

REQUIEM OF THE HUMAN SOUL

EXCERPT: SARAH

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Sarah

Sarah. Sarah, I miss you so much. It hurts almost too much to think about you, but I must. You are so much a part of who I am. Where are you, Sarah? Are you here, around me now? I know you are. As you said to me, years ago, you are always here, deep inside me. Our spirits joined and nothing can separate them. Not even death.

Sarah. When I first met her, I was just a little boy. Probably no more than ten years old. Sarah was in the class above me. Unreachable for a ten year old. Why she even talked to me, I'll never know. We found ourselves walking home from school together. Our homes were in the same direction, and before too long, this became a habit. Just a boy and a girl, walking home, pointing out things to each other as we went.

One day, after several months, as we were walking home from school, I realized I'd left my pens back in the classroom. I asked Sarah if she could loan me a pencil. We sat on a wooden bench next to the corn field, as she looked through her bag. She pulled out a brand new pencil.

"This is my only one," she said. "So, we're both going to get half."

Before I could say anything, she broke the pencil in two. She took out her pencil sharpener and sharpened the broken end. Now,

there were two smaller pencils. Then she said something to me that stayed with me forever.

“Eusebio, the spirit of this pencil has now been split in two. We’ll both have part of the spirit. Now, we’ve always got to be close to each other, or the spirit will get mad at both of us, and who knows what he’ll do.”

I couldn’t tell if she was joking or serious. We’d all been taught that everything around us contains spirits. But a pencil? I looked at her. Sarah Connor. She still had her Irish blood line intact. With her reddish, wavy long hair, her fair skin, her little nose, her freckles and her green eyes. I looked at those eyes and they seemed to be dead serious. Looking back at me, waiting for an answer.

“So, are you going to take your half of the spirit, Eusebio Franklin? If you take it, you’d better remember what I said about it.”

I decided to take what she said seriously. After all, who knows? And, already, by then, I was happier being with Sarah than anyone else.

“I’ll take it, Sarah. I’ll remember about the pencil spirit.”

And remember I did. To this day. As I look back through the years, I know that was the moment I began to fall in love with Sarah. I didn’t know it at the time. I had no clue what love even meant. But from that moment, there was something special I saw in her, that balance on a razor’s edge between a sublime, unique understanding of the world of the spirits on the one hand, and that touch of Irish humor, that playfulness about the most important things in the world on the other hand. It was a tightrope that Sarah walked between these two spaces, and sometimes I felt I was her balancing pole, that the things she said to me helped her to keep upright on that tightrope.

But none of those thoughts passed through my mind at that time. I was just struck by the possible importance of the pencil spirit, and I knew I’d made a promise I had to keep.

We kept walking home together after school. During weekends and Ancestor Days, when our whole community would get together to commemorate the Incas, the Mayans or the Aboriginals, I found myself always seeking out Sarah, because whatever I did, it always seemed to have an extra meaning, it seemed to quiver with a special life, when Sarah was around.

Sarah and I were best friends for many years before we became lovers. As I grew into my later teens, I would fantasize about Sarah at night, in the privacy of my bed, hormones raging. But during the day, when I was with her, our friendship seemed to have created a barrier that not even the force of teenage male hormones could shatter. I was afraid that one move as a male would do something to our friendship that couldn't be undone. And our friendship had become more important to me than anything.

Then, Sarah went through her Vision Day. I had just turned seventeen at the time. For a few weeks after her Vision Day, Sarah seemed strangely distant. I didn't know what had happened. Something had changed in her, and she wasn't telling me about it. I felt hurt, almost betrayed. I'd already come to rely on Sarah to share the world around me and give it meaning. When anything happened during the day, it didn't really have meaning until I'd told it to Sarah, and heard her laugh about it or tell me something about it that would never have entered my own mind.

More than a month passed after Sarah's Vision Day. I'd already made up my mind to confront her with my feeling of hurt, to ask her what had happened. But I hadn't yet plucked up enough courage. We were walking one Sunday afternoon in the corn field, where years earlier Sarah had given me half of the pencil spirit. Suddenly, she seemed gay and light. It was early summer, and the world was alive around us. We started laughing and playing around. Before I knew it, we were tumbling together on the ground, holding

each other. In a moment, everything changed. I realized that Sarah was holding me, not as a friend, but as a woman. My face was right next to hers. Our breath stroked each other's faces. Sarah's eyes looked into mine, and I saw something I'd never seen before. I saw Sarah's womanhood. Her eyes beseeched mine. The moments passed. It was as though she were calling my maleness out from my loins. I felt a stirring within me as I looked right back at Sarah's beautiful, female green eyes. She didn't need to say it, but she did. Her lips moved, and a whisper, barely audible, came from her.

