

Windy City Nocturne: A Sonata in Prose

By Scott Cimarusti

Introduction: Adagio

The nights are the worst. Any addict will tell you that.

Alone with your addiction as the minutes tick by; an endless parade of seconds, minutes and hours...your only companions the sound of your own breathing and the gnawing craving for whatever it is you desperately want but cannot have.

The daytime, at least, affords myriad distractions—however ineffective they may be at keeping your mind occupied. At least they offer the *possibility* of relief—even if that relief remains as stubbornly elusive as whatever it is you are addicted to.

But in the darkness and solitude of the night... That's when things seem to be at their most bleak and hopeless. When even the promise of the sunrise, and the accomplishment of having made it through yet another night, offers little solace. Because you know—after what feels like far too little time—you will find yourself in the exact same place and predicament twenty-four hours later, and even more despondent—which you could have never thought possible, even twenty-four hours ago.

Whether it's alcohol, drugs, cigarettes...

Or a person.

The nights without them are always the hardest.

Exposition: Andante

Spring in Chicago can be schizophrenic at times. Warm and welcoming like an intimate lover one minute, then icy and bitter like a jilted ex-girlfriend the next.

This particular night seemed especially cold and bleak—especially for March. Then again, it could have just been my melancholy mood. Being back in this particular part of the city turned out to be more emotional for me than I would have thought.

I should have been in much better spirits; the meeting I had earlier that day had gone remarkably well—better than I'd expected, in fact. Especially considering that I was probably a little more distracted and preoccupied than I should have been for such an important meeting.

As surreal as it was being back downtown in this area, it was just as surreal to be meeting with a fairly reputable book publisher—admittedly a smaller one—about the novel I'd recently finished and shopped around. I'd dabbled in writing over the years,

but never expected anything worthwhile to come of it. Yet another thing that had taken me completely by surprise over the past few years.

In fact, the string of emails and phone calls from the publisher had been so dreamlike in nature, that it didn't dawn on me at first where my meeting was actually located. Upon later consideration, I toyed with the fanciful notion that perhaps this particular part of the city might have some sort of talismanic quality for me. Or maybe I was just looking for a connection that didn't exist in the hopes that I would stumble upon good fortune in the same place a second time.

The meeting had ended around four-thirty, so I went back to my hotel room for a quick nap before dinner—but I couldn't sleep, not surprisingly. Too many memories and emotions conjured up from the last time I'd stayed in this hotel all those years ago. Even attempts at reading and writing proved to be futile distractions. So, out of desperation—since I hadn't slept well the night before, either, for the very same reason—I dug an orphaned and probably expired Ambien out of my toiletries bag, split it in half and dry-swallowed it. It didn't take long for sleep to take me like an over-eager lover, and I didn't wake up until after eight o'clock—with my mouth tasting like the inside of an old shoe and my stomach growling like a junkyard dog.

Of course, being in the part of the city where I was, there was no question where I was going for dinner.

Which is how I now found myself walking among a sparse nighttime crowd down Ontario Avenue, squinting against the insistent wind blowing off the lake as it raked my hair and rippled through my long charcoal gray coat, which flapped behind me like bat wings.

As I rounded the corner, I came to an abrupt halt as yet another wave of déjà vu washed over me, accompanied by the now familiar fluttery feeling in the pit of my stomach.

The restaurant was just as I remembered it from the last time I was here—down to the statues flanking either side of the front entrance. Though the sculptures did seem to be a little more worse for wear—as did I, I'm sure.

Tightening the reins on my emotions, I approached the front doors, noting that—unlike the last time I was here—there was no one with me for whom I would hold the door open.

When I stepped inside, I was instantly embraced by the soft lighting and the rich, dark hues of the wood paneling—almost chocolate in color and even in texture. A mélange of enticing aromas and the comforting hum of conversation completed the mental picture I had lovingly painted over the years, touching up a continually fading canvas as time took its toll, as it does with everything, it seems.

An elegantly, but not pompously dressed hostess approached me with an ivory smile and cheery eyes.

“How many?” She asked musically.

Two, I wanted to say. But instead I replied, “Just me.”

“If you’ll be dining alone,” she offered, “You’re welcome to sit at the bar.”

