

# Gilda

## A Short (love) Story or A (short) Love Story

By Thomas Harrington

I saw Gilda for the first time the night my wife died at the Massachusetts General Hospital.

The doctor shook his head, confirming that life had gone out of the hand I held. I placed Karen's lifeless hand on her stomach and kissed her warm lips for the last time. Her battle with cancer had also taken her beauty, but her spirit and character had remained strong to the end. What would I do without her?

I bit my lip to fight back tears and turned my head to avoid a sight I did not want to see. I noticed a candy striper lurking in the doorway, surely waiting for instructions from a nurse or doctor. Her face made me think of something my mother would have said: cute as a button. But, her sweet face was etched in sadness, which expressed exactly how I felt. I decided that the situation must have saddened her, because she could not have known Karen. Our eyes met; she pursed her lips: a display of sympathy, a show of emotion, or a sign of empathy. Her expression caused tears to rise, so I turned back to look at Karen for the last time. The love of my life had not lived to see her forty.

On the way out, I could not keep my gaze from the young girl. She had a flawless face that can carry off a pixie hairstyle, which surely also highlighted that beauty. She had lowered her eyes, so she did not notice me staring. My thought was that, at a moment of life showing its worst side, this young girl affirmed that beauty also exists, like a brilliant rainbow following a thunderstorm. Once in the corridor, my thoughts returned to Karen, all I must do, and my new situation in life.



The second time I saw Gilda, we met by chance.

On Wednesday evenings in the summer, lacrosse players—college kids or former college kids—met at an MIT athletic field for a pick-up game. Enough showed up each week for two sides, with a few reserves left to relieve the winded old guys. I had missed several games, unwilling to leave Karen during her final days and then dealing with the funeral. After so many unpleasant weeks, I was happy for the distraction and exertion. Once the game ended and the usual post-game banter had trailed off, I decided to drive to a spot beside the Charles River, where I could park and watch the sunset. I want to delay the return to my empty apartment.

I walked along the bike path to a break in the vegetation, where I would have an unhindered view across the water to the distant horizon. I spotted a biker, which I mistook to be a young man, standing at the river's edge. This turned out to be a dark-haired woman with a pixie hairstyle. A suspicion of recognition suggested acquaintance: she could be a former student that I had not seen for a few years. Many

lived in the area or stayed on for college. I guessed her to be in her early twenties, so she would have left prep school a few years ago.

She must have heard me approach, because she turned. A smile lit up her face, whose beauty I could not deny.

"I remember you," she said.

"Do I know you?"

"Your wife died."

The proverbial light flashed on in my brain. I was slightly embarrassed that she had to remind me how we had met—or, rather, seen—each other before.

"The candy striper."

She nodded, still smiling. Her openness provided a license to stare. Her face captivated me.

"You looked so sad," she said, now pouting. "Well, it was sad. But, I felt so sorry for you. I'd seen people die before, but for some reason, you touched me. I wanted to hug you, but we're not allowed to."

"Why?"

"That's the rule—"

"No, why did I touch you?"

"I don't know. Maybe because your wife was so young. No one knows why the brain works the way it does, why people react the way they do to any situation, or—"

"Philosophers do. Or psychologists."

"They think they do, and all have opinions, but no one knows for sure."

"That's an opinion."

"Which is all anyone can have. No one knows how the brain works, which is why I want to find out."

I appreciated her spunk, but was skeptical. I had experienced enough young students with crazy and unrealistic dreams.

"As a nurse?"

When her face changed, I realized my expression and my question had been sexist and, perhaps, prejudiced. I could have only assumptions about her, after having seen her only once and spoken only a few words with her.

"That's just a summer job. I'm studying to become a neurosurgeon."

"I'm sorry. I was wrong to assume."

She shrugged.

"No problem. You couldn't have known...like philosophers."

I was forced to chuckle.

"*Touché*," I replied. "By the way, my name is David. David Hunt."

We shook hands.

"Gilda Rubin."

"Gilda? What kind of name is that?"

"Jewish."

"Oh, okay."

"I'm an atheist, so don't accuse me of killing Jesus."

"I wouldn't," I replied, stifling a chortle. "Does that happen often?"

"It did where I grew up."

“Where’s that?”

“Long Island.”

I did not want to get into a discussion about religion.

“You been doing some sport?” she said.

“Lacrosse. There’s a pick-up game on Wednesday during the summer. A bunch of current and former college players.”

