

The Blood of Benetton

By Arthur Klepchukov

“Benetton, Benetton...”

Esmund stirred. His left hand crawled across the sheets.

“Esmund ... wake up old friend.”

The eyes of the sleeper parted and started to come into focus. He felt naked and cold, it was a delicious August night but a piercing breeze was coming through the open bedroom window. The curtains swayed and next to them stood his best friend Nathaniel, who had been dead for years.

“Nath...” Esmund uttered in fear as he briskly sat up in bed.

“Nothing to fear Esmund, nothing at all.”

Esmund instinctively reached over to his right, but his hands did not find his wife. He worriedly looked to his side and then his eyes scouted the room, but Felicia was not there. “Where’s Felicia? What have you done with her?”

“I don’t know Esmund; I haven’t done anything to her but she’s what I came to talk to you about.”

“But you’re dead, you have been for...”

“Two years, I know,” the ghost interrupted him.

A silent moment separated them as Esmund tried to grasp the reality of the moment. His throat was parched, his heart was heavy, and his very soul would not believe his eyes. Esmund could not say a thing.

The ghost took a step forward. “I came here to warn you.”

Esmund scooted away. “Warn me about what?”

“About Felicia.”

“Is something wrong with her? Where is she? What’s ...”

“Calm down Esmund,” Nathaniel interrupted again, “calm down and just listen.”

The husband leaned in towards his best friend.

“I’m glad to see that you still have a grain of trust for an old face,” the ghost replied with a jaded smile. It was pitiful and transparent but captured Esmund’s heart in a cold, distant burn. He nodded his head as if to indicate that his ears were eagerly listening. “I came here to warn you,” Nathaniel repeated, “and tell you that you will have to choose between love and death or life and heartbreak,” he walked over to the bed and picked up a photo of Esmund and Felicia from the husband’s nightstand, “but I see that you’ve already made your choice.”

“I don’t understand.”

“It is not your place to fully grasp the future.”

“Show me...”

“I’m afraid I can’t,” the ghost said, bowing his head, “I’m but a simple spirit, in some ways just as lost as you are.”

“I’m not lost.”

Nathaniel looked up at Esmund. “And yet you feel like you’re losing Felicia...”

Now the husband lightly bowed his head and pulled up his lower lip with a hint of agony.

“You can feel it, old friend. Something simply is not right.”

Esmund lightly nodded.

“Your emotions are strong and your heart is pure, but if you continue to follow it, you will soon be trapped in a maddening cycle of blood.”

The husband’s head shot up with a slightly fearful look of confusion. The word blood hit a nerve with him. Now he was fully awake. “Tell me more.”

“I’m afraid I can’t dear friend, I can’t tell you your path to the future, that’s something you have to decide and follow on your own.”

Esmund looked back over to Felicia’s empty half of the bed. “I understand.”

The ghost stood up and placed his hand on Esmund’s shoulder. “I hope so.” The touch was faint and cold. A drop of Nathaniel’s pain passed itself on to Esmund. Esmund reached up to touch the ghost, but his hands slipped right through the spirit. “Farewell old friend,” Nathaniel took a step back. “Good night.” Another step. “Sweet dreams...” And then the ghost was gone.

The husband spent a long time gazing at the open window through which Nathaniel departed. He could not remember opening it or drawing the curtains before he went to sleep. Then he felt her presence. Felicia stood in the shadows of the doorway. His wife had lipstick smeared over her lips and chin. She wore unfamiliar clothes that were the closest thing to pure black Esmund had ever seen. She had too much make-up on and her eyes emitted a faint, eerie glow. He could not tell whether the dark and tragic look painted her face with melancholy or a vengeful disaster. An uncanny, brooding feeling of fear gripped his throat. Esmund could barely breathe.

* * *

The sink water continuously ran over her cold, frail hands. The cool liquid bathed her tired fingers in a desperate sensation. Her eyes were gently parted and she could hardly see what she was doing. Her hands worked on their own, meticulously, with the stealth-like precision of lionesses. It had been a long night. The frosty water made her feel like a little girl on a February morning staring up at the winter sun and feeling no warmth at all. Felicia quietly washed the dishes.

Esmund walked up from behind and embraced her. “Good morning dear,” he said with a cool whisper on her skin. She instinctively moved her head to the right and back, resting on his right shoulder. As he kissed her neck, her cold skin ignited under his summer lips. Felicia leaned back more, until her mouth met his. “Good morning Es,” she whispered dryly.

Esmund’s caring hands moved up and down Felicia’s arms, sensing that they needed comfort, attention, and warmth. “You won’t believe the dream I had last night,” he started.

“Oh? What was it about?” she said, backing away.

“I saw Nathan, do you remember Nathan?”

“Of course I do, you two used to be inseparable.” She returned her attention to the dishes.

“Well he came to me as a ghost.”

“A ghost?”

“Yes, I was scared at first, but he only came to warn me.”

“Warn you? About what?” she asked in a lower tone.

Esmund paused and blinked a few times before answering. "Oh it was just something vague and symbolic that I couldn't really understand."

"Well what did he say?" She looked back at him, gazing straight into his eyes. He felt a touch of guilt.

"It was about you."

Felicia's eyebrows shifted to a sad position as she mouthed an "Ah."

"Don't worry darling, I don't think it was anything bad. Even if it was, we'll get through it." He hugged her again.

"As always..." Felicia turned back to the sink.

"It would be interesting to know exactly what it all meant though."

"It's just a dream Esmund; don't pay too much attention to it." Without glancing back at him, she felt like he was going to continue so she interrupted with: "Can we change the bed sheets?"

"Why? I like the white ones."

"I know, but they stain easily."

Esmund laughed and embraced her, "I didn't know we had a problem with dirt."

Felicia smiled and replied, "Well you know how clean I like to keep everything."

"Yes, I know," he responded, "and thank you. I almost feel guilty sometimes for not helping out as much as I used to."

