

## The Love Story

As he shifted his weight on the couch to face her he noticed a glint of light on the curve of her sapphire eyes. They were radiant spheres gleaming with effervescent energy and spirit glowing like crystal globes in the sky. They reflected the power of a resilient bond, a sovereign nation existing independently from the world. What he saw can only be described as the stirring expression of the purest and most powerful of human emotions, the expression of love. Looking into those sky-blue gems bursting with iridescent life force, he couldn't help but smile. "I love you," he said.

"I love you too," she replied.

Charlie looked at her. She was beautiful. He put his left arm around her, pulling her closer and wisped the long auburn hair out of her face. He whispered in her ear as he leaned in to her, smiled, and began to kiss her ardently. She was the most important thing in the world. They were so happy together.

But that was all in the past. In the present Ziola was just a memory and *they* were a lost recollection. He liked to remember, anyhow. It was hard for him to believe it was seven years since he last saw Ziola. Things were changed since then. His life was different. He was different. Charlie was now in the army.

He had short brown hair with eyes that matched his military haircut. His well defined muscle mass showed under the drab olive tank-top and olive pants that gripped his body. His boots were polished black like mirrors, and a silver chain hung around his neck. Attached to the chain was a silver cross that sparkled brightly in the sunlight. Charlie was a soldier in the elite special forces unit known as the Green Beret. It was a well-trained combat unit stationed at Fort Benning, Georgia.

The last time he saw Ziola he was nineteen years old.

In the hot golden illumination of the summer dusk, he sat smoking a cigarette in front of his barracks on a small green canvas stool. Almost dejected-like, he stared off to the distance, looking at nothing, his mind in another place. He took a final drag off the cigarette and flicked the butt. It sparked as it hit the ground and

he exhaled a blue cloud of smoke. A bead of sweat formed on his forehead and slid down his face. He was thinking about Ziola.

He didn't always think about her, but not a day went by that he didn't feel her love. Love was everything to him. Love was everything to the world. He always thought their love for each other was meant to be. "Love is the strongest force in the world," she used to say. "Love can conquer all things." That's why it was shocking to Charlie when it all went away. His parents taught him that true love was unconditional love. The movies taught him that real love would last forever. But those were just social aphorisms. They were lies.

Sitting in front of his barracks, Charlie thought about the time he slept in his car out in front of Ziola's house. The white siding of her house looked blue, cast in the haze of the weak gray light of the cold autumn morning. He woke up early from the pain in his neck and drove his car to the bakery to buy pastries so it would look like he was just stopping by to do something nice. Ziola's mother answered the door. She was a small lady with reddish-brown hair, cut short and held back in a style that made her look motherly. Her skin, like the siding of the house, looked blue in the early morning light.

"What are you doing here, Charlie?" she asked.

"I-I-I j-just thought I could bring some pastries for you."

Ziola's mother sighed. "Ziola is downstairs. She doesn't feel well, but I guess you can see her."

Charlie walked through the kitchen towards the stairs and it came from under the table snarling at him. The white of its teeth extended beyond its face. Ears back, growling, it threatened. It was the Sharpe, the new dog given to the family by a lesbian couple who was moving to a new apartment. The dog became a new part of the family, a favorite member, just about the time that Charlie and Ziola began to have the quarrels.

"Emily! Stop that!" Ziola's mom shouted.

The dog continued to growl as it slowly walked towards Ziola's mother, leaving Charlie with a clear path to the stairs.

Charlie walked down the stairs into the dark basement...

He sat in his barracks cleaning his M-16 assault rifle on a small table in front of him. He was lucky to have his own quarters since most people had to share rooms because of the overcrowding on the base. Charlie

was fortunate to have more space. It provided him with more privacy. It gave him sanctuary.

The room was small, the floor made out of cement. In it a small cot was positioned in the corner, a desk and bookshelf against the wall. A television sent out flashes of light as it displayed images of the daily news while a reporter relayed information. On the desk there was a small lamp. It illuminated a framed photograph of a pretty blond woman with green eyes. Her name was Corissa. She was his most recent girlfriend.

Charlie looked at his gun in pieces upon the table and threw the stained rag on top of it. With the flick of his wrist he struck a match against the edge of the table and held it to a cigarette in his mouth. He leaned back in his chair and looked around the room. His eyes rested on the picture of Corissa and he walked over to the desk to take a closer look. Then he pulled out a black notebook from within the top drawer of the desk. He opened it randomly and looked at the page. It was a poem he once wrote about Ziola:

#### The Light

I'll never forget the look on her face when she told me that she loved me. There was a special glint of light in the corner of her eye, the glint that tells a person that something is special. Her eyes always had that special glint of light. It shined in her eyes, in a way that made her appear to have more of a soul than anyone else. It was the glint of light that makes a person seem more real.