"Take me," she whispered.

And I took her. I took her like an erupting volcano. I couldn't restrain my actions. I ripped her clothes off her, not caring as buttons were torn off. I felt her soft breasts for the first time in my life. I kissed her and felt her tongue greet mine. I smelled her beautiful scent, I licked her lovely breasts, I kissed her between her legs and was overcome by her femaleness, her softness, her scent of sex. Then, she yielded to me. For the first time in my life, my maleness took over everything else in the universe. I was a wild animal taking my mate. I thrust and thrust and Sarah gasped and yielded further. We exploded together in a moment of ecstasy that I had never dreamed possible.

We lay there in the corn field, in the warm sunshine. Nothing would ever be the same again. We touched and stroked each other. There were no words. Only our feelings caressing each other's being. Our eyes met and our gaze locked. Then, something very strange happened.

As I was holding Sarah, looking into her eyes, her face seemed to start changing shape. I was transfixed. I felt like I was in a trance. Sarah's face seemed to encompass all womanhood. She looked like Cleopatra, like the Queen of Sheba. She looked like the essence of love, of sex, of female beauty. She looked as though every woman from thousands of years of human existence was touching her spirit

and putting their essence into her. I gazed, and wondered momentarily what Sarah was seeing in my face. I got lost in the profusion of female essence that looked back at me. And then, there was a flash. It was as though two electrical wires had short-circuited. I threw back my head, as did Sarah. Deep in the back of my brain, I felt like some circuits had flashed that had never before come to life. I had no idea what had happened. I looked back at Sarah and she was no longer every-woman, she was back to being Sarah, my love Sarah.

I broke the silence.

“What just happened?” I whispered to my love.

“Our souls just touched,” she whispered back, matter-of-factly, as though something like that happened every day.

“That was for real, wasn’t it? We didn’t just imagine it?”

She nodded ever so gently. “That was for real, Eusebio. Yes, it really happened.”

As we lay there, in the corn field, as I felt Sarah’s soft flesh around me, as our breathing enveloped each other’s breasts, I realized that something very special had taken place. There was a bond that had formed between Sarah and me that was beyond any ordinary meaning. Our souls had touched. Part of me was now in Sarah, and part of Sarah was now in me. Nothing could ever undo that.

For the next few months, I felt I was sailing on air. The world had become a place of extraordinary sensation. The sky was bluer and the earth seemed to give me a spring in every step. I lived for my time with Sarah. I was engulfed by my love. Nothing else mattered to me. My family, my friends, all wondered what had become of me, because nothing had any meaning any more unless it was with Sarah.

Then, the summer months began to fall, and it was time for Sarah to go and spend her Year Away. The day of Sarah’s departure approached for me with the impending doom of a funeral. Sarah was going to spend her year with the Humanist community in Wales. Her

ancient language was Irish Gaelic, and she was excited at the prospect of spending time closer to her Celtic roots. I dreaded it.

The day arrived and Sarah left, with hugs, kisses and tears. Sarah would write to me, frequently at first and then more rarely. Our method of communicating with each other was cumbersome. Sarah had to send an e-mail to a neighboring community to Tuckers Corner, which had access to InfoCore, the system that all digital communication had to go through in the United States.

Our Humanist community never signed up to InfoCore, so about once a week, one of our Outside Guides would pick up print-outs of any e-mail messages received for us, and I would get my treasured letters from Sarah. Every time she would mention another man in her letters, I would squirm with jealousy. I dreaded the notion that she would meet somebody there, and that I might never see her again. I was hopelessly in love with her.

The only respite to this year of deprivation was my own Vision Day, which gave me a renewed strength and sense of my inner self. I began to harden myself to the notion that, just possibly, Sarah's life and mine might not remain intertwined forever.

Then, finally, Sarah returned from her Year Away. She was back. At first, we were a little distant from each other, but as the weeks passed, I could see that our separation had not touched our love. We grew together again. After some time, when we felt as close to each other as before, Sarah confessed to me that she'd had a relationship with another guy in Wales. They had spent about three months together, and she had broken it off, she told me, because I was the person she loved. I went through all the anger, the hurt, the confusion, and finally the reconciliation that could be expected of an eighteen year-old who hears such a thing from the girl he loves. Ultimately, she had broken off the relationship and, most importantly, she was telling me about it.

That was when I asked her for the first time to marry me. We were sitting on the edge of the same corn field where we had first made love. I wanted, more than anything to know we would be together forever.

