

Tracing the outline of her face from a photograph, he shrunk into himself. Her hair, shiny and black; he could almost smell it. Roses. Her hair always smelled like roses. He touched the picture again. It was old, worn out by the constant pulling out of and stuffing back into pockets that he inflicted upon it. It was dry, brittle, and wrinkled. Nothing like her skin. Smooth, brown, like hot chocolate and tasted just as sweet. Vanilla though. Her skin tasted like the sugar of a childhood that lingered on the edges of what now constituted his reality. He licked his lips while staring into her coal black eyes. They had so much light in them. Life, really. He could easily remember the sensation of her being; her soul boring into his through those black diamonds, obtrusive and unapologetic. They used to be able to sit and stare at each other for hours, not saying one word. All he had to stare at now was her picture, a vicious memoir of what felt like a lifetime ago. He missed her, no doubt about that. But missing her did not quite describe it. He was incomplete without her. It was as simple as that.

Blasting back into reality, he was forced to once again focus on the horror that surrounded him. His moment of peace now shattered. Everywhere, bullets and blood and bodies. War. War in a country he otherwise would never have seen, not in this lifetime. Jim Crow had a way of keeping a Black man oppressed in America that was reminiscent of the not-too-long-ago abolished slavery. If it wasn't for the fact that he had no job opportunities other than sharecropping, he would never have come here. He took a deep sigh. That was another time and another place entirely. Another war to be fought with no fathomable idea as to the outcome. He stuffed the picture back into his shirt pocket, made sure it was secure. If it ended here, he wanted to be certain that even though they were thousands of miles apart, he died with her right next to him. She was his protection, his lucky charm, his star in the sky. The smell of gunpowder

invaded the memory of vanilla and roses. A descending whistle made him look up toward a bleak, white sky before everything faded to black.

White. Bright light. Then, darkness. White, blinding light again, except this time it came quicker. Then, the obliqueness of closed eyes. The only other thing his brain could register was pain. Everywhere, there was pain. White light again, and this time there were dark shapes in it. Rectangular lines. A window? Faint beeping coming over the roaring of an aching body. Darkness again. Suddenly his eyes sprang open. He was in a hospital room, the sterile white sheets gleaming off of the fluorescent lights. He wanted to move, get up, run away but he didn't have the strength. Hell, he barely had the strength to breathe. He began to hyperventilate. Where am I? How long have I been here? The door opened and in walked a nurse. Her hand reached out to touch his forehead. No vanilla. Only ammonia and antiseptic. He dry heaved into his mouth. She pulled him up so he wouldn't choke. He let a sob escape. She coaxed him into her chest and stroked his back. Pain. Nothing but pain, and not on the outside. He didn't mind though; it had been so long since he felt human touch. The dam broke. He cried.

The sun glared behind the clouds. It was a bleak, dreary day, the sky white and threatening, fading to a darker gray in the distance. No matter. He was almost there. Walking, he passed the trees that lined the road, noticing that their green was dull. Everything was dull. Life was shrouded in fog. The trees gave way on the right hand side to a barren plain, a little house visible in the distance. Everywhere, there was nothing and no one. He walked alone accompanied by the shrill cry of the black crows behind him and the rustle of the trees blowing and the crackle of dead leaves underfoot. Reaching the house he looked up toward the main

bedroom on the second floor. He saw the light. La Luz. Luz. That was her name. The other windows were dark. The house was a muted yellow color. Funny, he thought to himself, I remember this whole scenery before I left. There used to be so much life here. The land was green, the sky was blue, the house was sunny. He walked through the door and smelled stale, dead air. The plain furniture did not stick out, the dust rose as he moved, and everything seemed muted by an impenetrable hopelessness.

He moved up the stairs and heard crying. She was here. “Luz?” he called out loud. He heard a scream and then a mass of energy hit him like an asteroid. There she was, back in his arms again. His reason for surviving, the thing he had missed most. His sunshine, his light, his life. Luz, in a paisley print dress. She looked up at him with those coal black eyes and greedily pushed her tongue down his throat. He picked her up and held her. His body was still weak from its battery and sensing this, she jumped down. There were no words to be exchanged. It was obvious they missed each other, needed each other. He could not speak of the horrors he had seen and she could not speak of her innate loneliness during his absence. It was enough that they were reunited. She was just as vivid as he remembered. And he could smell the roses again. Roses and vanilla. Light emanated off of her. Only happiness here. A future. Babies. No more darkness.

She pulled him into the bedroom. The clouds in the sky lifted and she pulled off her dress. He felt her smooth skin and knew he was home. She undressed him. As the sun started to shine, the light in the room became unbearable. He moved to shut it off. He wanted to see her in natural light. They made love all afternoon and well into the evening. Eventually, he drifted off

to sleep and could smell scents rising from the kitchen. The house was dark when he opened his eyes. Creepy. He put on his drawers and a button up shirt and went downstairs to join her for dinner. Music played and they sat and listened and ate in silence. They savored the presence of each other. After eating, she snuggled up in his lap and laid her head on his chest, her hair tangling in the buttons. They warmed each other. Nothing but love in the room. "I love you," he murmured into her ear. "I love you," she whispered back. Happiness and light. She grabbed his hand and led him back upstairs. She left the curtains open at the window. His shirt with the hair caught on the buttons and her paisley dress crumpled up together on the floor. They made love under the moonlight and fell asleep cuddling.

The glare from the sky woke him up. He rolled over and realized he was alone in the bed. "Luz?" he asked. No response. He rolled over, away from the window and opened his eyes wider. Another dull day. No sun. Looked like it might rain. He got up and put on his shirt and a pair of pants. The house seemed cold, a stark contrast to the warmth that filled it the night before. He called her again. Nothing. There were no smells from the kitchen and no music. He pulled on some shoes and threw a jacket over his shirt and stepped out onto the front porch. Nothing around for miles. He noticed the dullness had set back in. He walked down the steps and up the pathway a bit, hoping to get a further glimpse down the long stretch of road. Nothing. He turned back around and noticed a light on in the attic. Huh, he thought to himself, she didn't answer me when I called her. Thought she wasn't here. He walked back into the house. He ascended the stairs to the second floor and pulled down the trapdoor in the ceiling that led to the attic. The light came blazing over the edge. He climbed the ladder and was knocked back by the smell. What the hell? It was worse than stale air. It was rot. The smell of something decayed. He

climbed all the way up into the attic and looked around. He retched onto the floor in front of himself. Her body was swinging from the rafters. There were flies, all over the place. She was wearing the dress he saw her in yesterday, the one with the paisleys on it. There was something else too. She looked as if she had been dead for months. This was not fresh. Old photos of the two of them lay scattered underneath her feet. He screamed and screamed and jumped back through the door. He threw himself down the stairs and out the front, his throat becoming hoarse with his wails.

They said he went crazy in the war. They said he imagined that last day he had spent with her. They said there was no way her body was that far along in the decomposition process that she could have been walking around. Post-traumatic Stress Disorder, they said. You could have cut the stench in the air with a knife. There had been no clouds and no blue skies. They admitted him immediately. Black folks in nearby towns whispered about him, saying how sad it was that the young soldier won a war for his home and came back and lost his mind. It's funny though; when he first arrived at the hospital, nobody seemed to notice neither the jet black hair that was still tangled up in the buttons on his shirt nor the scent of roses that inexplicably drifted off of his skin.