

Light

by Elena Estevez

I look down at my desk to avoid the direct sunlight shining through my grade school window, invading my eyes and causing them to create flashes of circular dots in the darkness of my blinking eyes. I close my eyes again to accept the darkness, and let it take over the invading light spots until they go away completely. As I open them again, they readjust to the lightness of the room. I go on with my studies and dip my pen into the inkwell, conveniently positioned in the hole on the right hand corner of my desk.

I think to myself what it would be like to be stuck in a hole.

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It's lonely here. All I can hear are the moans and prayers of the lonely and the disheartened. The cries of the ones begging for forgiveness aren't the worst. It's the ones who have gone insane that get me. The ones who laugh, sing, cry, and scream, because they have been in here for so long staring at the dark, sitting in the cold, and wondering when they are going to have to take that walk.

There is only one window on Death Row. It's at the end of the long hall, right by the door that leads you out of the row. You get led out to die, and you can see pure sunlight one last time before you do. They're cruel like that. Making us sit here day in and day out in the cold darkness. They want us to go insane. They want us to pay for what we've done.

I've been paying for my crimes for fifteen years.

My eyes have grown accustomed to darkness, but still there's nothing to see. Because of my diminishing eyesight, my other senses grow stronger. I can smell everything, especially my own stench. We are in these cells for almost twenty-four hours a day. We do everything in here: exercise, sleep, eat, piss and shit. Some days I'm too lazy to get up so I just piss myself. I'm used to it. It's no different than pissing in what they call "the toilet."

The toilet is commonly referred to as a porcelain throne. The toilet that occupies my nine by five cell is more of a hole, and when you have to aim in the dark, you need more than just a hole. There's no point trying to aim into a hole in the dark when you're just going to soak your shoes. So I piss myself. It gives me a sense of warmth anyways.

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There's a guy that has been here for two months. He screams about the smell. The stench of piss, shit, sweat, and rotting food is too much for him. So he pukes, adding to the buffet of smells.

I hate thinking about these things, smelling these things, hearing these things, so I rely mainly on what I can see. I think about the things I see: soft delicate hands reaching out for me, phosphorescent blue eyes, and reflections.

I never thought I'd fall in love...especially in this place.

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The first time I heard my love, I was lying in my cot. I was getting ready to die, thinking about dying, preparing myself. As I was about to fall into the dark quiet abyss, I heard a moan. It was a long delicate, almost sexual, moan.

When you've been in here for so long, you learn to pick your sounds. This sound caught me and reeled me in. I was weak at the time. No point in trying to keep yourself healthy when you're just waiting to die. I rolled out of my bed and crawled up the steel door of my cell. I managed enough strength to pull myself up to the small rectangular cutout that they put into the steel door, at eye level, just high enough to give you light and hope.

That's when I saw them, those eyes peering back and that hand reaching out. For who? For me, I was certain.

"Uh, hey." I tilted my head back just enough so my neighbor could see my smile through the rectangle.

No response.

"Name's Parker. What yuh in for?" I knew the answer. Murder. Something needs to be killed for you to end up here.

The eyes widened, and quickly shut. The hand that was so delicate and outstretched clenched up and withdrew itself. I heard another moan and a collapse.

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That was three years ago. I never thought I'd care so much for someone. After that moment I started making an effort. I started trying to live. I ate more than I usually did, and worked out in the cell to make sure if My Love ever saw me, I'd look good. My daily routine grew into push-ups, abs, squats, lunges, and the like. Every day. Twenty times a day.

When I'm not working out I'm looking through my window. Usually My Love will look back, and sometimes a hand will peek through My Love's window as well, reaching for me. I sometimes send over a wink, or tilt my head and smile, and sometimes I get a wink right back.

In those moments I can't help but be happy, because nothing else mat-



ters. Not my cell or my sentence. Not the stench or the screams. Just a wink. A singular wink makes that dark cell a little less dark. Those days, The Wink Days, I'll just sit in my bed and picture that wink.

