

A Waltz Yes, a Heart No
by
Barry Rachin

Dr. Stanley Gilford, chief cardiologist at Our Lady of Fatima Hospital, was not some mind-in-the-gutter degenerate. He never rented dirty movies - hadn't bought a Playboy or Penthouse since his college days. More to the point, there were scads of desirable woman - nurses and technicians - who he saw daily at the hospital; he felt no compulsion to undress them with his eyes, to imagine lewd and lascivious trysts. And yet, here he was sitting at the counter of the Central Ave Diner in Pawtucket, Rhode Island indulging his sexual fantasies. In this latest installment, Ruby, the head waitress, was flitting about the restaurant dressed in black, see-through panties and tasseled pasties. The previous week she sported a dominatrix's leather and chains. Since first coming to the Pawtucket diner six months earlier, he discovered that the erotic possibilities and permutations were endless. Still, it was not his fault. The waitress was a sorceress; she had put a hex on him.

"The usual?" Ruby eased Dr. Gilford's mug across the counter, filling it with steaming, black coffee. Less than two feet away behind the counter, her hazel eyes never rose above his Adam's apple, as though the physical effort to lift her head might provoke an hernia. Her pearly skin was flawless, the blond hair gathered at the nape with a hardwood comb. Midriff spilling over skintight jeans, the woman - she had to be at least thirty-five - exuded a flinty, hardscrabble loveliness undefiled by age.

"Yes, thank you." Dr. Gilford had a triple bypass scheduled at 10 a.m. then a round of consultations. Afterwards, he would go back to the office to see private patients - a brutal and demanding regimen. For the next fifteen minutes though, he could thoroughly relax and enjoy his meal. What intrigued him most about the tight-lipped blond was the contrast between her perfunctory way with customers - they could collectively and without regard to race, creed or color, all go straight to Hell - and the great care she paid to the food.

Ring! The cook had a small bell which he tapped with the palm of his hand each time an order was ready. The breakfasts - two ham and egg specials, a stack of blueberry pancakes and order of poached - for the truckers crammed into the end booth were done. Snatching the first plate, she ran the rest up the inner curve of her left arm well past the elbow. Ring! Ring!

"Who's got poached?" She set the plates on the table. As she turned back in the direction of the grill, a heavysset man with a walrus moustache grabbed her arm and muttered something under his breath.

"Only in your dreams, Romeo," she replied. The heavysset man chuckled and released his grip.

At the cash register, Ruby made change and set a family of five up near the door. A toddler upended a glass of milk. She cleared the mess and went back to the counter where an elderly man with a face like a dried prune complained that his 'eggs-over-easy' were runny. "Ain't gonna eat this soggy crap!" The old man pressed his wrinkled lips tightly together and twisted his scrawny neck to one side. Ruby hustled the plate back to the cook, who cracked two more eggs and threw them on the grill.

Ring! At the end booth, the heavysset fellow tried to revive his tasteless repartee, and the family of five finished their meal, leaving a huge mess. Sneering at no one in particular, the elderly man wolfed down his eggs and hurried off without leaving a tip.

“More coffee?” Ruby asked.

“Yes, thank you.” She filled the cup. “I’m Stan.”

Ruby gazed over his head at the row of paper plates describing the luncheon specials tacked to the far wall. “Got a job?”

“I’m a doctor.”

“What type?”

“Cardiac.” She stared at him dully. “A heart surgeon,” Dr. Gilford clarified.

“Oh, yeah.” She went off to check the food on the grill.

The product of liberal-minded Episcopalians, Stanley Gilford grew up in a tony section of Connecticut, peopled by bankers, lawyers, computer executives and the like. Blue bloods - well connected and, except for a few Johnny-come-latelies - backed by ‘old’ money. After high school, Stan chose the Brown University medical program. He met his future wife, Bernice, while interning at Rhode Island Hospital. They were divorced five years now.

Bernice, the love of his life. In later years, Bernice, the trial lawyer who let the courtroom invade their bedroom - who openly acknowledged the brain’s preeminence over the heart and all other, ephemeral organs. In the summer of 1991, a physician in the cardiac unit of Fatima Hospital, Dr. Nesbitt, was sued for malpractice by the widow of a former patient. An improbable twist of fate, Stan’s wife was spearheading the prosecution. “Perhaps you could remove yourself from the Nesbitt case?” Stan said. By this time their marriage was characterized by polite formalities.

“Why would I want to do that?”

“Dr. Nesbitt’s a colleague.”

“I’ve nothing against the man,” she said frigidly. “It’s strictly a legal thing.”

Something went awry in his brain - synapses misfiring, imploding and setting off multiple chain reactions. Neurological fission. Stan headed for the hall closet where they stored the 36-inch Pullman suitcase. “I’ll pack my bags and be gone in the morning. But don’t take it personal - it’s a doctor thing.”

