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The first flame burns hottest

For many of us, the love of our youths never turns cold

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Four or five years ago, Frank Bowling posted his e-mail address on Classmates.com, a Web site that allows old school friends to reconnect.

Frank wasn't looking for his old buddies, an ex-lab partner or the guys from his trumpet section.

He did it for just one person, the girl whose photo he still kept in his wallet, that knockout in the bikini from the Mentor High School class of 1967.

He'd thought about Dollie Ortiz, his first love, at least once a week for more than 35 years. He was convinced she had married well and was enjoying a life of happiness.

Still, Frank went ahead and registered at the site. He says now that it was his note in a bottle.

"It was for nobody else," he says. "It was a long shot."

Bowling's attempt at reconnecting with a first love is far from uncommon.

About a third of Classmates.com users surveyed have used the Internet to look up or contact an old boyfriend or girlfriend.

With about 60 million people registered on the site (and 23 million more at rival Reunion.com), it's safe to assume that tens of millions of people are thinking a lot about their old flames, particularly their first flame.

There is something about that first love, says Nancy Kalish, a professor at California State University, Sacramento, who has studied reconnected romances for more than a decade. She's author of "Lost & Found Lovers: Facts and Fantasies of Rekindled Romances."

There is evidence that first loves actually are imprinted in our brains and become almost a cog in our development, like the other sights, smells and songs of our youths, says Kalish.

"That's not true of romances that start later in life," she says.

Frank and Dollie met at a summer get-together in 1965. She smiled at him, and he fell in love on the spot.

They soon became inseparable, in band together, in the same classes, holding hands in the halls. They went on dates, often to the drive-in, "fogging up the windows," says Frank, laughing.

But just before senior year, his stepdad got a job in Nebraska. The Bowlings moved away.

At first, Frank and Dollie kept in touch, sending tearful letters. But then one of his mentioned a girl named Diane he had met.

Dollie went on to college, met a guy and got married.

Frank stayed single.

"I just never met anyone else in life that came close," says Frank, who's now an engineer for Boeing in Seattle. "Nobody else measured up."

It's that sentimentality that drives a lot of us to think about -- and perhaps reconnect with -- first loves, says Lee Robert Schreiber, who tracked down his first flame after 25 years and wrote a book about it, "The One That Got Away."

"You think back to when times were more perfect," Schreiber says. "It's something you want to go back and capture."

Whether or not that can be done depends on the situation, says Kalish.

For rekindled love to work, the original relationship had to be strong.

"If it didn't work then, it won't work now," she says.

The chances get better, she says, if the lovers were split because of reasons beyond their control: disapproving parents, college, military service.

Or a move to Nebraska.

Dollie's marriage lasted less than two years. She later married again, only to have her second husband leave her for a younger woman when the children were still in diapers.

She settled into a difficult life as a single mom but never forgot Frank.

"I had kept his poetry all those years, and every once in a while I'd go back and read it," she says. "That was the standard by which I measured love."

In October 2004, Dollie heard a radio advertisement for Classmates.com and says she felt a strange urge to log on.

Often, an emotional life event -- a death or illness, a divorce, a significant birthday -- sends us in search of that first love, says Kalish.

Sometimes folks might just want to say hello.

With the Internet, it's so easy.

So easy and so dangerous.

Frank and Dollie were both single, so there was no problem if things heated up. People in committed relationships who make contact with a first love don't realize they're playing with the passion and intensity of the hottest flame around.

"If you're not willing to leave your marriage right now, there should be no contact," Kalish says. "The strength is incredible. People will leave spouses, drop careers, close their businesses, lose their status in the community. They will give it all up. Their kids will hate them. They don't care. They'll do it."

Dollie logged on to the site at work.

"As soon as I saw his name on there," she says, "my eyes did one of those ahhhwooooga kind of things."

They began exchanging e-mails, letters, phone calls. He flew to Cleveland on Valentine's Day last year for a reunion.

He stumbled on the escalator when he saw her.

"We smiled, our eyes met, and it was just like all those years melted away," says Dollie. "We ran into each other's arms, and I jumped on one of those baggage-claim things so I could kiss him because he's about a foot taller. We kissed for a long time."

By late April, Dollie had left Cleveland and moved in with Frank in suburban Seattle.

They were married in July.

"It's like we are hard-wired to love each other," she says.

And is it the same?

"It's like coming home," says Frank. "We're very happy. We just look a little older, that's all. We're the same inside."

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