“I like lacrosse,” she said. “I played in school.”

I knew enough not to reveal my opinion of women’s sport.

“You seem to have a low opinion of philosophy,” I said.

“That was my major in college, that and psychology.”

Surprise surely showed on my face. I shook my head.

“I judged you wrong. You look young for your age, because I guessed you to be twenty or twenty-one.”

“I’m 22.”

I was incredulous. I had seen enough padded CV’s to be skeptical of anyone’s claims.

“You’ve already graduated from college and are in med school?”

“It’ll be my third year.”

I did the math in my head...and came up with liar or *genius*. This young lass had graduated with a dual major—difficult ones—at 19 or 20, which means that she finished high school at 15 or 16. Improbable, but possible with a high IQ and drive.

“Two tough majors,” I said. “You must have a high IQ.”

“My mother brags to people that it’s around 200, but some tell me there’s no such score. I don’t know and don’t care.”

“Well, I know one thing for sure: you’re too smart for me. Let’s watch the sunset.”

But, the sky could not keep my mind from spinning.

“Something doesn’t add up,” I said. “You’ve done two years of medical school, but you’re only 22. Did you lie about your age?”

She chuckled.

“I get that a lot. I finished high school at 16 and Radcliffe at 19 and a half.”

“Your grades must have been good.”

“I’ve never had less than 4.0.”

“I remember psych majors being weird, but you seem normal.”

“I won’t ask you to define *normal*.”

Her smile told me that I had not offended her. I returned to the sunset, but questions kept popping into my head.

“Did you also do pre-med?”

“Not officially. I had advanced science—you know, chemistry and biology and physics—and audited a bunch of courses and took some in the summer. One of my professors was married to the dean of the medical school. Foolishly, he promised to admit me if I maxed SATs in the required subjects, which I did.”

I could not help myself; I shook my head.

“I guess a brain surgeon has to be smart.”

“Becoming a surgeon is only the first step. I want to do research into understanding how the brain works.”

“Why not try to cure cancer?” I asked. “That’s more urgent in terms of human suffering. You know, like pancreatic cancer?”

“Perhaps, but that’s not as challenging—or have as far-reaching implications—as understanding how the brain works.”

“Having just lived with cancer, it seems fairly challenging.”

“Maybe, but I believe a cancer cure will be found in manipulating genes. Understanding the brain is bigger than just DNA. And, think of what it can lead to: challenging everything about human behavior, ethics, religion, law, society, you name it. Everything we do will be turned on its head—pun intended—when we understand how the brain functions.”

I had gone from depressing thoughts about cancer—and Karen—to being impressed by a young woman and laughing at her jokes. Glancing at the horizon, I could see only the lingering glimmer of daylight. We had been so involved in our discussion, that we had ignored the arrival of nighttime. This would be no place for a young woman by herself.

“Let me drive you home,” I offered.

“I’ve got my bike.”

“It’s dark, and I have an SUV.”

“That’s okay. I don’t mind the dark...or non sequiturs.”

“It’s not safe along the river.”

“I’m not afraid. Besides, I can’t be, because I don’t have a car. I’ve lived here for five years without much trouble.”

“Too many weird people out and around.”

“If I worried about weird people, I wouldn’t get out of bed in the morning.”

“At least walk with me to my car and the street lights.”

“Okay,” she said, turning her bike to join me. “I like talking to you. And, it’s nice you worry about me. I don’t have anyone that does that.”

I had not asked about boyfriends. Now, I knew. Not that it mattered. I found her very attractive, but the age difference was too great, and I was still mourning the loss of the love of my life. Still, it had been pleasant to talk to Gilda. Too bad that I would never see her again.



The third time I saw Gilda, she surprised me.

The following Wednesday, I was on the field playing lacrosse. The ball was at the other end, so I had time to glance around. To my surprise, I spotted Gilda watching from the sideline. I hadn’t recognized her at first, because I had not expected to see her again and certainly not here or now. She stood near—not with—the usual mix of families and girlfriends. Her hair sparked the recognition, and she wore a sun dress: spectators always sported jeans, shorts, or sweat pants. I wondered if she had stumbled upon the game or was on her way to the river or somewhere else...or come on purpose. I could not imagine her being interested in a bunch of guys playing lacrosse, although she had claimed to like the game.

I soon realized that her presence had added a spring to my step and caused an unwanted desire to show off, which I had not felt since college. I was forced to chastise myself for acting like my students, when trying to impress the opposite sex. She must be here to meet someone else, so I should slow down before I hurt myself.