Her name was Ziola, she was the only person ever able to understand me, other than my brother. Of course my brother and I are too similar to be considered separate. We were raised together and grew tall under the same sunlight. But Ziola was different. She was of the moon and stars. She understood me differently.

Ziola had long auburn hair that looked very much like a river of fire. It was thick, shiny, and smooth. Her skin was pale like the moon but unblemished like silk. Of course it was that special glint of light in her eyes that I was attracted to. That light in her eyes that allowed me to see. To see who I was, to see that I was special, and to see what was important in life.

I remember the first time we were together after we had become a couple. It was a bright summer day in early June. The forest enveloped us with its sweet smells and sounds. Everything was in bloom, and I can remember that the leaves on the trees were greener that day. As a matter of fact, all of the colors were brighter that day. It was as if everything was illuminated and in a literal sense...the colors were brighter. I have never seen colors as bright as the colors I saw on that day, and I will never see colors that bright again. I attribute this to Ziola's own inner beauty, and the reflection of the beauty that she saw in me, through the glint of light in her eyes.

The sun seemed to cast a more dramatic light on things that day more dramatic than any light I have ever seen and more dramatic than any light I will ever see again. It seemed to illuminate the white, fluffy, dandelion seeds that were floating throughout the air like a school of fish in the ocean. Light and puffy, they seemed better that day.

We laughed and we talked, nothing in words stands out...it was just a normal day between the two of us. Except everything seemed brighter that day. The sky was a deeper shade of blue, and the grass was a greener green. In Ziola's eyes, I saw for the first time, what it meant to be loved.

Those are the days a person never forgets. The days that are better. The days that are better not because of what you have done, but because of who you are with. The days that are good, just because they are good. Those are the days I will never forget.

When a person makes you feel better, and makes life better, and it can all be seen in the air outside, and it reflects in their eyes, that person is a person I can never forget. When that person casts light on a dark and bitter soul like mine, turning a black hollow heart into love, that person is special. That person makes the world outside, look just a little better.

I'll never forget Ziola's face when she told me that she loved me. I'll never forget that day in early June, when the colors seemed brighter, and life seemed better. I'll never forget the feeling of love. I'll never forget any of these things. But there is one thing left unsaid...As much as I wish and as hard as I try...I'll never forget the day... the light, drained out of her eyes.....

Life without Ziola seemed impossible at first. He was so dependant on her. She was so much a part of his identity. It took Charlie a long time to figure things out. He had a hard time believing that a person could fall out of love. Charlie had to teach himself that the romanticized conceptions of love were just social aphorisms. However, though Hollywood love was just a cliché, love itself was no illusion. As time went on, after the loss, Charlie began to understand the concept of love differently. There was so much pain involved in loving another person. The word love did not refer to the emotion that caused the deep affection and fondness between two people like Charlie always thought of the word. Love expressed the relationship of power and control that people had over each other. To love meant to have the power to destroy. To love meant to use the power of destruction to eliminate fellow humans, be it emotionally or physically. To love meant to feel hostility toward or to detest. To love was to hate. Charlie learned most of this from the deep pain he felt by her loss.

Charlie walked to the bookshelf next to his desk. He was the only person on the base to have such

an extensive collection of literature. He had books written by all of the great champions of love. Through the great poets he had an understanding of the purest of human emotions; Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet, Hemingway, The Holy Bible, Mein Kampf, Nazi Germany, White Nights by Dostoevsky, The Handmaid's Tale by Margaret Atwood, Love in the Times of Cholera by Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee. By reading these great works he was able to understand errors in the social aphorisms romanticized by Hollywood and embraced by society. The great poets of love retained the answers. They were his monument to love.

He picked up the Bible and looked at the cover. It was a thick black book with a golden cross on the cover. "How could one man be full of so much love," Charlie thought to himself as he set the Bible down. He reached for his copy of Mein Kampf. "How could Hitler have had so much love for mankind? Or was it for his love of Jews?" Charlie wondered. Ultimately, however, Charlie always came to the same conclusion. "Hitler must have done what he did out of his love for a woman. After all, he *did* set himself on fire with his mistress Eva Braun." It was an incredible love story. Maybe love *was* the strongest force in the world.

Charlie set the book down on the shelf and turned his head towards the television. A reporter was announcing the finding in a recent court case. "The jury has just reached its verdict in the Scott Severson trial and it is apparent they did not find him convincing. Scott Severson *was* found guilty of murder in the first degree for the brutal killing of his wife Lucy Severson who was found at the bottom of a river with a severed head."