My eyes instinctively followed the deliberate sweep of her arm toward the familiar place where I’d hoped to sit anyway.

I manufactured a smile. “That would be perfect.”

No, not perfect, I corrected myself. It was perfect the last time I was here.

But it would be good enough for tonight, at least.

“Right this way,” the hostess gestured, her smile unwavering.

Resisting the urge to wait for my noticeably absent companion to take her seat first, I shrugged out of my coat and draped it over the back of my chair before sitting. Even though I was alone, I still felt her presence as if she were here with me. It was almost tangible...physical...

Along with that familiar tug in my chest.

“Evening,” a husky, yet friendly voice welcomed from behind the bar. I swiveled just enough to face a kindly and worldly-looking African-American gentleman with close cropped hair lightly peppered with silver. “What can I get you this evening?”

You were white and bald the last time I was here, I thought to myself with a hint of a wan smile. I rested my elbows on the bar and rubbed my chin thoughtfully. “Last time I had a Heineken... This time I’ll take something a little stronger. Glenlivet on the rocks, please.”

The bartender smiled as if he understood my reason for choosing scotch over beer. “Coming right up.”

I turned around to inventory the paintings and furnishings that I remembered from my last visit, to try to commit it all to memory once again; to keep that mental canvas as impervious to the passage of time as I could.

A chattering of ice cubes against glass prompted me to return my attention to the bartender. I fished out my credit card and handed it to him. “You can start a tab, please.”

He nodded his assent and turned to swipe my card at the terminal behind him.

I pivoted toward the empty chair beside me and raised my glass almost imperceptibly as a toast.

“To memories,” I whispered under my breath.

The scotch was soothing liquid fire down my parched throat—radiating warmth throughout my torso once it splashed down into my stomach.

The bartender returned with my credit card and a menu, reciting the dinner specials to me.

She and I had split a steak last time, I recalled after the bartender had gone off to attend to another customer while I perused the menu. With asparagus spears, I noted, smiling to myself as I began surveying the room, as was my custom.

I've always been a people-watcher, ever since I can remember. Which may at least partially explain my fascination with writing. Observing all the seemingly trivial details and mannerisms of people and weaving them into the characters I write about to try to give them personality and flesh.

The bartender interrupted my reverie by asking if I'd had a chance to review the menu—so I shook my head to clear it and read off my order. I opted for pasta this time; I couldn't bring myself to eat a steak here alone.

I passed the time waiting for my food to arrive with my continued people-watching and with finishing my drink—which the bartender dutifully refilled.

I had to chuckle to myself as I noticed that just like last time, the crescent-shaped booth behind me was once again occupied by a very amorous younger couple. The difference being, this time I wasn't accompanied by someone with whom I could share *my* affections.

Once my food arrived, I set about devouring it methodically—I was even hungrier than I realized, I guess. Plus, I figured a full stomach would keep the one-and-a-half Glenlivet's from going to my head. Not that I really needed to keep my wits about me; in fact, a scotch-induced dulling of the senses was probably what I really needed.

My plate cleared, the bartender returned to take my dishes and ask if I wanted dessert. I drained my second glass of scotch and indicated that a third would be sufficient to serve as my dessert for the evening.

A visit to the men's room was on the verge of becoming imminent at this point, so I swiveled my chair around to survey the room and assess my sobriety before I headed in that direction.

For reasons I will probably never understand—even now—I lingered for a few moments, actively taking in the scenery of the restaurant and immersing myself in its ambience, my mind wandering back to the last time I was here. Perhaps on some level, I sensed something was about to happen.

And how grateful I am that I did hesitate. Otherwise I would have missed a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity that I never could have predicted in my wildest dreams.

Recapitulation: Moderato

Logicians are quick to dismiss coincidence as our natural tendency to falsely attribute significance or correlation to statistically random events. Ordinarily, I'd be inclined to agree with them. But what transpired next would cause me to question this hypothesis and always wonder if other forces weren't at work in determining the course of our lives.

Or the people we encounter.

My focus was on the windows by the front door to catch a glimpse of the bustle of the city outside—perhaps to ground in reality the fact that I was indeed back at this particular restaurant so many years later. Though, oddly enough, it seemed like just yesterday when I was here last. With her.

