

## Another Coffee Shop Confessional

by Scott Cimarusti

for Christine

“So what do you think?” She could actually hear the smirk in his voice as he stood up and spread his arms wide in sweeping gesture. And for a moment, he looked and sounded like he used to when they first became friends so many years ago.

She couldn't help but smile in return. Not so much about his comically exaggerated showing off of the diner that he had invited her to, but rather in response to seeing the glimmer of simple joy on his face—a once familiar smile of the purest glee; notably seldom seen by her anymore.

“It's just what I expected,” she replied through a giggle, moving in for the customary hug. And she noted that he again held her just a little tighter and a little longer than he used to—not lecherously, of course, but more like a drowning man clinging to his lifeguard rescuer.

She let him pull away and resume his seat in the corner booth while she set down her purse and shrugged out of her coat. She took the opportunity to actually survey the coffee shop that he'd described to her as his regular hangout.

It looked like it had been designed and built during the period of the eighties when fifties- and sixties-era nostalgia had been in vogue. There were about a dozen booths lining the one side and curving around the back, all upholstered in what had once probably been a soothing shade of mint-green. On the opposite side of the diner was, of course, the obligatory counter with a half-dozen matching vinyl-seated stools standing at attention. On the wall behind the counter were advertisements from the heyday of when the corner diner had been a common sight. She could imagine there was a time—probably back in that lost decade of the eighties, when the two of them had first become friends—when this coffee shop had been just the right amount of kitschy to be charming. Now, however, the yellowing formica-topped tables and counter and the dingy and listless chrome were all glaring reminders of the passage of time, and how the years eventually dull the shine from everything.

Including old friends and their smiles.

She had just settled into the seat across from him with a groan of vinyl when a waitress in a washed-out green uniform approached their booth.

“Coffee?” the waitress rasped in lieu of an even perfunctory greeting. She was brandishing the half-empty coffee pot as if it were a weapon and glaring with rheumy eyes from a prematurely wrinkled and life-weary face that seemed almost ageless.

Across the table he was sipping mud-colored swill that was presumably coffee from a cracked and yellowed porcelain cup.

“I’ll just have a glass of water,” she replied to the waitress.

The waitress’s expression as unvarying as if she were sculpted from stone, she departed from view to return with a red-tinted pebbled plastic glass pre-filled with water and crushed ice.

“Anything else?” The waitress barked.

He gestured with his coffee cup. “Top me off, please?”

The waitress leveled her blank stare at him before begrudgingly fetching the coffee pot to oblige him.

“Thank you,” he offered with his now customary manufactured smile.

The waitress withdrew again, and the two old friends found themselves alone.

“So how long are you in town for?” She asked.

“Just long enough,” he replied with a weary sigh. “How are the kids?”

She beamed as she always did when discussing her children. “Good... One going into middle school, the other into high school. Hard to believe...” Her voice trailed off thoughtfully. “And yours?”

He sipped from his coffee, suppressing a wince at either the bitterness or the temperature—maybe both. “They’re good. Got a wedding coming up at some point—as soon as she and her fiancé find the time to plan it. Then I have one more finishing up college, and the last one’s almost done with high school.”

She shook her head in good-natured disbelief and took a sip of her water. “Hard to believe,” she repeated.

He managed a wan smile. “Indeed.”

An awkward silence threatened like gathering summer thunderheads—which would have been a rarity once upon time. She could remember when they never seemed to run out of things to talk about—and to laugh about. She opened her mouth to dispel those storm clouds, when he beat her to it.

“And your better half? How’s he?”

She chuckled. “I thought I was *his* better half...”

He nodded, fixing her with his deep-set eyes—which were uncharacteristically serious-looking; it wasn’t a look that suited him, in her opinion.

“You are,” he admitted, conjuring up a wan smile. “But we can’t let you get too confident with that.”

She laughed again. “God no.”

He raised his eyebrows expectantly, waiting for her answer.

“He’s good...” She suddenly felt self-conscious discussing her husband—though she didn’t know why. “He’s been working a lot, same as me. It seems like we only see each other as we’re passing each other on our way to work.”

He set down his cup in its saucer with an audible clink. “That’s not good... You have to make time for each other. Make each other a priority—even if it’s just to sit and watch an episode of TV together. Now that the kids are older and doing their own thing, you have to.”

“I know...” She acquiesced. “But sometimes that’s easier said than done.”

He nodded. “I know it is.” Then he fixed her with that serious stare that somehow transformed him into a stranger to her. “But you still need to. Trust me—I’m an expert at how a marriage can fail.”

She lowered her gaze, pretending to study her glass of water; feeling admonished. “I know. I will.”

