

## Two Become One

Sarah awoke thirty seconds before her alarm clock went off. Leaning over, she rested her hand on her husband's sleeping chest and gazed at his face until his eyes slowly opened. For the next few moments, no one existed except them. No worries were allowed here, not because she would not allow them to come, but because when they came they melted against his face like fragile snowflakes. There was something unusual in his eyes this morning; it was obvious even in the darkness, though she couldn't identify what it was. She wondered if there was something different in her own eyes as well.

Her alarm clock rang well before she was ready. Before turning it off, she silently thanked him for that moment together, as she had done every morning since their wedding. While he didn't have to get up for another hour, she needed to begin preparing for the day. The first thing she did was pray. Normally her prayers lasted around ten minutes, but this morning she went for twenty, pouring out her heart with a passion that laced her whispers with desperate authority. Hers were the prayers of a woman who clung to God for her very breath. Self-sacrifice, self-denial, submission to the will of God—thus far Sarah's entire life had been built upon these pillars. However, if she was being absolutely honest, she knew that she was holding something back. Her motives were not pure, no matter how badly she wanted them to be. Buried in the recesses of her conscience was a truth so undeniable that all she could do was pretend it didn't exist. So she prayed for mercy to cover her faults; she prayed that God would forgive and accept her soiled sacrifice; she prayed that her family would be blessed and favored; and she prayed that her strength would not fail. On this last point she was adamant. Despite her tainted heart, her strength absolutely could not fail.

When she finished she walked down into the den and started up her daily workout routine. She had a bounce in her step because this was the last workout of a 60-day challenge, and because her husband, who originally pressured her into doing it with him, had fallen off after day 23. Knowing his sensitive ego, she contented to marinate in the private knowledge of her superiority without rubbing it in. Yet now that she was at the end, the temptation to brag was almost too strong to overcome. After working out she showered, dressed, and went into the kitchen to start breakfast. She made her husband's favorite: stewed and sweetened apple slices, oatmeal from scratch, toast with honey, and chamomile tea. She nodded approvingly as she tasted the apples, not quite her mother's recipe, but about as close as she had ever come to it. She glanced at her Donald Duck watch—6:13 am. Her heart began to beat a little faster. The world slept as time ran short. Closing her eyes, she leaned against the granite topped counter and waited.

At precisely 6:15 am, her husband came down dressed in his best, freshly pressed suit and sat down to eat. He wore the shirt and tie combination that she picked out for him on their last shopping date together. The shirt was a very pale, almost white pink and the tie was a rich purple patterned with small pink diamonds. Sarah took one glance at him and laughed inwardly; he knew what he was doing. What he was wearing, the citrus Hugo Boss cologne he had on, the way his beard was freshly trimmed and moisturized, it was all for her. He must have noticed that she was in need of some encouragement, and this was his way of showing it. She loved the way he loved her.

“I don’t know why you have all your make-up on this morning,” Sarah teased as he ate. “It’s not going to get you anything. You shouldn’t have used so much lotion on your beard.”

“What makes you think I want anything from you?” He sniped back. “You’re only here to wash my clothes and cook my food.”

“And judging by how well you’re dressed and how fat you’ve gotten, I’d say I’ve been doing that very well.” She knew that would get a response—giving in to temptation had never felt so good.

Her husband frowned as he put down a spoonful of now-suspicious-stewed apples and examined his midsection. “Am I really gaining weight? I thought those workout videos had trimmed me down.”

“I’m sure they would have if you had finished them.” Sarah giggled, laying the final trap.

A knowing smile crossed over her husband’s face. “Okay. I get it. You finished the tapes this morning didn’t you?”

“Actually,” said Sarah beaming, “I did. But you did very well too! You got all the way up to day 23. What an accomplishment! Honestly, Husband, I’m surprised you made it as far as you did.”

“You have waited a long time to bring this up haven’t you?” He said as he spooned up the last of his oatmeal. “Day 23?” He grimaced. “I thought I lasted longer than that.”