As if to complete the illusion that all those years hadn't blurred by in the blink of an eye, I thought I spotted a familiar face in the crowd gathered by the front door.

Blaming the mirage on the alcohol and wishful thinking, I shook my head and rubbed my eyes vigorously—figuring that if I were hallucinating this vividly, I was in no condition to stand up and capably navigate my way to the men's room.

I opened my eyes again to refocus on that same area, and my initial suspicion was confirmed. My eyes widened in shock.

Perhaps this part of the city *was* indeed somehow magical for me.

Because there she stood: the woman who had been my main preoccupation since I was back in the city—not to mention the countless other times my thoughts had wandered to her over the past several years. She was fluffing and fixing her hair while scanning the room when our eyes locked. She, too, blinked in disbelief at first, her face mirroring the same shocked expression I must have been wearing.

Time froze. And it seemed as if a veil had been lifted from before my eyes; the world around me was suddenly infused with vivid colors—even the background noise seemed to gain extra vibrance and texture. And in those seconds that stretched into immeasurable time, I devoured every detail about her.

As usual, it was her eyes that captivated my attention first; the very same eyes that continued to haunt my dreams. Comparing them to emeralds would be cliché and insufficient. They were a lush, vivid green that always made me think of a sunlit summer meadow stretching to an endless horizon. Many nights I still fell asleep to the vision of her eyes peering at me over the gentle slope of a snowy white pillow. Even from across the restaurant, I could still read volumes in their seemingly fathomless depth.

She was bundled up in an elegant waist-length black wool coat accented by a rose-colored scarf. She wore fashionably faded jeans and equally fashionable low-cut boots. Her hair was shorter and darker than I remembered—more subdued.

Before I could begin processing this bizarre and unexpected reunion, we were standing before each other—then hugging, clinging to each other as if we were both drowning, oblivious to the crowd around us. I could feel the smoothness of her cheek against mine and I inhaled deeply of her perfume—the scent that I will forever associate with her.

It was several minutes before I could bring myself to break the embrace and hold her by the shoulders at arm's length.

“Oh, my God,” she began, laughter creeping into her voice. “I can't believe it's really you—what are the odds?”

“Pretty slim,” I admitted, a grin spreading across my face. “You really are here, aren't you? This isn't some bizarre waking dream...”

She reached for my hands to take them in hers, and she continued to giggle—the same musical laugh that still echoed in my dreams and in my memory. “I don't know—it might be... It would almost have to be...” Still chuckling, she made to move past me. “I think I need to sit down.”

I joined in her laughter and gestured to the area at the bar where I'd been sitting. She hesitated before taking her seat, regarding me saucily over one shoulder. “These seats look familiar...”

I shrugged sheepishly and took her coat before pulling out her chair for her. As I resumed my seat next to her, the bartender reappeared and asked her if she'd like something to drink. She considered this for a moment before ordering a glass of their house red. The bartender disappeared again, and she and I faced each other in an expectant but not awkward silence while the butterflies danced madly in my stomach.

“So...” she began, leveling her penetrating gaze at me—and I immediately found myself spellbound by her eyes once again. “How are you?”

I took a moment to set down my glass and afford myself that brief pause to steady my voice. “I'm OK... How are you? What brings you here, of all places?”

She smiled primly. “I'm doing well. I'm in town for work—meeting a client.”

“Alone?” I asked, already knowing the answer—and knowing that she knew I knew.

“No.”

I felt myself bristle slightly at the implied reference to her husband, hoping she didn't notice. “Ah.” I made a show of looking around the room. “He didn't come here with you?”

She shook her head and straightened the cocktail napkin on the polished surface of the bar. “No, he wanted to catch up on some work back at the hotel. I was feeling a little restless, so I decided to go for a walk.”

“And you found yourself here... In this particular restaurant...” I added with a knowing smirk.

She flashed me a maddeningly coquettish smile. “I was in the neighborhood... Thought I would revisit a familiar place.”

I arched an eyebrow. “‘In the neighborhood’? This is far from your neighborhood, my dear... Where are you staying?”

“The Marriott down the street.”

