

Modern-Day Orpheus

by Scott Cimarusti

Their affair had been incendiary.

And like all things incendiary, it had burned out quickly and spectacularly.

For some reason, he was hesitant to call it a “love affair”—though he had convinced himself that she did love him.

But looking back now, he couldn’t help but wonder.

He, on the other hand, harbored no doubts about his love for her, even now. Still. A love that stubbornly lingered.

Lingered like the endlessly fluttering flock of questions that still plagued him about how and why things between them had ended.

The affair had begun innocently enough, like most things that wind up being far from innocent.

She had been a friend of a friend of a friend who occasionally came to see him and his band perform Friday or Saturday nights.

She had not been a groupie, though—thankfully—for he steered clear of those attention-starved parasites.

She had been different. Just slightly aloof—but not standoffish.

Unlike the rest of the group she hung out with, she made no attempt to fit in; she had her own unique style and presence, which she wore proudly and effortlessly. And without any need to impress anyone.

And that was what drew him to her.

Even now, as he sat alone in the all-night diner’s corner booth, nursing a cup of something that passed for coffee, he could vividly recall the first time he’d really noticed her.

His band had just finished their set for the night, and he was unwinding with a beer in a corner by himself while his bandmates paired off with their respective groupies.

He’d spotted her raven-black hair among the gaggle of peroxide blondes. Their gazes had wandered toward each other’s like an aligning of two planets, each silently daring the other to look away. He somehow knew he would have to be the one to offer a smile first, so he did so with a flash of uncharacteristic confidence.

He remembered her initial defiance to return the gesture—as she opted instead to roll her eyes, though not dismissively; but more as a test to see if he was in on what would be the first inside joke between them.

He still has no idea what he did or how he did it, but she must have seen something in his nonverbal response that convinced her he understood.

And so it began.

He knew she would not be the type to fall for the customary drink ordered for her from the stranger across the bar. No. This would require an actual approach—one of the hardest moves in the book, especially for him. Even if he had a repertoire of witty if not overused opening lines—which he didn’t—he knew no such banality would bait her into a conversation. And he also knew that whatever he was going to say to her, he would have to think of it quickly—because he’d already surmised that she was not the patient type, nor one to grant second chances easily. This would be among his toughest auditions.

And he wouldn’t even have his bandmates as backup, like he usually did when the four of them took the stage.

Grasping his beer bottle by the neck to have something to occupy his hands, he ventured out of his safe corner and parted through the chattering crowd.

As he closed the distance between them, it seemed as if she was pretending not to notice him—yet still monitoring his progress out of the corner of her eye. And the closer he got to her, the more powerful her allure—like the pull of a magnet that gets stronger with proximity.

Her dark hair was a few inches past shoulder-length, not really styled, but more tamed. She was wearing fashionably faded jeans, a burgundy turtleneck sweater, and for just the right amount of retro-kitchiness, a well-worn jean jacket.

He’d already spotted the unmistakable spark in her eyes from afar—a spark like a beacon that drew him to her like a lost ship on unforgiving seas. And as he drew closer now, he found himself teetering on the brink of drowning in those forest green eyes.

She still maintained the pretense that her attention was occupied elsewhere, and it wasn’t until he had sidled up next to her—still at a respectable distance—that she turned to level her hypnotic gaze at him, almost rendering him speechless.

Almost.

He held that gaze for the briefest of moments, suddenly hyper-aware of all of his senses simultaneously, as this specific moment in time and space was indelibly etched into his memory.

Then he mustered the courage to speak.

“If you’re going to keep staring at me from across the room all night, the least you can do is let me buy you a drink.” Not terribly original, but not too cliché, either. Still conversational with just the right amount of self-assured brashness without being cocky.

She rolled her eyes—but not without letting the slightest hint of a smile escape. “What makes you think I even want you buy me a drink?”

“So you’re not denying that you *were* staring...” he teased.

“An absence of a denial is not an admission,” she countered, arching an eyebrow.

