

Love and Time
By R. A. Conti

1.

"Here you go," the waitress said. She handed Brian his credit card and receipt. He signed and gave it back. She looked at his signature. "I went to school with a guy with your name."

"You mean college?"

"Oh, no. Elementary school."

"Where you from?"

"I grew up in Germantown."

"You don't mean Fitler School, do you?" he asked.

"That's the one."

"That was forty years ago! I hardly remember anybody from back then."

"Do you remember Gloria?"

"Oh, yeah. Gloria Caton, later Gloria Lord. The first girl I ever fell in love with. I have no idea what happened to her."

"She got married right out of high school. Her husband was slightly older than her, a friend of the family. He was a schoolteacher. They had three kids. He died five years ago."

"You a friend of Gloria's?"

"I am Gloria," she replied, timidly.

"Oh, God! I'm embarrassed now."

"For what?"

"For mentioning I was in love with her- you- way back then."

"Oh, that's okay." She blushed. He noticed and smiled. That made her blush some more.

"Look, I've got to be going. Would you like to get together and reminisce about Fitler? I never meet anyone from back then. It would be fun to see what we remember."

She pretended to hesitate but then nodded.

"Good. Here's my number. Give me a call." He handed her the paper, eased himself out of the booth, stood up, and looked in her eyes, "Nice meeting you. I hope we can see each other again." She nodded and said good-bye. Brian left.

2.

Gloria had a problem. She liked Brian and agreed it would be fun to talk about their school days. However, he confessed he was 'in love' with her back then. That stirred her curiosity. She did not recall him from school, except for his name. She also did not remember much about herself from back then. Maybe he did. She wondered what he could tell her about herself as she was many years ago. If he had been 'in love' with her, what did he remember about her? Gloria decided to find out.

She did not want to seem too eager. She waited a week and called him. He seemed relieved to hear from her. He had probably given up.

"I have an idea," she said. "I'd love to spend more time talking to you, but I don't want to go to another restaurant and sit and talk. My apartment is just a few blocks from the cafe. I get off at seven on Thursdays. Why don't you come by and we'll walk over to my place? It's more comfortable and we can talk all we want."

"Sounds great!" he replied. She thought he sounded a little too enthusiastic. Why did he think she was inviting him over? Did he think something else was afoot? It had been a while since she had spent any time with a man. Gloria needed to sit and talk. She hoped he was not expecting anything more.

3.

He stopped by the luncheonette Thursday night. They walked five blocks and three flights up to her place. She unlocked the door, stepped in, and flipped on the light. The place had a lovely simplicity. All the colors were pastels. She liked to drape colorful scarves over things. She liked candles, too. He felt comfortable.

She picked up a photo. "My kids," she said, smiling. Then she picked up another photo and showed it to him, "Arnold. I miss him." Brian did not know what to say. He nodded solemnly. There was an awkward silence.

"Well, I'm a tea person. I like to relax with a pot after a long day at work. I have lots of tea around. Would you like to share a pot?" she asked.

"Oh, yes, great," he replied. She gestured for him to follow her to the small kitchen. She filled a pot with water and set it on the stove to boil.

"You want to pick one?" She pointed to a shelf filled with various teas.

"I'm not much on teas. They all seem interesting. What would you normally make at this time of night?"

"Oh, this one," she showed him a box covered with Chinese lettering.

"What is it?"

"I can't describe it, but I love it." She prepared the teapot and poured boiling water into it. "It's best when it steeps for a while."

"Okay."

Gloria gestured for Brian to take a chair at the small table. They sat down. She glanced at his left hand and noticed the impression of a missing wedding ring. "You married?"

"Yeah. But I wish I wasn't."

"Why?"

"Neither of us is happy," he confessed. Gloria detected the tone of regret in his voice.

"Oh, I'm sorry."

"We never were. We got along okay, but there's no spark between us."

"You don't love her?"

"I care about her as a person."

"Does she know this?"

"More or less. We've always had a difficult time communicating, even on the smallest things. I assume she knows. It's obvious enough. What about your marriage?"

"We were in love the whole time. I've looked at my friends' marriages and it seems mine was unusual. Nobody seems to be in love anymore."

"It's true." Brian grimaced as if the truth was painful to acknowledge.

"So what are you doing about it?"

"What do you mean?"

"Have you been hoping to meet someone else you could fall in love with?" she asked, trying not to sound like she might be interested.

"Yes, but it never happens. What about you? Are you seeing anyone?"

"No. I've dated a few guys, but they wanted to marry me."

"That was a problem?"

"Yeah. They wanted a wife, or mommy, not a lover. They were nice and all, but I knew I'd be unhappy." She looked at him wondering if she could ask him the question she wanted to ask. He looked puzzled. She was quiet.

"Something wrong?" he asked.

"Yeah. I hope you don't mind, but I'd like to ask you about Gloria as she- I- was back then." A look of surprise crossed his face. He shrugged. "It's just that I don't recall much about myself," she explained. He understood what she meant.

"Well, I don't know when I first noticed you. I think it was in third or fourth grade. You were a new kid in my class. Even though you were a gawky girl, there was something different about you." She grimaced; he smiled.

"I think it was a glow. Where the other girls were just kids, you were something else. I think, in a way, you were already a young woman. As time went by I remember suspecting you knew stuff the rest of us didn't."

"What kind of 'stuff'?" she asked, smirking.