I smiled wanly. “Speaking of familiar places...” I let my voice trail off as I pretended to study the contents of my glass. “I’m staying there, too.”

She placed a hand on my arm to lure my attention back. “It’s good to see you...”

I raised my gaze from her hand on my arm to meet her eyes. “You too.”

The bartender returned to deliver her wine, and he asked me if I wanted a refill. Two was usually my limit on scotch—and I’d already almost finished my third. But a fourth was definitely in order now, so I drained my glass and nodded.

I folded my hands in my lap and swiveled to face her more directly, keeping my eyes steady. “So how’s married life these days?”

She took a sip of her wine and shrugged. “The same. I don’t think that will ever change. Work is good.”

I nodded appreciatively. “That’s great—good for you.”

She leveled her gaze at me. “What about you—are you seeing anyone?”

I snorted a derisive chuckle. “No.”

Her eyes narrowed. “What—I can’t ask?”

“You can ask; it’s a free country, after all—so they say...” I snickered, raising my hands in mock surrender. “But to answer your question: no, I am not seeing anyone.”

She rolled her eyes at me before playfully slapping me on the arm to signal a shift in conversation topic. “So what are *you* doing here?” She eyed me suspiciously. “Surely you didn’t brave the city traffic just to hang out here...”

“Maybe I did,” I dared.

She held my gaze for a moment before replying. “If anyone would do something like that, it would be you.”

“Fair enough,” I admitted. “I had a meeting today with a publisher not too far from here.”

Her eyes lit up. “No way! That’s amazing!”

I nodded and shrugged matter-of-factly. “So far it seems promising. A surprise to be sure.”

“A surprise for *you*, maybe... Not for some of us.”

I let my gaze drop. “You are too kind, as always. I, on the other hand, continue to remain skeptical, though cautiously optimistic—as always.”

“Oh, whatever...” she waved me off with another eye roll, batting her lashes slightly as she took another sip of her wine. It was a trademark gesture of hers—one that she and I used to joke about constantly; and one that never failed to tug at my heartstrings. Like it did now.

Another silence started to settle between us—but she was quick to break it.

“So...” she began again, grabbing my knees to pivot me in my chair to face her again. “Enough of the small talk... How are you—really?”

I could feel my jaw tighten as I manufactured my best smile. “I’m OK. *Really.*” I emphasized the last word with raised eyebrows and a hint of mimicking sarcasm.

She rolled her eyes again, and I lowered my head, shaking it slowly. “You’re going to have to stop doing that...”

“What?”

“Rolling your eyes at me like that.”

She tilted her head to one side quizzically, then it dawned on her, and she placed a hand on my forearm, lowering her head to feign shame. “I’m sorry...”

I sighed theatrically. “It’s OK... You just can’t help being so damned charming.”

She started to roll her eyes again, and I pointed a mock warning finger at her—which she then took in her hands, leveling her gaze at me once again. Her eyes softened. “I miss you...”

I swallowed and forced myself to maintain eye contact. “I miss you, too.”

I could see her eyes searching mine.

“Listen...” she began after a deep breath.

I cut her off with a polite wave of my hand. “Let’s not do this. Not now. You don’t need to explain anything.”

“But I feel like I do.” Her eyes were almost pleading. It was not a look that suited her.

I shook my head dismissively—but not unkindly. “You did already. And like I told you before, I understand.”

She leaned in even closer, her eyes stubbornly earnest. “Do you?”

I kept my gaze locked with hers. “Like I said from day one: all I’ve ever wanted is what’s best for you. You know that.”

“I know... You always say that, but—”

I fixed my stare upon her, dropping the tone of my voice. “I *do* want what’s best for you. Always. Remember, we were friends a long time before we were... You know...”

She nodded, her eyes momentarily closing with a dreamy slowness. “I know.”

Then she reached for her glass of wine and raised it. “A toast to your publishing dreams finally being realized.”

I returned the gesture with my glass. “To you.”

Her eyes softened again with a subtle shake of her head. “To us.”

I offered a smile in return, and we clinked our glasses together, letting a comfortable silence settle between us this time; me studying her intently as I always did. I let my eyes rove the delicate contours of her face, the curves of her body beneath the powder blue fleece and denim she wore. She must have sensed me watching her because I could see the color rise in her cheeks.

