

WILLIE NELSON AIN'T DEAD

A slow dance

by Darren Van Michael



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## CHARACTERS

BART

30s, looks younger than he really is. A lover of all things country. Innocent to the point of cluelessness, but not stupid. His simplicity is his charm. Things tend to bounce off of him.

MATILDA

30s or 40s, looks older than she really is, dressed tightly and wearing clothes that are almost too young for her, in a constant search like a shark whose become bored with the menu. Everything seems to stick

## SETTING

Present day. A honkytonk.

NO REPRODUCTIONS W/O PERMISSION OF PLAYWRIGHT

A honkytonk. A few tables and chairs and a row of stools at a bar. A small dance floor under a cheap disco ball. A jukebox plays soft Country Western music. The bartender seems to be on a break. At opening, there seem to be only two people at opposite ends of the bar. Neither acknowledging each other at first. BART, a lover of all things country, dressed as such, cowboy boots, possibly a cowboy hat, button-down, etc. , occasionally glances over at MATILDA, a girl dressed as if she was expecting a wider selection of men with whom to share a dance. MATILDA looks down in her drink, glances around the room, catches eyes with BART, then back to her drink. She lets out a long sigh.

BART

Quiet evening.

MATILDA

Yeah.

She sighs.

BART

(with a long whistle)

Seems a shame for a dance floor to be empty.

No response.

BART

Mighty fine music.

She continues to stare down at her drink.

BART

(moving over to her slightly)

Mind if I buy you one?

MATILDA

No, I'm good. I don't think the bartender's around anyway.

She sighs again.

BART

Oh. (BEAT) Is everything ok?

MATILDA

(very sarcastically)

Everything's fine. Nearly perfect. Don't I look just perfect?

BART

Oh, no, you look good.

BART thinks this will open up the conversation. Instead it dies and MATILDA goes back to looking at her drink. She looks around as if waiting for something or someone.

BART

Waiting for someone?

MATILDA

(under her breath with a chuckle)

Mr. Right.

He sees an opening.

BART

How about a dance?

MATILDA

Here we go.

BART

What?

MATILDA

Here we go. I knew it wouldn't be long before one of you good ol' boys made a move.

BART looks around the bar noting the lack of patrons, no bartender, just music.

BART

Well, you come to a honkytonk dressed like that, you're sending a pretty strong message –  
“Someone, ask me to dance!”

MATILDA

Is that the message you heard?

BART

Yes, it was.

MATILDA

Well, you must have your wires crossed.

BART

What's the matter with you? I was just trying to ask for a dance. You dance, don't you?

MATILDA

(conceding)

Yeah, I guess so.

BART

(offering again)

Well?

MATILDA

(a slight smile)

Ok, but only one. I like to keep my options open.

MATILDA takes his hand and he leads her to the small  
dance floor under the lights of the disco ball.

BART

This is nice.

MATILDA

(not letting herself like it too much)

Yeah, a little.

BART

So...what do you do?

MATILDA

Can we not talk? I just want to dance.

BART

Oh...ok. Just dance.

They sway softly. MATILDA lays her head on his shoulder after a moment. BART feels like the ice has broken a bit and starts again.

BART

So you like country music?

MATILDA

I'm in a honkytonk, aren't I? Please less talking, more dancing.

They dance a little more in silence. Music.

BART

I was just wondering...

MATILDA sighs in disgust that he won't be quiet.

BART

(stopping suddenly)

Now just a minute – I –

MATILDA

What? WHAT? What is it?

BART

Well, I – don't know. I just thought I'd make some conversation. Did I do something? What happened to you to make you so ornery? You seem like you just got branded or whipped.

MATILDA

Congratulations. Five minutes before we got a cow or horse reference.

She pulls back away from him and confronts him.

I wasn't saying –

BART

Just who do you think – ?

MATILDA

No.

BART

Just WHO do you think I am?

MATILDA

Nobody.

BART

What?

MATILDA

Nobody. I don't think your anybody.

BART

Yeah?!

MATILDA

Yeah, nobody. You're nobody! (pause) Ok?

BART

Ok. As long as we're straight on that.

MATILDA

She grabs his hand and pulls him back to her hard. She presses herself hard into his chest and continues to dance and listen to the music. BART seems a little confused but continues to dance for lack of a better option.

(referring to the music)  
I've seen him seven times.

BART

MATILDA

(sighing again for the interruption)

Hmm?

BART

Willie Nelson. Five concerts. Once in downtown Nashville at a record store.

MATILDA

That's just six times.

BART

(a little hesitant in the confession)

Oh, well...He came to me once in a dream. I guess I count that too.

MATILDA

(she laughs innocently)

You're so weird. Why do I get the weird ones?

BART

No, seriously.

MATILDA

Oh, I believe you. I believe you saw Willie Nelson in a dream. I once dreamed that George Washington gave me a Swedish massage, but I don't count that as a true brush with celebrity.

BART

(a little offended)

I don't just count it because he was in my dreams. That's not it. It was a moment. One of those defining moments. Like right now? Tonight.

MATILDA

Oh, yeah. Right now huh? You think you have a chance with me?

BART

Well, I admit it's a long shot. But it's just the two of us. We haven't had the best first dance, but who knows.

MATILDA

Isn't he dead?



BART

Willie Nelson?

MATILDA

Yeah.