"Oh please," she added, "I couldn't ask any more of you."

"Sometimes I don't think you ask enough."

"Well that just means I can handle things myself."

"Don't let me get lazy here," Esmund jokingly said, "or I'll have to dream some more to keep myself busy and entertained."

Felicia wiggled out of his arms and walked over to the table with a clean pair of plates.

"I'm going to figure this dream out; it's like nothing I've ever had before. So crisp, so..."

"You'll just confuse yourself in some subconscious mess."

Esmund smiled and jokingly asked, "So I should just drop it?"

"Leave it be. Everything is fine isn't it?"

"Is it?" he asked, stopping her on the way to the stove.

She replied with a quick peck on the lips, "of course."

They both smiled. Felicia turned her attention back to breakfast.

"What are we having?"

"Scrambled eggs."

"Oh you're an angel."

"Not quite, but enjoy."

Soon they were both seated at the table and enjoying a deliciously cooked light breakfast with two glasses of tomato juice. The summer sun visited through the windows of their roomy kitchen and graced the lovely couple with its pleasant presence. The skies were a vivid blue. The birds were chirping as if spring had come again. The kitchen was spotless and the food tasted well.

"Oh, I just remembered," Esmund began, "your mother called yesterday."

Felicia slowed her chewing. She put down her fork and it rested on half of an egg.

Esmund noticed Felicia's change in mood and said his next words more gently, "She asked that you call her back sometime."

His wife remained silent and swallowed her last bite.

"Felicia," he said, "Why have you been growing so distant from her? Why not give her a call? Your mother is alone after all."

"It's none of your business Esmund," she abruptly snapped back.

He looked away from her and now stopped eating his food as well.

"I'm sorry Es, I..." she stopped and rested her head in her left hand. He noticed a tear run down her cheek.

"Felicia, dear," Esmund briskly got up from his seat and went over to her. He wrapped his arms around his wife. "Does it have something to do with Erica?"

"No..." Felicia replied distantly. She leaned into him. "I'm fine...really."

Esmund kneeled and gently lifted Felicia's chin. "Are you sure?"

"Yes," she said, getting up and taking her unfinished breakfast to the sink. She filled another glass of tomato juice and took a pair of pills out of a white bottle.

Esmund rose up and brought his dish and glass to the sink. He put his left hand on Felicia's right shoulder. She looked up at him.

"Maybe you'll reconsider taking those today?" he humbly requested.

"Es, we've talked about this before."

"I know, I know, but haven't you ever considered a less lonely future in this house?"

"No." She swallowed the pills and downed the tomato juice. She had lied.

* * *

Esmund confidently knocked on the door and in a moment it opened. A homely, dim light shone from behind the man in the entrance.

"Esmund! Felicia!" David greeted them.

"Good evening Dave," Felicia politely said. Esmund shook the man's hand.

The trio stepped inside.

"How's my favorite couple? I'm glad you could make it tonight!"

"We're great, thanks for inviting us," Esmund replied as he took Felicia's jacket and hung it in the closet.

"Oh, of course. You two look like you need to unwind a bit," David said as he took a sip of his martini.

"And you look like you're working on a light hangover for tomorrow morning," Esmund jokingly replied.

"Ha ha! There's the good old Es I know!"

Felicia excused herself while the two friends stepped into the living room, full of David's usual guests. Esmund guessed that there was the same amount of people as usual. David had not seemed to change his hospitable and social ways of always inviting everyone he was the least bit acquainted with to his house on any given Thursday night. The parties were always in carefree celebration of the coming weekend. Esmund was never jealous of his friend or any of the numerous guests; Felicia gave him all the company he needed. They walked over to a slim, lanky man of average height in a yellow Hawaiian shirt at the mini bar.

“Esmund Benetton, Oliver Sims, Oliver, Esmund.”

“Hello Oliver,” Esmund extended his hand. Oliver shook it with a flimsy grip.

“So Es, I was just telling Oliver here about how Susan is pregnant again!”

“Oh,” Esmund said in a sad surprise, “congratulations.”

“Wait, wait, I didn’t tell you yet?” David asked.

“No.”

“Boy, I tell you having kids makes you lose track of everything else in life.”

Esmund opened his mouth as if to say ‘I wouldn’t know,’ but hesitated and remained silent, just offering his friend a polite smile.

“I’m happy for you Dave,” Oliver added, “honestly, I don’t know how you’re going to manage a third one. I have enough stress with just little Dan.”

“Oh you’re doing fine,” David said, “it’s a bit easier once you’ve fathered at least one!”

“Do you have any kids Esmund?” Oliver asked.

“Ah, no.”

“Yeah Es, I’ve been meaning to ask when you’re going to have a little tyke of your own running around here. My son could use a bit of company you know!”

“I want one very much, but it’s not entirely up to me,” Esmund replied while his eyes found Felicia on the other side of the room. Their eyes met and she smiled a sad smile before returning to her conversation. She finished a glass of tomato juice and got herself a martini.

Esmund’s mind drifted away from the party. He saw the fields of Scotland on a pleasant June day. He wished for a breeze but the winds were calm. The rain his grandmother predicted did not care to arrive. The skies were as peaceful as they had ever been, without a single wispy cloud. A father put his strong, aged arm around his son as they stood and watched the sun begin to set.

“Dad?” the little boy asked, “Where does the sun go every day?”

“Well Esmund, the sun has to rest just like we all do. It can’t just shine all the time. Even you can’t keep that great smile of yours up all day!”

“Aw, dad. Stop it! Where does it really go?”

“You really want to know?”

“Yes!” the boy jumped in excitement.

“Our planet spins round and round each day. When it turns towards the sun we get morning and day but as it keeps turning the sun goes out of view and we’re greeted with night.”

The little boy stared up at the sky in awe.

“And you know what’s even more interesting?”

Esmund turned to his father with wide eyes that asked ‘what?’