“So what’s this new book about?” she asked. “You know, I still re-read your others from time to time...”

“That makes one person, I guess...” I cleared my throat with a self-deprecating smile. “The new book is a little different from my earlier half-assed attempts at novels... This one is more of a romance.”

She sat up a little straighter in her chair, her eyes sparking with interest. “Really?”

I nodded, pretending to examine the ice cubes in my glass. “It was finally time.”

“Time for what?”

I sighed and gave my response careful consideration. “Time for me to write about us.”

She continued to stare intently at me, her eyes brimming with naked emotion.

“But don’t worry...” I paused to swallow a mouthful of scotch. “...All the names have been changed to protect the innocent.” My default method for keeping my emotions in check has always been humor—even lame attempts such as this one.

Her eyes continued to search mine as mine searched hers—my heart thudding in my chest.

“Interestingly enough...” I continued, my gaze momentarily dropping to her knees as I remembered the last time we were here together, when I gently caressed her knees and thighs while we talked. Between kisses. “At least some of that passion must have found its way into the pages of the book... Which may be one explanation for why this book got the attention that my others never did.” I sipped my drink, my mouth suddenly unusually parched. “So I guess I have you to thank for that, too.” I offered a bittersweet smile. “My muse.”

She continued to stare at me for a few more moments before leaning in to kiss me tenderly on the cheek. I closed my eyes and allowed myself the luxury of surrendering to the familiar sensation I’d missed and yearned for far too long. At that moment, there was nothing else in a city of millions but the feather-light caress of her lips on my cheek, and my pulse thudding in my ears.

She pulled away, our lips mere inches apart, her eyes filling my field of vision with that dreamy look of hers that I still saw when I closed my eyes many nights. I leaned toward her, pressing my lips gently to hers, and I could feel my stomach plunge—like when I used to ride the roller coaster as a kid. But it wasn’t a roller coaster or the scotch that was making my head spin now—this intoxication was far more addictive.

We both opened our eyes at the same time, and I recognized the lustful gleam I found staring back at me.

“Wow...” She whispered, raising her eyebrows and slowly pulling away.

“Wow, indeed,” I echoed.

We both took sips of our respective drinks simultaneously.

“I missed that,” I admitted. “It’s nice to know some things haven’t changed over time.”

She nodded silently.

I could feel that familiar sinking feeling in my chest as the realization hit me: that could very well be our last kiss for a very long time. At least as long since the last one—if not longer.

Or perhaps even indefinitely.

I happened to catch the bartender’s attention, and I pounced out of my seat, raising my hand insistently.

“Check, please.”

He nodded and headed over to the terminal to close out my tab.

She remained silent, avoiding my gaze the same way I was avoiding hers.

Then she spoke.

“I still think about you, you know...”

I hung my head and closed my eyes, gripping the edge of the bar to steady my knees, which were still wobbly from the kiss. Steeling myself, I let go of the bar and turned to face her, the heat rising in my cheeks, my voice a little unsteady. “And I still love you. I never stopped. And I can’t imagine I will ever stop loving you in some way.” My eyes narrowed emphatically. “Ever.”

She met my gaze, her eyes yielding and thoughtful. After several moments, she spoke.

“So where does that leave us?”

By then, the bartender had returned with the receipt—so I hastily scrawled my signature and fumbled through my pockets anxiously, though there was nothing in there that I needed at the moment. I just wanted something else to distract my brain and my hands; as if busying myself could restore my control over my raging emotions. I just needed to be active in some way to keep myself from feeling so damned helpless.

“I don’t know,” I admitted, shrugging myself into my coat. “I don’t know... I guess the same place we’ve been since the last time we were together.” My shoulders slumped in defeat.

She rose from her seat and began putting on her coat—which I held for her, using the opportunity as an excuse to take her in my arms from behind. She leaned back into me, placing her head against my chest while I gently nestled my cheek in her hair, breathing deeply of all the familiar scents that I’d desperately missed, refilling my memory to stave off the diluting effect of more time passing.