Seemingly satisfied with her response, he leaned back in the booth with an audible grumble of vinyl.

“So did you bring it?”

She could feel the color rise in her cheeks, as if she should feel guilty about the item in question. She supposed she did feel a little guilty. She probably shouldn’t have kept such a thing—it was the only secret she’d kept from her husband after almost two decades of marriage. But for whatever reason, she couldn’t bring herself to throw it away. Especially after having kept it for over three decades.

She forced herself to meet his gaze, unable to suppress a sheepish smile. “I did. Just as you asked.”

He nodded appreciatively without smiling. “Can I see it?”

She continued to stare back at him for the briefest of moments before retrieving her purse on the seat next to her and fishing out a wrinkled and dog-eared envelope. She slid the envelope across the scuffed formica tabletop toward him.

He didn't reach for the envelope right away, though—opting instead to lower his gaze and stare transfixed at it with an odd mix of veneration and incredulity. It was almost as if the envelope held him in a trance.

He tilted his head quizzically, a hint of a distant smile curling the corners of his mouth almost imperceptibly.

“It's almost like a time machine, isn't it?” He ventured, his tone almost reverential, as if he were referring to a historical document like the Magna Carta or the Declaration of Independence. “This is a relic from a very specific time in both of our lives, you realize,” he mused, his eyes becoming even more distant. “A pivotal time. A time from which we have little else—if anything; except for fragments of memories...”

She wanted to laugh or something to dispel the uncharacteristically somber fog that was coalescing around them—but she didn't think she could have mustered even an obligatory chuckle. Nor would she have dared. For she suspected that he might not have taken too kindly to such a reaction from her.

He swallowed audibly, raising his gaze to hers. “You do remember, don't you?”

There was an earnestness in his eyes that she hadn't seen in more than a decade. She met his gaze and dared herself to hold it. “I do.”

Seemingly having found the affirmation he was looking for, he finally reached across the table and slid the envelope toward him with a whisper. He gently wedged a thumb under the unsealed flap and withdrew the five folded sheets of notebook paper.

She watched his eyes rove over the lines of his own handwriting—block printing back in those days, a holdover from when he was an aspiring artist. She felt a twinge in her chest upon seeing the raw emotions scrolling across his face as he flipped from one rumpled page to the next. She couldn't recall seeing him react that way to anything in recent memory.

It was almost as if she were seeing him as he once was, back when she first knew him when they were both naïve teenagers on the threshold of adulthood.

Maybe he had a point about the contents of that envelope being something akin to a time machine.

She felt a lump rise in her throat.

She watched him linger on the last page, sipping her water for lack of anything else to do. Then he gently restored the pages in numerical order and slipped them back into the envelope, tucking the flap inside without sealing it—just as it was when he took it from her. Then he slid it back across the table toward her. She could tell from his expression that his mind was working in overdrive—she'd observed that look many times over the years, and she knew it would only be a matter of time before he would voice at least some of what he was thinking. But she also knew that whatever he would say was only the tip of the iceberg of what he was thinking.

Another awkward silence was quickly congealing between them—broken only by the incessant buzzing of the neon clock behind the counter, and the distant rattling of dishes back in the kitchen. She was a little surprised to discover that the waitress was nowhere to be seen; nor were there any other patrons in the diner at the moment.

“You should get rid of that,” he proclaimed, finally, almost startling her.

She arched an eyebrow at him, setting down her glass. Of all the things she'd expected him to say, that was not among them.

An abrupt chuckle of bewilderment escaped her lips before she could stop it. She quickly followed it with, “Why?”

He sipped from his coffee, his eyes flat and unreadable. “Why keep it?”

She blinked at him in disbelief. “Because...” she searched for the words. “Because it was a very sweet and heartfelt letter written by you.” *Back when you had feelings*, she wanted to add, but quickly reconsidered.

He was studying her intently as if he had read her mind about the unfinished thought. Then he shrugged dismissively. “Be that as it may,” he added matter-of-factly, “I still don't see any justification for keeping it. Especially since if it were ever discovered, you'd have some explaining to do. It doesn't seem worth the potential risk.” He paused before continuing as if waiting for her to respond. “You were obviously too smart to take me up on my offer in that letter, so why keep it?”

Her eyes narrowed. “What do you mean, I was ‘too smart?’”

He drained his coffee cup and set it down. “You don't agree?”

She could feel her temper starting to simmer. “It wasn't that I was ‘too smart’... You know what my reasons were—we've talked about this...”

He nodded. “We have... But that doesn’t mean I still can’t have my own take on it, regardless.”

