

3 AM.

Moonlight streaks through the open window and onto the crumpled sheets. Lace curtains dance gently in the light breeze, like waves lapping at the shore.

The woman lies sleeping, the air tenderly playing with her hair as moonlight catches the band of gold circling her finger. It glimmers faintly, sparkles, and then fades.

Downstairs, something stirs.

The wooden door rattles as it opens; the stained glass window fragile within its frame. The stench seeps into the home as the being enters. Decomposed, sodden and earthy, its rotten hands trace muddy trails along the walls. The decaying odor takes cumbersome steps towards the stairs, hands sliding in blood and grit on the varnished wood of the handrail as it searches for hold.

He lingers at the foot of the stairs; clouded and milky-blind eyes scanning the pictures on the walls. His eyes lay to rest on one photo – straining to focus he draws nearer – a young couple; happy, smiling...hopeful.

His heavy boots begin to climb the stairs now, large earthy footprints leaving solid dirt evidence on the grey, fading carpet. He wheezes as he climbs, the rancid meat of his chest exposing his torn lungs heaving.

The spectre reaches the top of the stairs and waits breathless, every fatigued breath making a rasping, gurgling noise in the deep cavity of his ribs.

But her room is close now. Staggering those final exhaustive few feet he reaches the door, the eroded khaki fabric of his uniform falling in tatters to the floor with each step.

He pushes the door open silently to reveal his sleeping beauty. Standing in the doorway he breathes deep and inhales the familiarity of this room. To him it smells of comfort, tenderness and home.

A sudden gust of wind causes the curtains to bellow outwards violently and the woman stirs in her dreams. The man slowly approaches the bed, his heart full of pain, and whispers her name.

Cautiously and disbelieving she eases upon her eyes and stares - not in horror - but in miscomprehension of what she sees before her. When she looks, she does not see a decaying carcass, nor smell the stench of death.

She sees the man she loves.

His wife moves her mouth as if to speak, but he silences her with a tender touch of his finger on her lips. Her eyes brim with tears, bewildered and yet adoring.

In desperation she rips at the medals on the jacket of his uniform, flinging them in rage across the room and screaming that, "You didn't have to go! You didn't have to go! You didn't HAVE to!"

The tears come now, and his arms hold her in comfort as she releases the pain of the last three years, sobbing in uncontrollable spasms as her grief is freed.

They are stilled in reunion, clinging to each other until relief comes to her in the form of sleep.

The ghost of her husband stands watching over her, then glimmers, sparkles and fades away.