“Eusebio, I love you,” she responded, warmly. I had the feeling I wasn’t going to hear what I had hoped for.

“I love you,” she continued, “not because you’re the smartest person around, because you’re not. Not because you’re the best looking, or have the best body, because you don’t. Not because you have the best personality, because that’s not necessarily true.”

We were sitting on the grass together. I wasn’t enjoying what I was hearing. She turned and pointed to a mound of earth not far from us. It was a little hillock, covered with grass, completely unnoticeable.

“I love you, Eusebio, because you’re like that mound of earth right there.”

A mound of earth! This was not my idea of a romantic response to a marriage proposal.

“I love you because you’re always there, Eusebio, like that mound of earth. I know what you are, and I can trust that you’ll always be that. You’re reliable. You don’t bullshit around. You don’t try to be what you’re not. You’re part of things, and that gives me more comfort than anything. When I left for my year away, that mound of earth was just sitting there, and now I’m back, and it’s still there. In the rain, it gets muddy and in the spring it gets a new layer of grass. It does what it should do, and I trust it. That’s what I love about you, Eusebio Franklin.”

I wasn’t sure how I felt about what I heard. But that was part of my love for Sarah; she was always taking me to some new place in my mind and soul that I hadn’t even dreamed was there. At least she was telling me that she loved me.

“So will you marry me?” I asked again.

“No, Eusebio. Not right now.”

“Why not?” I felt a terrible surge of disappointment. I wanted Sarah so badly to be part of my life.

“Because you’re not ready yet. I need to know that I’m right about you, that you really are as reliable as that mound of earth. Next year, it’s your Year Away. Go away, spend that year. When you come back, if you still want to marry me, then I’ll know I was right. Then we’ll see. Right now, let’s just love each other and enjoy being with each other.”

She put her arms around me and started kissing me.

And so it came to pass, as Sarah had predicted. I went to Argentina for my Year Away and came back wanting more than anything to marry her. I had my own infidelities in Argentina, which I admitted to her. They taught me the difference between having sex and making love. I could have sex with any woman who would have me; I could only make love with Sarah. And that was all I wanted.

Sarah was good to her word. She accepted my proposal the second time. We got married in a joyful ceremony in Tuckers Corner. We struggled like all young couples everywhere to make ends meet. I began my career as a junior History teacher at our school. Sarah, like so many others in Tuckers Corner, began her own crafts business. She had a fascination for ancient Viking art, and we put together a little metal workshop for her in the back of our small, two-bedroom house.

I felt that the spirits had smiled on us. I couldn’t quite believe that life could be so good, so right. Sarah became pregnant, and we had a beautiful baby girl, Sally. The years passed. Life wasn’t easy, we had to watch every dime of our money, but we had each other and we had Sally, who grew into a spirited and beautiful little girl. It seemed like nothing could spoil our daily routines. We tried to have

another baby, but we kept waiting without results. That was OK. Sally was our delight.

And then, Sarah began to notice that her abdomen was swelling a little, but it wasn't because she was pregnant. She tried doing more exercise, but started to find that she would quickly get tired. This went on for months, and just didn't seem to go away. One day, when we were making love, she shuddered and let out a gasp of pain. We both felt there was something wrong. But we didn't want anything to disturb the peace and happiness of our lives. We just waited for Sarah to feel better again.

She began to get terrible indigestion and found herself going to the bathroom all the time. Then, one day, she found that she had some vaginal bleeding in the middle of her menstrual cycle. We knew we couldn't ignore her symptoms any more. We went to the Tuckers Corner Medical Center together. Sally was nine years old at the time.

I wish I could forget the look on the doctor's face after he had performed some tests on Sarah. He walked into the waiting room where we were both sitting nervously. He brought us into his consultation room. He looked seriously at both of us and then turned his attention to Sarah.

"Sarah," he began gravely, "you have ovarian cancer. It's beyond the early stage, and we can't yet tell if it's in stages two, three or four, without doing surgery. If it's stage two, we can treat it here at Tuckers Corner. If it's a later stage, we're going to have to arrange for you to visit the Albany Medical Center. We would need an Outside Guide to help arrange the visit."

A terrible sinking feeling pulled me in my gut. I looked across at Sarah and held her hand. I could only imagine what she was feeling.

She went directly into surgery. They came out and told me the bad news. It was at least stage three. They couldn't treat it here in Tuckers Corner. We needed to plan for a trip outside, to Albany.

While Sarah was recuperating from her surgery, I talked with the Tuckers Corner Financial Administration. I had never in my life spent a moment thinking about these things. The Financial Administrator explained to me that the Tuckers Corner Emergency Fund was available to pay for us to go with the help of an Outside Guide to the d-human Medical Center in Albany.