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I take My Love's hand and pull it through the county fair my town holds every fall. As a kid my favorite part of the fair was that game with the milk bottles stacked up that you have to knock down with a baseball. I was a pretty athletic kid, but even then it always took me at least fifty cents before I could knock them down. The best part of that game is that it always wielded the largest prize: boys got to choose a baseball card, and girls got to choose a stuffed animal. Boys could choose a stuffed animal if they wanted to, but you'd be marked as a sissy for the rest of your life.

My Love and I walk over to the game, and I hand the vendor one dollar. He hands me the first ball. As I lift my arm to throw the ball, I flex my arm as much as I can and throw my love a winning smile with all my teeth. The windup is the most dramatic part, so I make it count. I give my most professional exaggerated windup and throw the ball with all my might. The ball crashes into the bottles, right in the center, and sends the liquid inside the bottle every which way. I end up getting soaked because of how hard I hit the glasses.

I turn around and My Love has the biggest smile on. The soft hand reaches up and wipes the liquid off my face, slowly and sensually. I know what's coming. I grab My Love's small waist and pull her toward me. My Love wraps those delicate white light arms around me and I pull My Love in for the most romantic, passionate kiss I have ever given anyone in my life. The hands slowly glide down under my ass and squeeze.

Suddenly we're back in my old bedroom ripping the clothes off each other, and kissing all of the bare parts. My pants finally slip off and I feel a delicate cold hand reaching around the base of my penis and pulling. I moan, half out of pain and half out of ecstasy, as an inmate violently smashing his head against his metal door wakes me up.

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I won't always be here.

D-day is coming, and it's coming soon. In fact, the preparations have begun. Yesterday they came into my cell to ask me how I'd like to die. I picked what everyone picks: the gas chamber. They say it was created as a more humane way of execution, for me it makes no difference. I'd just prefer to die alone in a chamber than as a spectacle to satiate their lust for death.

Today I'm still sitting, waiting to see what the next step should be. I've

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lost the will to live again. What's the point? I'm dying in a couple of days anyways. There's no point working out. There's no point eating. There's no point in trying to love...

I turn to the light directly coming through my hallway window for the first time all day. I don't need to look long before I can see the hand reaching. This hand is my escape, my refuge. In this place I have nothing else to hold onto, except maybe the thought of dying.

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It's funny, the things you think about when you know you're going to die. I think about beer: smooth, cold, and refreshing. Taking a nice long chug and letting it sit in your mouth for a little bit to get the bitter taste before it slides down your throat. I love that taste. The best is having some beer after a nice big cheeseburger. When I got little pieces of bread stuck in the crannies of my gums and teeth, I didn't even try to get them out. The trick is to drink the beer while the bread is still stuck in there so they soak up the taste. Then later, when you try and get the bread out you get a little reminder of the beer.

I used to give any excuse to have beer: games, tailgates, parties, anniversaries, birthdays, holidays, remedies for colds, and poker night with the boys. I used to have beer seven days a week. I haven't had beer in fifteen years. Damn. I hear they let you pick your last meal. Maybe they'll let me have a burger and some beer.

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It's my last night in my cell. My meal is ready, and although I'm not allowed to have beer, my burger does taste pretty damn good. I got a big cheeseburger with all the fixings: tomato, onions, lettuce, ketchup, more ketchup, and some mustard. I also got some french fries, a chocolate milkshake, and some cheesecake. I really wish I had some beer though.

On the row, we hate the guy that gets his last meal. Just imagine, you're sitting there in the cold darkness just having eaten a mushy excuse for a dinner, and you smell meat, pure unadulterated meat. It's one of those rare smells that reels you in, and everyone gets reeled in on these nights. As the guard walks slowly down the hall you start hearing pounding on all the steel doors, and yelling, "Hey buddy, why don't you throw some of that over my way?"

The guard always smiles when he walks down the hall with someone's "last meal" because it's pure torture; it's torture for the person eating it, and torture for those who have to endure the smell. The guards carrying the meal always walk slowly, just slow enough so the smell settles in everyone's cell for the rest of the night. When my food sits outside of My Love's cell I hear a faint moan, and then crying.