As the game progressed, I could not resist glancing to where she stood to see if she was still there. I stifled the urge to wave. The longer she remained, the more I hoped that she had come to see me. But, I told myself, this could be nothing more than a fantasy. I was sixteen years older than her. Anyone as intelligent as Gilda Rubin would not be dumb enough to fall for someone so old and certainly not as intelligent.

After the game, I strolled to my car and she joined me. Up close, the cut and material of her dress, both perfect for the summer heat and humidity, revealed most of what I needed to know about her body. Cheap flip flops confirmed her desire for comfort over style. I could detect no make-up, but the heat had caused a slight flush, which added to her allure.

“Hey.”

“Hi,” she said. “You’re not bad for an old guy.”

“I don’t know how to take that,” I replied, grinning.

“It’s a compliment.”

“You come to watch the sunset?”

She smiled and shook her head.

“No, lacrosse. I wanted to see if you’re any good.”

My eyes widened involuntarily.

“And?”

Her smile turned into an impish grin.

“Like I said: not bad.”

“You mean for an old guy?”

“Everyone had a helmet, so I didn’t notice differences...only in talent.”

I chuckled. I wondered if she was teasing me. I knew one way to find out.

“Let me buy you dinner?”

Her smile brightened. She nodded. That smile again, I thought, and felt a twinge in my gut.

“The choice is McDrive or—if you give me time to shower and change—there’s a new Italian place on Charles Street.”

“So, no memories?”

I frowned and shook my head. She touched my arm and pursed her lips.

“Sorry,” she said. “I love Italian, but I’m used to spaghetti from a can.”

“You’re gonna have to ride with me to my place and wait while I change. You can watch television. Where’s your bike?”

“I rode the bus and walked.”

I turned to load my bag, my mind spinning. I guessed that she had planned this outcome, otherwise she would not have come on foot and not dressed up. I did not know what to conclude, and then decided that it was best to assume nothing

and see what happened. We would have a nice dinner and pleasant conversation. I liked talking with intelligent people.

Gilda climbed in and fastened her seat belt. I could not resist a glance at her legs, when her dress rode up. She did not seem to notice, busy inspecting the interior.

"I don't ride in cars much," she said. "This is nice."

"It's an Audi. What's called a Q8."

"Okay," she said, suggesting a lack of interest in cars. "I didn't ask what you do."

"I teach math and physics to rich kids at a private secondary school. And, I coach soccer and lacrosse. Nothing world shaking, but I like my job."

"Where do you live?"

"At the harbor."

"Isn't that a long way?"

"There's not much traffic at this time. We'll need 10 or 15 minutes."

Traffic was light, so I had not lied. Because I took back streets and entered the parking garage at the rear of the building, Gilda did not see the façade or the location. I pushed an elevator button and 33 lit up.

"So high?" she said.

"You should like the view."

I opened the door and let her proceed into the living room.

"Wow!"

She marched to the floor-to-ceiling windows, which provided a view of the harbor and outlying islands.

"Wow, again."

When she turned, I spotted concern on her face.

"You sell drugs?"

"What? No. What makes you ask *that*?"

She glanced around.

"A teacher can't afford a place like this."

"Oh, sorry," I said, realizing her concern. "This belonged to my wife. She inherited money and had a good salary as an investment banker."

"So, it'll be yours?"

"It already is," I replied. "She transferred everything to me, once she realized that her situation was hopeless. She didn't want me to have to deal with probate."

"She must have been really nice."

"She was."

"And, just so you won't accuse me of lying...I also have some money of my own. I was a fund manager for ten years, before I quit the rat race to teach."

"A place like this must cost a bundle. How big is it?"

"About 2500 square feet."

She whistled.

"I share three small rooms with three other girls," she said. "You must feel like you won the lottery."

I shook my head.

"I'd rather have Karen than her money."

"Sorry," Gilda said, chagrined. "I didn't mean it that way."

"The choice was not mine. As I tell my science students: in a disagreement with nature, humans always lose."

She pursed her lips and nodded, and then turned back to admire the view.

"I can see airplanes," she said, her face brightening.

"That's Logan Airport."

"Cool."

Even a future brain surgeon can display child-like innocence. I liked that.

After showering and dressing, I returned to the living room and found Gilda holding a photo of Karen. She turned, and I noticed that her eyes were moist.

