

## INTO THE ROSE TOMB

Mónica Cristina Muñiz Pedrogo  
Literature, Department of English  
Facultad de Humanidades

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He knew on that day, far off into the unavoidable future, that the smell of the dead had never quite dissipated from his body and that his skin had brought the war with him.

By the end of an ill-fated ambush against the enemies of his nation, he was left trapped in an abandoned prison complex after his companions had hastily retreated, forgetting his unconscious body under a dozen or so corpses. With nobody else but himself and his weapons, he slept with the innocents who had perished at his hands, victims of an unfortunate case of being forcefully dragged into a battle they never deserved to be in.

He wanted to believe that his training as a soldier was enough to help him endure the pain and to maintain the discipline and order of his mind in his dire circumstances. However, the silence would attack his eardrums, overpowering his voice and letting it go into the abyss of despair.

In an attempt to stray the coming insanity, he would imagine himself at his suburban home, eating a delicious dinner with his wife, son and daughter. It would be spring and his wife's rose garden would be blooming with its colorful beauty. Peace would reign among their innocence and there would be no mountains of the dead to plague their lives.

So, when his comrades had opened the prison doors, a large burst of light reached his eyes and he felt absolute fear. His mind panicked and his body convulsed against the unnatural intruder that dared to hinder his struggle to achieve happiness. And through it all, as the soldiers grabbed him by the arms and carried him to safety, all that he could think of, all that he could *know*, was that this was the beginning of the end.

However, even as the deafening silence echoed in the deepest corners of his consciousness, the sight of his family remedied it all. He could not help but cry with joy when he saw his wife and children running up to him after the plane finally touched down on his homeland. All will be well, his wife told him between hugs and kisses. *We will be happy once again.*

There was much celebration after his return, with his military superiors shaking his hand with pride and his family and friends congratulating him over bottles of wine and roasted turkeys. A brave, *brave* patriot he was to the eyes of those around him and he would smile, content with the righteousness of this outcome and pushing down the groaning of battles long past.

As day turned to night and the moon rose on high, his wife led him to their room and laid herself upon their bed, surrounded by a lagoon of rose petals and delicate candles. It was enchanting; it was alluring, making the world fade away and just bring light upon that one moment, upon that wonderful woman that filled him with so much love and hope. She beckoned him to her, embracing him as he let his mind wander in the crevices of his desires and denial.

*Happiness is possible*, were the chants he constantly heard. And when he witnessed his family's awe-inspiring smiles as he stood upon the snow on a winter day, the cold already beginning to slowly cling to his skin, he wished for the eternity of that promise.

But it was never meant to last.

There were whispers near his ears, strange words that seeped between the cracks of his home as nails caressed his arms and neck. A horrible stench clogged his nostrils and left him with barely any fresh air to breathe in. And before he knew it, *they* began to appear, casting the shadow of their presence within the hallways, forever turning his haven into the remembrance of the past instead of a foundation of the future.

His wife would worriedly look at him, asking him what was wrong with him, but he always refused to answer. A headache, a tiredness, a lack of sleep that could be quickly remedied with a few pills and a good sit in front of the fireplace. Nothing to worry about, my children, my wife, *for all will be well.*

But his mind had no control over the might of reality, and so he would wake up every morning with the shot-out face of a woman clutching at his body. He

would look out into his front yard and an old man with his arms blown off would scream at his existence. As his son and daughter ate their cereal during breakfast, a young man with bullet holes all over his torso would sit beside them, waiting to be noticed, or maybe just witnessing what he was robbed of.

He tried to keep the visions away from his family, however. He determined to himself that they would be his reality and not his fantasy; that their existence would not encounter that of his war. And he said this to himself, like a mantra, even as a girl with black hair and a tattered veil hauntingly stared back at him.

An unquenchable hunger then came. Hour after hour, he would open the fridge and eat whatever was available. What began as a few quick sandwiches soon became a never-ending consumption of whatever edible food was in his line of vision. But no matter how much he tried, his body still weakened and the hunger intensified.

When the walls turned to steel and the carpet became bloodstained concrete, he lost the desire to crawl through the sheets and feel his wife's skin. What was once passion quickly became an unimaginable sadness. Their united breaths just gave way to the smoke of the ignited bodies, running and rolling and fire-consuming flesh to the bone until in one final stroke life would be extinguished once again. When his wife fell asleep, he would let the bloody woman embrace him on his bed.

He could feel it, rumbling from the depths of the surface, the far off walls of a war-torn building, rising from the snow and blocking the sun from his eyes, closing in on his mind, as it had already done with his body. They loomed over him with their grandeur, as masters would against their inferiors. The bars on his windows would stream their shadowy lines over his figure, clawing away at him one wound at a time.