“We revolve around the sun.”

The little boy’s eyes grew even wider. He looked around and said, “I wish the sun would never leave.”

“Why not?”

“I don’t like the night. It’s scary.”

“Scary?” his father asked, “what is there to be scared of? Your mother, you, and I are all together and safe.”

“I don’t know...there could be monsters out there.”

Esmund's father laughed. "Well maybe there are..." The hand that hugged his son now shot down to the youngster's tummy and tickled him. "How's that for a monster?"

"Dad! Daaad!" Esmund yelled while jerking and laughing.

His father stopped and held Esmund close. "Let me tell you a secret son."

Esmund grew quiet and stared up at his father.

"The monsters will only bite if you let them in."

"I won't dad, I promise I won't."

The father smiled and patted his son on the head. "You know what I wish?"

"What?"

"That you find a nice girl to make a wife and that you bless your dear mother and me with a grandson."

"A girl? Oh no! Never!" Esmund drew a thoroughly dissatisfied look on his face.

"Don't worry Esmund," his father said, "You'll grow up to be a great man with a great wife and a wonderful little boy who you'll teach about the sun and how to keep the monsters away."

At that moment, but only ever so briefly, little Esmund tasted the future.

Esmund's thoughts drifted from the field of his childhood to the years that had passed since then. He felt the sting of regret. He recalled how one day his father decided to move to America, taking his wife, his little boy, and his profitable tea company with him. Esmund remembered growing up on this side of the Atlantic and how his father always hoped his son would inherit the company. He never pushed Esmund, he never told him how to live or what choices to make, but any stranger could see that he wished with all his aging heart that Esmund would follow in his footsteps. However, when Esmund grew up he decided that his father's business was not his cup of tea. The company went under, as did his father's health. Both of Esmund's parents were gone now. He knew he had to live his own life, but at times he still felt like he failed them by letting the company go. He had not graced them with a grandson either.

Esmund's attention returned to the cozy and dimly lit living room. He looked around and Felicia stuck out to him for some reason. Then he realized why she looked so different. Dave had on a green shirt. Oliver wore yellow. Rebecca's dress was red. The entire room was full of color. He himself was wearing white. Felicia was the only person in the room to be in all black. Her eyes had met his again, now with a shade of concern. She could tell he was slightly hurting. Esmund smiled and his wife returned the heartfelt gesture.

"So Felicia, tell me how you've been!" Rebecca said.

"Oh, nothing special. Esmund and I are doing well."

"He's around here often but I haven't seen you in some time! It's nice to know you're still with us," Rebecca jokingly said.

Felicia politely laughed and said, "Sorry, death hasn't bitten me yet."

"Don't talk like that! You look fantastic!"

"Thank you. You seem to be doing fine too."

"Oh you know me, always the busy housewife. Timothy and Jimmy keep me on my toes."

Felicia looked away from Rebecca and took a sip of her martini, which she had not previously touched.

"So how has Erica been? I've seen less of her than you," Rebecca inquired.

Felicia's eyes returned to Rebecca's. They simmered with resentment. Rebecca obliviously gazed on, awaiting an answer before feeling a bit uncomfortable from Felicia's look. Rebecca swallowed and checked her hair.

"I wouldn't know," Felicia finally replied, "We don't keep in touch."

"Wow, really? You two were the closest of sisters!"

"Don't remind me."

"What happened?"

Felicia was annoyed and hesitated. She took a big gulp of the martini.

"What is it dear?"

She took another sip of her martini before answering. "One day she changed and decided to leave us, but right before she did she tried to force her new way of life upon me. When I didn't follow her, like she expected, we went our separate ways."

"Oh that's too bad. And didn't your father leave as well?"

Felicia looked at Rebecca as if she were ready to rip her throat out.

"Felicia," Esmund said as he walked up to his wife. "Honey, I have to talk with you about something." He saved her.

The pair walked to the porch.

"Are we leaving already?" Felicia asked.

"We'll leave whenever you want, but I wanted to show you something."

He gently slipped a key into her soft hand. She looked at the golden piece of metal and then back at him.

"We have a beach house all to ourselves for the weekend."

The porch light bathed the couple in a soft, enchanting light as the waning moon watched over them. Esmund smiled the same bright, full smile that had always made his father proud. Felicia said nothing; she just grasped his cheeks and gave him a long, sweet kiss. She needed to escape.

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Esmund's hands quickly worked through the folders in his file cabinet. "Where? Where is it?" he whispered to himself. His eyes darted from folder to folder but he could not find his old journal. It was not of great importance that he find his old writings, he was just the type of person capable of gently lifting out the best from the past and enjoying it. Whereas Felicia was one to generally discard what was behind her, Esmund embraced the days long gone. Felicia's recent shift to forward-focused thinking only made him wonder more and more often why there was a great rift between his wife, her mother, and her sister. What had happened? They seemed to be a tightly built family, three strong women who managed quite well without the man that chose to abandon them. Esmund was in the mood to find answers or just take a look back and smile at the scribbles of yesteryear.

He finished the last cabinet and cursed to himself. He hoped that Felicia had not thrown it out as she had developed a recent penchant for getting rid of things that she said "weren't worth remembering." Esmund could never agree with that notion. No matter how sweet or painful the past was, he felt that it should never be forgotten.

"Where have I not looked?" he thought. And then it came to him, the closet. "Of course!" he thought, "with the size of that, anything can get lost in there." He rose to his

feet and walked across the room to the walk-in closet. A breeze came through the room and the closet door lightly shook. Esmund stopped with a slight surprise and then his dream flashed back into his mind. He looked down and realized he was standing in the same spot Nathaniel had been when he woke up and first saw him. Esmund swallowed hard and opened the closet, deciding he would try to figure out the dream again later.