During the trial, the prosecution created the appearance of wrongdoing and incompetence. Dr. Nesbitt’s flawless record counted for nothing as did the fact that the deceased had been steadily losing ground to obstructive pulmonary disease long before coming under the physician’s care.

The appearance of wrongdoing.

Through legal artifice, smoke and mirrors, Bernice persuaded the jurors to see Dr. Nesbitt as a bumbling fool. The doctor’s physical appearance only bolstered the unflattering portrait. Tall and ungainly, his pilly, brown socks trailed around his ankles. The socks you noticed; the IQ of 130 and encyclopedic, medical mind were not so readily apparent. In the end, the jury found in favor of the widow. The heart doctor protested the decision and lost again on appeal.

Limbo: the abode of just and innocent souls on the border of hell.

When Stanley Gilford was a child, a pet spaniel got hit by a car. After the accident, the dog limped downstairs to the basement where it lay listlessly on a throw rug for the next six months. Its spirit and hind limbs sufficiently mended, the animal finally hobble outdoors. A year

after the divorce and his friend's trial, Stan Gilford - his six months having long since expired - was still cowering on a metaphorical throw rug in the basement of his mind. Drifting aimlessly in a hellish limbo, he stopped attending church, let his membership in the tennis club lapse, swore off women altogether.

Dr. Gilford was away at a medical convention the following week - a new laser treatment for cardiac stenosis. When he returned to the Central Ave Diner, another woman, a chain-smoking redhead, was serving the food. "Where's Ruby?"

"Sinus infection. Won't be back until the end of the week."

For the next three days, Dr. Gilford ate all his meals at the hospital cafeteria. The next time he visited the diner, Ruby was back behind the counter. Dr. Gilford took a seat next to a well-dressed man in his sixties reading the Providence Journal Bulletin. Like weeds on a bone-dry, August lawn, twin tufts of hair sprouted from the old man's nostrils. "Water's the thing, you know," the older man said, turning to Dr. Gilford with an easy smile.

"How's that?"

The man thumped the newspaper with a stubby index finger. "Politicians worry about air quality, global warming, holes in the ozone, hazardous waste. But talk to any self-respecting ecologist and they'll bend your ear about the shortage of potable water in third-world countries. Am I right or what?"

Dr. Gilford didn't have to consider the answer. "Yes, that's true." At the grill, the cook was mutilating an order of bacon. He always cooked the bacon too long, and it came away with the consistency of cardboard. The fact that they favored extra-thin strips didn't help matters.

"Desalination," the old man said. "A great idea in theory, but those underdeveloped countries that need the technology most can least afford it."

Dr. Gilford agreed implicitly with his point of view. What future was there in desalination when people living in coastal areas of Africa and Asia were dying of endemic diseases such as cholera and typhus - both infectious organisms easily spread by contaminated drinking water?

The older man grinned broadly, wiped his mouth with a napkin and fumbled in his pants pocket for a wallet. "Money's on the counter, Ruby." With a half-dozen orders bubbling on the grill, the waitress didn't bother to look up. Grabbing a topcoat, the old man nodded pleasantly and headed out the door.

Twenty minutes passed. Except for a booth full of townies dawdling over tepid coffee, the Central Ave Diner was empty. "Planning a vacation?" Ruby leaned over the counter with her pretty face no more than an inch from his ear.

Dr. Gilford looked up from the travel brochure he had spread on the formica surface. "Copper Canyon. It's in the hill country of northern Mexico." He handed the brochure to Ruby. On the cover was a picture of a steep canyon with a waterfall cascading over rocky ledges down to a boulder-strewn riverbed. "In September, I'm going on a 5-day backpacking trip with a friend from the hospital."

"White water rafting and horseback rides into traditional, Tarahumara Indian country," Ruby read in a gravelly monotone. She flipped the brochure over. There were pictures of dark-skinned Indians, a Catholic mission constructed in adobe style, and hikers trekking through a verdant valley. "Not taking the wife?"

“I’m divorced.”

Ruby bent so far over the counter, her breasts were almost in his face. Dr. Gilford could smell her musky perfume - a pungent scent reminiscent of English Leather. She held her left hand up, splaying the unadorned fingers. “Welcome to the lonely hearts club.”

Dr. Gilford retrieved the pamphlet. “Not a very exclusive organization according to statistics. Would you like to go out some time?”

Ruby’s features went slack. “You mean a date?” He shook his head up and down. The waitress let out a loud belly laugh, a cross between a guffaw and a whooping, straight-from-the-gut howl. Several of the customers looked up in mild surprise.

Dr. Gilford turned the color of fried kielbasa. “A simple yes or no would have sufficed.”

Her face remained neutral. “Let me think about it and I’ll get back to you.”

He handed her his business card. “You can catch me at the office anytime after noon most days.”

She thrust the card into her jeans pocket without looking at it and plucked a pencil from behind her ear. “So, what’ll it be - besides a romantic interlude, that is?”