“A very long time. And I have heard you voice such thoughts before, Husband,” Sarah said with a devilish smile. He had another name, but she almost always called him “Husband”. It was the only name he had to which she claimed sole ownership.

He chuckled as he pushed himself up from the table and walked over to where she was leaning on the counter. “I don’t remember hearing any complaints,” he said in a low voice. As he spoke, he reached out and gently held up her chin with his fingers. After two kids and fifteen years of marriage, it amazed her that he could still flutter her heart with a simple look.

“You think you can just walk in this kitchen, eat my food and...ooh.” She gasped as his lips found the spot in her neck just above where it connected with her shoulder. “You bastard,” she whispered as her charade came crashing down. “You bastard, you bastard, you bastard.”

After a few seconds she managed to pull away, but when she did she noticed that he was looking at her with the same strange look from earlier that morning. It was as if he never really saw her until today. There was so much pride in his eyes, so much respect in his face, it embarrassed her.

“Come with me,” he said, leading her back to the bedroom.

“I don’t have a lot of time, Life and Breath,” she said haltingly.

“We don’t need a lot of time, Soul and Heart.”

In her circle of friends, she had often been told countless stories about how selfish men were in the bedroom. Over weekly lunches she listened to complaint after complaint of neglect and frustration. It never really dawned on her what a special man her husband was until she compared their love life to what her friends went through. He always paid attention to her desires, never letting her feel as if her only role in the bedroom was entirely encompassed in his personal satisfaction. Ironically though, the fact that she wasn’t bound to that role made her all the more eager to embrace it. Because she knew that he was willing and happy to do for her anything she might crave, she found unspeakable joy in doing the same for him. She was everything to him, and he was everything to her.

Their sex was more like a dance than anything else, with different emotions bursting beautifully between them as they kept time to the music. Sometimes they danced slow steps of solemn sacredness, other times they danced fierce steps of blistering passion. When he took control she felt completely safe as his firm, dominant arms swept her across the room. Then the dance changed and with a queenly elegance she took the lead, creating an intricately rhythmic choreography that he could barely keep up with. Only during sex did Sarah truly understand what it meant to be one with her husband. Man and woman, normally separate beings, but briefly coming together to fuse into...something more. It was a word she did not, and could not know, as it was not written in the languages understood by man. But whatever the word was, she knew instinctually that it meant “as humanly close to the Divine as possible.” Once it was over Sarah found herself sprawled across the bed with a smile on her lips and her clothes scattered across the room.

“Life and Breath?” Her words came between quiet heaves for air.

“Yes, Soul and Heart?”

“I love you.”

“I love you more.”

“No. You don’t,” she stated factually. Sarah rolled over until her head rested against his glistening chest.

“I’m scared, Husband.” She whispered, her voice as soft as kitten steps.

He reached for her hand and started to trace the lines of her palm with his fingers. It was something he always did when she was stressed. “I know you are,” he breathed. “It’s okay to be scared. But you are the strongest woman I have ever met. I’ll never know another like you.”

She smiled again. “I love you too. But what if something goes wrong? What if--”

“Where is your faith, Soul and Heart? We have not come so far to fall short here. God is with us. You cannot fail. We cannot fail.”

“We cannot fail.” She put as much power in her voice as she could. “Are you sure this is what you want?”

“This is bigger than you and me.” He said slowly. “We have our part to play, so we do what we can the only way we know how. Sarah... you don’t have to do this.”

Sarah knew how hard that was for him to say. She also knew that he meant every word. God, she loved this man.

The sound of faint footfalls echoing down the hall outside of their bedroom suddenly stole her attention. Their daughters, Alayah and Jannah, were getting ready for school.

“I have to go now,” she said thickly.

“Yeah. Ok, yeah. I suppose I do too.”

They looked at each other once more, their minds desperately memorizing every sound, every look, every smell, and every thought that this moment contained. Never before had the finite tried so hard to contain the infinite. