

Coffee Shop Confessional

By Scott Cimarusti

It was just before midnight, a light snow starting to fall, the delicate flakes wafting down from the velvet sky like confetti outside my office window. I had been working late to meet a deadline when I decided I needed a change of scenery, and my eyes needed a respite from staring at the stark bluish-white glow of my computer monitor.

I locked my office door, rode the elevator down to the lobby alone for the first time in recent memory, shouldered my way through the revolving door, and started walking with no direction or destination in mind. The night breeze tousled my hair off my forehead, and the shoulders of my gray overcoat were soon dusted with virgin snowflakes. My footfalls were almost completely drowned out by the hum of the traffic beside me as the endless parade of vehicles—even at this hour—hissed through the melting snow on the asphalt labyrinth.

I walked past many other fellow pedestrians, their heads lowered against the wind and snow, each bent on his or her respective destination. And I was reminded of one of the city's many peculiar dichotomies: you were never really alone in the city, it seemed, but that didn't mean you could never be lonely. Quite the contrary, in fact; it was among the countless faces of strangers where a person could lose his or her identity and feel the most isolated. And right now, I was feeling that loneliness—even though I had just spoken to my wife an hour before when she called to see how my article was going, to find out when I would be home, and to say goodnight. Maybe it was the sound of her voice through the phone instead of in person, knowing that I should have been home with her in bed, her head cradled between my neck and shoulder as I listened to the steady, soothing cadence of her breathing and feeling the gentle and rhythmic rise and fall of her chest against me. But here I was instead, working late yet again, and out among the brotherhood of strangers.

As I said, I had no particular destination in mind, but I soon found myself standing outside a coffee shop around the corner from my office building. Through the windows, I could see a few customers inside. The neon sign above the door was still aglow and buzzing, the stylized blue crescent moon lazily reclining in a white coffee cup, and the words "Blue Moon Café" in a curvy, roaring-Twenties-style font—all wrought of neon. A cup of coffee would be just the thing to help me focus on my rapidly approaching nine a.m. deadline.

I had never been inside the Blue Moon Café before—though I must have passed by it countless times. With a jingling bell to announce my arrival, I was relieved to find the place to be what I could only describe as an "anti-Starbucks". There was no trendy jazz playing, no strategically-placed over-priced mints or bags of beans for sale—it was just an old-fashioned coffee shop: plain, simple, non-pretentious, and clean; a breed on the verge of extinction.

The gleaming white Formica counter that ran along the right-hand wall was spotless, the chrome stools flanking it were polished to a museum-like shine, the periwinkle upholstery also meticulously cared for. Across the narrow aisle from the counter was a row of booths, upholstered with the same pale blue vinyl, and curving around the corner opposite the door all the way to an alcove where the doors to the restrooms were, a payphone mounted to the wall between them.

Out of habit, I made for the corner booth—for some reason I can't explain, I always need to sit with an unobstructed view of the door in any restaurant or bar. As I dusted the snow from my coat and smoothed the hair off my forehead, I passed an elderly man with a shock of wild white hair hunched over the counter and swallowing forkfuls of pie as he thumbed through a newspaper, his reading glasses perched on the end of a red and rather bulbous nose. In the booth directly behind him, a tired-looking man in his mid-forties, still dressed in a suit and tie—which probably looked crisper and better-pressed twelve hours ago—rubbed his eyes wearily and scanned through a pile of paperwork between sips of coffee. In the back corner, in the booth closest to the restrooms, was a young couple in their twenties, dressed in the latest hip-hop fashion and regarding each other with casual disinterest.

I settled into the corner booth with a creak of vinyl and was immediately greeted by a friendly smile from a waitress wearing an apron the same color as the booth's upholstery. She was probably in her mid- to late fifties, her hair almost completely silver, but something about her demeanor—in spite of the late hour—made her seem younger; her blue-gray eyes almost twinkled.

"Welcome to the Blue Moon—what can I getcha?"

I noticed a slight southern-twang in her voice, and briefly wondered how her journey through life had directed her here. "Just coffee," I replied. "Black."

Her smile widening, she gestured with her pen toward the menu propped atop the napkin holder. "Well, if you get hungry, we have a great selection of desserts and pies."

I nodded amiably. “Just coffee for now—thanks.”

And with a swish of her blue apron, she was back in a heartbeat, a gleaming cup and saucer balanced in one hand, and a piping hot carafe of coffee in the other. She very deftly placed the cup before me and filled it without spilling a drop.

“Gimme a holler when you need a refill, hon.”