I can barely remember the details. All of a sudden, life was a daze. I just remember us being driven in one of our rickety fifty-year old automobiles by an Outside Guide, Stacey, to our neighboring d-human community. There we got in an automated, high-tech taxi which took us to the Albany Medical Center. I barely looked out the window at the world around me. I could only think of Sarah's pain and fear, and hold her hand.

Stacey had arranged everything for us. She led us through the maze of strange, high-tech passageways, to an automated check-in area. I went with Sarah into the examination room, where they put humming machines around her and watched computer screens. It barely took half an hour, and then we were in another doctor's consultation room. Only this time the doctor was a d-human.

He looked at us with something like benign pity. He spoke to us slowly and simply as though we were both ten years old. Obviously, he'd had experience dealing with Primals before and this was the style he'd developed.

"Sarah, the type of cancer you have is not likely to be responsive to the old-fashioned approaches available in your community. It's an advanced cancer, known as 'late stage three'. I'm sorry they put you through a surgery at Tuckers Corner. We could have used nano-surgical techniques here to eliminate the tumor

without having to cut you open. But even here, we can't easily stop the cancer from growing back.

"You see, Sarah," he continued, "this type of cancer is unheard of nowadays. The genetic patterns that permit this have been screened out of everyone for generations. Everyone except Primals. I've never seen a cancer like this before. We had to go into the archives to identify its genetic fingerprint. The problem, Sarah, is that our whole medical infrastructure is set up to manage d-human health problems. We couldn't even begin to treat this here in Albany."

It wasn't sinking in. It didn't make any sense. This was the d-human world. They had all the scientific answers.

"What are we supposed to do?" I blurted out.

"Well, if Sarah had this cancer a hundred years ago, it would have been easy. Any medical center like ours would have identified the genetic fingerprint in a moment and created a designer protein to attack that particular cancer. The treatment would have been easy and non-invasive. It would have led to a complete cure in a matter of weeks.

"Of course, the technology still exists to do all this," he continued. "It's just not normally used. We'd have to get in touch with the CHD in Atlanta."

"The CHD?" I asked, puzzled.

"Sorry – the Center for Historical Diseases. They're the national center for archives of diseases that used to affect Primals. They're mainly a historical research unit. But they might still have some of the equipment needed to create the right protein to kill the cancer. You see, each cancer like this has a unique genetic structure, and a protein has to be individually created to eliminate the cancer."

"So they can cure Sarah?" I was jumping to the conclusion I wanted to hear.

“Well, they should be able to. I’ll have to speak with them and see what they can do. And how much it will cost. I have to warn you, this approach may be very expensive. It’s not just a matter of applying a standard treatment. They may have to retrofit certain machines and possibly even construct a machine from scratch to create the proteins that are needed. The machines used a hundred years ago for this are just historical curiosities nowadays.” He stopped and thought for a minute. “Alternatively,” he continued, “they may be able to import a machine from somewhere in the developing world. If they can find one.”

Sarah and I left the Albany hospital with Stacey. We were bewildered. We didn’t know what to think. Sarah’s life, it seemed, was in the hands of a d-human doctor and the archives of the Center for Historical Diseases. We jumped between hope and fear. But we seemed to spend most of our time with the fear. It crept into our beings and hung there, spreading its black tentacles into all our thoughts and feelings.

A couple of weeks later, Stacey led us on another visit to Albany. The doctor had the answer from the CHD. We were back in his consultation room.

“I spoke with a doctor in Atlanta whose historical specialty is twenty-first century oncology – that means the treatment of cancers. He told me he can construct the machinery to identify and create the protein that would eliminate your cancer entirely, Sarah.”

The relief swept over us. That was until his next sentence.

“The only problem is, it’s not inexpensive. He estimated the total cost for the treatment, including the specialized equipment, would be in the region of fifty million dollars.”

I felt that I’d been hit in the stomach. I didn’t know what to do. It would take Sarah and me a lifetime to earn fifty million dollars. We had no savings. The whole Emergency Fund of Tuckers Corner,

which had paid for us to come here to Albany to visit the doctor, only had about thirty million dollars in it. Where would we get the money?

“There’s one other possible alternative, if you can’t find that kind of money,” the doctor continued. “In Europe, they have more Primals and they still have some of this historical equipment in use in some of their medical centers. I’ve got a friend in London. I’ll give him a call, and see if there’s anything they can do for you there. I expect it would be a fraction of the price.”