Charlie moved his canvas chair in front of the television and sat down to bask in the cold illumination of the screen. He took a drag off his cigarette and watched the smoke get brighter as it was caught between the blue rays of light coming from the television. It was time to watch the news.

Charlie sat at a table in the bar with his friend John. John was the lieutenant of his unit. He had the same military haircut as Charlie. Even though they were off base, they both wore their military clothing.

"Aren't you glad you left the barracks?" John said.

"Yeah, sure," Charlie replied. He took a drink from the brown bottle and looked around the room. The lighting was dim and everything was illuminated in a dark orange.

“But you know I’d rather be on vacation.”

“Ha, ha, ha. When are going to stop calling it vacation? Sometimes I think you mean it,” John replied.

“I d-d-d do mean it. All this sitting around is starting to g-g-g get to me. They should send us somewhere.” Charlie’s stuttering came in spurts. It was always this way since he could remember.

“Don’t worry Charlie! Shit, that’s why I wanted you to come out tonight. A little bird told me vacation is coming soon. I can’t give you the specifics...you know...but be ready. We’ll be shipping out soon.”

“Really?” Charlie replied. “That’s great! I’ll make sure to p-p-p pack my luggage.”

“Don’t get carried away. It’s just some reconnaissance shit. No contact. But it’s better than sitting around here.”

“Yeah,” Charlie answered.

“Until then just try to enjoy yourself for Christ’s sake. Shit. Have some fun...It will be a couple of days yet.”

At that moment a waitress came to the table carrying a tray. “Two more for ya?”

“Sure,” John answered. “You want another Charlie?”

“O.K.”

The waitress walked away.

“How about her, Charlie? I bet she would be *real* nice.”

Charlie looked at her leaning over the bar to grab their drinks. She was a pretty brunette with shoulder length hair. The short skirt she wore revealed smooth tan legs and her cleavage showed by the cut of her tight shirt. “No,” Charlie replied.

“God damn it, Charlie. You’re not going to give me more of your crap on respect are you? You should lighten up a little. Are you still stuck on Corissa? Fuck!”

“N-n-n no,” Charlie replied.

The waitress came back and left the beers.

Charlie looked down at the brown bottle and then back at John who was still talking about the girl. He took a mouthful of beer, then lit a match and held it to a cigarette in his mouth. Smoke filled the yellow air as he watched the match slowly burn down to his fingers. Then it was just a small trail of smoke rolling upwards to the ceiling. Charlie blew a cloud of smoke into the air as his mind drifted away and he thought of the past.

Charlie knew a guy from high school named Nathan Swanson. Nathan was arrogant and vane. He was an intelligent guy who thought of himself very highly. He believed he was smarter than everyone else and he wanted them to know it. Often he would say things like, “you wouldn’t understand,” or “it’s beyond your level of comprehension.” Those were his favorite things to say. Anyhow, his love was a noose around his neck, it was destroying him. He loved himself so much that nobody else wanted to be near him and he had no friends. He loved himself so much he blew his head off with a shotgun.

Charlie remembered feeling bad for the guy even though he didn’t like him. It must have been lonely for him. He was full of so much love. And what a way to go! Hemingway would have been proud. Yes, Nathan was surely full of love!

Charlie recalled Nathan’s suicide was around the time he started to give up hope on Ziola. She was gone for two years by then and she wouldn’t return his phone calls. He had to drive past her house just to see her. Those days Charlie was feeling pretty badly.

One starless, moonless night, Charlie drove past her house. Looking through the black night, all he could see was the yellow glow of a lamp through the window of her room. He thought of the good old days when he was welcome to enter the house, the days before the growling lesbian dog, the days when they were happy together.

“I love you,” he thought to himself as a feeling like caustic acid swelled in his chest. He wiped the scathing tears from his burning eyes. “I love you more than anything in the world,” he said. The tears bit at his skin like voracious cockroaches piercing him like needles of fire.

Without you I live in a darkness that has enveloped my inner soul like the rapacious beast envelopes its prey with its blood thirsty fangs. I am impaled and helpless in the darkness and I can not see. I am blinded by the voracious cockroaches that gnaw at my eyes and I am burned by the caustic acid that lies beneath my skin. I need you to fill my darkened soul with the sacred life-force of your inner beauty. I want to dance with the light radiating from your eyes like the flames of a fire dance on the side of a wall...I love you...

Sitting in front of his barracks Charlie polished his boots with a cotton cloth. Every so often he lit the shoe polish on fire, watched it flare up, and blew it out. He dipped the cloth in the black oil and coated his boots, then he dipped it in water. He made tight circular motions over the toe. It wouldn't be long now. Vacation was coming soon.