"Well, you have to understand that I didn't know about girls, or dating, or any of that. You seemed to be comfortable with all of it. It was as if you knew how boys and girls related to each other, while the rest of us, especially me, didn't have a clue."

"Are you trying to say 'sex'?"

"No. I had no idea what sex was until much later. Ironically, when I learned about sex I think my attraction to you went away. It was before I found out about sex that I was so hung up on you. And, I knew you into junior high. I can remember when you and George Norcross were going steady."

"George Norcross?"

"You don't remember him? You guys dated for a while. I don't know what grade we were in. I knew him before the two of you got together. But, I stopped being attracted to you. Maybe I just got old enough to realize it was hopeless, so I gave up."

"That's a shame," she remarked quietly. He did not know how she meant that. "You seem kind of nice now, but I don't remember you at all from back then, except for your name."

Gloria did not believe she was the person he described. She assumed he confused her with someone else. Fortunately, (for both of them) the Gloria he remembered still existed deep down inside her. When this childhood Gloria heard herself described, she perked up.

"I'm not surprised. I was the one who was infatuated, not you," he said, grinning.

"But your infatuation lasted a long time, didn't it?" The childhood Gloria was coming back to life.

"Probably five years, at least."

"Oh, my! And I never knew. I guess I should tell you I'm sorry." The young Gloria teased him as she would have teased the boys back then.

"It's about time!" he responded, grinning again.

Young Gloria felt delighted.

"Hey! I meant it," she said, smiling. This was Gloria, the fifty-ish woman.

He decided to tease her a bit more. "You ruined my young life."

"You seem to have gotten over it." Now old Gloria and young Gloria were interacting. Gloria felt a surge of playfulness and self-confidence.

They paused for a few moments and sipped their tea.

"So what about now?" both Glorias asked.

"What do you mean?"

"Since we met a week ago, have you been thinking of me?"

Brian had been thinking of her, but not because she revived his boyhood infatuation. He thought of her because it had been a long time since he met a woman his age that seemed interesting. Which answer was she looking for?

He nodded but didn't say anything.

“Oh, that’s nice.” She paused, looked away from him, then turned and said, “I don’t know if I should say this, but I’ve been thinking of you, too.” Young Gloria smiled. The old lady still had some coquettishness left in her!

Shit! He thought. *How am I supposed to respond to this? Should I stress I’m a moral person and still married, however bad it is? Or does she hope I’ll say what I think she wants me to say, that I’m attracted to her?* Gloria might think he was a pig for betraying his wife. He decided to risk the truth.

“Um, yes, I’ve been thinking of you. I hope you don’t mind.” Her face brightened and she smiled. Inner Gloria gloated. *Yes!*

“I hope you don’t mind. I had to get that out of the way,” she said. He wanted to ask her why. Then he realized this was how the Gloria he knew so long ago would have behaved. She never hesitated to say or do whatever she wanted. “Do you want to sit on the sofa?” He did not answer. She pushed, “What’s wrong?”

“I don’t want to give you the wrong impression; I’m not divorced yet.”

“Brian, your divorce has nothing to do with me.” Her statement shocked her. Inner Gloria felt delighted.

“Okay then.”

“Come sit with me.” Gloria rose from her chair and pulled his arm to get him up. They went into the living room. She gestured for him to sit on the sofa. He squeezed as far into the corner as he could. She grinned and then sat next to him, mere inches between them. He began to perspire.

“Something wrong?” Young Gloria was in control. He did not answer. “This is what you always wanted, isn’t it?” she asked. “To be alone with me?” He started to regret he ever told her about that. She waited for him to reply. “Back then, it was you who wanted this, now it’s me. Or, maybe I should say it’s both of us? By the look in your eyes, I think I can tell how you’re feeling.”

Brian realized she was serious, something he would have never expected when they were in school together. Back then, he feared she would go out with him but then dump him because he was boring or weird. Somehow, he knew that would never happen now.

Brian leaned toward her so they could kiss. It was a sweet, gentle kiss, more like a hello than a lover’s kiss. She put her arms around him. “That wasn’t so bad, now, was it?” He smiled and shook his head. “Good, can we do it again?” This kiss was more passionate. They responded to each other. Their fifty-ish bodies begin to tingle.

They broke the kiss slowly. Gloria sighed. “That’s more like it. You had me worried about all that stuff about being in love with me back in school. I thought you were just making it up. But I felt it in your kiss.” He remained silent and did not even look at her. “What’s wrong?” she asked.

“I was just thinking. If we had done that back in school, I don’t know how I would have reacted. I probably would have gone right into orbit. Maybe never come back down.” She smiled. “I guess I should say thanks,” he added.

She felt flattered he thanked her for merely kissing him. “So you still like me, then?” she asked. He smiled and nodded. “Good; wanna go steady?” He grinned, not sure if she was teasing him. “Great. But now it’s time for you to go home.”

“Sure. It’s late.”

“Uh, that’s not why I’m telling you to go home.” Gloria had noticed the tiny flame that lingered after their second kiss. She didn’t want it to turn into anything more, at least not yet.

“Oh..., well, goodnight, then.” Brian said as he stood up and leaned to kiss her good-bye. She held him a little longer this time, savoring the way he warmed her. Inner Gloria

almost swooned. *It's been a while!* she thought. *Maybe the old girl's ready to have a man again!*

“See you soon?” she whispered. He nodded. “I’ll call you.” *Yup, she’s ready!*