"I knew her only at the very end," she said. "She was gorgeous."

I nodded, feeling a lump in my throat.

"Even in suffering, I found her gracious. That's rare."

I swallowed and returned to the bedroom, pretending to have forgotten something.

The restaurant was cozy and sparsely filled: bad for the owner, but good for us. We could talk freely and ignore other guests. The food was good and the service good enough.

Gilda told me about growing up on Long Island, about Radcliffe, and about her divorced parents. Her father, who she rarely saw, lived in London; she avoided seeing her mother. I mentioned briefly my time with Karen and then focused on my life before and after my marriage. The most-interesting discussions were about the vision of her future and the conflict in humans between nature and nurture.

"I snuck into lectures on neuroscience and was fascinated," Gilda explained. "All human activity is mechanical, driven by electronic charges. That goes against everything taught by society, whether in schools or churches. Of course, philosophers will never agree that neuroscience can explain human behavior. That would be like taking religious belief away from the pope and put them out of work."

"Can they co-exist?" I wondered out loud.

"Can Jews and Palestinians co-exist on the same real estate?"

"Ooh, I'm not gonna touch that one. Let's stick with academics."

A waiter interrupted the conversation to take our dessert order. I noticed that Gilda seemed to be lost in thought.

"Humanity has evolved," she said. "But, all the great philosophers are long dead, and no new ones have come along. Ideas are less interesting than trying to figure out where they come from and how the brain works. That's what I want to do: figure out how the brain forms ideas, how thinking and memory work."

I did not know whether to be impressed or incredulous. But, now aware of her intelligence and ambition, sarcasm would be misplaced and surely spoil the evening. I did not want to hurt her.

"Becoming a brain surgeon will do that?"

"That will give me access to the latest knowledge and the best research methods."

“Uh—”

“I haven’t figured out if I can pay for it, but I’ll keep begging for scholarships, work at the hospital, and put myself deeper in debt. The time in med school has proved to me that I was right to leave tired and worn-out theories behind me. Thought is so important—so endemic to human life—but we do not understand how thinking works. The ensuing thought becomes more important than the act of thinking.”

Gilda was losing me, but I could not admit such inadequacy. After all, I was a science teacher, so I should be able to keep up.

“Humans become so hung up on words, because they cannot understand how they are conceived—thus the importance of philosophers. Because we speak and write and read, we believe that only we among all living creatures *think* and are therefore superior. Once we understand how the brain really works, we will be able to prove or disprove that conceit.”

The waiter arrived with dessert and coffee, giving my brain a chance to cool down. Gilda beamed, either because of the dish in front of her or, perhaps, happy to have someone to talk with about her passion. I doubted that her nurse colleagues or hospital patients would share her enthusiasm or even listen, much less understand.

“Despite progress in recent years, humans are still a long way from understanding the brain,” she continued. “Many people are foolish enough to think that philosophy or psychology explain everything. They don’t. Just like religion doesn’t explain reality. They are all based on opinions and stories and wishes and hopes...*and* hype or bluster. Anything not able to be proven by a mathematical formula, the periodic table, or quantum mechanics is suspect. Ideas are intangible; science can be real. And, the fascinating thing about neuroscience is that there is so much left to discover. I spent too long studying human ideas and the nature of ideas. I want to learn how they are produced and to help add a layer to understanding of the human mind.”

I thought for a moment.

“Will understanding how the brain works explain the meaning of an idea or someone’s actions or, for that matter, the meaning of life? Will someone still be a criminal, if it’s proven that nature—his genetic make-up—made him commit the crime, which is in itself nothing but a human idea.”

“Guilt a human concept,” she replied.

“But, we feel something, so it must be natural, not learned in society.”

“That’s why we must learn what happens in the brain to trigger such a feeling, because feelings have origins long before morals were conceived or defined.”

“Won’t society—all groups in all countries—have to re-evaluate everything?”

“Possibly,” she replied, frowning. “But many, if not most, laws and rules and mores are based upon what humans *want*, not what causes behavior, so little would change quickly.”

“Governments and religions all try to control people,” I said. “Aren’t you afraid that understanding how the brain works will lead to more or better ways to manipulate people than already exist?”

"Maybe. But, that's no reason to inhibit medical discovery. And, I think that it'll be fun, if I open that Pandora's Box."

I thought for a moment about all she had said.

