‘I think we’ve got it’ he mumbled as his subjects eagerly waited, lingering amongst the synthetic light. Coupled by their beaming smiles, the pair graciously rose and acknowledged the frail photographer for his superb contribution to their dining room shelf. He almost smiled, insisting that it was quite alright and that they would receive their photographs within days. Captivated by the alluring glow of the newborn child, the photographer’s heavy eyes trailed the family as they briskly shuffled towards the door and exited the studio. Picture perfect. The veteran detached his age-old camera from its stand and nonchalantly ambled toward the grand lighting set. The faltering lights flickered as if they frantically fought for their last breath, before he calmly raised his arm and switched them off. Solemn in his own company, the deserted photographer grudgingly stepped toward the blackest corner of the hollow studio. The radiance of the moon poured a faded glow of soft light throughout the studio, eerily projecting his shadow across the dusty, frayed floorboards toward his dark room.

The daunting creak of the wooden door was enough to intimidate the bravest man. The photographer’s weakened figure dolefully arched over the top of the staircase, pondering the first step. As the door closed behind him, his shadow was lost in the unremitting darkness that skulked all around him. Submerging into the depths one step at a time, his sullen mind was corralled by a myriad of thoughts. The endearing family of three cheerfully smiled as the photographer recalled himself recapturing their image. As he gradually continued down the staircase gazing into the overwhelming darkness, the mother’s kind face resurfaced in his imagination. Her deep blue eyes exuberantly glistened in his consciousness with a mesmerizing glimmer of ivory white. So familiar in their clarity, they simmered in his mind as he reached the cool air of the basement. As his fingers scaled the damp stone wall for the light switch, his thoughts snidely provoked him. Suddenly it made sense. Those lustrous eyes found a face: a painfully harrowing, yet innocent and graceful face. The photographer reassured himself that he was ready. ‘I can do this’, he muttered as his trembling hands identified the light switch and illuminated his sanctuary.

A vivid shade of scarlet red dispersed throughout the underground abyss, gingerly complimenting the illustriousness of his timeworn magnifying machine. The narrow room, consolatory and often reassuring to an elderly, withdrawn heart, offered him little warmth against the crippling chill of a hapless winter night. It was time. He carelessly loosened his grip on the camera and moved as fast as
his feeble frame would allow him. The miniature cabinet doors below the towering machine were immediately swung open and he purposefully reached inside. The photographer’s insipid fingers sensed the coarse texture of the delicate box. He clenched his teeth so tightly as if it would keep him together; keep him from feeling anything again. With his heart in his hands, the photographer tentatively peered into the box. The soft, charming light adorned a closed roll of negative film scrawled with the inscription ‘Forever Together’. He searched for breaths but the murky air wouldn’t soothe his reopened wounds. It had been so long. He wondered if he could go back there. If he could let her image in, where it could develop and solidify in his grief-stricken heart. Agony bubbled within the photographer as he intensely tightened his grip. The red incandescence beguilingly danced in his mind as the bewildered man acted upon his bleeding soul. He sought after the switch on the magnifier, but his desperate eyes were embroidered with tears that clouded his vision. With hands shaking in resolve, the negatives were cut and placed on the square panel and injected into the lifeless machine. He breathed deeply and flicked the switch, starting the process of immortalising the last photographs they had taken before she was taken from him.

The photographer hunched over the bench, aching and numbed by his harrowing past. He reconciled in the passive twilight, his heart softly beating a melancholic tune that could be heard miles away. The first print was finished. He grasped the photographic paper and plunged it in the pungent solution. A wicked odor of raw acidity and chemical solution lingered, gradually festering in his weakened lungs. He replaced it with the next piece of film, before rigidly swaying back and forth in anticipation of the photographs. The somber presence that the scarlet luminescence imposed was not enough to mellow a man so drunk on his own emotions. And then she appeared. Beneath the gentle ripple of the solution her eyes began to trace his memory like a ship emerging from a wintery fog. As her figure became more recognizable, she too began to slowly establish her presence in his wandering mind. Tantalizing at first, she appeared so vivid and eloquent he had to close his eyes. But even there he was not free of her memory. He had pulled back the curtain in his mind and he was assaulted by the moments they had shared. He envisaged a beautiful, untouched lagoon caressed by bold shades of green. He could almost smell the aromatic scent of Limber Pine wisp past his nose as they indulged in romance and delight. But his anguished spirit couldn’t be disguised any longer, and the photographer’s fantasy was disrupted by the despondent noises of the ancient magnifier. The darkroom that befriended him now enraged the photographer. His heart ached. In a final act of aggression he pushed the chemical bath from the bench, sending liquid and the image splashing against the floor. The tranquility of the serene darkness had succumbed to the chaos that engulfed the empty room. Loneliness invited his tears as he despairingly arched over the silver
bench, defeated by life’s cruel demise. Before the dark room consumed the heartbroken photographer, he jolted his head. A whiff of smoke and toxicity hung in the air, emitting from the magnifier and his second printing attempt. Immediately, he returned to the magnifier, only to find a burnt, shriveled negative curling beneath the globe.

He removed the melted negative and he sunk to his knees, clinging to the damaged film. The image corrupted in his hands, it was almost impossible to see her translucent face clearly amid the darkened bubbles. A lonesome tear descended down his cheek and became yet another drop of chemical solution encrypting his photographic memory, abandoning him once again in darkness.