I smiled at the casual term of endearment. “Will do. Thanks.”

I watched her retreat back behind the counter then turned my attention outside the window of my booth. The disparity of the light inside the Blue Moon Café versus the darkness outside made the window a smoky mirror, revealing my own weary reflection. I met my own shadow-shrouded deep-set eyes, noting more than a few strands of silver in my windswept hair, my long, sloping nose, and my angular jawline peppered with more beard stubble than I typically permitted.

Looking past my reflection, I immersed myself in one of my favorite hobbies: people-watching. With my hands hovering above the steaming mug of coffee to warm them, I scrutinized my subjects outside with the same intensity as Jane Goodall had studied her apes. Several minutes must have passed before I actually took a sip of the coffee, and as I did, I heard the bell above the door announce the arrival of another customer to the Blue Moon Café.

I was glad I had swallowed the mouthful of coffee before I looked up to observe the newest late-night patron; otherwise, I might have choked.

Standing just inside the door, dressed in a beige overcoat and rubbing her hands together—blowing into them to warm them—was a familiar face that I hadn’t seen in well over a decade.

I blinked vigorously to clear what I initially perceived to be a hallucination brought on by fatigue from the late hour and eyestrain from too much time spent in front of my computer, but my vision proved to be as reliable as ever.

For some reason, I could feel my heart begin to race, and I quickly averted my eyes, hastily grabbing the menu and pretending to study it. I still watched her, though, stealing an occasional glance to do so, marveling at how little had changed about her. My gaze was immediately drawn to was her bright green eyes; still as wide, inquisitive, and expressive as I remembered them—the windows to her soul, I used to call them. I could remember a time when I used to drown in them.

She unwound a thick, woolen burgundy scarf from around her slender neck and lowered the hood on her overcoat, shaking the light dusting of snowflakes from her auburn hair, which she still kept long, but straighter now—more natural looking than I remembered. As she approached my booth, I quickly lowered my head to avoid eye contact. Out of the corner of my eye, I watched her take the booth one away from mine, shedding her coat and scarf as she did so.

The silver-haired waitress greeted the Blue Moon’s newest customer with the same efficiency and pleasant manner as she had shown me. I watched as the night’s most intimate stranger folded her arms, leaning her elbows on the table as she did so, and politely asked for a cup of tea with a wedge of lemon. And I couldn’t help but smile at the familiarity of her request.

I took a sip from my coffee, still trying to keep my face concealed for some reason that I didn’t quite understand. After all, what would the harm be if she did get a look at me? She probably wouldn’t even recognize me anyway after all these years.

Then I heard a familiar voice call my name.

My Pavlovian response was to raise my head in the direction of the voice that hailed me.

And I found myself staring straight into those eyes that I never expected to see again.

I swallowed against a quick and powerful wave of icy water rising in my chest, drowning my heart in bittersweet melancholy. Feeling the gooseflesh rise on my arms, I managed a wan smile and greeted her by name.

She raised an awestruck hand to cover the wide “O” of her mouth. “Oh, my God, it really is you.”

Still reeling from the flood of long-dormant emotions and the rapid blur of memories like a slideshow, I nodded slowly.

Our reunion was briefly interrupted by the waitress returning with the requested cup of tea and wedge of lemon on the saucer. Once the periwinkle apron and silver hair were out of sight, those familiar green eyes found me again. “My, God...” she was shaking her head in disbelief. “How long has it been?”

I shrugged absently. “Since college. Almost thirteen years now.”

She squeezed lemon juice into her tea and stirred it thoughtfully. “Thirteen years...” Her voice trailed off with a wry chuckle.

I reached for my coffee, my one anchor in reality now, and took a long sip. “So...how have you been?”

She didn’t respond right away; her eyes were distant and thoughtful. I could almost see her shake herself from her reverie. “Good...good... Busy. You?”

“Not too bad...”

Our eyes met again, and an awkward silence loomed between us like gathering storm clouds. Then her face suddenly broke into a familiar smile; a smile that at one time could render me a helpless servant to her bidding—not that I used to mind all that much. She chuckled.

“Would you mind if I—” she blurted out before cutting herself off by shielding her eyes with one hand. “I can’t believe this—this is so bizarre. Never mind—forget it.”

As if reading her mind—an ability that I once boasted—my voice had become a runaway horse, voicing her incomplete thought before my rational mind could rein it in. “Would you like to join me?”

Keeping her eyes averted, she quickly snatched her coat and scarf in one hand and her cup of tea in the other, and had taken the seat across from me in my booth before I could take a second breath. It was almost as if she had deliberately moved with such speed before she could talk herself out of it. Once settled, she met my gaze again, and I noted the flush in her cheeks.