"I admit to not knowing anything about the brain and accepting that there is a lot to learn," I said. "But, I can't see how understanding how the brain works will explain, for example, why that guy shot John Lennon or why Hitler turned out as he did. If someone had tested little Adolph's brain as a child, he was yet to have learned to hate Jews or have his First World War experiences."

"Maybe it won't," she replied. "But there are many aspects of human life and human behavior that will be explained. And, we'll discover stuff we never imagined."

"Do you think that humans could reach a point where they know too much?"

"Possibly. And, there's a risk in that, but we mustn't let that prevent us from searching."

The conversation had become far deeper than I could have expected. I enjoyed talking with her, but we had to find an end.

"Do you like lobster?"

Surprise showed on her face.

"It's out of my price range. Why?"

"How 'bout dinner on Friday?"

She shook her head, which incited disappointment.

"I work the night shift tomorrow and Friday, but Saturday's good."

I brightened.

"Great," I said. "Okay. I'll drive you home, so I know where to pick you up on Saturday."

Gilda beamed one of those smiles that were beginning to erode my concerns about age difference and the proper mourning period for Karen. If nothing else, they would fuel a fantasy or two.

On the way to the car, she provided her opinion about organized religion, which was rather close to mine. That was one key element of a good relationship. That and a nice smile. On the way to Cambridge, she filled me in on her schedule, which was packed. Regular shifts at the hospital, which rotated day parts, and summer semester assignments left little time for play. I wondered if, perhaps, that explained the lack of a boyfriend.

"Why don't you give me your number, in case I need to get in touch," I said.

"I don't have a phone."

"Everyone has a phone."

"I can live without one, so it's an unnecessary expense. My roommate lets me use hers, if I need to call somewhere."

"I'll give you my number, in case you want to cancel."

"I won't."

"Just in case."

I rattled off my number, which she repeated.

"Got it," she said.

I knew enough not to question her memorizing skills. I would have had to write a note or punch the number into my phone.

Gilda pointed out her house, where she shared an apartment. Apparently, only one of her roommates was around during the summer, but all paid their rent. She took on the extra chore of cleaning for a reduced share of the costs. I did not ask where she found the time.

“Don’t touch the door handle,” I ordered. “My mother taught me to be a gentleman.”

She merely smiled and waited for me to circle the car. When I opened the door, her smile had diminished to what looked like a smirk. I feared that I might be acting “old”.

“I had a great time,” she said. “Thanks for dinner. I haven’t eaten in a restaurant for ages.”

“You get to do it again in a few days.”

She stood facing me; her smile had returned.

“Just to let you know,” I said. “I don’t ever want to get into a discussion on free will.”

She laughed.

“I like talking with you.”

“Me, too,” I replied. “You can’t fake chemistry.”

She kissed me quickly on the lips and hurried towards the door. After a few steps, she paused and turned.

“You shouldn’t *fight* chemistry,” she said. “I can’t wait for Saturday.”

She waved and ran up the stairs without turning to look back. The door opened and closed, and she was gone. I recalled my thought last time: I’ll never see her again. Now, like her, I couldn’t wait.

On the way home, I thought about my situation. I was almost forty, a recent widower, and infatuated with a young woman not much older than my students. The only thing missing from this moral disgrace was sex...a thought that caused my imagination to head down paths I had yet to consider...and knew that I should not.

Unable to sleep, my mind came up with the word *smitten*. If I recalled my vocabulary lessons, the root was in smite, which meant to strike a blow. Gilda had certainly struck me: I was smitten by her beauty, her brains, her body, and what I had learned of her character. Instead of mourning Karen’s death, I could not keep this young woman from my thoughts. I was no better than my teenaged students, who scribbled the name of their latest infatuation, with hearts or stars or smiley faces, in their notebooks during class and day-dreamed instead of listening to my lecture. At least, it was summer break, so I was not distracted from anything important...besides mourning.



The fourth time I saw Gilda, she surprised me even more.

As I drove to Cambridge to pick a woman for a dinner date—something I would not have imagined ever happening earlier in the week—I thought back on

the past few days. Gilda had been in and out of my thoughts. I replayed the time we had been together, thought about things she had said, and toyed with fantasies, which I knew were far-fetched. The fact that she had come to see me play lacrosse and had mentioned the pull of chemistry puzzled me. What had she meant by not fighting chemistry? Was this clever girl playing games with my brain? Or, was my brain playing games of its own?