The closet was a sizeable walk-in opening in the corner of the master bedroom of the house. It was the size of a tiny bedroom. It even had its own window. Esmund pulled down one of the window shades and looked down upon the street in front of his house. He saw his next-door neighbor Simon with his son on a shiny new red bicycle. The father was teaching the youngster how to ride it. For a moment, he closed his eyes and pictured himself with a little boy down there. He could almost feel the warmth of the sun on their skin and the child's lively laughter. Esmund swallowed hard again and looked away from the window.

He turned around and found himself staring at Felicia's dresses; he again noticed that most of the pieces hanging down were all of dark colors, either a deep blue or plain black. Most of what Felicia used to wear, the colorful summer dresses, her lady's hat, a yellow blouse, and a pair of lime green sandals, were carefully folded under the darker clothes. Those things had not been touched in some time. Summer was almost over; he wondered why had she not worn any of the warm-weather attire?

To his left was his small collection of suits. Esmund brushed his hand through them, greeting the friends that knew him best. Not a single speck of dust emanated from them, he kept them in pristine condition and wore them often. For a brief moment he looked back to Felicia's more colorful clothes and felt a bit sorry for them. He kneeled down and began to look through the boxes that were carefully stacked under his suits. Esmund went through them like the file cabinets, and with the same amount of success. It was not until he searched that top shelf that he produced the prized journal he was looking for. He pulled it down slowly, as if indulging in a handshake with an old friend while looking deep into his eyes.

A shriek came from outside and Esmund dropped the journal. He peeked through the closet window again. Simon's son had fallen off the bike and was crying over his bloody knee. He felt sorry for the child as the red liquid painted the concrete. He wondered how Simon felt at that moment, what he was saying to his boy, and what Esmund himself would do in that situation. He drew a small blank before coming up with an answer, a miniscule moment before clarity but big enough to make Esmund subconsciously wonder if he could handle being a father. The thought bubbled up into consciousness and Esmund immediately answered himself, "yes, of course I can." Felicia never doubted him, so why should he doubt himself?

As Simon and his son headed back to their house, Esmund turned around to pick up the journal he had dropped. He kneeled and took the old paper in both of his nostalgic hands. It was then that he noticed a shade of red that seemed so familiar. The journal had fell right next to the colorful clothes Felicia wore no more and he noticed a crimson fabric in the corner. Her favorite dress, neatly folded in the corner, untouched, just like Felicia's past. Esmund reached for it and pulled it out.

The dress still retained its deeply vibrant color but felt awkwardly heavy. Esmund squeezed his fingers together and realized that there was something inside the dress. He gently unwrapped the fabric to find a weathered notebook. It took him only a moment to

recall what it was: Felicia's old journal. She had shown it to him and all the sweet words she had written inside when they first got married. It warmed his heart to know how deeply she felt and that she fully reciprocated his love. He treasured this more than his own journal. He had to take a look.

Thursday, February 7, 2001

Erica got out of the hospital today. Her right arm was badly broken so they had to keep her there a little longer than for the usual fracture. Her doctor encouraged her to start a journal to warm her arm up and get it conditioned for regular use again. She wasn't very open to the idea. To give her a boost, I said I'd start a journal too and she promised me that she would write as much as I would write. That's why I started writing this. I hope it helps. ... Mom was really worried about Erica but the doctor says she'll be just fine; she just needs time to heal. ... I'm helping mom out as much as I can, she's still doing a great job at the office, and she might even be promoted! She's always been such a hard worker and I hope that this company can finally see all that she's worth. ... I'm doing well, still a little lonely but never sad, I don't let it show ... this entry is all over the place, I don't really know what to write or how to write but I guess it's good to get in the habit of dealing with whatever's on your mind on paper ... I'm wrapping this up because Erica and I are going out for a walk and we need to be back before dinner's ready. Mom's making stir fry, Erica's favorite.

He remembered Erica and his mother-in-law. They were good people who took well to his relationship with Felicia from the beginning. Her mother was one of the happiest people at their wedding and Erica used to always treat Esmund like a big brother. He missed them and could not recall the last time he saw or even heard from Erica. He flipped a few pages ahead.

Sunday, November 17, 2002

I met someone very interesting this week. He's a handsome guy called Esmund ... Mom thinks that's a strange name, but I like it. It's just one of those things that make him stand out in a special way. ... Erica has Toby, Sarah has Max, and I have Esmund ... He makes me feel special. ... Erica thinks he's cute but that doesn't matter. What's even more wonderful is that no one in my life has been as sweet to me as he has been...

Esmund smiled and wanted to think back to the month they met, but hesitated. Felicia was the only good thing during that time. He didn't want to recall the accident. He skipped a few pages and one line out of the Tuesday, April 29, 2003 entry caught his eye: "Months ago I said that no one in my life had been as sweet to me as Esmund had been. Well I feel even more strongly about it now. Honestly, I don't think anyone in my life will ever be as sweet to me as he has been." Esmund was touched. He remembered her words and flipped back to the entry he had read before. He compared the two lines and just smiled, exhaling a sigh of happiness and fulfillment.

Friday, June 27, 2003

Esmund and I finally did it! We're married! ... I couldn't be happier if he brought me the world in our wedding bed tomorrow morning because to me, he is the world. ... I just wanted to jot these few words down quickly before we left for our honeymoon. Life couldn't be better. ... Each passing second seems like a sweet kiss from Esmund on my eager lips. ... I love him. I love everything.

The next few pages were surprisingly blank. Esmund thought that that was where the entries stopped until one he had not seen before came into view. Unlike the rest of the journal, this page was in bad condition, almost like Felicia tried to crumple it up and throw it out. The entry was inexplicably short:

Tuesday, April 12, 2005

Erica, why? I hate you for what you did to me.

"Why the two year gap?" Esmund thought, "I guess there's less to write about when things are going well." He looked back at the date, Tuesday, April 12. "Felicia visited her mother and sister the weekend before," he recalled, "yes, that's when David and Susan had their first child. I had to go away on business and couldn't come with Felicia."