“So...what have you been up to the past thirteen years?” I said, matter-of-factly.

She looked at me blankly with complete bewilderment, then we both collapsed into a fit of nervous—but genuine—laughter. Once it subsided, we both took a sip from our drinks and sighed audibly—almost in unison, causing another bout of the giggles.

“Why is this so awkward?” She asked.

I shook my head, smiling. “I don’t know.”

She arched an eyebrow. “It shouldn’t be.”

“No, it really shouldn’t.” I felt as if an unseen puppeteer were controlling my movements. I also heard my voice say, “You look great.”

She tilted her head slightly to one side, her customary response to either flattery or curiosity, I remembered—though in this case, it might have been either. “Thank you—so do you.”

I took another sip of my coffee. “So what *have* you been up to—seriously?”

She took a deep breath—like a diver before the plunge into the water—and proceeded to give me the Cliff’s Notes version of the past thirteen years of her life since she and I last saw each other.

After college, she put her advertising degree to work and got a job with one of the city’s more notable agencies. She got burned out quickly, though, and after a few years, wound up going back to school at night—law school, I was surprised to learn, since when I knew her, she had never been shy about voicing her distaste for that profession. Once she got her degree and passed the bar, she wound up starting her own practice, specializing in representing those who couldn’t afford legal counsel—unwed mothers, the elderly—which was right in line with her crusade to save the world one person at a time that I remembered about her. She mentioned having a few serious relationships over the years—not too many, and none of them resulting in marriage or children. But she punctuated her account by raising her left hand and displaying an engagement ring.

My eyes widened in disbelief—though I’m not sure why—but I was able to mask my surprise with a sincere congratulations.

She withdrew her hand quickly, awkwardly, as if almost a third of our lives hadn’t passed since we last spoke, and she was breaking this news to me shortly after our break-up.

“Sounds like things are going well for you—I’m glad to hear it,” I offered, prompting another expectant silence.

“So what about you?” she asked. “What have *you* been up to?”

I shrugged nonchalantly and summarized the past several years, ending with my job at the magazine where my impending deadline still awaited me.

She took a sip of her tea with a sly smile, her eyes gesturing toward my left hand. “And that?”

I followed her gaze and after a heartbeat, understood the reference.

“Yeah, I’m married. It’ll be three years this October.”

“Any kids?”

“Not yet.”

“Soon?”

“We’ll see.”

She set her cup down in the saucer with a musical clink. “Well, that’s good. I’m very happy for you. She must be very special.”

I nodded slowly, making a point to hold her gaze. “She is.”

“So what brings you out on a night like this, then, at this hour?”

I ignored the perceived implication. “I was working late on an article, when I decided I needed a break.” I traced the handle of my coffee cup with my finger. “What about you? Leave the fiancé at home tonight?”

She tilted her head slightly to the side again. “Couldn’t sleep. Decided to go for a walk.”

“So you live around here?”

“About four blocks away.”

A chuckle of disbelief had escaped my lips before I could suppress it. After all this time and all the growing distance between us, she and I still wound up being so close geographically.

She regarded me quizzically. “What’s so funny?”

“Nothing,” I lied. “It’s just that I still can’t believe I ran into you—I never come in here.”

“Me neither.” She opened her mouth to add something else then promptly closed it, pretending to stir her tea. I didn’t press her on it.

Yet another brooding silence had settled over us, like a suffocating flannel blanket. The real question I wanted to ask was hovering on my lips, and had been ever since she sat down across from me—after all, how often is one afforded the opportunity to reunite with an old flame and ask those nagging questions we almost never get answers to?

I was getting ready to give voice to one of these questions, when—as if it was her turn to read my mind—she asked it instead.

“So do you ever think about me—us? Reminisce about the past?”

She had fixed me with her piercing emerald eyes, and I suddenly felt like a criminal pulling a jailbreak in an old black and white prison movie, caught in the guard tower spotlight while the siren wails in the background. I was initially taken aback by the bluntness of her question—not to mention the fact that I had been considering asking her the very same thing.

She quickly lowered her eyes. “Never mind—you don’t have to answer that. Forget I ever said—”

“Sometimes,” I interrupted. “Do you?”

I could tell by her eyes that she appeared to be considering the implications of her answer. “Sometimes,” she admitted.

We each continued to stare into our respective drinks, avoiding each other’s eyes.

“That’s OK, isn’t it?” I heard her ask.

