ONE LAST TIME

 There is really no love like your first love.

 Whether the receiver of your love is truly worthy, or whether she or he is simply a fantasy, or a projection of your own deepest needs and desires -- or whether your love for each other is genuine, and selfless, and transcendent -- that reality is usually given to a later debate and a more mature analysis.

 Yet when first love happens, it is life-changing and unforgettable, and it impacts the rest of your days with unique and powerful memories and emotions.

 Mark met Laura when they were both sixteen and living in Chicago. By chance, their neighborhoods were just a few city blocks apart. They met casually through two friends who arranged their initial meeting in the summer of 1967. Each was instantly smitten, as if through some kind of heavenly intervention. They couldn't get enough of each other's company for more than four blessed years.

 Although they attended different high schools, the couple spent their first two years together at Northern Illinois University in DeKalb. Then Laura -- who had extensively studied theater, dance, and voice while Mark focused on majoring in Education -- decided to move to New York City and try her luck at auditions for possible stardom on Broadway. A heart-broken Mark was devastated, as their relationship was severed.

 But fame eluded Laura, despite all of her talent and devoted efforts. She eventually found work as a singer with a minor jazz combo, and worked doing that in Greenwich Village and, much later, back in Chicago -- that last move unknown to Mark.

 Over the intervening decades, both had married. Mark became a community college History teacher and moved to Colorado, where he and his wife, Elaine, raised three fine children. Laura later married a piano player, Gene, from one of her various jazz ensembles, but that couple never had any children. Meanwhile, over the years, Laura had taken up the terrible habit of cigarette smoking. Her working-class father had been a heavy, four-pack-a-day smoker, which eventually killed him. Yet even that reality failed to frighten her away from her growing addiction.

 In 2012, arriving in South Korea by air to change planes on his way to an international education seminar in Vietnam, Mark received a somber email from Laura's husband.

 Laura had died after a year-long battle with lung cancer. She was only sixty-one years old.

 Laura had contacted Mark, with her husband's knowledge, a year earlier via email. Mark had never expected to hear from Laura again since he last spoke with her almost forty years earlier. She admitted that she was gravely ill, and was undergoing chemotherapy and radiation treatments to combat her cancer. But she needed Mark's support and prayers and their wonderful memories together re-lived to help her cope, she explained. And so, over the course of that year, they sent each other lengthy and emotional emails. Mark was open with his wife about what was happening and what he was doing. Fortunately, Elaine was not offended -- realizing that these were likely the final communications between the former first lovers before one of them met death.

 The last email from Laura said how much she had always loved Mark, and that he was the absolute best of all her relationships in her life. She went on to admit that she should have never left him, and that she was so sorry for the hurt she caused.

 "It should have always been us, Mark. I was such a fool. My selfish ego craved fame and stardom. I failed you as I likewise failed myself in trying to blindly pursue what I assumed was to be my career."

 Mark wrote back, forgiving Laura, hoping to give her some closure and peace. Secretly, however, his own heart ached and his mind was unsettled. His longing for Laura was mixed with frustration, anger, and helplessness. How could life be so painful and unfair?

 It was but a few days later when Mark received that devastating email from Gene notifying him that Laura was gone. She had died sometime when Mark was flying at 35,000 feet above the clouds westward across the Pacific Ocean.

 When the full realization of Laura's death sank in, Mark was in a daze of grief and loss. He returned home to Colorado and his wife a week later from the seminar in Vietnam, having earlier informed Elaine via text message of Laura's having passed away in an Elmhurst, Illinois hospital. Mark obviously loved his wife and their now grown children, but he knew that such feelings could never be as transcendent and transformative as his love had been with Laura. Of course, being overseas when he got the bad news, Mark was unable to attend Laura's funeral. But he hoped someday to at least visit the cemetery where she was buried.

 It was soon after that when the dreams started coming. The past beckoned, strong and deep. The memories of being with Laura again when they were teenagers came back in a continual torrent. The longing for his first love was slowly becoming unbearable -- indeed, almost an obsession. Mark was ashamed to share these thoughts with his wife, however. It was too intimate, too rare, too special. And allowed to grow again, such a resurrection of past feelings could even jeopardize their marriage. It was not worth the risk, he realized. So he kept his emotional turmoil to himself, even as it burned his heart and upset his mind. He even briefly entertained the crazy notion that Laura's spirit was somehow trying to communicate with him from beyond the grave...

 Mark wrestled with his lingering feelings for Laura for ten long years. He even flashed back to being with Laura occasionally when he made love with Elaine, then felt regret and unspoken guilt for his emotional betrayal. Yet, after that decade-long struggle, he ultimately came up with an unusual, possibly even insane notion:

 He would return to their old neighborhood in Chicago and try to go back in time and see Laura again.

