AT THE POOL

 My name is unimportant. Nor is knowing where I live, how long I've been married, how many children we had, or what I did for my long career before retirement. None of those ordinary facts are germane to the true story I'm about to tell.

 But what is important is that I'm a seventy-six year old man. It's an age when you tend to look back on what you did with your life, and wonder whether it all mattered. It is also an age when you are keenly observant of all the life around you: people, animals, plants, even insects. Why, you might ask? Because you realize with stark finality that you won't be around forever, so you need to take it all in now while you are still alive. Clouds, the wind, rain storms, rushing rivers, the stars at night, smells, sounds -- everything makes an impression, because you have the time at last to appreciate the entirety of your brief earthly existence.

 There is a pleasant, modern community pool in the town where I live. Every summer, I like to go there a few times each week to swim some lane laps and generally cool off in the refreshing blue water. They go pretty light on the chlorine here -- enough to be compliant with the county health rules, but not so much as to burn your eyes or excessively dry out your skin. It's nice.

 The pool can accommodate up to 200 people, but on the weekdays when I come in the early afternoon, it rarely has more than 40 people -- mostly mothers with young children or a handful of seniors like myself. There are also six teenaged lifeguards, and an adult male director in charge of everything.

 I usually spend two hours here. I come without my wife, who -- wrongly and self-consciously -- assumes that she shouldn't be seen in public wearing a bathing suit anymore. I swim a slow, ten-minute lap session, then rest for twenty minutes. I do this routine four times, then rinse off and head home. While resting in the folding lawn chair I always bring, under a shade structure set up on a grassy side area, I either daydream, or simply look around, or read a book, or listen to music on my iPod. It's relaxing.

 One day, a young woman about age nineteen was sitting on a colorful beach towel alone, avidly reading a thick paperback book under the shade structure where I usually set myself up. I thought she might be a college student on summer break from the nearby university. What initially struck me was that she was not staring at her iPhone, or scrolling, or texting someone. Instead, she was actually engrossed in reading a real book! This action somehow delighted me.

 Trying not to disturb her, I unfolded my lawn chair about ten feet behind her and off to the side. Next, I set down my belongings, took my swim goggles, and went into the cool blue waters. It was a typical hot day, about 90 degrees F., just past one o'clock. I did my usual lane laps for ten minutes, the large looming clock at poolside keeping me on schedule.

 I got out, dried my eyes and ears, then put my ear buds in for some music.

 (*Heaven...I'm in heaven...*Fred Astaire singing "Cheek to Cheek.")

 Trying not be seen as some kind of pervert or 'dirty old man,' but still innocently curious, I carefully glanced at the young woman. She was wearing a bright pink two-piece swimsuit fastened with black strings. Her back was toward me as she was hunched over reading her book. The other pool patrons were far away from us. This setting gave me the odd illusion of intimacy, as if I and the young woman were alone together.

 (*You...stepped out a dream. You are too wonderful...to be what you seem...*Sergio Mendes and Brazil 66 singing "You Stepped Out of a Dream.")

 Next, I noticed the young woman's darkly-tanned skin. It shone with a rich softness and glowed with health. Her long black hair was pulled back and cascaded down her toned back. From what I could see from my vantage point, her trim body appeared perfect.

 Now before you get caught up in any lewd assumptions, you must know this: I fully realize that I am old enough to be this young woman's grandfather. I am not lusting after her in any sexual manner. (That would be both immoral and obscene, like the main character in Nabokov's scandalous novel, "Lolita.") Old men admiring young women are almost always harmless. It's a specific form of male nostalgia, in a way. It is not meant to be offensive or to be looked upon as anything predatory. I was honestly and simply appreciating her natural physical beauty. Did she know that time would steal that away from her someday? Plus, I was simultaneously remembering my own youth from long ago, and recalled my hugging and kissing of such older teen-aged girls -- in every instance, each of us eager and willing and in awe of nature's incredible power of physical attraction.

 *(Are the stars out tonight? I don't know if it's cloudy or bright...I only have eyes...for you, dear...*Art Garfunkel singing "I Only Have Eyes For You.")

 The mystery woman suddenly marked her paperback and put it aside, and gracefully rose from her beach blanket. I tried to look away, but I felt compelled to watch from the corner of my eye as she strolled to the pool and slipped it. From behind my prescription sunglasses, I caught a glimpse of a perfectly-portioned body, exactly the right height and weight. She was stunning, yet she seemed unaware of her alluring beauty. Her calm manner appeared content and carefree.