I looked up. “I think it is.”

She met my eyes and smiled wanly. “It was all such a long time ago,” she repeated.

“Indeed it was.”

Her hand suddenly darted across the table like a lunging cobra, and she gave my free hand a gentle squeeze. “I’m glad things turned out OK for you.”

As if our hands touching completed some electrical circuit, I felt a strange jolt, followed by another flood of faded memories and strangely familiar emotions. There was one more question I needed to ask her—and I knew I would never get another chance to do so, so I plunged ahead, hoping she didn’t hear the unsteadiness in my voice.

“Do you remember, toward the end of our...relationship... You told me that you wished you could have met me later in life?”

Her eyes grew wide, and I thought I could see them shimmer ever so slightly. “Yes.”

I cleared my throat, fixing her with a firm stare. “I’ve always wondered what you meant by that.”

It might have been my imagination—or a twinge of vengeful wishful thinking that I’m not particularly proud of—but I thought I saw her lower lip quiver slightly before she lowered her head. “When you and I were...together...I wasn’t quite ready for...” She appeared to be searching for the right words, and not having much luck.

“A commitment?” I interjected, sounding a little harsher than I had intended.

To her credit, she ignored my unwarranted jab, and continued to find her voice. “I wasn’t ready to forfeit control to someone else.”

“I never asked that of you.”

She nodded, her hair a copper-colored veil before her eyes. I think she may have been on the brink of tears. “I know. And I know how much I hurt you when I left.”

I let her words hang for a heartbeat or two. “It doesn’t matter. As you said, that was a long time ago. I shouldn’t have asked you that.”

“No,” she replied. “It’s OK. You deserve an answer—even after all these years.” She raised her head, sweeping her hair back, her vibrant eyes locking with mine. “The truth is my feelings for you at that time scared me.”

My eyes must have widened in surprise because she chuckled softly as she continued.

“Yes, me: Miss Confident-And-Independent-Modern-Woman. I had never felt anything close to that before, and it scared me.” She pretended to study her hands as they fidgeted nervously in her lap. “We were just about to graduate, and I was so hell-bent on not winding up like my mother, that I was afraid what would happen if I...surrendered myself to you.”

I hadn't expected such a display of naked emotion from her. I don't think she ever opened up that way to me the whole time we were together—it was a little unsettling. “You should have known me better than that... I would have never asked anything of you that you weren't willing to give.”

She smiled wanly. “I know that now. I learned that in the years afterward—when I met guys who were more...demanding than you were.”

Hearing this admission from her should have brought me some sense of vindication—of closure. Strangely, there was none. Her long overdue confession proved to be a hollow victory. Especially upon hearing her next words.

“Sometimes I wish you would have fought harder for me.”

I recoiled as if slapped. “What do you mean?”

“If you cared for me so much, why did you let me go so easily?”

I could feel a quick surge of unresolved anger that had spent a good deal of time restrained by a thick, albeit rusted, chain—the strength of which had not been tested in a very long time.

“What was I supposed to do?” I asked, making a concerted effort to keep my tone even. “You made it clear that you wanted to move on. I couldn't very well force you to stay with me.”

“No,” she admitted. “But you could have been a little more aggressive in letting me know how you felt.”

I threw up my hands. “You knew how I felt—how could you not? I figured your mind was already made up. Besides...” I could hear the chill creeping into my voice, and made no attempt to conceal it. “I felt I had to salvage what little of my pride still remained.”

I realized at this point that some emotional scars, no matter how old and seemingly healed, can still bleed all too readily to a familiar blade.

“Besides,” I continued, “Would it have made that much of a difference anyway?”

She sighed heavily, and I could read the regret in her eyes. “I don't know. It's hard to say now, thirteen years later and a lifetime ago.”

It dawned on me, then, just how surreal this night was. What were the odds of me working late this particular night, deciding to take a break at the time that I did, *and* choosing this particular coffee shop—at almost exactly the same time that a lost love from my past that I hadn't seen in over a decade chose the same place for a cup of tea? It was dizzying to contemplate.

The renewed silence between us was rapidly solidifying like drying concrete.

“We sure had something special, though, didn't we?” I blurted out suddenly, surprising even myself.

She smiled, her eyes glistening. “Yeah, we sure did.”

I made a show of looking at my watch, unable to conceal my shock at discovering that it was now almost one o'clock.

“I don't mean to be rude, but I really should get back to work—I have a nine a.m. deadline that won't wait.”