 If such a thing was indeed possible, even for a few minutes, he knew he had to try it. His inspiration was triggered by the novel "Bid Time Return" by Richard Matheson, which had later been made into the popular (now a cult favorite) 1980 movie "Somewhere in Time," starring Jane Seymour and Christopher Reeve. Using a carefully selected and controlled environment -- and pure will power or perhaps a kind of self-hypnosis -- the main character was actually able to go back in time temporarily to see his lover again.

 Mark was suddenly offered an excuse to return to Chicago when a favorite aunt of his, Sylvia, died at age ninety. He announced to his wife that he wanted to attend this important funeral. He further explained that he could also visit other long-lost relatives in the area for a few days, if Elaine didn't mind. His wife agreed, and announced that she would simply remain at home.

 While flying from DEN to ORD, Mark made a mental note of five favorite places that he and Laura felt were most closely linked to their relationship and its memories. So after attending his aunt's upcoming funeral -- but before visiting his other relatives -- Mark would go to each place and determine which one had not changed at all in over forty years. In Mark's mind, this sole factor was very important. He figured -- in his desperation and longing to see his first love again -- that the 'magic' would not work if a neighborhood area had changed so much as to shatter 'the spell' of the past.

 Naturally, his first task upon landing at O'Hare was to pick up his rental car at Avis and drive to the Mount Emblem Cemetery in nearby Elmhurst, and find Laura's grave. (He decided not to contact Laura's husband, Gene. The reason was that Mark had never even met the man, nor was he sure that Gene was still living at the last address of his and Laura's modest Elmhurst home from ten years ago.)

 At the cemetery office, a helpful clerk had a nearby groundskeeper walk Mark over to the general section where Laura's grave was located. The mid-October weather was blustery and cloudy, a hint of the cold and bitter season to come that would soon be descending upon all the Midwest.

 Left alone now after being assisted, Mark found Laura's resting place. There it was, with the telling dates of her existence chiseled under her first and last name:

 born October 23, 1951 died April 2, 2012

 Mark stood and stared at the dull, gray headstone for several minutes, then broke down and wept. If she had lived, Laura would have turned seventy-one in a few days, he sadly realized. Why didn't you stop smoking years ago, when you knew it could someday kill you? Why did you have to die, Laura? He kneeled next to the grave and placed his hand on the grass covering it. He rubbed his hand there for a few moments as if to touch his first and best love again, then rose and left the cemetery.

 After attending his aunt's funeral at St. James the Apostle Church in Glen Ellyn, Mark stopped at a local Walgreen's drugstore and found a spray tester bottle of Chantilly perfume. This was Laura's favorite scent, which she liked to wear on special occasions, like when they went to Friday night dances at her public high school. The gentle smell immediately caused Mark to swoon back into deep and vivid memories of his first love! He hadn't smelled this special scent in more than fifty years. Meanwhile, in his pocket, was a rare black & white photo of him and Laura -- him tall and proud, with Laura seven inches shorter and curled up next to his body in a half-hug, both of them smiling and secure, neither with a care in the world. Mark also had a treasured love letter from Laura dated 12/12/67, and a bookmark that Laura had made for him -- a pressed and dried flower on a laminated piece of black cardboard, with a sunshine image etched in gold ink, and their two names in a tenderly-rendered heart. Along with the invigorating odor of Chantilly refreshed in his mind, and the other three artifacts, Mark would try to use all four prompts from his past to somehow return to Laura, if it was at all possible.

 Back in his rental car, Mark headed for his and Laura's old neighborhood on the South Side of Chicago. It had become a dangerous ghetto area over the decades, however, dubbed "Terror Town" by the police and the Media for its high crime and drug gang activity. Mark had to exercise extra caution here now, even in the daytime. He skipped going to his old childhood/family home, because he had been told by relatives at Sylvia's funeral that it no longer existed, having been abandoned then burned to the ground years ago.

 The first of five stops for Mark was at Cunis Ice Cream and Candy Shop on 79th Street near Colfax Avenue. It was here that Mark and Laura would escape the summer heat and humidity of the city to enjoy cool dishes of ice cream or special ice cream sodas in its precious, air-conditioned indoor comfort.

 But Cunis was boarded up and empty. It had moved out to the far southern suburb of South Holland, a faded, half-torn sign indicated. The whole nearby remaining commercial street area looked something like a war-zone.

 So next, Mark drove over to the Chelten movie theater near 80th and Exchange Avenue. Here, the young lovers had shared popcorn and petting in the dark back row of the balcony while casually half-watching various movies.