We returned to Tuckers Corner in a daze. How had it come to this? How could Sarah’s life be at stake over money? We’re not going to let this happen, we’re going to do something about it, I kept saying to Sarah. But I had no clue what we were going to do.

The days passed. We seemed to be in suspended animation. Word spread around Tuckers Corner. Everybody was especially friendly to Sarah and me. But no amount of warmth and friendship could metamorphose into fifty million dollars. We kept waiting for a message from the doctor in Albany. Perhaps Sarah’s salvation lay in Europe.

The message came from the doctor. Stacey brought it to us. Europe wouldn’t work. It seemed they had all the equipment, but the bureaucracy wouldn’t permit it. There was a lot of political pressure in Europe to reduce the expenditures on Primal health care. It would be impossible for Sarah, as a Primal, to enter Europe for the purpose of medical treatment. If she went to Europe as a tourist, they wouldn’t treat the cancer; they would just send her back to the United States. We were checkmated by politics and bureaucracy. The doctor said he’d check into the cost of importing the machinery from a developing country, but we got the sense he was getting bored with this project and we weren’t going to hear from him again. Not unless we found the fifty million dollars.

Things were becoming critical. Sarah was getting increasingly tired. We feared the cancer was growing back. One day, we were visited by one of the Tuckers Corner councilors, Vanessa Pilger. Vanessa was a matriarch of our community, well respected and liked. When she spoke, you knew she spoke for Tuckers Corner. She sat down with us in our living room.

She told us that the Tuckers Corner council had met to discuss Sarah's predicament. Everybody in the community was desperate to find a solution for Sarah. A few months earlier, a tourist from Boston had visited Tuckers Corner and had fallen in love with our collection of ancient Peruvian and Bolivian weavings on show in our ethnic museum. He had offered Tuckers Corner seventy million dollars to buy the whole collection. The council had, of course, instantly refused. It has been a basic tenet of our community since inception never to lose the original collections of ancient ethnic crafts that Jessica Goodrich had spent so many years building in the early days.

However, the council had now voted to override this basic principle and had agreed to sell the entire collection to raise the money to pay for Sarah's treatment. For a moment, I was excited. I felt the stirring of hope inside me. It would work. We would get our lives back. I would have my wife. Sally would have her mother.

Then, I looked at Sarah and I saw her shake her head. She kept shaking her head. Softly, she spoke.

"No," she said, "I'm not going to accept that. Thank you. I mean, thank you from the bottom of my heart. I can't believe what everyone would do for me. To save my life. But I can't accept it."

"Why not? What's the matter with you?" I almost yelled out at Sarah in frustration.

"I can't accept it, Eusebio, because to do so would be to begin unraveling everything Tuckers Corner is about. I want my life. Trust

me, I don't want to die. But I'm not going to stay alive at the expense of Tuckers Corner."

This was a Sarah that I had never known. I didn't even understand what she was saying.

"Sarah, how can you say this?" My voice was still raised. "Your life is worth more than weavings. That's what they're saying. What's the problem with that?"

"Because it's the first step to unraveling everything our community is based on. I've thought about this for a while. And I've already made up my mind."

All these years, I'd never known Sarah to keep something important from me. We'd always shared our thoughts about anything. I was shocked. Sarah continued talking.

"Don't you see, Eusebio? If I accept this from the Council, then we'll get to pay for the treatment. And I'll live and we won't have the Bolivian and Peruvian collection any more. That's great. Then, what happens a year from now, or ten years from now, when someone else gets sick from a disease that costs tens of millions of dollars to cure? They will say, 'If you could pay for Sarah Franklin, why can't you pay for me?' And the next thing you know, we'll sell the Sepik River bark paintings, and the Dogon masks, and the Torajan doors. And soon there won't be anything left that Jessica Goodrich spent all those years collecting, that we've all used for our inspiration for generations. And so we'll start selling bits of land that we don't really need. And before you know it, there will be nothing left of Tuckers Corner. Just a bunch of useless, sick Primals who mean nothing to anybody, not even to themselves. I'm not going to be part of that unraveling. My life means almost everything to me. But our community means more."

Sarah sat back and a grim smile passed over her face.

“Look, it won’t be the first time a Celtic girl sacrificed herself for her community,” she said with sadness and irony in her voice.

Vanessa, who’d been observing this dialogue between Sarah and me, spoke in a soft voice.

“Sarah, the Council is aware of everything you’re saying. You’re right that we’ve never sold anything in our collection before, because we haven’t wanted to set a precedent, just like you said. But this is a unique situation. We’ve never seen something like this before, where someone so young, so full of life, is now sentenced to death, and we know there can be a complete cure if we can only pay for it. This is a one-off situation, and the Council is willing to do it, so don’t refuse it.”

