

Coffee Shop Confessional

by Scott Cimarusti

It was just before midnight, a light snow just starting to fall, the delicate flakes wafting down from the velvet sky like party 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, bulldozed 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 many of the city's 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 say goodnight, to see how my article was going, and to find out when I would be home. 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. But here I was instead, 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, and 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 before—though I must have passed by it countless times. With a jingling bell to announce my arrival, I was relieved to find it 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 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 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 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; content to sit there with my hands hovering above the steaming mug of coffee to warm them as 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.

I was glad I had swallowed the coffee before I looked up to investigate the newest late-night patron; otherwise, I might have choked on it.

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 clear 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, searching, 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 her thick, woolen burgundy scarf 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. Then she began to approach my booth, and 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 approached 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 chamomile 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.

"Kevin?"

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

And I found myself staring straight at a face 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.

"Hi, Diane."

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 delivering her requested cup of tea with a wedge of lemon on the saucer. Diane smiled at her and thanked her, her gaze returning to me once the periwinkle apron and silver hair were out of sight. "My, God..." she was shaking her head in disbelief. "How long has it been?"

I shrugged absently. "Since college. Almost thirteen years now."

Diane 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?”

Avoiding eye contact, 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 eyes 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 could feel myself nodding as if an unseen puppeteer were tugging on a string. I also heard my voice say, “You look great.”

She tilted her head slightly to one side, her customary response 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 “the little guy”—unwed mothers, the elderly—which was right in line with her need to save the world one person at a time that I remembered. 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 we were just breaking up now.

“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.

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?”

“Hopefully.”

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 over.”

A chuckle of disbelief had escaped my lips before I could stop it. After all this time and all the growing distance between us, she and I 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.

“Do you ever think about me? About the way things used to be?”

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 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. After a pause, she nodded. “Sometimes.”

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.

I sighed audibly. “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 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 emerald 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 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 I still had left at that point.”

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

This realization softened my tone. “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.”

I realized, then, just how surreal this night really was. What were the odds of me working late this particular night, then choosing to take a break at the time that I did, *and* making this particular coffee shop my choice of destination—at almost exactly the same time that a lost love from my past that I hadn’t seen in over a decade chooses the same place for a cup of tea? It was dizzying to contemplate. And as if that particular chain of events weren’t bizarre enough, she had just confessed to me why she left me and broke my heart right before we graduated college, finally answering a question that had plagued me for a great deal of time afterward—and even, admittedly, on rare occasions still whenever I reminisce about that time period.

The renewed silence between us was rapidly solidifying into a wall 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.” Then I resumed my progress 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 above casting a surreal 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 looked around through the steady fog of steam that was my breath, surveying our midnight brethren as they continued toward their destinations. And, after the unexpected reunion I had just participated in, I couldn’t help but wonder what strange twists of fate each of them might be experiencing this night.

I turned back to Diane to find her eyes searching mine, 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. “So what do we do now, exchange e-mail addresses or something? Send each other Christmas cards?”

Now it was her turn to look around, 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...again.”

A long pause. “I guess so.”

I shrugged. “Well, then, take care of yourself.”

“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 in vehicles—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 perfume and shampoo 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 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.

I didn't even hesitate as I strode right past my office building, hailing the first cab I saw. Less than a half an hour later, I was standing next to my bed, watching the steady rise and fall of the vague hump of blankets that was my sleeping wife. Without undressing, I slid between the sheets and curled up alongside her, looping an arm around her waist. She stirred briefly, but did not wake up.

I kissed her softly on the cheek, suddenly feeling an almost overpowering wave of love and gratitude for her. I continued to lie that way for several more minutes, listening to her breathe amid the nightly symphony of familiar sounds. Whenever I closed my eyes, I could still see Diane sitting across from me, her eyes tinged with such profound sadness and remorse. Only it wasn't Diane, I realized, it was my wife instead, that same

mournful look in her eyes, and it broke my heart. I found myself precariously on the brink of tears; whatever control I had managed to maintain over my emotions was slipping away from me like rainwater through my fingers. I embraced her a little tighter, not wanting to wake her, and I whispered a vow into the darkness; that no matter what it took, I would never let her slip away from me—my pride be damned. It was far better to sacrifice one's pride to hang onto those we loved.

Then I gave my wife another kiss, slithered out of bed, and headed for the spare bedroom that served as our shared office, where I powered up my laptop and began to type.

By six o'clock that morning, I had written a completely different piece than I had planned for my nine a.m. deadline. I wasn't sure my editor would appreciate it, but I needed to put the night's events in print—before I began to doubt that they ever occurred.

And before I forgot the lessons learned in the “Coffee Shop Confessional”.