

# The Tunnel of Love

*A Story of Red & Gilda Felix*

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by Mazher Ahmad

“Hello Matilda”, the handsome young man with red hair standing on the corner of 21<sup>st</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue shouted across the street. Brooklyn in the mid 1930s was alive with characters from all walks of life, and this gentleman was one of the more colorful ones.

Pierre Felis’ family had immigrated from France and settled in Brooklyn a few generations back. Over the past few years, he had made his living maintaining buildings by day, and making impressionable young ladies laugh by evening. During the Great Depression, Pierre along with many other able bodied men, suffered the dreaded fate of waiting in bread lines to make ends meet, but it was his perseverance and humor that helped him survive.





“My name’s not Matilda,” the lovely lady in her mid-20s shouted back – “it’s Gilda!”

“OK Matilda, “ he replied with a grin.

Exasperating on the outside, she strutted away down 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue, smiling fully content on the inside.

She liked Pierre’s style – he was handsome and charming and although his parents had a less than stellar reputation in the neighborhood, this apple seemed to have fallen far from the tree. His blue eyes and fair skin conveyed a lightness about him that made her feel at ease. It was his humor, though that truly brought her alive whenever she would look back across their street.

It was 'Red', the nickname given to Pierre on account of his natural auburn hair color, who had pursued Gilda more than the other girls. Gilda lived at 293 21<sup>st</sup> Street and Red resided just up the road from her and would often see her walking to the local delicatessen on the corner.

On occasion he would follow her to the movies and playfully tug at her hair, as if they were still school children innocently teasing each other.

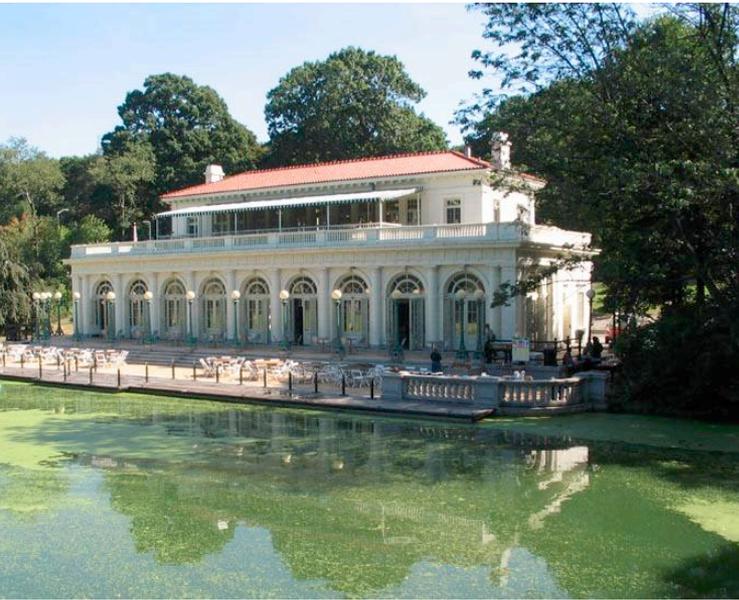
This continued for some time, with Gilda being more and more amused by his antics and witticisms, and Red growing more and more fond of Gilda.



Persistence soon paid off, as the two began to see each other more formally. Summertime in Brooklyn was magical – alive with the sounds of a thriving city, tucked under the shadow of the bigger brother New York City to the west.

Only a stones throw from the mighty borough of Manhattan, Brooklyn had created its own identity for its youth to explore. The Brooklyn Bride may have been the connection to the center of the world, but the center of Brooklyn was Prospect Park.





Prospect Park, created in 1857 by Frederick Law Olmsted and Calvert Vaux (known for their design of New York's famed Central Park) was the center of outdoor life in Brooklyn.

Full of luscious lawns, lapping lakes and tranquil trees, Prospect Park was the playground for the young adults of the city, and Gilda enjoyed to play.



The Bicycle Path from Prospect Park, Brooklyn, in Coney Island.

From J. A. Allen.

McGraw-Hill, 1896

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Gilda and Red would often go to the Park and enjoy the boat rides and bicycle adventures. On one occasion, Gilda rode a bike that was going so fast that she couldn't stop it. But before she toppled over and crashed, her protector Red rode up to her, grabbed the handle bars and straightened things out as always.

That was Red – always, there for his Gilda, and Gilda always laughing and enjoying Red’s company. They were the perfect fit and loved spending as much time together as they could find.

On another occasion, the couple, while walking through the park, noticed that Red’s pant zipper had broken. In her demure way, Gilda removed her coat and gave it to Red to cover himself up.

They were garments for each other, protecting each other, covering each other’s faults, and making each other look beautiful.





As their romance blossomed, Red and Gilda became more and more serious. Both were in love and during their first real date, they went to Coney Island.

“I loved to go on rides like the Cyclone”, Gilda recalled, “but Red, he was afraid of them. You see, his parents were a bit older and so he had not been exposed to the things the other kids were doing. So he couldn’t swim and really didn’t like going into the ocean or on the fast roller coasters. But I LOVED it and we had a great time.”



The one ride Red did find the courage to take Gilda on was the Tunnel of Love. One of the classic romantic spots on the island, the two of them sat on the boat that floated them through the dark cave's entrance.

Surrounded by creepy spiders and spooky noises, Gilda screamed and huddled close to Red. In the darkness they moved through quietly and when the moon showed through the tunnel, Red leaned over and gave Gilda their first kiss.

In 1939 they married. Gilda was 26 years old and Red two years older. And for the next thirty one years, they lived a full, prosperous life.





Honeymooning at Niagara Falls, moving to Bay Ridge, and raising a daughter and a son were just a few of the highlights of this precious couple's life together.

In 1969, Red passed away. The ever elegant lady, who had grown up a seamstress working through the Great Depression at a store across from Macy's in New York City, knew what it took to persist and began to move on with her life.

Although her partner of over three decades had left her, she carries his laughter, joy and love in her heart to this day.





Thirty years later at the young age of 99, Gilda sits calmly in Room 219 of the Morris Hills Center. She shares pictures of her family and reflects on where she was during the major events of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. From World War 2 to JFK's assassination, the Moon landing, and the Vietnam War, she vividly recalls each event as if it were yesterday.



But when asked what memory stands out the most from her near century of adventure, she chuckles with every fiber of her body when she thinks about her response to Pierre "Red" Felis' voice shouting from across her beloved Brooklyn street.

"My name's not Matilda, its Gilda!"



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