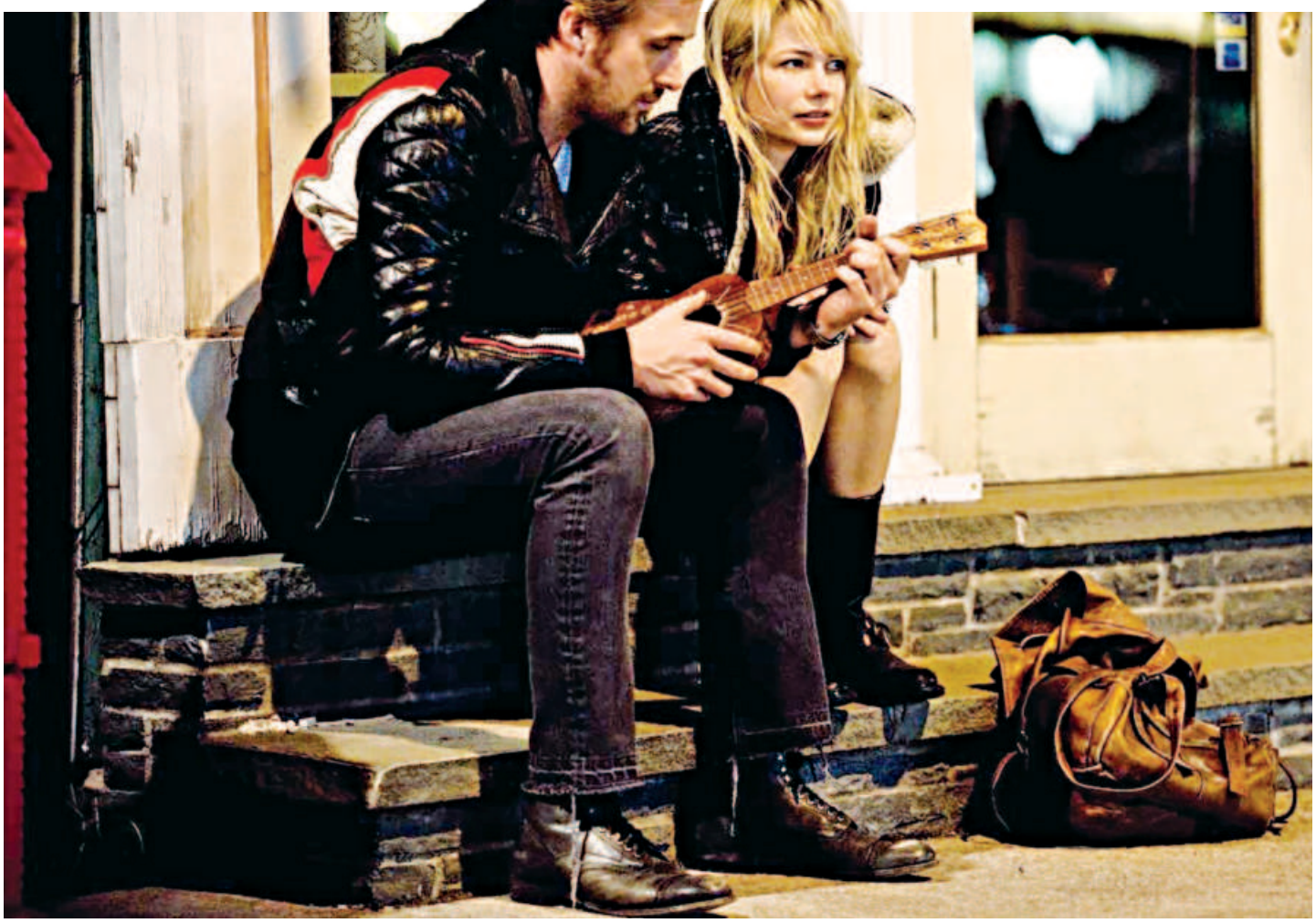


MOVIES

Blue Valentine still stings in your 20s

SHARAR CHOWDHURY

**This review contains spoilers for the movie*

I keep coming back to one thing about *Blue Valentine*, which is how it shows you the right person at the right time, then shows you those same two people turn into the wrong ones. It never lets you decipher where the switch happened.

The film cuts between the two timelines on purpose. One minute, Dean and Cindy are walking the streets at night, half-strangers convinced they have found the one. The next, they have been married for six years and cannot stand to share a room. Putting the falling-in-love next to the falling-apart is why the film hurts the way it does.

The romance is real. The nighttime wandering, Dean playing ukulele on the pavement while Cindy taps her feet in a shop doorway: none of it is ironic. You believe them – which is the trap – because underneath all that tenderness, the film is showing you two people in their 20s rushing into a marriage without ever asking the boring questions. What do you actually want? Where do you see yourself in 10 years? Cindy is pregnant, scared, and on her own. Dean shows up and chooses her completely. He marries her, raises the baby as his own, and asks for nothing back. It is the most generous thing in the film. It is also the decision that quietly dooms them.

Being chosen at your lowest is not the same as being right for each other once you have climbed back up. Cindy was training to be a doctor. Dean is content painting houses and indulging in his vices. He says, more or less, that being a husband and a father is dream enough for him. Maybe he means it. But Cindy ends up married to a man whose ambitions she never actually knew, because when they met, all she could see was someone who wanted her and the baby. She did not fall for his future, as there was not one to fall for.

There's a Jeff Buckley song, "Lover, You Should've Come Over", that names her exact bind: the feeling of being too young to stay put and far too old to break free and start again. That is Cindy by the end. She is suffocating, but there is a child now, and she grew up watching her own parents stay locked in a cold, loveless marriage. She knows what that does to the kid caught in the middle. So, she takes the harder stance and lets go, not out of cruelty, but because she refuses to hand her daughter the same childhood.

Here is what I really cannot resolve: who is the bad guy? Cindy, for leaving a man who was good to her when she had nobody? Or Dean, who refuses to grow past his resentment, takes offence at every word, and treats her ambition like an attack until she cannot breathe? I have gone back and forth, and I do not think the film wants me to land anywhere. There is no villain, but rather, there are two people who made an enormous decision on the back of one tender, desperate night and woke up years later as strangers.

That is why it still feels honest at 20-something. We are sold the idea that loving someone hard enough is supposed to be enough. *Blue Valentine* says outgrowing someone is real, even someone kind, even someone you once meant it with. The decent thing to do in that situation is to say so out loud, to talk about who you are becoming, instead of clinging to who you used to be for each other.

It is complicated, the way real relationships are complicated. No bad guy. Just bad timing, a few bad decisions, and the plain fact that people grow in different directions. The film does not try to comfort you about that; it refuses to pretend otherwise. At this age, that honesty is worth more than reassurance.

Sharar Chowdhury is learning how to be a manager and believes "I'm confused" is not a complete sentence. Send him emails at: sharar672@gmail.com

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