“Well, you were clearly staring at someone in my general direction...” He sighed theatrically. “But it looks like I’m the only one brave enough to venture over here to investigate.”

“How typical of the self-absorbed musician...” She sighed in mock exasperation. “He thinks all the women in the room have their eyes on him...”

“Oh, not just the women,” he corrected with a sip of his beer, his eyes never leaving hers. “The men, too.”

She chuckled in spite of herself, and he noted how her smile danced in her eyes.

“I’m still not hearing a denial that you weren’t staring...” he added.

She drained her wine glass. “I’m afraid you’ll have to find someone else to indulge your egomaniacal fantasies tonight... It’s too late for me to take on that kind of challenge.”

It was his turn to laugh. “Oh, I suspect it’s me who isn’t up for *your* challenge...”

She nodded appreciatively. “Now I think you’re getting it...”

“Well,” he continued, since it was too late to back out now. “The least you can do is let me buy you one more glass of wine—with no obligation—as compensation for wasting your precious time.” He gestured past her with an upward tilt of his chin. “Besides, it looks like your friends just ordered another round without you, anyway.”

“Very observant,” she admitted. “But who says I need to hang around and wait for them? I can take care of myself.”

“Oh, I have no doubt of that,” he admitted. “But if you let me buy you one last drink, I’d consider it a personal favor to me—otherwise I’ll be awake all night, wracked with guilt at having disrupted your otherwise pleasant evening.” He raised his hands in mock surrender. “Humor me.”

She arched her eyebrow again. “I already have.”

He couldn’t help but smile wider. “Indeed you have.” He drained his beer bottle and reached past her to set it on the bar behind her. As he did, he caught an intoxicating whiff of her perfume that made his head swim a little. “In that case...” he made a show of digging into his pocket for his modest wad of cash and fished out a wrinkled five. “...Allow me to leave your tip.” He placed the bill on the bar and met her eyes one more time, his heart racing. “It has been a genuine pleasure. Enjoy the rest of your night.” And he turned to walk away, hoping that his gamble would pay off, that she would eventually stop him after letting him take a few steps. But he knew that for his transparent ploy to work, he could not look back—no matter how tempting it would be.

He was about to resign himself to defeat and lose himself in the crowd, when he heard her voice above the insistent murmur of clashing conversations:

“For the record: I never said ‘no’ to that drink—”

He stopped and turned around to find her pretending to look everywhere else in the room except at him, her lips curved into a teasing and mischievous smile.

It was that smile more than any of her others that still haunted him, even now as he stared into the depths of the nondescript mug of almost-coffee clutched in both hands; he oblivious to the other patrons of the all-night diner, and they oblivious to him.

That was their “how we met” story, and it was the spark that ignited an explosive affair between them.

Like kindling, the fires of passion between them had burned hot and quickly—in what seemed like a blinding flash. To this day, he still had no idea what he said or did right that night, but she let him take her back to his place. And before he knew what was happening, he found himself watching the sun rise through his bedroom window while she dozed contentedly with her head on his chest and one leg curled protectively around his.

As their insatiable appetite for each other continued to stoke those ravenous flames in the weeks that followed, he noticed something else about her.

She had become his muse of sorts.

The start of their affair had also marked an unprecedented surge in his songwriting—something which surprised even him. Lyrics and melodies now flocked to him like rare tropical birds that had previously eluded his efforts to snare them in his net. When inspiration struck, he furiously scribbled down notes on any scrap of paper within reach. Then he wove those threads together by the meager light of his solitary desk lamp in the quiet hours of the night while she slept on his side of the bed.

Not only were his bandmates impressed with his songwriting efforts, but so was their self-appointed manager—so much so, that he booked some studio time for them out of his own pocket so they could record the new songs as a demo.

With those demo recordings in-hand, their pseudo-manager had graduated to a legit manager by getting the band signed by a small up-and-coming indie label. The advance wasn’t much, but it was still more money than any of them had seen in a while—and more importantly, it was the shot they’d been waiting for.