The best part about the food is that it's hot, which is very rare on the row. Every day I'm used to the cold bland mush that has just enough nutrients to keep me from passing out. This food is very different. After the first couple of bites I can already feel my stomach churning, but I don't stop. I let the hot meat sit inside my mouth until it makes my whole body warm and I get goose bumps. I start slowly at first to let the food settle and to let the flavors, that I haven't tasted in so long, soak into my tongue. My primal instinct kicks in, and I start devouring the food. A bite of burger, a fry dipped in my milkshake, and then a handful of cheesecake. I start smearing the cheesecake all over my burger and stack the fries inside. After swallowing it down with a big chug of milkshake, I feel it coming back up. But I refuse it. No. I have to do this. I've waited so long for this. I take one more bite and it all comes up.

What was once a rich delectable aroma now reeks of pure acid and cheeseburger. This is how I spend my final night. I'm weak from all the retching, and my body aches of hunger. I smell like death. I hear laughing up and down the halls, and whispers of what an asshole I am. I know I am. Everyone is before they die, it comes with the lack of caring, and now I understand.

I think of the crying in the cell across the hall and what pain My Love must have been in smelling the food, and what pain My Love feels now that

I am in pain. I can't bear looking across the hall. I can't bear seeing the glint of those sad eyes in the moonlight. Yet something stirs in me. I drag my weak body across the slippery stone cell that is now covered in my vomit. I reach the door and look up. The moonlight reflects off the stone in the hallway, allowing a rectangular light to enter my cell. I look back at my cell, and I see reflections again. This time light reflects off the past twenty years of my life: the thin mattress that has taken to my body shape, my etches on the stone, and the dingy hole, which I had given up on using. My body has touched every cold surface in this cell. My body knows this cell. I'm not sure I'm ready to leave it yet.

I grasp the steel until my hands are suction cupped to the door and pull myself up to my window. I hold on to the corners of my window so I won't fall, and look out. To my dismay, nothing is there. No one is there. I am alone.

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I've always thought about how I'd say goodbye.

This morning I think of saying goodbye to My Love. I know that I haven't been the best Lover, and that I don't deserve a proper goodbye. Yet, I know My Love will miss me. In fact, I have no idea what My Love will do once I'm gone. Who will that hand reach towards? Surely to no one else in the row. Who will meet those eyes? No one else cares like I do.

I am back on my cot now, laying in my vomit soiled clothes. I stare at the window and imagine the guard coming to lead me out of my cell. I imagine ripping free of my shackles and going to My Love's door, where the hand will be waiting for me. I imagine demanding the guard to open the door, and moved by pure sympathy, he does. I imagine running in and embracing My Love, hugging tighter as My Love hugs me back, finally kissing.

I hear the door open at the end of the hallway, and as I snap out of my daydreams I realize that I'm hugging myself.

The footsteps reach my door and I sit at the corner of my cot preparing to be taken away. I hear the key go into my lock. The door opens, and two guards come into my cell to escort me for my final walk down the row. One of them immediately grabs his nose and holds back a gag from the stench.

"It smells like shit in here! What the hell happened?" He looks at my jumpsuit and makes the connection, "Strip."

The other guard grabs my collar and yanks me up so the other one can unzip me. I am immobile. I am limp. This is my last touch. They lay cuffs on me and start to lead me out of the cell, stark naked.

I finally bring my head up to look at My Love's door one last time. The

hand is there, reaching for me, begging me to come to it. I start shaking, trying to break free. The guards are surprised, and my left arm manages to get loose. The strength I had worked so hard for comes into play when I pry my right arm from the other guard's grasp. I reach with my cuffed hands to grab the hands, but before I fold my fingers around the hand I'm pulled back by my hair.

"And where do you think you're going," one of the guards growls at me.

"I can't," I said, "I'm not ready. I need to say goodbye!" I start thrashing again, but this time the guards are ready. They drag me screaming down the hallway. In my thrashing I notice the light. This is the first time I see the window that's light had haunted my cell. The light of the window stops me and I catch myself staring at it. I let the light encompass me, show my perfection and my flaws. I take in its warmth. I let the alien invade my body and possess me so that I no longer have to think of my fate. Right before I step through the door I take a long look at the sun. I let it engrave my eyes, before I step back into the darkness.