He paused and tried to replay that month in his mind. A realization occurred to him. "April...April...that's when Felicia first started to act differently. I remember! She came back from the trip and she was almost a completely different person. She looked forward to it so much but came back so pale and with so much sadness. That's also when Erica left Felicia and her mother. What happened that weekend? What did Erica do?"

He brushed his hand over the bitter page and felt bumps in the paper. Somehow he knew they were Felicia's tears. His heart grew empty. He wanted to help her; he wanted to know what had happened to make her cry; and most of all he wanted to take her pain away from her. Esmund quickly flipped through the next few pages, skipping an entry and going back to it after realizing it was the last one in the entire journal. He noticed a name that he never thought he would see.

Monday, July 18, 2005

I was thinking back in time today, something I try to never do anymore. Emma came to me in a dream last night. I cried so much in the morning. I couldn't help it. I just thought of that darling little angel, how much we all wanted her, and how it almost killed us to lose her. ... I dreamt about her growing up and showering us with her smiles and joy. Esmund would love her because I know how much he wants a child. I would care for her like my own. Maybe Erica would have stayed if Emma was still around ... I vengefully thought about my father. Is Emma the reason you left? You couldn't handle it? Well how were the three of us supposed to cope you bastard? You wouldn't have cared even if your daughter was still alive ... I can't bear to think about this ... I thought about calling my mother for consolation but I knew that wouldn't help. She thinks I'm still the person I used to be. ... She thinks I'm nothing like Erica, but I'm not, and I can't bear

lying to her. ... I couldn't say a thing to Esmund; I wouldn't want to unload any more of my pain on him. He's the greatest thing I could ask for and lately I've done virtually nothing for him. I'm the type of wife that would give daddy a real reason to leave. ... I'm sure Esmund knows how much I still love him and always will and I am so sorry for not showing it. If he only knew ...

“Emma, poor little Emma,” Esmund whispered. She had been mentioned only once in his presence and he never pressed to find out more. He just knew that Felicia and Erica’s baby sister died in childbirth. It was another dark, unnerving shadow that weighed on his wife.

Esmund wished with all of his heart that Felicia was home right now. He wanted to hold her, to stop her from saying anything like what was in the last entry, and to love her. “How could she even think that?” he thought, “she has always been an angel, a little distant lately, but still of love and passion ... still the woman I married!” He held the red dress and wished that she would just wear it. A vicious notion crawled into his head like a tapeworm. He thought that he was losing his wife. A tear rolled down his cheek. Esmund had to talk to her; he had to know whatever she was not telling him. Most of all, he had to help her.

He wiped his cheek, closed the journal, and neatly folded it back into the beautiful crimson dress. He reached to put it in its place and then stopped when he felt something smooth and cold on the back of his hand. Esmund felt a disturbingly strange sensation and the expression in his face changed correspondingly. He put the folded dress down next to him and reached back to what lay underneath it. He pulled out a slim square box that was blacker than anything he had ever seen. It was ice cold to the touch.

The metal container opened without a sound. Esmund’s eyes grew wide when they saw what lay inside. He worriedly put the box down as he looked down at the very outfit Felicia wore in his dream. The cloth was as black as the box and made of a fabric the likes of which Esmund had never seen before. Something struck him as awkwardly wrong about the outfit. He didn’t dare touch it.

In the corner of the menacing box, Esmund saw an earring. It was in the shape of a trio of metal claws, wrapped around a ceramic ball that had a black and yellow pattern around it, almost like that of a tiger. It was not Felicia’s. It looked vaguely familiar but he could not put a name or a face to it. There were two dried red drops on the earring.

* * *

The road stretched into the horizon on a beautiful summer afternoon. On the right, fields of corn graced the scene, the golden heads of the stalks turning to all who passed by. On the right, a peaceful landscape with gentle flowing hills and tall grasses flowed like the waves of the sea. The car moved along peacefully on the lonely road.

“Thank you,” Felicia broke the beautiful silence.

“For what honey?”

“This trip... I think it’s just what we need.”

“I’m glad you feel that way. I hope to clear my head and get some rest too.”

“Es?” Esmund looked over to Felicia from the driver’s seat.

“Do you know what this drive reminds me of?” she asked.

“What?”

“The way we met.”

Esmund smiled and nodded but felt a sting inside. He tried to focus on the present. “The scenery is more beautiful right now.”

“Yes it is, but don’t you remember how I loved the tall pines along that road?”

A different stretch of road opened up before the couple. Esmund was a few years younger, but still looked similar. His hair was longer and his clothes a little more loose and relaxed, just as he was during those times. Felicia still had golden streaks in her beautiful auburn hair. Her eyelashes were slightly curved too much and she wore more make up. She was wearing the crimson dress. Towering trees hugged the two-lane road from left and right while the moon, faintly shining through the clouds looked down on the couple-to-be from above.

“Thanks for driving me home Esmund,” Felicia weakly said.

“It’s no problem; you’re on the way to my place.”

“Really, I feel bad. I don’t usually get like this.”

Esmund laughed, “It’s ok, I’ve seen much worse.”

“I hope you haven’t been drinkin’, and if you have ... you’re doing a good job of not showing it,” Felicia jokingly replied.

“No, I’m very light with drinks. I always get stuck being the designated driver while everyone else gets smashed.”

“I would rather have a sensible soul at the end of the night than a drunk one.”

“Yes, exactly,” Esmund looked at her in surprise.

“I know I sound like a bit of a hypocrite saying that with the way I am now but you know what I mean ...”

“I definitely do. I don’t believe you can just drink your problems away.”

“Is that what you think I was trying to do?”

“No, sorry,” Esmund tried to recover, “I was saying that as a general statement.”

“Relax, I’m just joking. You’re such a gentleman, that’s impressive.”

“And you still look so pretty when you’re so drunk, *that’s* impressive.”