I thought I saw a flash of disappointment in her eyes—again, probably wishful thinking. “No, I understand—I know how that is.” She began gathering her coat and scarf. “I should get back home, too—I didn't realize how late it was.”

As she stood up, she began fumbling through her purse, presumably for her wallet, but was unable to locate it. I couldn't help but smile; even after so many years, some things—like her inability to keep her purse organized—never changed.

I stopped her with an upraised hand. “Don't worry about it, I got it.” I fished for my wallet, tossed a ten dollar bill on the table, and began to walk away.

She looked at me, surprised. “Isn't that a bit much for a cup of coffee and a cup of tea?”

I considered this for a moment. “It was a bit more than that.” I continued toward the door while she shrugged into her coat and followed me out.

We both stopped just outside the door to the Blue Moon Café, the neon sign overhead casting an ethereal bluish glow to our immediate surroundings and the light snow still falling. The parked cars lining both sides of the street like slumbering beasts were dusted with a fine blanket of snow, as were the street signs and the trees. I followed the progress of some of our midnight brethren as they continued toward their destinations. And, after the unexpected reunion I had just stumbled upon, I couldn't help but wonder what strange twists of fate each of them might be experiencing this night.

I turned back to find those familiar green eyes searching mine again, staring at me expectantly. Even though I had no cause to, I felt a sudden pang of guilt and I began to fidget nervously, searching for something else to say.

Finally, I came up with, “Good luck with the wedding and everything. I'm sure your marriage will be a happy one.”

She smiled. “Thank you. Good luck to you, too—with...everything...” she stammered.

I stuffed my hands in my pockets, for lack of anything else to do, watching the frosty plumes of my breath evaporating. “So, what do we do now, exchange e-mail addresses or something? Send each other Christmas cards?”

Now it was her turn to inspect our surroundings, her eyes reflecting that her mind was working. “No,” she replied. “I don’t think so.”

I nodded agreeably. “Fair enough. So I guess this is good-bye...” I swallowed hard. “...Again.”

A long pause. “I guess so.”

I shrugged. “Well, then, take care of yourself.” I extended a hand awkwardly, as if I were greeting a stranger.

She took my hand in hers and lightly shook it. “You, too.”

I felt like I should say something else and I hesitated, but before my own tongue could betray me, I sped past her.

Something made me pause, though, and I turned around. She was still standing there, watching me, a blue halo around her head from the Blue Moon’s neon sign above.

Then we both rushed toward each other and embraced.

It was a gesture of desperation, more than anything else; two drowning victims clinging to the other in a desperate attempt to stay afloat in an attempt to relive—if only for a moment—a shared bittersweet memory from the past.

We stood there in each other’s arms for several minutes without speaking, our fellow nightly travelers—both on foot and on wheels—oblivious to this unexpected and long overdue reunion. I quickly found the familiarity of the embrace a little disconcerting, a little too familiar, considering how much time had passed since the last time we had held each other. The familiar scents of her hair and her perfume were almost intoxicating as more old memories were conjured up like a waking dream. In fact, that would have been an accurate description of the entire encounter: a waking dream.

We both broke the embrace simultaneously, the urge to punctuate it with a kiss almost too strong and familiar to ignore—again, even after all the years that had passed. But we both caught ourselves in time, and instead of either of us surrendering to that impulse, we both turned and headed off in our respective opposite directions.

Surprisingly, it was almost half a block before I couldn’t resist the urge to turn around any longer.

She, too, had walked about the same distance, and was now standing there, facing me. And even though I could only make out her silhouette through the curtain of cascading snowflakes, I could still feel our gazes locked.

We continued to stand like that for several more minutes before we both turned and walked away—out of each other’s lives once again.

And as I walked back to my office, feeling colder and lonelier now than before, I couldn’t help but wonder just how much of our lives are determined by choice, or by choices we are forced to make, based on the choices of others.

I reached my office building before I realized it, my gloved hand clenching the main lobby door handle.

But I didn’t open the door.

I continued to stand there, my mind racing through a flurry of memories, sifting through old feelings and emotions, in an attempt to find something resembling sense and order to them all. And through it all, one word kept coming back to me.

Choice.

I released the door handle from my grip and headed back toward the street, hailing the first cab I saw.

Tonight I would make the right choice.

The deadline for my article could wait; but there were other deadlines that shouldn’t be missed.

Less than a half an hour later, I was lying beside my wife, listening to the steady rhythm of her breathing and watching the snowfall through our bedroom window blinds.

And that’s how I fell asleep, savoring a fleeting moment that I would have otherwise missed, had it not been for my encounter at the Blue Moon Café.