The scorching noon sun beat down on his shirtless body as he worked on his boots. He was sweltering in his green canvas pants but was used to it. It was always humid in the Georgian heat. The silver cross around his neck became hot as it glistened in the sun. He clutched it with his right hand. He hadn't always been a Christian.

He used to think there was a contradiction inherent to Christianity. Why would an omnipotent, omniscient, being allow so much pain and suffering in the world? Why would God's plan have so much poverty, disease, and war? Over the years, however, Charlie came to realize it was all done out of love. God loved humanity...that's why he gave his only begotten son to die upon the cross. Jesus loved him. Jesus loved everyone. Over time Charlie became more dependant on his faith.

As he worked on his boots Charlie watched the muscular figure of Lieutenant John approaching.

"Are you ready to go yet, soldier?"

"Packing," Charlie replied.

"Make sure you're ready soon. Departure in less than two hours."

Charlie lit a cigarette and smiled. "Just packing my suitcase," he said.

John laughed.

The plane took off two hours later.

Charlie barely remembered the flight across the ocean in total darkness. The landing was vague and they moved quickly to the old fishing boat that was to be their cover for the mission. They were on the water in the cover of darkness and had a good hour on the sea before rays of the morning dusk began to paint the ocean.

There was still no land in sight.

The boat was rickety, old, and made of wood. The white paint was chipping off the outside to reveal timber beginning to rot. But it was only a disguise. The inside of the boat was sleek and well outfitted. The motor was new and fast. The console was equipped with modern electronics and satellite communication.

“The mission is reconnaissance,” Lieutenant John shouted from behind the steering wheel. The other two were in the stern angled off to the sides looking for potential problems. Charlie sat point on the bow and stared down the barrel of a mounted M-16 assault rifle. “We are to make it to the checkpoint to see if the Guatemalan authorities are working with the cartels to traffic drugs on the waterways. There should be no combat on this one.”

Charlie sat in front of his machine gun, staring out across the sea. He was glad to be on vacation again. The sun was beginning to climb high and soon the full day would be upon them. It was an easy mission. Charlie watched as land began to fast approach. On the beach he could see a young woman standing in front of a shoddy wood hut. The roof was made of rusty corrugated steel. Charlie watched her as they approached. She was just a civilian. He looked at her dark black hair and his mind returned to the past...

Charlie walked down the stairs into the dark basement. He was glad to get away from that horrible lesbian dog. He saw Ziola laying on a couch in the dim light. Her skin was pale in the obscurity and she did not move.

“Ziola,” he said.

She did not answer.

“Ziola,” he said again.

“What do you want?” she replied.

“I thought we could talk,” he said.

“I told you not to come here anymore.”

“But...”

“I don’t want to see you anymore.”

“But I love you.”

“Charlie...”

“What?”

“I’ve been cheating on you...I’ve been seeing another man.”

“But...”

“I was cheating on you for a long time...what we had...it...didn't mean anything.”

As the fishing boat drew closer to the shore Charlie looked at the woman on the beach. She had long black hair and dark gold skin. She was surely a partial descendant of the Mayans but was probably more westernized. She wore a cotton cloth wrapped around her waist as a skirt and a white low cut shirt. He was close enough to see she wore gold loop earrings.

Staring at the woman on the beach Charlie began to feel intensely. He would not be in the position he now found himself had it not been for his undying love for a woman. Charlie was in love with Ziola...and that would never change...he would be in love with her until the day he died. As the boat crept closer Charlie's chest filled with the sting of caustic acid. Thinking of Ziola his eyes welled up with tears but Charlie fought them off. Charlie would shed no more tears. From this day on Charlie would show no emotion.

As the fishing boat trolled towards the shore Charlie aimed his mounted machine gun towards the woman on the beach. She was the mother of two children, they were both playing in the sand outside the ramshackle hut...Charlie looked down at the silver cross that hung from his neck... It shined brightly in the hot Atlantic sun... As the mother of the two children was pulling her laundry off of a clothesline she looked up to see the fishing boat. She met the ship with a friendly smile. She was used to seeing fishing boats in the area, though they usually didn't come this close to the shore. As the woman slowly raised up her hand to wave, she noticed a glint of light radiating from Charlie's silver cross. The reflection of light made rings that were gleaming with effervescent energy and spirit like a crystal globe in the sky. What the woman saw can only be described as the stirring expression of the purest and most powerful of human emotions, the expression of love. Looking at the silver cross bursting with iridescent life-force the woman couldn't help but smile as Charlie slowly pulled back on the trigger.