They both laughed.

“Look at you, Mr. Serious and you fire off one like that!” Felicia said as she brushed her hand through his hair. He tried to fix his hair. “No, keep it; you look a little more rebellious that way. I think it’s sexy.”

Esmund smiled with a hint of embarrassment and gently replied, “Ok.”

“It’s a beautiful night isn’t it?” Felicia remarked as she looked outside, leaning her head on the window.

“I don’t like the fog but it is a nice night.”

“Oh, I love the darkness and the fog, so mysterious ... and these trees! Have you ever seen them this tall and grand?” Felicia laughed. “Sorry, that’s the alcohol talking.”

“No need to apologize, you’re by far the most interesting drunk person I’ve driven home.”

“And you’re by far the nicest guy I’ve ever spent more than five minutes around Esmund.” She turned her head and looked at him with her pleasant eyes. Esmund could not help but stare at her.

“You can call me Es.”

They both smiled and Felicia slowly turned back to the window. He kept looking towards her and smiling. She closed her eyes and started to fall asleep, still grinning.

That darkness would be the last calm moment Felicia would experience right before the collision. The vehicle flipped over, flew over the ditch, and hit a tree. Esmund and Felicia wore their seatbelts but as they were both jerked violently to the right Felicia's head went through the passenger side window. Glass shattered. Metal crumpled. The wheels eventually stopped spinning as the car lay upside down on the edge of the forest.

Esmund was banged up but otherwise fine. Felicia was knocked unconscious. He spent the entire night in the hospital watching over her. She came to in the morning and he was by her bedside, bandaged up and slumped over in his own arms.

Felicia's eyes opened. She was in a pale white room and tried to move her hand. The first thing she felt was the IV in her wrist. She looked around and realized she was in a hospital. She could not remember how she got there. Erica was asleep in a chair in the corner of the room. Her sister was still wearing the yellow and black striped dress. Felicia always said it resembled a tiger pattern. She looked towards the window on the right and could see the morning sun greeting her. To her left lay Esmund, eyelids fluttering. "He must have just fallen asleep," Felicia thought. She noticed a dozen drying roses in his left hand, gently dripping on the bed. She smiled and tried to sit up in bed.

Esmund was awakened by her movement and jolted upright.

"Oh, hi, sorry..." he muttered before realizing who he was talking to. "Oh my God, Felicia...I'm so glad you're awake."

She just smiled at him and made no reply.

"I'm so sorry about the accident. I don't even know what happened. We must have hit something in the road. You remember how foggy it was..."

"Esmund, stop ... please, it's ok."

He anxiously moved his lips and tried to say more but she put two fingers on his mouth and he stopped.

"These are for you," he said, raising the roses.

Her eyes said thank you as they looked deeply into his. He smiled.

"How are you feeling?"

"I'm fine but I don't really remembering anything after I dozed off in the car. I'm more worried about you Es, you look like hell."

He tried to rub his eyes awake and she rustled her hand through his hair again.

"Don't worry about me ... I was so worried about you."

"Oh yes, here I am with just a scratch or two and a mild headache while you haven't slept all night and have at least a dozen bandages on your face alone. And roses too? Gosh, you didn't have to..."

"I wanted to."

"Thank you."

"Oh, don't say that, I feel so bad for putting you here."

"Accidents happen."

"I'm so sorry this one happened."

Felicia put her fingertips under his chin. "I'm not Es."

He stopped worrying and looked at her. Felicia began to lean up towards him but he stopped her and leaned in towards her. They briefly kissed, parted, and then their lips

met again for a second, much longer time. Both closed their eyes and just tasted each other. A rose petal fell into Felicia's palm right before Esmund took her hand. She wrapped her other arm around him. In the corner, Erica was still in the same position but her eyes were slightly cracked open and she was gently smiling.

The engine softly whirred as Esmund accelerated. "That...was one crazy night," he said with a long sigh.

Felicia was looking out the window again, to the cornfields. She turned toward Esmund and brushed her hand through his again, just as she had done for the first time, years ago. He forced a smile.

"That was the first night I met Erica," he said, changing the subject.

"Hmm," Felicia responded, turning back to the window.

"I remember that dress she had on. I thought it was almost funny, going to a hospital all prettied up like that."

"She always had a killer style, even in the worst situations."

A silence divided them.

"You know, I started believing in luck after that night," Felicia said.

Esmund glanced back at her.

"I met you, we survived a pretty gruesome crash, and ended up together."

He smiled, "is that why you wear that necklace? For luck?" He looked at the necklace lying in her bosom. It had a golden chain and a small black sun with curvy rays extending out from it. Felicia glanced down on it with a light frown.

"Oh, you know I just got that this year."

"I know, you've never taken it off since."

"It protects me," she said with a firm seriousness.

"Protects you? From what?" Esmund jokingly asked.

"From all the things in this world that seem to emit light but are really drowning in darkness."

* * *

The match softly struck the box and ignited. The fire burned in Felicia's eyes. She missed the warmth of life. The night was a cold companion, even in the summer. Felicia closed her eyes. All that darkness. All that pain. All the nightly screams. Life haunted her. She didn't notice the shadow crawling up behind her. It spread over the den like the black of night after sunset and it made the candle glow seem that much brighter. It was only sunset, she was lighting the candles early. Felicia opened her eyes.

"Felicia, we need to talk," Esmund said with an overpowering sense of seriousness in his deep voice. She squinted her eyes as if she was about to cry, still kneeling next to the candle.

"Felicia," he hesitated but then softly erupted, "I don't know what's going on with you. I want to help. I want to be your husband. I want to love you and I want you to understand how much I truly think we should have at least one child."

His wife remained silent.

"I know it hurts ... to think about Emma. I can't tell you anything that'll make it hurt any less. But what happened to her will not happen to our child."