His wife, love of his life, watched him from the corner of her eye, rocking back and forth every other night as the lights flashed before his eyes, tumbling into the fire and ash, hearing the screams of deathly echoes. She would clutch the bed sheets with her fist and coax him back to her world, kissing him within his shattering hope.

The fear and hatred, as it began to fester over his family, was nearly tangible to him. A lurking monstrosity, waiting to be unleashed; to destroy beauty, to bring ruin to happiness once cherished, to paint their frame with the nightmares of his

regrets. But his wife and children would, *will forever*, remain at the edge, never quite touching that far off world of his. He would make sure of that, no matter what.

However, the walls began to close in, suffocating him while the rest of the world moved along without hesitation. The rays of sunshine lost their splendor and the warmth of the fireplace was as hot as smoldering coals. Winter kept dragging on and the cold trespassed the vault doors and barred windows. His tears froze before they could fall and her eyes burned as the roses wilted away.

— “Darling, please come back to me,” his wife would whisper to him, an edge of desperation in her voice as she attempted to kiss his fears away.

*Oh*, did he wish to just let it all go, to succumb himself into the inner peace of his mind and heart, to ignore the chains streaming from the ceiling and the thousands of bullets that decorated the floor; to forget that his wife now cooked on old prison stoves, that his children played among broken tanks in the courtyard, and that he kept dismantling and mantling his gun over and over again until he blacked out into the vacuum of his trauma.

But he tried to resist, because his family was still there, hope and innocence still clinging to them, defining them as creatures of a better world. If they could still exist in such a way, with a twinkling in their eyes and with smiles as bright as a summer’s sun, then he would be content, despite it all. His pain lingered in the atmosphere, but it never got into their lungs and veins. They were safe. *They were safe.*

And then she saw her.

Once, and only once, did his wife turn towards the spot that had captured his eyes, witnessing his nightmare in the flesh? And before he could say otherwise, she threw a nearby cooking bowl against the wall.

The girl was still there and he knew it, and *she* knew it.

And that was enough.

On the day that winter had reached its peak with a near-unstoppable freezing force, his wife knelt next to him as he stared into the unlit fireplace. She took his hand and he could feel her warmth already being taken away.

— “Do you want to go outside?”

He slowly nodded, and she led him outside into their backyard, among the trees and monumental walls and the roof that replaced the sky. With a delicacy of touch, she hugged his body to hers and began to sway them from side to side.

— “Do you remember? Our wedding night, when we danced alone after everybody left?”

— “Yes,” he replied, his voice wavering and his eyes stinging.

And so they danced, together among the snow and corpses, immersing themselves into their own rhythm of living and dying. He let a few tears fall, laughing with his wife as they made circles around screaming victims of cruelty and greed. They scratched at their faces, pulled at their arms, stained them with their sorrow and pain, but the couple just kept on dancing.

But it would be all right, he knew, for it would all come to an end soon enough.

She let go of his body then and twirled a few feet away from him. His children suddenly appeared, running up to their mother, giggling and clinging to her legs as he slightly waved at them. Eyes blazed from the trees, faces of the lost looking on, waiting, *expecting*. There was silence.

And then she took out her gun and pointed it at him.

Precise, unhesitant, convinced of her endeavor. There would be no detours, no pleas for mercy, and no cries of desperation that would convince her of turning that gun away. From that moment on, he would be her target, and that was that.

There was a serene smile on her face, as the wind blew through her hair and the snow fell around her, a calmness of destiny, of the prophesized end of his life. He knew he should stand up and run as far as he could. He should, *he should*, but he would not let himself do it.

— “Put your finger on the trigger, darling,” she said, instructing him to do what his body feared.

He wished for all to have gone so differently. To have lived in his ignorance and have a happily ever after. Yet, despite his efforts, war effortlessly overcame him, for it was a truly powerful force and it would follow him to the grave.

But even as the dead piled on around him, grabbed on to him, and pulled him into their decomposed arms, whispering deadly prayers to his ears, he never lost sight of his family. He knew, above it all that he had one last choice, one last manifestation of his will that nothing on this planet could ever take away from him.

His family was light itself in that dark cavern and he wanted it all. To forget the calamity, to erase the bodies. To let the victims of victims lay in lifeless tranquility.

— “Shoot.”

Blood spilled anew within the tomb of a prison he had lived in for weeks, clashing against the silence of the walls and the judgment of the corpses' eyes. But as the darkness came and his world faded, the image of his family remained. Forever together, forever smiling, forever living, with rose petals falling into the void.

Maybe, in another life.