“Thank you, Vanessa, but I’ve already made up my mind.” Sarah responded with a strong voice. “I couldn’t live with this burden on me, knowing I’ve started the process of destroying Tuckers Corner. How am I meant to feel, years from now, when someone is dying from breast cancer, and they’re in their fifties, and they say, ‘Why should Sarah Franklin get her life, and not me?’ How am I meant to watch that person die, knowing the community paid for my life and not for hers? We can’t get into this path. And the only way to stop it is never to start it.”

So Sarah rejected the offer from the Tuckers Corner Council to pay for her treatment by selling the weaving collection. For weeks, I tried everything in my power to get her to change her mind. All of our friends would visit and add their voices to the arguments. I tried logical reasoning. I tried to appeal to our love. I even tried guilt. How could she leave her little daughter Sally, to grow up without a mother? Never in my life had I been so angry with Sarah. How could she give up her life for a theoretical principle? How could she do this to me? To herself?

The weeks turned into months. Sarah became weaker. The good days became fewer and the bad days were more severe. Finally, one day, Sarah begged me to stop haranguing her to do the treatment.

"I need you, Eusebio, to help me through my last few months," she whispered to me, lying in bed. "I need you as my husband, my love. I can't stand your anger any more. Let it go. Please. Be there for me. Hold my hand and be with me until I get to the place where only I can go."

From that day on, I never tried again to get Sarah to change her mind. I just gave everything I had to help her through those final months. My anger didn't go away. But it metamorphosed and became anger at Julius Schumacher and Jessica Goodrich for creating the situation that we found ourselves in. Why did they reject something as basic as the d-panel for genetic screening? Something as simple as that would have prevented Sarah from getting this cancer. I hated Jessica Goodrich for never compromising on this. I blamed her in particular for what Sarah was suffering.

"Don't do this, Eusebio," Sarah said one day as I vented my anger at Jessica Goodrich. "Suppose she was right? Eusebio, that day, years ago... That day, when our souls touched..." She looked at me and I nodded back. "That has meant more to me than anything. All these years, we've shared our lives together in a way I never dreamed was possible. There have been so many times when I've said to myself, if I should die today, that's OK, because I've felt such happiness on this earth. If Jessica was right, and their genetic engineering does something to the soul, then we might never have known life the way we've known it, never have known love the way we've known it - if they'd optimized our DNA before we were born. Would you have been willing to take that risk? I don't think I would. I'd rather have it the way it's happened, cancer and all. I wouldn't lose what we've had together, not for anything."

I looked straight at her, and tried to pierce the veil of her sickness to see if she really meant what she had just said. I just couldn't tell. Was she trying to believe it to make herself feel better as she lay there in her living hell? Was she just saying it for my sake? I couldn't know.

The months continued their relentless ride. Sickness was all about in the house, in the smells of the carpet, the mess of soiled clothes, the pervading gloom. And hiding in the corners, behind closed doors, in the shadows, Death was lurking. Sarah was losing her battle to stay alive. The worst days were the days when she felt better. Occasionally, she seemed to get her energy back, and we'd go for a walk or eat a real meal. She'd help Sally with her homework. For a few hours, we'd have a glimpse of life as it once had been, as it was meant to have been for us for so many more years. For a moment, we'd forget the fate that had been seared on our family's life. We'd get a momentary lightness of heart, even a smile or a laugh. And then, without warning, Sarah's body would start shuddering, she'd try to make it to the bathroom, but before she could get there, her stomach would convulse and the vomit would swarm over the carpet and the walls, as if Death had jabbed Sarah from its dark corner, to make a mockery of our moment of good cheer.

Month after month. The only consistency was Sarah's continuing spiral of weakness, weight loss, and pain. Every day was a physical agony for her and an emotional torment for Sally and me. One afternoon, I was watching Sarah as she slept. Her eyes opened weakly and she gave me a thin smile.

"Eusebio," she whispered. I got closer to her to hear what she was saying. "When I die... Take my ashes... Wait until the first rainy day... I mean, real rain... Take my ashes to your friendly oak tree... Your totem... In Jerry's back yard... Pour my ashes into the roots, mix them with the rain. That's where I want to be." She was gaining her

strength back as she spoke. "I'll always be there, with you, with your totem, Eusebio. I'll become part of your oak tree, and I'll never be alone. Our souls will stay connected, even after I die. Part of my soul is already in you. And another part will be one with your totem. Then I'll never be alone." She looked intensely at me. "Promise me, promise me, Eusebio."