BART

No, he's not dead. Willie's still kicking and going strong. Raisin' hell.

MATILDA

Can't be raisin' too much hell. He's like a hundred, isn't he?

BART

Nah, he's fine. Saw him last year. He was laughing, singing, like the years hadn't touched him.

MATILDA

Now when you say you saw him, you referring to -- . I mean, did you really see him or did you dream you saw him? Are you smoking something?

BART

No, no, I really saw him. And I don't smoke. Walked into an old record store when I was in Nashville last summer. There he was. Looking through the blues section. Look, I know what it sounds like.

MATILDA

Sounds crazy.

BART

Yeah, yeah, but hear me out. Have you ever felt like you were lost? Like you're in the middle of an intersection but there are roads moving off in every direction like you're in the center of a wheel with hundred of spokes shooting off in every direction around you. And all you feel like is that you're spinning there. Spinning so fast that you can't focus, completely overwhelmed. You may see people but no faces. Cars but no drivers. And then you think you're moving but all you're doing is drowning. Sinking, spiraling down. So many options, you don't have any options. In that worst moment, at the moment of complete collapse, like you just want to give up on things, that's when I saw him.

(he sings softly, not very well but sincerely)

“Just like a lighthouse you must stand alone and mark the sailor's journey's end”

BART (cont'd)

Or something like that. Heck, it could have been “Whiskey River” or “On the Road Again.” To be honest, I wasn’t in my right mind at the time. Drunk as a skunk. But I felt better after I woke up.

MATILDA

And Willie Nelson did that for you.

BART

Sure. As good an explanation as anything else.

MATILDA

(conceding)

Yeah, I guess so.

(noticing that the only music playing is Willie Nelson’s songs)

Is that all that old juke box plays? Willie Nelson?

BART

No, but that’s all it plays when that’s all you select. I put ten dollars in it and selected tracks D1 through D20. Willie’s greatest hits.

MATILDA

I’m more of a Hank Jr. fan.

BART

I guessed that.

MATILDA

Oh, you did. How?

BART

The way you’re dressed. Definitely not a fan of the Red-headed Stranger. Hank tends to attract a different crowd.

MATILDA

A different crowd?

BART

Yeah, like Hooters’ waitresses.

MATILDA

(pretending to be insulted)

Hooters' waitresses?

BART

(trying to apologize)

No, I didn't mean –

MATILDA

Relax, cowboy. I'm just messing with you.

(after a pause and letting him off the hook.)

They have good food. I love their wings.

(She smiles at him.)

I worked there after high school.

BART

You did?

MATILDA

What does that mean? "You did?" I could work at Hooters.

BART

No, I didn't mean that you couldn't. Of course, you could. I mean you have the... I mean, you seem... I mean, the food is great. I love the wings.

MATILDA

The food is great. And thank you.

BART

For what? I don't think this seduction is going very well.

MATILDA

(laughing)

No, you're doing just fine. Stop trying so hard. And thank you for not thinking I could work at Hooters. I think that was a clumsy attempt at a compliment.

BART

Well, I, I just – Man, this is not my night.

MATILDA

You just keep dancing. The night's not over. And Willie's still playing on the jukebox.

BART

I've seen Jr. four times.

MATILDA

All in this world or did he also visit you in a time of need?

BART

Nah, all in concerts. I don't see Hank as a dream-visiting kind of guy. He's got too much on his plate.

MATILDA

(laughing)

So weird.

(To no one in particular)

How do I get stuck with them?

BART

So you were hoping for something else.

MATILDA

Well, yeah. No. I don't know. Just thought I'd show off this new dress.

BART

Well, for your sake, I'm sorry there aren't more to see it. But if truth be told, I'm glad I'm the only one.

MATILDA

What's your favorite Willie song?

BART

That's a hard one. It's Willie. That's like trying to pick your favorite hundred dollar bill. I guess I'd say "Just Like Over the Mountaintops". Love that song.

MATILDA

That's not the name of that song.

BART

What? Sure it is.

(Singing to remind her)

“Just like the sun over the mountain top you know I'll always come again  
You know I love to spend my morning time like sunlight dancing on your skin”

MATILDA

That's not the name of that song.

BART

Yes, it is. I'm the biggest Willie fan in the world. That is the name of the song, lady.

(realizing)

I don't know your name.

MATILDA

Matilda.

BART

Matilda? Isn't that a kangaroo? The dancing matilda?

MATILDA

No, lunkhead. The song's "Waltzing Matilda." It's Australian. I think it's some sort of reference to a blanket or something. Not very pretty.

BART

Eh, it's ok. It's nice. Different.

MATILDA

Wow, I think I'm going to swoon with delight. Your name?

BART

Bart. Bart the lunkhead cowboy.

MATILDA

(smiles)

Ok, well, "Over the Mountaintop" is not the name of that song.

BART

It isn't. What is it?

MATILDA

(playfully)

I'm not telling you now. Just shut up and dance.

He pulls her back to him and they continue to dance.

BART

You come here often?

MATILDA

(sighing with the admission)

All the time. You?

BART

First time.

She smiles to herself.

MATILDA

(she sings softly as they dance)

“There are some turns where I will spin,  
I only hope that you will hold me now till I gain control again.”

(not singing)

“Till I Gain Control Again”, Mr. Biggest Willie Fan in the World.

They continue to dance as the lights fade.

BLACKOUT

END OF PLAY