Felicia backed up into a table and fell the short distance to the floor. She started sobbing. Esmund knelt and took her left hand in his. He massaged her wedding ring finger, working his way up to the aging gold bracelet that was one of a thousand symbols of their love.

“I understand that because of your father you’re afraid that I might leave one day, just like he did,” Esmund said. Felicia turned away, back to the candle. The light reflected in her tears. He continued, “I promise you that no matter what happens, I will never abandon our child. I would never do that to you or repeat that part of your past.”

Felicia bowed her head and then quickly looked up at Esmund, burning a hole in his eyes. “How, Es, how can you guarantee that?”

Esmund sadly looked at her. She began to turn away but he gently took her face in his hands and stopped her. Felicia turned back towards her husband. “I can’t guarantee anything, I can just give you the same promise and the same love I always have.”

Her eyes wandered down, almost closing, as two big sour tears rolled down out of them. They rolled down the soft hills of her cheeks, leaving pieces of themselves behind in her pores. Gravity brought them down slowly at first, and then quickly, until they merged with Esmund’s fingers, tenderly clutching his wife’s bitterly sad face. He wiped away her tears and put his fingers to his lips, tasting her sorrow.

“I can only continue to give you all of my heart, as I always have, and promise to be the best father that I could possibly be.” He took two of his fingers, still damp from her tears that he kissed and touched them to her forehead. Felicia looked up at the love of her life. Her lips trembled and then she slowly turned away, breaking his caring hold on her face.

“It’s not just Emma ... or my father.”

Esmund tried to turn his head to look into her eyes again, but she kept turning away. Felicia leaned in dangerously close to the candle.

“Esmund...”

The silence clutched his heart.

“If we have a child,” she whispered, almost blowing out the flickering flame, “it won’t be normal.” She rose to her feet.

Esmund looked up at his wife; he was in her shadow now. “Felicia, I will love our little boy or girl no matter what.”

She turned back to him and fell into his lips. He did not have to say a word. She knew he understood, agreed, and repented. She trusted him. He trusted her. They were husband and wife, a *real* husband and wife who loved each other more than life itself. Felicia cradled him in her arms and repeatedly kissed his forehead.

“I...I...I’m so sorry for all your pain Felicia.”

“It’s ok honey...it’s ok. I haven’t been an angel who deserves better.”

He looked up at her with confused eyes that masked a hint of clarity and understanding. “I think I know.”

Felicia froze. She grew cold and looked back at him with fear in her eyes.

“I...I found the black box in the closet...with those clothes and Erica’s earring.”

She looked down but Esmund’s fingers gently lifted her chin.

“Tell me...please just tell me.”

“Esmund...”

“Yes?”

“What you saw wasn’t a dream.”

His mouth gaped open. He kept staring into her eyes, those same big, dark, lovely eyes that had just penetrated him. He kept trying to find a cruel joke in them, an illusion, anything but the truth. Esmund kept trying to wake up. Felicia brushed her hand down across Esmund’s cheek; her touch was ice cold. She showed the faintest sign of a smile.

“Tell me everything,” he said, mustering up courage.

“I will Es... I’ll show you.”

Something about the way she said those words comforted him but did not sit right with the depths of his soul. He trembled. She kissed him.

“I deserve the truth...” Esmund whispered.

“...yes, yes you do.”

“Because we’ll always be together.”

“Always...”

Felicia kissed him again. Her lips were cold, as if there were no life left in them. The candle blew out.

* * *

The midnight sky was crystal clear. One could see the stars even with sunglasses. It was a special night tonight. It was a time of truth, a time of love. The moon shined gallantly through the skylight and swam with Felicia. She stopped under the opening and looked up at the lovely pale orb. The two spirits greeted each other, one pale and dead, the other pale and also not quite alive. The pool water circled around Felicia’s slender body, stalking it like a vulture.

“Hello my opaque angel,” Felicia whispered.

The moon reflected brilliantly in her eyes. She was familiar with the sensation. There were many moments during many dark, brooding nights when she stopped to admire the tainted white sphere. It was the only true object of light during the night, like a distant sister of the sun, a reminder that there is light in this world, even in complete darkness.

“How are you my sweet?” Felicia continued, “I’m staying in tonight, but soon we may have new company with us.”

Candles lined the rim of the pool, gently igniting a room that was otherwise drowning in darkness. The shadows around the pool moved with the midnight breeze. She could feel the night stalking its prey outside, moving swiftly and smoothly, like the water around her soft and sensual body.

Felicia leaned back and floated in the water. She closed her eyes and felt the gentle flow of the pool. Her lips protruded gracefully from her face, kissing the air around her, reaching for the sky. She could feel the pool lights glowing, ever so slightly warming the water, and surrounding her. They were tentacles of light that slithered through the liquid in which she bathed, begging her to stay, pulling her in, and not letting her go. But the light was never her friend. She found more comfort in the darkness. Felicia only confided in the moon, as long as that round creature was visibly above her, she never felt alone. After a peaceful moment with her dear friend, she continued her backstroke.

“Es...dear Es,” Felicia thought to herself.

The darkness did not answer her.

“Why did she separate us like this?”

One stroke, two.

“Didn’t she like you after all?”

One stroke, two.

“Wasn’t she happy for her little sister?”

One stroke, two.

She envisioned a figure wrapped in darkness, except for the black and yellow tiger stripes of her dress and earrings. Three claws gripped the spheres hanging from her ears. Felicia whispered out loud in a menacing voice: “I will never forgive you.”

“She took your very life from you Felicia.”

One stroke, two.

“How can you contemplate doing the same to Esmund?”

One stroke, two.

“Making him live with this curse?”

One stroke, two.

“A child...”

She stopped. Felicia grasped her flat and smooth stomach.

“But it will be born with it regardless...”

Her eyes grew sad.

“A daughter, a son, either way... a murderer,” she whispered.