I promised her, as the tears flowed out of control, down my cheeks and splashing onto Sarah's soft, hollow face.

And then, one day, I woke up and walked over to Sarah. I was now sleeping on a make-shift bed next to Sarah, because she was beginning to convulse in her sleep and needed the space of the whole bed to herself. I knelt down to check on how she was doing, and I saw that she no longer had any breath. Sarah was dead. She had been freed from her torment. My insides let out a silent scream that echoed through the universe. For the first time ever, I got a glimpse of that dark, cold, infinite vastness of eternity, that awful void that had sucked Sarah's life from her body, and from me. Where had my Sarah gone?

The next days of my life, a different form of life without my love, without my ever present Sarah, were all just a daze of frozen emotion. Family and friends, long faces, ceremonies. Sarah's ashes in an urn. If I hadn't had the responsibility of helping Sally make it through this time, I don't know what I would have done. I was numb. How would I deal with the world without my love? How could I be both a mother and a father to Sally?

One Saturday, I was cleaning out our bedroom. Sorting through Sarah's underwear drawer, there, in the back of the drawer, behind the bras and panties and socks, was half a pencil. It was the pencil that Sarah had broken, years ago, when we were children. She had kept her half all through the years. That afternoon flooded back into my mind, so long ago, sitting on the bench, wondering if this girl

really meant that we had to be together or we would make the pencil spirit angry. That moment, I realized, that was the moment when I had fallen in love with Sarah. I sat on the floor and started sobbing. My body convulsed in big, heavy sobs as the tears started flooding my face. All the memories, all the moments of love, all the special things, they all kept tumbling into my mind, and there was no Sarah there to be with me anymore, to make more memories together. I wept for my love, I wept for myself. Then, softly, I felt an arm around me. It was Sally.

“It will be all right, Daddy. We’ll be all right. Mommy wants us to be strong and to be happy. I know it.”

How did she know what Mommy wants? It was right then, with Sally hugging me and trying to comfort me, on our bedroom floor, I realized to what extent Sally was her mother’s daughter. That same quality, that ability to seem to know things that I could never understand, that quality that had made me fall in love with Sarah so many years ago, was now expressing itself in Sally. I felt the same quizzical surprise I had felt countless times in Sarah’s presence. Did Sally know what she was saying? Was she just saying it to make me feel better? Was there another source giving her this clarity that I could so rarely find?

From that day on, Sally’s presence began to fill the void in my heart. As she grew into a young woman, she began to resemble Sarah so closely in her physical appearance, in her movements, and the way she spoke, that occasionally I would find myself momentarily confusing whether it was Sally or Sarah talking to me. A father’s pride began to mend the gaping hole that had once been a husband’s love. Sally was full of boundless energy. Yes, we had our share of fights as I tried to set down the parameters for a teenage girl, and she would get angry. What would hurt me the most, when she was really mad at me, she would spit out the words to me that she knew would

pierce through all my defenses: “Mommy would have understood what I meant...” But those battles of adolescence were just punctuations in our lives, and for the most part, as Sally’s days and months filled up with academic challenges, sports, social crises, boyfriends, all the normal milestones of a healthy growing girl, her energy swept me up in its flow and kept my heart from breaking.

That was until Gareth Lewis appeared on the scene. Not that I hold anything against Gareth. In fact, I like him a lot. He’s a good man with a good soul. But he took my Sally away from me.

Gareth was staying at Tuckers Corner on his Year Away. He came from the Humanist community in Wales, the same community that Sarah had stayed in during her Year Away, a long, long time ago. It hadn’t taken long for him to become a regular fixture at our dining room table. At first, I was happy for the company. I could see Sally’s eyes light up in his presence. I should probably have figured it out sooner. If Sarah had been around, she would have told me what was going on months before it ever occurred to me. Sally and Gareth were falling in love.

Gareth was twenty-three years old. He’d waited on his Year Away for as long as possible, a full five years from his eighteenth birthday. That was because he was so involved in his art. Gareth is a kinetic sculptor, a throwback to the twenty-first century style of art, which uses “smart ceramics”, a material that transforms its shape, color and texture within a three-dimensional space. Gareth’s art always centered around a particular theme – the assimilation of indigenous cultures into the modern world. One sculpture he gave me, still there in my living room, shows a fierce tribesman from Borneo throwing a spear. The spear then transforms into a cloud which rains onto the tribesman. As the rain falls on the tribesman, it gradually melts his features and turns him into a modern looking man, sitting down at a desk. By the end of the transformation, the

tribesman's face has lost all character, and just smiles passively into space.