Of course, I was also plagued with guilt: guilt about having thoughts about another woman so soon after Karen's death and guilt about having fantasies involving a younger woman. I worried about the consequences of being seen together, about the consequences if I got in deeper—if that was even an option. Summer break was a blessing and a curse. I was being kept from nothing important, but I also had too much time on my hands to think foolish thoughts. In the few rational moments, I reminded myself that I was not a teenager in heat, so should not act like one.

As soon as I stopped in front at the appointed hour, Gilda emerged from the house. This suggested that she had been waiting and watching from inside the door. I had always had to wait for Karen. *Damn*, I thought. I should not compare...but comparisons were inevitable. As I jumped out to open the door, I thought of Gilda's quest to understand the brain. Would she discover why humans always compare? And, why someone can act like a foolish teenager at any age?

Once again, her smile gripped me. She wore a slim-fit, sleeveless black dress with a hemline just above the knee. This was less-revealing than the sundress, but more tantalizing.

"You look very nice," I said.

Closer, I could see that, once again, she used no make-up, which would surely blemish her flawless beauty. There could be a hint of lip gloss, or she could have just licked her lips.

She pecked me on the cheek.

"Thanks," she replied. "You've now seen my entire wardrobe of dresses."

Once again, my mind sprang to compare. I had recently hauled boxes and bags of Karen's clothes to the Salvation Army. My brain was at work again in its strange ways.

"It's enough for me, if it's enough for you."

"I don't have many occasions to wear a dress, so it's enough. Last time I wore this was at graduation two years ago."

Again, I was pleased to learn that boyfriends did not plague her existence. Not that it mattered...

"How was work?" I asked, to stay on safe ground.

"Hospital work experience is great, but it's not moving the ball ahead fast enough. I wish I could take more classes than I do, but I need the money."

This attitude explained why she had been driven to complete high school and college so quickly.

"This evening, you're going to forget about hospitals and school and the brain and have fun."

"The first two, yes, but not the last one," she replied. "Where are we going?"

I had chosen a seafood restaurant on the harbor, not far from my apartment. I wanted to be able to have wine with my dinner, so I would walk home and pay for a taxi to take Gilda to Cambridge.

"I promised lobster," I said. "Remember."

"How could I forget? I can't remember the last time I ate lobster."

The restaurant was crowded and louder than the Italian place, but I managed to beg a decent table in a corner. I conceded the view for relative seclusion at a less-popular table.

"I hope you don't mind not having a view," I said. "It's better for conversation back here, though we might have to wave for service."

"I don't need a view," Gilda replied. "I saw it on the way, and I can see it on the way out. I prefer conversation with you."

As much as I had loved Karen, she had been a pain at times. Like when not getting the table she wanted in a restaurant. That was one reason that I had chosen this restaurant: Karen had refused to eat here, after a run-in with the maitre d'. I assumed that I would find no reason to compare the two women, but had failed again.

"Listen, we have to make a deal."

Gilda appeared surprised.

"You order whatever you want and do not use the word *expensive*," I said. "Okay?"

"Don't throw me in that briar patch."

She made me laugh out loud, which caused a lady at a nearby table to turn and glare.

"Do you like Champagne?"

"I don't know," she replied. "Sorry, but these aren't things I have access to."

"I'll order some and you can try. If you don't like it, you can have something else."

I ordered a half bottle of the real stuff. To keep things safe, I toasted to health. That seemed to be appropriate, since we had met under very unhealthy circumstances.

Dinner proceeded with good food and good conversation, which ranged over a variety of subjects. I was impressed by her general knowledge, because high-IQ eggheads with a specific career path can have limited interests. Not Gilda. Her mind seemed to absorb and retain facts like a sponge.

A second half bottle of Champagne arrived.

"I like this stuff," Gilda said. "Don't know if it's worth the price, but I like it."

I topped off our glasses and held mine up, as if to toast someone or something.

"You don't mind being seen in public with such an old guy?"

"Nobody knows me," she replied.

A sly grin appeared.

"I'm kidding," she said. "I don't care what people think. And, you're not old: my father is old. He's 60."

"Okay, but what about boyfriends your age?"

"I've never had a boyfriend *my age*. I was always in classes where everyone was older. Kids my age were—and still are—somewhat infantile and retarded. We didn't have anything in common."

"Didn't that bother you?"

"No," she stated. "I like being with older people, men especially. The problem is that most men can't handle intelligent women."

"I can't handle dumb ones."

"Which could be why I like talking with you."