 I paused my music and removed my ear buds, and likewise went into the pool to retain my usual schedule of laps. But she was at the far end of the water, away from me. I swam for ten minutes, then got out. Back at the shade structure, the young woman had already returned. But now she was stretched out on her back, taking in the sun as its warmth dried her creamy brown skin. Her book was still resting aside, yet I was still too far away to ascertain its title. She put a clean white baseball cap over her face, as if to take a little nap.

 I sat back in my lawn chair, and resumed listening to my music.

 (*Cherish is the word I use to describe...all the feeling that I have hiding here for you inside...*The Association singing "Cherish.")

 I cautiously stared at her flat, tanned belly and her flawless naval. I quickly took in the marvel of her hands and feet too, knowing she could not see me studying her. I felt somewhat guilty but was unable to help myself. The nameless nineteen-year-old was like a classical female sculpture or an oil painting masterpiece in some museum. How can God create such an incredible physical specimen, I wondered? And why does He frustrate both men and women, knowing that such magnificent flesh is destined to decay and dust?

 The mature adult in me knew that if I was ever foolish enough to strike up a casual, innocent conversation with this beauty, it would be a travesty: experience-wise, she had to be mostly void-like, and largely ignorant of life's serious depth and sorrows. And yet, there was that old memory inside me of such mysterious attraction! Young people don't realize that old people have the same feelings and needs and thoughts from when they were young. Only the elderly are sadly trapped in a progressive, unstoppable wreck of their own once handsome and vital bodies, as time moves on, seemingly faster and faster.

 (*My Cherie amour...lovely as a summer day...my Cherie amour...distant as the Milky Way...*Stevie Wonder singing "My Cherie Amour.")

 Suddenly, the woman removed the white cap from her face, got up, stretched luxuriously , then walked slowly over to where I was seated. She had a rather peculiar smile on her face. Shocked, and perhaps embarrassed, I looked away. I was very conscious of my pale, fat gut, the age spots on my hands (with my wedding ring), the tiny red and blue veins near my ankles, and my fast-disappearing hairline.

 (*Hey Venus...oh Venus...Venus, if you will...please send a little girl for me to thrill...a girl who wants my kisses and my arms...a girl with all the charms of you...*Frankie Avalon singing "Venus.")

 I fumbled a bit, and managed to turn off my iPod music, then faced her -- less than bravely, I must confess. I politely removed my sunglasses. Old school habit.

 "Um, Yes?" I uttered awkwardly, after clearing my throat, which was quite dry. My tongue felt sluggish too.

 "Hi! I hope I'm not disturbing you. But I had this overwhelming sensation that I should approach you and give you a quick, simple little gift." The young woman smiled warmly. Her perfect teeth were dazzling. I was taken aback.

 The stranger's friendly tone of voice was sincere, however, and therefore instantly elicited my trust. Looking at her face -- up close, for the first time -- I could see that she was probably part Polynesian or maybe Hawaiian in ethnic origin. Her deep dark eyes had something of the Asian mix in them.

 Then the young woman did something totally unexpected.

 She gently put one petite hand on my head, smoothing my thinning white hair. With her other hand, she tenderly cupped my wrinkled face and leaned over and gave me a remarkable single kiss.

 The kiss was a combination of every meaningful kiss I had ever received over my entire seventy-six years of life. Soft. Warm. Giving. (Slightly tasting of mint?) It was truly spectacular. It was transcendent. It was timeless -- the very essence of the elemental force of life itself as our lips met.

 But it was all over in an instant. I could have stayed lost within its remarkable sensation forever. I was shyly dumbfounded -- after taking a deep breath -- and thus said nothing. I looked into her eyes, however, and hoped she could at least ascertain my humble gratitude for her amazing and selfless gift.

 "Why did I do it? I felt that you deserved it. That's all."

 She smiled her golden smile again and left me, then returned to her beach blanket , assembled her belongings, and casually left the pool area.

 I never even learned her name, or anything else about her, after our special brief interchange.

 Looking at the clock, I knew it was soon time for me to rinse off, pack up, and drive home. Naturally, I would skip telling my wife about the incredible, unforgettable incident. Doing so would surely lead to big trouble. Decades of marriage had taught me wisdom.

 Yet I secretly looked for the mystery young woman at the pool every week for the rest of that summer. I wanted to know what book she was reading. Could that somehow be a key to the mystery? But really, I only wanted to thank her.

 Now and then, I look back on that day. Who was she? Where is she today? How did her life turn out? Why did it happen? What did it all mean?

 But I never saw her again...

 THE END

 by Jack Karolewski

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