 But now, the building hosted a storefront Afro-American evangelical church, its marquee announcing "Jesus Saves All Sinners," rather than any movie title. Several black pedestrians stared at Mark with suspicion or out of simple curiosity when he briefly stepped out of his car, for his was the only white face around, likely for many miles. He quickly sped off.

 St. Bride's Church was a few blocks away, at 78th and Coles Avenue. Across the street was the castle-like red brick elementary school where Mark was educated from 1957-1965 by Catholic nuns and priests. Although Laura was raised Lutheran, she often accompanied Mark to Mass in the basement of St. Bride's. They would usually stand in the back for the 11:30 service because the crowds often filled up the pews. (The much larger main church upstairs was also simultaneously packed during Sunday services.) Sometimes, Mark took Communion or went to Confession, but later he lapsed as a Catholic despite being both an altar boy for three years and also attending a Catholic high school.

 However, like Cunis', both St. Bride's Church and its school were shuttered for good, the once thriving Irish and Polish community gone in the 'white flight' from the rapidly encroaching and later completely enveloping black ghetto. All who could had fled to the far southern, still white, city suburbs or to nearby northwest Indiana. The elderly who were unable to flee merely endured the drastic racial upheaval until they eventually died in their own once proud and tidy homes. The neighborhood streets were now littered with trash and broken bottles, any surviving lawns uncut and choked with weeds, with house doors and windows barred to thwart break-ins. So sad...

 Down Coles Avenue several city blocks to the west was Laura's house. Mark already had a bad feeling that it, too, was gone, and sure enough, his suspicion proved true. An empty lot filled with discarded car tires, rusted cans, torn and crushed cardboard boxes, and ragged shards of dirty clothing was all that remained.

 Yet this was the exact place long ago where he and Laura had sat on her worn living room couch by the front picture window which looked out upon the street -- talking, hugging, kissing, wishing, hoping -- discussing (in naive, teen-aged terms) the meaning and purpose of life, art, poetry, literature, religion, and philosophy. They talked into the wee hours, long after her parents and two brothers had gone to bed, later falling asleep themselves in each other's arms, then waking up after a few hours -- with the night still dark -- and continuing their conversations right where they left off until dawn. Mark would be an English professor at an Ivy League college and maybe even be a famous author someday too, while Laura would be a famous theater star, her name prominently displayed in the lights on Broadway.

 Yes, this was the where her house once stood, Mark recalled. And upstairs, in her bedroom with its faint scent of Chantilly, with her door closed and locked even when we were alone in her house, with our clothes discarded one piece at a time, lying then on her soft bed, we explored each other's bodies like curious animals discovering an exciting, exotic land, our hands and fingers and mouths and tongues feverish and exploring -- innocently, tenderly giving and receiving pleasures undreamt of. So this was it...true, eternal love...and it felt like they were spinning and whirling together beyond the heavens.

 A blue and white Chicago police cruiser pulled over and interrupted Mark's intense memories, startling him.

 "Hey, fella, you lost or somethin'?" a uniformed older black officer called out from his rolled down squad car window. "We don't get too many white folks around here. Best be careful, especially if'n you mean to stay around after it gets dark."

 "It's O.K., officer. I used to live around here a long, long time ago. Just going down memory lane, that's all. I'll be moving along now. Thanks for your concern, though," Mark replied, smiling and giving a wave.

 The cop nodded, bemused, and said good-bye, then drove off.

 Four places from my past investigated, and four fails, Mark sadly realized. The last evidences of his golden youth had been cruelly altered or even annihilated. There was only one more place to see, and that was nearby Rainbow Beach on Lake Michigan, just a few blocks away across Lake Shore Drive.

 The beach was the favorite hang-out for all the area teenagers throughout the summer. The sizzling sands, the cold lake waters, the lifeguards watchful in their white wooden towers, the smell of suntan oil and lotions, the concession stand selling popsicles for ten cents, or hot dogs or sodas or candy, or the ice cream bars that needed to be eaten quickly before they melted into a dripping mess in the sun. Dozens of tiny transistor radios were always tuned to AM 890, station WLS, where the upbeat song hits of the 1960s drifted out. Couples hummed or sang along with their favorite songs, holding hands as they lay on their large, colorful beach towels or blankets in their swimsuits.