I glanced around for a waiter, in hope of receiving the dessert menu. I felt Gilda place her hand on mine, so I abandoned my search and turned to face her. Her dark eyes bored into mine; her expression suggested desire.

"I want to sleep with you tonight."

"Uh—"

"Don't think I'm a slut or a nymphomaniac."

"I wouldn't—"

"I haven't had sex for three years. Not because I haven't wanted to, but because there was no one I wanted to let touch me...or to touch."

She squeezed my hand.

"I want you to hold me and touch me and make love to me."

Up until she had touched me, I had not expected such an outcome. Of course, I had had fantasies about sleeping with her, but that was, well, just fantasy. Imagining sex with a pretty girl, who looked great in a sun dress, was standard operating procedure for a heterosexual male of the species. I could not admit this to anyone, because I should be mourning the loss of my wife. And, there was the age difference. Some would call this robbing the cradle.

"Shall we skip dessert?"

Gilda beamed and squeezed my hand.

"I remember liking your face, when I first saw you in the hospital, but talking with you at the river sparked some emotion."

"That's why you came to watch lacrosse?"

She nodded.

"I was stalking you."

I laughed.

"I've never been stalked. I always thought it was supposed to be something bad."

"I'll let you decide."

The waiter showed up with dessert menus, but I sent him away for the check.

"I can't wait to be in bed with you," Gilda whispered. "I've thought about being with you so much."

"I guess I can admit to having thoughts about you."

"Sex is like hunger: you can't suppress it."

"Why did you go so long without any?"

"I did it myself," she replied, matter-of-factly. "I told you already: I just didn't find anyone I wanted to do it with."

I should have become used to her candor, but women talking of sex still surprised me.

On the walk to my apartment, we alternated between holding hands, Gilda holding my arm, and me putting my arm around her shoulder. My thoughts were a jumble of eager anticipation and guilt. I wanted this woman badly, and not just because of sex drive, but worried about the consequences.

A red pedestrian light forced us to stop, so I turned to look at Gilda. City lights enhanced her beauty like candles. She smiled and then kissed me.

"I want you badly," I said. "But, I'm also torn."

"Why?"

"Any other woman would not, but you know I should be mourning the death of my wife. And, there's the age difference."

She drew her face back and frowned.

"All human concepts," she said. "The only thing that matters is what's driven by nature. Remember what you said on Wednesday? You can't fake chemistry. But, you can fake morality."

"And, you said you shouldn't *fight* chemistry."

"Which we won't."

She kissed me again, and then the light changed. We hurried across the street, my thoughts in a jumble. The dominant thought in my mind: how soon we forget.

"Behind closed doors—or wherever there are no witnesses—morals and behavior are agreed between participants."

"Yeah, but—"

"The age difference means nothing," Gilda stated. "Do you think animals know the age of whatever other animals they screw? And, hormones driving sex are much stronger than emotions controlling adherence to religious rules or society's laws. One does not need to understand the workings of the brain to know that; one must merely observe human behavior."

"True, but you won't find many fans of that way of thinking."

"If you and I had grown up on different sides of a deserted island and met by chance, the only thing driving us would be natural urges."

"That's rather far-fetched."

Gilda shook her head.

"That's why I want to understand the brain," she said. "That way, we'll know the difference between the impact of nature and of nurture. All we have now are theories and disagreements, which are all flawed. I know that the brain is driven by electrical impulses, which are all chemical in nature. Social mores have no chemical or mathematical foundation."

"So, what you're saying—from my simple-minded point of view—is that sex is okay?"

Gilda laughed.

"I hope it'll be better than *okay*," she said. "And, if it'll ease your conscience, you won't be breaking any of the Ten Commandments."

"Maybe not, but this is a state founded on guilt," I said. "Massachusetts is where they burned witches and forced adulterers to wear a big red A."

"I'm guilty of neither. At least they didn't burn Jews."

"Ooh," I said. "Good thing no one can hear us. Anyway, you've convinced me that there's nothing unnatural about us jumping into bed together. That said, many—especially Karen's friends—would consider what I am about to do immoral."

"No one will know."

"Here are the facts, your honor: I'm almost twice as old as the young lady."

"Closer to 16 years, and nature doesn't care."

"We're not married."

"No law of nature requires a piece of paper."

"My wife just died."

"Again, nature does not demand mourning and certainly does not define a period. Understanding the brain should explain grief, but will not provide a necessary mourning time."