What I wouldn’t have given to be able to take her back to the Marriott, like last time. Hands clasped together as we tried to outrun the icy wind, laughing and savoring life the way it was intended: with passion and purpose—if you believe the love stories, that is. Then we would make love throughout the night, eventually collapsing in each other’s sublime embrace, exhausted and content.

As if reading my mind, she raised her head slightly. “I should go.”

I reluctantly released her from my embrace. “I know.”

She spun around to face me. “I don’t really want to... I wish I could stay...”

“So do I.”

She took my hand and gently pulled me toward the door. “Come on, let’s walk back to the hotel together—since we’re both staying there.”

I hesitated. I knew saying goodbye again for what might be the last time for quite a while was not going to be easy. I’ve always had a problem with goodbyes—especially with her. I feel like I’ve had far too many of them with the handful of people that I genuinely care about in this life.

Then again, I had no idea when or if I would ever see her again, so part of me reasoned that I should savor every minute with her that I could. A bizarre twist of fate had already granted me more than I could have reasonably expected or hoped for. I should continue to make the most of this unexpected and most welcome blessing.

Besides... I knew damned well there was no way I could ever deny her anything when she looked at me the way she was. Something I suspected she knew, but, to her credit, never exploited.

So I complied, knowing I was only making the inevitable goodbye harder on myself by postponing it—even if only by a few minutes.

Curious how a person’s life can change irrevocably in such a short span of time.

We stepped out into the night, hands clasped tightly together—the city ours once again for what might be the last time.

I greedily hoarded every detail I could, knowing that these memories would have to sustain me indefinitely. The way her eyes reflected the kaleidoscope of city lights... The rustle of her coat... The way the wind tousled her hair... The outline of her profile... The pitch and timbre of her voice... The weight and warmth of her hand in mine...

Her very essence.

The strength and confidence I felt just being with her—the completeness and subtle perfection of it all.

Everything about her.

Everything that I still loved and missed dearly.

Everything that would be taken from me once again.

Before I knew it, we were standing outside the Marriott, our breath frosty plumes in the artificial light, the tiny clouds of vapor evaporating just as quickly as my fleeting time with her this night.

Before either of us could utter a word, I pulled her to me and kissed her with a gentle ferocity. Then I held her to me and whispered in her ear.

“Thank you for tonight.”

“Thank *you*,” she replied, melting against me. “I’m so glad I found you tonight.”

I nodded against the growing lump in my throat. “Me too.”

Then I pulled away and channeled what remained of my soul into one more kiss that I gingerly placed on her forehead.

Then I let her go.

Again.

I turned and walked away without a word and without looking back, even though my room was at the same hotel. I knew I could not watch her leave me again.

In fact, I didn’t return to my room until early the next morning. I sat in an all-night coffee shop and stared out the window at the city until I saw the sun rise. I knew I would have driven myself mad knowing I was in the same building as she was, separated by concrete, wood, and drywall.

And circumstances.

I left Chicago later that morning.

Coda: Allegretto

The meeting I had at that up-and-coming publisher turned out to be the official start of my career as a novelist. They eagerly accepted my manuscript and signed me to a three-book deal with a modest advance. The first book saw decent sales which grew gradually as word of mouth spread. The critics that took any notice had little to say, though a select few were generous enough to describe me as a less polished and more melancholy Nicholas Sparks. Of course my sales were a fraction of his, but I was still invited to a few book signings at a handful of the dwindling local bookstores—where each time I was thrilled to meet a dozen or so of my growing number of readers.

At every book signing, I was invariably asked by at least one of my readers where I got the inspiration for my writing. And I always responded the same way: with a smile and a polite change of topic.

My most recent book signing took me back to Chicago about a year and a half after that fateful reunion—to Lit Fest in Publisher’s Row. I was pleasantly surprised and humbled to find such a turnout of readers waiting in line for a signed copy of my second book, which had just been released to marginally better critical acclaim and noticeably better sales numbers.

Seated at a small table tucked in a secluded corner of the crowded room, I was so immersed in savoring the realization that I had finally become the novelist I’d aspired

to be, that I'd already prematurely signed the eleventh or twelfth copy of my book before I had a chance to look up and greet the eager fan who'd handed it to me. When I did raise my eyes, I had trouble believing what I saw.

A familiar pair of eyes as green as an endless sunlit summer meadow.