That's where Gareth is at. He's moody and passionate. His art had already created quite a following in Wales among d-human society. They would sometimes come to the Humanist community of Llandovery in Southwest Wales with the sole intent of buying a work of Gareth Lewis. Apparently, in Europe there's a sizeable group of d-humans who romanticize Primals and believe they're worth preserving. These people, mostly young and liberal-minded, found that Gareth's work spoke to their political and cultural ideals.

During the year Gareth was visiting Tuckers Corner, we came to know each other well. We would sit around, after dinner, drinking too much whiskey. I would reminisce about times with Sarah; Gareth would talk about the new project he was working on; and Sally... Sally would watch me watching Gareth talking, sizing up my feelings, wondering how I would react to the coming turn of events. By that time, Sally was twenty years old. She'd gone through her Vision Day, and came out the other side a strong, caring woman; but at the same time, a loyal daughter who loved her father and knew she was everything to me.

One night, about three months before the end of Gareth's Year Away, it was clear something was up. Gareth was already on his fourth glass of whiskey, but was still nervous. His voice, usually filled with feeling, was taut. He followed me into the kitchen as I was making some coffee for the three of us.

"Mr. Franklin, there's something I want to discuss with you," he said.

That's right – Mr. Franklin. In our Humanist communities, there still exists an atavistic tradition of respecting our elders, and although Gareth would call me Eusebio when we were both relaxed, it

was quite normal for him to address me as Mr. Franklin if there was something important to talk about.

“Look,” he continued, “I don’t know how to say it so I’ll just say it. I love Sally and she loves me. We want to marry each other. I know that she means the world to you. I want to ask you, Mr. Franklin, for your permission to marry Sally.”

By this time, even I had figured out this was going to happen at some time. And I had thought through the consequences. So I wasn’t surprised at Gareth’s answers to my questions. Not surprised, but devastated nonetheless at the knowledge that I was going to lose my Sally, and there was nothing I could do about that. Nothing that wouldn’t cause untold misery to the very object of my love.

“Where would you plan to live, Gareth?”

“It would have to be in Llandoverly, Mr. Franklin. I’ve got to go back there to carry on my art. I’ve got a following there. People are waiting for me to get back. Here, nobody knows about my art, and nobody cares.”

I knew that was true. There was no arguing about it.

“So you’d propose marrying Sally and both of you going to Llandoverly?”

“Yes, Mr. Franklin. But only if you give us your permission. And your blessing.”

“What’s more important to you, Gareth?” I asked him, looking into his eyes. “Your art or Sally?”

“It’s a fair question, Mr. Franklin,” he replied, “but I can’t answer it. At least, I can’t answer it honestly. I don’t know. I love Sally. I love my art. It’s everything I am. I don’t know how I’m meant to compare the two.”

He had answered honestly. I told him I needed to speak alone with Sally. She told me she’d been fearing this day for many months. She hadn’t known what to do. She knew she shouldn’t leave me

alone, but she loved Gareth so much. She wanted to spend her life with him.

What was I meant to do? There was only one way to go. I made a toast to their love, and we all finished the bottle of whiskey. As time went on, I noticed that my drinks were getting bigger than Gareth's. There were tears aplenty, and hugs. Then, in the early hours, they disappeared into Sally's bedroom. And I disappeared into mine. Mine and Sarah's, only there was no Sarah. But there were more tears. Only these were different tears than before. Tears of loneliness. Tears accompanied by an aching, gnawing knowledge that I would soon be losing the living memory of Sarah, the young, happy face that had shooed my loneliness away.

So we had a great wedding celebration. And the weeks passed too quickly until it was time for them to go. And I hugged Sally and made Gareth promise to look after her, or her mother would haunt him forever. And I believed that Gareth would do as he promised.

And I went back to my quiet, lonely house. Where there were only memories. Of Sarah. And now, of Sally. And I went back to my teaching, telling my young pupils about the lost souls of the great warriors of the American plains, about the lost souls of the great wanderers of the Australian outback, about the vast mysteries of human existence which have now been all but forgotten. And each day, I would go back to my quiet, lonely house of memories. And I would miss Sarah. And I would miss Sally.

So it was an easy question for me to answer, when Yusef asked me if I would be willing to give my life to save the human race. The answer was right there on the tip of my tongue. I have had my days of sunshine, my moments of unbelievable joy, of wonder, of excitement, of satisfaction. I've loved, I've felt, I've created another special human life with the woman I loved. Would I be willing to speed up my return to the infinite, to join the other side where Sarah's

waiting for me, in order to save what's left of our human race? That's one of the easiest questions of my life.

REQUIEM OF THE HUMAN SOUL

EXCERPT: SARAH

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