Felicia descended into the water before a tear could roll down her wet cheek. She felt her veins pulsating with cold adrenaline. She considered staying under water forever, never coming back up. Esmund would be spared. An innocent child would go unborn and would be spared her life. “Maybe Emma was spared,” she thought. “Maybe she was lucky to never enter this world and live with these feelings.” She grew absolutely still. The water began to creep into her. “I’m giving up,” she thought, “daddy would be proud.”

Felicia jolted up out of the water, coughing. She felt blood trickle down the side of her face. She grabbed her nose but it wasn’t bleeding. Then, Felicia slowly reached up and wiped her eyes. The red monster that came from within lingered on her fingertips. A drop fell into the pool and quickly dissolved, as if it had never existed. She looked up at the moon again.

“I will not deny my child the chance of life, no matter what kind of life it is.”

Felicia swam on. She saw Esmund. She saw his smile, his short but well-groomed hair, his eyes, his lips, and his love.

“Do you love him enough to keep him alive?” she asked herself, “or do you want him all to yourself, no matter what price he may have to pay?”

And then it occurred to her, “but if he truly loves me, shouldn’t he be willing to pay any price for *us*?”

* * *

Esmund sat in warm seclusion under the peaceful, clear sky. His head was pointed at the moon, but his eyes were closed. The bubbles of the hot tub rose up and popped all around his relaxed body. He thought of nothing but Felicia.

“Darkness, so much darkness...why? What’s going on?”

A shooting star fell overhead, but Esmund missed it.

“Felicia, Felicia ... Nathaniel?”

He sighed a long and heavy sigh.

“Am I going insane? Can I not tell between dreams and reality? No... no... how can *this* be reality?”

A breeze brushed over his upper body, provoking goose bumps in his skin.

“So cold...she was so cold.”

The bubbling hot water did not help to soothe the worrisome husband’s thoughts. He kept thinking on and on, thoughts firing like bullets from a machine gun, a war of confusion being waged in the depths of his mind, his heart refused to choose sides although it had already sided with Felicia. He wanted his wife. And she came to him. Esmund heard the glass door slide gently open. A soft sound in the night, piercing the silence. His heart stirred. His eyes opened.

“Hello...” Felicia smiled at him as she walked over, with a half-finished glass of tomato juice in hand.

“Hi,” Esmund looked up at her as she sat down, her feet resting in the hot water.

“Relax Esmund,” Felicia whispered, “Everything will be ok.”

His eyes looked up at her naively, believing, caring, loving, and hanging on to every word. If she would have told him that the sky was white and that there was no day or night, he would have believed her in that moment.

Felicia put her glass down, leaned over, and rested her head on top of his. She could feel his body relax a little bit. It was warmer than hers. Esmund lifted his head and kissed his wife on the neck. Felicia closed her eyes and enjoyed the romantic gesture. She lightly giggled and wrapped her arms around him as they returned to their original position. He massaged her hands. They both looked down at the water, their eyes glimmering with the liquid lights of the hot tub.

She reached over and got her glass of tomato juice again. She placed it to his lips. He took a sip and enjoyed it. “No wonder she loves this stuff,” Esmund thought to himself. Felicia lifted the glass to her lips. He looked up to the sky and thought how lonely the moon looked.

“Es...”

“Yes?”

“I haven’t been taking the pill.” She finished the glass.

Esmund looked up at her, eyes delighted and full of hope. Felicia just smiled and lightly nodded. She leaned in close to him and held his head, full of visions of the future.

“After tonight, nothing will ever be the same again,” she whispered in his ear.

* * *

Some people renew their wedding vows. Esmund and Felicia Benetton had no need for any more words; they renewed the passion of their wedding night. It was the thousandth time they consummated their love but it felt more special than any other for both of them, especially for her. For hours their bodies moved in unison. Her body accepted his gift as their souls came together, as one. They looked at each other in mutual bliss as the sweat still trickled down their bodies.

“Felicia... this is the greatest night of my life.” His eyes were full of love.

“We’ll have so much more to look forward to in the future.” Her eyes were still full of passion. She leaned in and embraced him.

“Yes.” He exhaled and

“I love you, Esmund.” She kissed her way up his chest to his neck. Her lips, as warm as the rest of her body, almost burned passionate imprints in his skin. He enjoyed every touch and tender kiss as she worked her way up to his chin and to the left.

“I love y...” his mouth gaped open and his breath stopped. His fingers clutched his heart. Esmund went dead cold. His body shook violently. He shrieked with all of his soul. And then he was gone.

Felicia slowly lifted her head from his neck. The blood was still dripping from her fangs. The white bed sheets were ruined. The pillows already had red pools soaking into the feathers. There was a crimson spurt on her golden sun necklace. The two holes in the side of his neck quivered and then went still. Her teeth rescinded back to normal shape. She gently put his head into its normal position and brushed her long, cold fingers over his eyelids, closing them. Esmund was dead.

She sat on top of the corpse, looking at her tender husband. He had become as pale as her now. Several minutes passed. This was taking too long. Felicia closed her eyes. The blood leaked out of her mouth and dripped on his stomach. All this time, she was wrong. She had made a mistake. The love of her life was forever gone.

The body shook. Felicia’s eyes bolted open. A quiver passed through the corpse’s legs. Vibrant blue veins began to form in his chest, his arms, his neck, branching to the sides of his face. His mouth moved. The veins began to work. They pumped and circulated cold blood throughout his body. His eyelids became black and then light again. The skin on his face shrunk to violently hug his skull. He began to convulse and then everything stopped.

Silence permeated the late night air. His eyes opened, pure black now. Esmund was reborn. Felicia, still on top of him, eyed her husband in fearful anticipation. His eyes stared right through to her soul. His upper body slowly rose until he was face to face with Felicia. An apocalyptic silence and agony cascaded into the moment.

“I love you too,” Esmund finally said.

Felicia shed two tears and smiled the biggest smile her heart could muster. Esmund leaned in and kissed her. He could still taste his own blood on her lips.