Looking back on that all-too-brief period of time, it seemed so surreal to him now; dreamlike.

As if it had all happened to someone else.

Especially since he had so little tangible proof anymore to verify what now seemed like a vivid and fanciful daydream of his own making.

The only reality he could rely on with any certainty anymore was the diner in which he now found himself—with the battered guitar case on the worn vinyl seat beside him as his sole companion.

Staring into the depths of the white porcelain coffee mug now, it would be far too easy to convince himself that she had ever existed at all.

Too good to be true is how he would describe that all-too-brief period of time now in hindsight. His musical efforts had finally started blossoming fruit, and he had fallen madly in love with the woman who had turned out to be his muse.

And while that time had blurred by like a dizzying carnival ride, he was still able to recall even the minutest details with uncanny clarity. The scent of her hair... How her eyes sparkled when she laughed... The way his stomach dropped whenever they kissed... It was if he had been half-asleep up until that night when he'd met her—and then truly awakened for the first time in his life with all of his senses amped all the way up.

So much so, that he had been able to ignore that nagging voice of doubt that always kept his expectations in check. The one that kept him from diving too deep into any one thing and ending up disappointed and disillusioned.

Like he was now.

He set down his empty cup onto the saucer with a muffled clink and peered over at the grease-smudged 80's-era Pepsi clock buzzing tunelessly behind the diner's counter. He sighed heavily and buried his face in his hands.

The last thing he could remember with any degree of clarity was the band's label-signing party—though he couldn't recall if that had been two days ago or two weeks. In many ways, it felt like two decades.

It was the same night the two of them had narrowly avoided getting sideswiped by an especially reckless taxicab. He could remember instinctively pulling her to him in a protective embrace when he'd heard the shrill screech of the tires—figuring this would be the end for both of them. But miraculously, they had somehow escaped unscathed. The experience had left them both understandably shaken up—but it was nothing that a drink or two in the company of friends (or at least preferred acquaintances) wouldn't fix once they arrived at the bar.

He and his band had played a short set that night—just three of the new songs he had written. The owner had given them the stage time as a favor, since they'd always been one of his more reliable acts.

The band's loyal gaggle of groupies had been in the front row, as always—the usual suspects and the recent bandwagon-jumpers. But for the newly prolific songwriter, there was only one woman in the room.

His muse wore a simple and stylish black dress that night, her ebony hair a little more reckless than usual, cascading past her shoulders; her smile almost demure and her emerald eyes hypnotic.

She'd kept a respectable distance over by the bar, away from the groupies. He, of course, understood her distaste for their ilk—for it was an aversion he shared. Plus, it was just part of her character and yet another of the countless reasons why he so adored her.

Their band's set ended with the last song's final guitar chord ringing out in the smoke-hazed room, punctuated by a ribcage-thumping drum sequence. The crowd erupted in feverish applause.

So the band gathered at the front of the stage, and with their arms slung around each other's shoulders, they took what would be their final bows together.

When the house lights came up, the rest of the band started striking their gear to make way for the next band—but he couldn't wait to pounce down off the stage and confer with his muse.

His gaze locked onto hers, he parted through the crowd, oblivious to the spattering of congratulatory pats on the back as he passed fans and well-wishers. He saw her follow his progress over the rim of her wineglass, those piercing green eyes drawing him like a moth to a flame.

He sidled up alongside her and casually leaned against the bar. Even after several weeks together, the nervous butterflies still lingered.

"So, whadja think?" He posed with a hint of a self-satisfying smirk.

She shrugged dismissively with that mischievous twinkle in her eyes that drove him mad. "Meh..." Her lips curved into a saucy smile.

He leaned in closer to her, curling one arm behind her to gently palm the small of her back while he tickled her ear with his lips—which he knew always gave her goosebumps.

"OK..." she purred, "I admit it: you guys were amazing..."

"You wanna see amazing?" He slithered his other hand up her thigh to the swell of her hip. "Wait until I get you home..."