"You must be desperate."

Gilda laughed.

"I'm not. I'm being rational."

We reached the door to my building, so I paused. I had a choice: we could go upstairs or I could have the concierge order a taxi. I could spend the night—alone—with a clear conscious or ignore the puritan whispering in my ear and let Gilda share my bed.

"Is your moral self still battling with your natural self?" Gilda asked, a smirk on her face.

"No contest," I lied, and opened the door.

We did not speak in the elevator. Gilda clung to my arm, as if afraid to lose me. I could not escape, even if I wanted to. Because she was so hung up on the brain, I had begun to think about its workings...something I had never done before. She had pointed out that sex drive is like hunger: it cannot be denied. Still, people try to avoid having to make love. She had refused to let anyone touch her that she did not desire, and I have let concern about mourning the death of my wife worry me and—up to this point—inhibit me. One seemed to be driven by physical desire and the other by morality; one was natural, and the other was social. Different impulses were making human brains, albeit one female and one male, direct a similar action. I decided that she had a lot of work to do.

A fly on the wall of my bedroom would have been unable to determine who enjoyed themselves most. But, said fly would not understand the complexity of sex and could not know the turmoil in my brain. Despite all we had discussed and my acquiescence, I still felt guilty about having so much pleasure in a bed I had shared with a wife now dead, especially since she had suffered so much.

Perhaps, as harsh as this might sound, I should be grateful that Karen had died. If I had met Gilda when she was still alive, I would have had a true dilemma. Then again, would she still have turned my head? I had met Gilda only because Karen had died. Some would say that it was fate. Or luck. Or...life.

Although insignificant in comparison, I still worried about having a relationship with someone so young. What would people, especially those at my school, say about me being with someone near the age of my older students? Of

course, her intelligence placed her in a different league, but people would judge by outward impressions, and they would judge critically. Did I care? Should I care? Gilda would say that such sentiments were conceived by humans and, therefore, unnatural and of no concern.

Gilda hugged me and then kissed me.

"That was worth waiting for," she said.

"Why did you want me to touch you and none of the other guys that might have tried?"

"I don't know," she replied. "Perhaps the answer is related to why you let mourning prevent you."

"Up to a point."

"Understanding the brain is not needed to understand sex drive—that's chemical and electrical—but it might explain our reluctance. It's obvious that something's going on up there."

Gilda tapped her head. My mind had been spinning, like one of those irritating beach balls on a Mac screen—you have no idea what's happening, but something was moving inside—without reaching any meaningful conclusions.

"I just thought of a movie," I said. "I hope I don't wake up with an ice pick in my heart."

She pushed away and sat up. Her expression was more surprise than anger. I had been trying to be ironic.

"If I put it in your heart, you won't wake up."

"Yes, doctor. But, those are the fears of an old man with a young lover."

Gilda put a hand on my neck and pulled me towards her.

"I am not that shallow," she said. "I didn't fall for you just so I could leave you. And, I hope you're still not struggling with morality."

"I was just thinking that I might lose some friends. Especially Karen's."

"Will that bother you?"

"It shouldn't," I replied. "If someone rejects me, because I fall in love, then they were never a true friend."

Later, Gilda lay beside me, breathing softly. I lay awake and contemplated the fact that Gilda lay beside me in my bed.

What had lured me into the moral dilemma—which I had quickly ignored—in the first place, I wondered for the umpteenth time? Her beauty? Her intelligence? Her character? My vulnerability? My loneliness? Or, simply, the fact that she let me into her pants? Something more than mere sex drive must be going on. More likely, it was a combination of all aspects of Gilda's and my character and situation. If one aspect had been missing or different, would we have ended up in each other's arms in my bed? No one, least of all me, could determine why people are attracted to one another. They just are. And, we were. I had assumed that, after Karen died, I would never be attracted to another woman. But, I was.

When I awoke the next morning, I found Gilda eyeing me. A smile spread across her face.

"I've never spent the night with a man."

"I hope I didn't steal the blanket. Or snore."

She giggled, shook her head, and snuggled closer. I expected her to ask me how I had liked the sex with her: a standard morning-after question. I would have to lie. I had learned long ago that sex with a beautiful woman is never the same, but always the same.

“I want to wake up every morning beside you,” she said.

Surprised, I hugged her.

“Well, Gilda Rubin, I’ll guess you’ll just have to move in.”



I stopped counting the number of times I saw Gilda.



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