She was shaking her head in disbelief, trying to keep her tongue under control. Then she sat back, her arms folded, one eyebrow arched. “You blame me, don’t you?”

He quickly averted his eyes. “Blame you for what?”

“Are you going to make me say it?”

“I’m afraid you’re going to have to.”

She took a deep measured breath. “You blame me for your failed marriage and everything else that’s happened since.”

He snorted derisively. “Why would you say that?”

“You do,” she quickly added, the hint of a victorious smile curling her lips. “You think that if I had taken you up on your offer in that letter, your life would have turned out much different.”

He shrugged. “Don’t you think it would have?”

“That’s not the point,” she countered.

“So what *is* the point?” He demanded.

“The point *is*...” she strained to keep her voice even. “Maybe you can’t admit it to yourself—or maybe you just refuse to. But you know just as well as I do that things might not have worked out between us, either. Did you ever consider that? And then what?” She alternated between pointing at him and herself. “The we wouldn’t even have this—whatever ‘this’ is anymore. Is that what you would have wanted?”

He was shaking his head emphatically. “Of course not. But, do you *really* think that anything would have come between us?”

“Who knows?” she almost shouted. “There are no guarantees about anything! That was why I did what I did way back then—I just couldn’t take that chance!” She lowered her voice, fixing him with her eyes. “Back then, the thought of us potentially someday hating each other was unthinkable to me.” She sighed. “It still is.”

He sighed, too, in response, and she could hear the weariness in it. “I still think it would have at least been worth a shot.” He lowered his eyes. “It just feels like such a wasted opportunity.” She could see his jaw tighten. “All those years just gone with nothing to show for it... Years we’ll never get back...”

A myriad responses danced on the tip of her tongue, but she didn't have the heart to voice any of them. She knew he understood on some level that she had a point—he just wasn't in the right mindset to admit it to her or to himself, even. He wanted someone or something to blame to try to make some sense of how things didn't work out the way he'd wanted or planned.

He finally raised his eyes to meet hers, and she was a little shocked and more saddened to see them glistening with brimming tears. "We could have been one of those couples celebrating our fiftieth anniversary, you know..."

She swallowed back the rising lump in her throat and nodded, feeling the sting of imminent tears in her own eyes.

His eyes narrowed and he forced a smile. "I would have treated you like gold, you know. Everything I did and tried to do for her, I would have done the same for you. And then some."

She smiled in return. "I know."

Another silence fell between them—though not an entirely awkward one.

He made a show of looking at his watch. "Wow—I can't believe how late it is already. I should probably be going."

She tried to mask her disappointment. "I guess I should, too, then."

He dug in his wallet for a few bills to toss on the table while she stood up and shrugged into her coat. She waited in silence while he put on his coat, and then she led the way out of the diner, holding the door for him.

The cacophony of city noises greeted them as soon as they both stepped outside; the steady hum of traffic, the constant hiss of tires on the wet pavement; the occasional angry blare of a horn. She had taken a few steps in the direction toward her car, assuming he'd follow, when she realized he had hung back beneath the shadow of the diner's awning. The neon signs in the window cast harsh shadows on his face, making him look even older and wearier.

He was staring at her, his hands stuffed in his pockets, clearly struggling to find the words he was looking for. Then, just barely audible over the street noise, she could hear him say:

"I'm sorry."

She ran back to him and took him in her arms. He wrapped his arms around her, cradling her head with one hand, which always made her feel safe and protected, for some reason.

"You keep that letter," he whispered. "Please."

She gently pulled away and fished the letter out of her purse and offered it to him. “Why don’t you take it?”

He raised his hands in refusal and shook his head emphatically. “No.”

“But—”

“No,” he repeated. “I wrote that for you. I’d never written a letter like that before—and haven’t since.” He offered her an earnest smile. “And I’m pretty sure I never will again.”

She stared at him for a few more heartbeats before replacing the letter back in her purse and taking him in another hug.

“I just don’t want it to ever cause any trouble for you,” he added.

She shook her head insistently against his chest. “It won’t. I’ll make sure.”

The two friends embraced in silence, and for the briefest of moments, they were both transported back through the decades to when they first were friends, teenagers trying to navigate the uncertainty of adolescence and make some sense of the complex cauldron of the feelings they had for each other.

And after what seemed like nowhere near enough time, they both broke their embrace.

And they kissed.

Not as friends or as lovers, but in a way completely unique to just the two of them.

After the kiss, they held each other’s hands and found the understanding in each other’s eyes that was always there—though sometimes harder to find.

And without another spoken word, the two friends turned and went their separate ways.

For now.