottle of scotch, a full glass beside it, and one half empty. JOHNNY sits fingering the ticket with the number, 315.

JOHNNY (VO)

I didn't have a hope in hell of tracing that ticket, and I knew it. But as long as I could keep the possibility alive, I knew I had Rita on a string.

His thoughts are interrupted by the ring of the telephone.

JOHNNY

Yeah ...Who is this? ...the Jade Dragon ...

INT. CHINESE RESTAURANT DAY

A large Chinese dragon stands in the foyer: JOHNNY enters, gives his hat to a girl in a cheongsam, takes the ticket, and follows the head waiter to a booth where a heavy-jowled man is working his way through a tower of dim sum baskets. He nods to JOHNNY to sit down opposite, offers him one of the baskets.

JOHNNY
I'm not hungry.

HENDERSON
Then get the fuck out. This is a restaurant.

JOHNNY
First tell me about Danny?

HENDERSON
Who?

JOHNNY
The piano player.

HENDERSON
I don't care a flying fig for that little fart. Where's the girl?

JOHNNY
You referring to some lady in particular?

HENDERSON
Some lady who ain't so particular.

JOHNNY
For my usual fee I'll see if I can find her.

HENDERSON
Don't get smart with me, Asshole. Your number's marked.

JOHNNY
What number would that be?

HENDERSON
Just be careful it don't turn into a zero.

JOHNNY
Change your mind, let me know.

He gets up to go, but then becomes aware of three other men, at different tables, also getting up — among them is Frank.

JOHNNY
You going to let me walk?

HENDERSON
You wanna walk, walk. So long, it's been good to know you.

JOHNNY makes a rapid exit, followed by the other three men — but immediately that they are all outside, JOHNNY does an about-turn and comes back in.

JOHNNY
 (to girl in cheongsam)
 Forgot my hat.

He rummages for the ticket, brings it out, but then, stops dead. From his wallet, he slides out the ticket given him by Rita.

CLOSE ON: the tickets – apart from the number, they are identical.

He swaps them over and places the number 315 on the counter. The girl goes off muttering in Cantonese.

Outside, the men stare back through the glass door in confusion. One motions to his head to the others; they drop back out of sight.

CLOSE ON: a hat placed on the counter – it is just like the one JOHNNY wore in, except that this one has a wider, pleated band.

JOHNNY looks at it for a moment, and then, suddenly, snatches it up, and crashes through a door opposite, marked "Private".

INT. KITCHEN, CHINESE RESTAURANT DAY

JOHNNY hurtles through the confusion of cooks and steaming woks.

EXT. BACK STREET DAY

JOHNNY comes out of a side door, and walks rapidly along the street, turning the hat over and over in his hands. He steps to the curb to hail a taxi – but, just then, a hand grabs him from behind.

The three men are on JOHNNY; one pulls down his jacket to trap his arms, while another delivers a hefty blow to the solar plexus, and then the chin. JOHNNY goes down in a heap. While Frank holds him by the ears, the others go through his pockets, scattering his possessions over the pavement – but they find nothing which interests them.

FRANK
 Give yourself a break, Buddy,
 deliver the girl. Believe me,
 she's not your type.

They go, leaving JOHNNY on the ground. He feels like death, but then a little smile comes over his lips. From the corner of his eye, he sees the hat, lying at a distance. On all fours, he crawls towards it and retrieves it from the gutter.

OVER WE HEAR THE SOUNDS OF A SALVATION BAND.

EXT. STREET CORNER DAY

A Salvation Army band plays; JOHNNY, hatless, joins the small throng of on-lookers. A girl in uniform comes round with a collecting box; as she raises her head, we see that, beneath the bonnet, is Rita.

JOHNNY
The military look – suits you.

RITA
Nothing new to me, Mister. I grew up in it – faith and charity.

JOHNNY
You got to believe in something.

RITA
So they say, but I heard the devil's got the best tunes.

JOHNNY
Maybe, it's time to find out.