Had he totally lost his mind? Cruising down route 95 toward the hospital, Dr. Gilford felt his face flush hotly for a second time in less than an hour. He should have simply shown her the brochure of Copper Canyon and let it go at that. Not that there was any predicament, no reason for self-flagellation. The waitress’ erotic good looks taken aside, Dr. Gilford understood perfectly well his own, hidden agenda: Ruby’s appeal resided in the fact that, in virtually every respect - physical, emotional, intellectual and aesthetic - she was the exact opposite of his ex-wife.

He needed a strategy to recreate a semblance of order in his out of control, personal life. The Central Ave Diner was off-limits. A Newport Creamery two miles up the road served breakfast; if he didn’t want to eat at the hospital cafeteria, he could stop there. As an additional precaution, he would instruct his receptionist to run interference; when Ruby called and was rebuffed a half dozen times, she’d get the not-so-subtle message. The burning pressure, like acid reflux, began to seep out of his chest. He felt restored, more his disciplined, purposeful self.

Around 11p.m. as he was preparing for bed, the phone rang. It was Ruby. “How’d you get my home phone?”

“It was on the card underneath the office number,” Ruby replied. “Still want to go out with me?”

He did not even pause to consider the question. “I’d like that very much,” he replied meekly.

“Here are the ground rules: if you come back to the diner, don’t expect preferential treatment. I’ll serve your number two specials and refill your coffee mug once at no additional charge. When you’re finished eating, you pay the bill and go about your business.”

Dr. Gilford placed a hand over his eyes and squeezed hard. “OK.”

“I’ve had two cesarean sections and breast fed both my kids; with all the wear and tear, these knockers ain’t holding up so well. Just so there won’t be any illusions, I ain’t half as nice to look at in the buff as I am with clothes on.” “Not that my naked body should be of any interest to you,” she added quickly, “cause I don’t put out. Not on the first date, not on the twentieth.”

His head was spinning. He sat down on the edge of the bed. “You’re losing me.”

“You don’t get no sex without marrying me.”

Dr. Gilford considered the double negative and was almost tempted to tell her what the sentence actually meant. “I asked you for a date, not a commitment for life.” He shifted the phone to the other ear. “What are you doing Friday night?”

When he hung up the phone, Dr. Gilford was ecstatic, euphoric - out of his mind with joyful expectation; which is to say, he was more confused than ever. He went to bed but couldn’t sleep. Ruby’s disembodied voice - as abrasive and bruising as 50-grit, garnet sandpaper - kept floating back to him. Dr. Gilford climbed out of bed and wandered into the kitchen. On the oak table was the brochure from Copper Canyon. Next to a picture of several Indians, their skin so dark it might have been rubbed with black earth from the rain forest, was the following:

“Tata Dios made us as we are. We have only been as you see us... there is no devil here. Only when people do bad things does He (God) get angry. We make much beer and dance much, in order that he may remain content; but when people talk much, and go around fighting, then He gets angry and does not give us rain.”

Tarahumara Shaman 1893

Dr. Gilford desperately needed to visit a place where the devil hadn’t made any appreciable inroads; where poverty, in the modern sense, was a relatively new phenomena; where people drank *tesgüino*, corn beer, and danced to appease the Gods so there would be sufficient rain for a plentiful harvest. An amorphous lump welled up in his throat and began to throb like a vestigial heart.

At forty-two, only now was he beginning - at the most crude and fundamental level - to understand certain basic truths, truths which had eluded him for the better part of a lifetime. He went back to bed and, almost immediately, fell into a thoroughly restful sleep.

On Saturday night Dr. Gilford drove to the working class, Mount Pleasant section of Providence past rows of three-decker tenements. The homes were older, some in disrepair. Not a bad neighborhood; certainly not the best.

“Hey, this here’s a swell car!” Ruby noted as they drove toward the downtown district. She ran her hand over the Lexus’ leather upholstery. “A heck of a lot nicer than my bag of bolts.”

They ate dinner at the Biltmore. Following the caesar salad, the waiter returned with two cut glass bowls of lemon sorbet. “To cleanse the palette,” the waiter explained in response to Ruby’s puzzled expression and hurried back to the kitchen.

Ruby tasted the tart ice and put her spoon down. She wore a tight-fitting green dress with heels that showed her supple legs to good advantage. On anyone else, the outfit might have seemed tawdry, but the absence of makeup or jewelry threw the focus on her haughty good looks. No pretense or posturing - just a woman on the front side of middle-age perfectly at ease in her lovely body. Stan sensed that, if not a single waiter or guest were present in the dining room of the Providence Biltmore, Ruby would still cross the floor with the same blithe flair. By whatever name - *duende*, *panache*, *esprit* - she possessed it in ample supply.

After the meal, they went into the lounge for drinks. “You’re obviously not dating me for my brains,” Ruby said, her voice as dry as the wine she was sipping, “and the prospect of sex doesn’t loom large on the horizon. So what’s really happening here?”

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