She drew his gaze with her eyes, and if what he found there was not the essence of love in its purest form as he'd ever seen it, then she was one hell of an actress.

She reached up and wove her fingers into the nest of curls at the base of his neck and gently nudged his head closer to hers so their lips could connect—his stomach doing the broken elevator plummet yet again.

And they kissed for a lifetime.

Then she pulled away, her eyes filling his field of vision.

He swallowed audibly, his head spinning. “I should go help the guys finish striking. I’ll be right back.”

She continued to hold his gaze for a few heartbeats more—and it wasn’t until he replayed this moment over and over again in the days that followed, that he realized he had glimpsed the slightest hint of sadness in her eyes.

Oblivious to it at the time, though, he slowly turned around and headed back toward the stage.

As he walked away from her, he couldn’t shake the feeling that she was right behind him—even though she had no reason to follow. They both knew the routine: he’d finish striking the band’s gear, then he’d return to her, and they would leave together, heading back to his place to make love until they both collapsed in each other’s arms.

As he made his way back toward the stage, everything around him seemed to be moving with frustrating dreamlike slowness, as if the air around him had suddenly grown impossibly thicker. Yet he still felt as if she were keeping pace just a step behind him.

He wanted to turn around and look, but something warned him not to—though he had no idea why.

It was maddening; the stage still seemed impossibly far away from him somehow. And he could still sense her presence right behind him, yet he dared not look back.

Finally, he couldn’t suffer this odd uncertainty any longer. After all, why shouldn’t he just glance back over his shoulder to see if she was indeed following him? Maybe she needed to tell him something that he couldn’t otherwise hear over the constant murmur of the crowd.

So he stopped.

And he turned his head to look back.

She was not behind him.

Nor was she seated at the bar anymore, he discovered.

She was gone. And nowhere to be seen.

She might have gone to the ladies room, he reasoned.

But the fluttery panic in his chest knew better.

Her vanishing act had been deliberate.

Everything that had transpired afterward was now lost in a thick haze—except him waiting for her in vain until the bar closed.

He was startled out of his reverie now by the tired-looking waitress breezing by his booth to send him on his way with his check. As soon as the gossamer slip of paper fluttered down to the dull Formica, he dug into his pocket for a crumpled fiver and tossed it unceremoniously beside her hastily scrawled ticket.

Replaying that night in the bar yet again had done nothing to dispel the feeling of hopeless disbelief upon realizing she was really gone.

And that was how she had passed into memory for him—no more real to him than his recently finished cup of coffee would be in a few hours when the sun came up. Mere fragments of memories...

And that was what troubled him the most.

Resigning himself to these harsh truths, he slid out of the booth with a grumble of vinyl, dragging the guitar case behind him like a stubborn child. He passed the parade of nameless and faceless diner patrons and shouldered his way through the jingling door and out into the night. Toward whatever other soon-to-be-forgotten memories awaited him there.

“Modern-Day Orpheus” is based on the Greek myth of Orpheus and Eurydice. In the story, Orpheus is the son of the god Apollo and a gifted musician who falls in love with and marries the beautiful Eurydice. Unfortunately, while fleeing a shepherd with ill intentions for her, Eurydice is bitten by a snake and dies. Devastated by her death, Orpheus mourns her through a song so beautiful, it touches even the gods. So Apollo advises his son to visit Hades, the god of the underworld, and attempt to win over Hades with his music and beg for Eurydice to be returned to him among the living. Orpheus takes his father’s advice and manages to enchant Hades through song and persuade him to release his beloved. But Hades has one condition: Eurydice can follow Orpheus out of the underworld, but Orpheus cannot look back to confirm that she is behind him—otherwise he will lose her forever. Orpheus agrees, but on his way back to the land of the living, he begins to worry that Hades has fooled him. He lets his suspicions get the better of him, and he cannot help but turn around to make sure Eurydice is there. It turns out that she was behind him all along; but since he has violated the terms of Hades’ agreement, she is whisked away from him back into the underworld where she is lost to him forever.