 Mark and Laura's favorite spot here, however, was the large rocky breakwater at the far eastern edge of Rainbow Beach. Unlike the similar breakwater at the northwestern edge of the beach, this gray rock pier was closest to a huge city water filtration plant, with the massive U.S. Steel Mill factories just beyond that. The breakwater (known to everyone as "The Rocks") was made with giant blocks of stone -- each appearing almost as large as those used to build the great pyramids of Egypt -- and this pier jutted out into the lake. People could walk out to the end of this lengthy breakwater by slowly and carefully jumping on or otherwise moving across the granite stones. Some locals would regularly fish from here, or teens would paint their names as graffiti on the rocks, or swim off the sloping sides or even off the very end point to prove their courage. Meanwhile, in the distance -- about 2.5 miles off shore, making it appear tiny from the breakwater -- stood the circular 68th Street 'water crib' building. This was one of several facilities that drew up supposedly cleaner lake water, then pumped it through hundred-year-old underwater brick tunnels into the city for further purification and use.

 Yes! This was finally it! Mark exulted after he parked his car in the enormous, almost deserted parking lot and walked across the beach sands to the connecting beginning of the big rocky pier. Nothing seemed to have changed here since he had been a teenager. Plus, he was in luck -- the cloudy and blustery weather had kept everyone but him away from this part of the beach, as moody, dark waves slapped against the stone breakwater. Crazy or not, he would try to go back in time and be alone with Laura again, right here, right now...He took out their photograph, her letter, and her book mark, and he concentrated on their reality. He focused too on the recently remembered smell of Chantilly at Walgreen's.

 With his eyes clamped shut, Mark wished with all his might to return -- if only for mere moments -- and go back to his first and best love. He prayed. He begged God. He asked for forgiveness for anything wrong that he had done during his life. "Oh please, please...tell me what to do and I'll do it. Just give me this one last chance," he murmured, his heart sincere, humble and contrite.

 Then it happened.

 When Mark opened his eyes and he could focus again, he saw Laura near the end of the stony breakwater, not more than a dozen feet away from him. He was stunned yet ecstatic. Her brown hair was pulled back in a ponytail, and her deep brown eyes under her alluring dark eyebrows looked welcoming and loving. She was wearing one of Mark's old light gray sweatshirts, which he had given her, and it was of course baggy on her petite frame. Laura also wore a pair of faded, form-fitting white chinos, and scuffed, once-white tennis shoes without any socks. She smiled her special, only-for-him smile, and eagerly moved towards her love as Mark likewise rushed towards her.

 "I don't know how this has happened, Mark, but I'm so glad it did...just look at us, my love...we are sixteen years old and together again!" she joyously proclaimed.

 For a second, obviously not having a mirror to check his image, Mark glanced down at his hands. The age spots (earned from his seventy-one years) and his wedding ring had vanished. Plus, under his perceived different clothing outfit, he felt youthful lean muscle again rather than heavier flab. He was brimming with energy and zest. It was miraculous!

 The lovers immediately began passionately kissing, as Mark tenderly moved his hands under Laura's baggy sweatshirt, from her waist upward, to caress her petite warm and soft breasts. They were perfect and unfettered, her nipples firm and erect. She sighed with delight, and surrendered him her tongue while they continued kissing. Her lips were as sweet as he remembered, and Mark was fully aroused too. He held her glowing face in his hands and pressed his face into her lovely cheek and onto the side of her pulled-back brown hair, her skin smelling of her own natural freshness, and ever-so-faintly, of Chantilly.

 "Oh, Mark...I should have stayed with you! We should have gotten married! Remember how we fantasized about our future together, and how we even chose the names for our children in advance? How could I have been so wrong to have abandoned your undying love for pathetic and cruel New York City?" Laura lamented. "I beg you, my dearest dear, to please forgive me," she pleaded, choking with emotion.

 "I forgave you a long time ago, Laura. I have never, ever stopped loving you! Somehow, we have been given this wondrous gift to be together, holding each other now, for one last time." He stared into her lovely brown eyes, which were now running with tears of joy, as were his. He hugged Laura even tighter, and closed his eyes, with both lovers sharing perfect bliss...

 The next thing he knew, Mark was back sitting in his rental car, stunned and alone. Still somewhat disoriented, he looked at his face after flipping down the driver's visor mirror. He was back in the present, staring at his wrinkles, his graying and thinning hair, and his eyes, bloodshot, as if he had been recently crying.

 Was seeing Laura again just a hallucination? Had he somehow self-hypnotized himself and used his full power of will into believing the impossible? He would never know, but he would remember those precious minutes for the rest of his life...

 It was then that he noticed -- after carefully checking all of his pockets -- that Laura's letter, and her pressed flower bookmark, and the vintage photograph of them happily together were nowhere to be found.

 Yet wasn't that the faintest whiff of Chantilly he detected on his fingers, when he happened to rub an itch near his nose before starting up his car engine to drive away?

 THE END

 by Jack Karolewski

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