He puts a coin in her box, and whispers something in her ear. Rita's eyes widen. He goes.

INT. OFFICE NIGHT

JOHNNY sits in semi-darkness, alone in the office.

JOHNNY (VO)
If it was all a dream, it was a dream I intended to pursue to the end.

He hears approaching footsteps, running along the corridor outside. The door opens, and Rita stands there, wearing his trenchcoat, the sleeves rolled up. He picks up the hat and skims it across the room to her.

RITA
Danny's lucky hat!

JOHNNY
Too bad he left it behind.

She runs her fingers all around beneath the band, and then around the inside, but finds nothing. She looks up to JOHNNY. From his fist, he produces a little flat silver key.

JOHNNY (CONT.)
It belongs to a locker at Central Station.

She crosses the room and reaches for it, but JOHNNY withdraws it from her grasp.

JOHNNY (CONT.)

Do you know how many hours I've
spent dreaming of you?

RITA

Then, Johnny Two-slug, maybe,
your dream has come true.

She undoes the coat; beneath, she is wearing only silk
underwear. She slides onto his lap, and pulls his head towards
her. But as Johnny nuzzles her breasts ...

CLOSE ON: Rita slipping the key from his hand.

MUSIC AND MIX TO:

INT. BEDROOM, RITA'S APARTMENT NIGHT

A suitcase lies open on the bed. Rita, dressed to travel, is
frantically throwing things in. From beneath some underwear in
a drawer, she takes a small pearl-handled revolver, and puts
it in her pocket. She snaps the suitcase closed, and goes.

INT. HALL, RITA'S APARTMENT NIGHT

Rita opens the door, and gasps, as she suddenly finds herself
face-to-face with Frank. Before he can speak, she pulls the
gun, and shoots him point-blank in the stomach.

INT. OFFICE NIGHT

Johnny lies disheveled on the couch, staring wide-eyed at the
ceiling.

INT. STATION NIGHT

Rita, carrying her case, walks as fast as she can across the
concourse to a bank of left-luggage lockers. She checks the
number inscribed on the flat silver key, and, with trembling
fingers, slides it into the lock - it turns.

Inside is just an old battered music case. she pulls it out,
and throws back the flap - to find only a grimy wad of
manuscript paper.

CLOSE ON: the cover page, with the title, "Rhapsody for Rita".

She rifles through the pages, but there is nothing there but
pencilled music notation. Over comes the station announcement
for the departure of the last train.

With tears of rage, she tosses the papers down, runs her
fingers around the inside of the case - but there is nothing
to be found. She flings it bitterly at the lockers, before
turning and hurrying towards the barrier. Pages of manuscript
flutter across the concourse.

OVER: ORGAN MUSIC

INT. CREMATORIUM CHAPEL DAY

A coffin bearing a single wreath is lowered from view. There are only three mourners; Danny's Wife and two children. As they turn to go, we see that JOHNNY is watching from the doorway. He waits for them to approach.

JOHNNY

It's the friend of a friend of
Danny's. There's something here
he would have wanted you to have.

He presses an orange envelope into her hands.

LORNA

What is it?

JOHNNY

Details of a bank account. Maybe
your son can read them to you.

He turns to go, but she catches him by the sleeve, pulls him back, and then reaches towards his face. Instinctively he stiffens, but then gradually softens, as she runs her fingertips lightly over his features, down to his lips.

INT. OFFICE NIGHT

CLOSE ON: Danny's lucky hat; Johnny lifts it to reveal the picture of Rita.

He puts the hat on the back of his head, lights a cigarette, and then picks up the picture.

JOHNNY (VO)

For a man who believes in nothing
else, a woman's beauty is as
close as you come to divinity.
But, at the end of your dreams,
you may find there's still
something more ... that's pure
rhapsody.

CLOSE ON: Rita's picture - flames lick up it from the lighter in Johnny's hand.

MUSIC SWELLS AS WE DISSOLVE TO RAIN ON THE WINDOW.

SUPER: END CREDITS

THE END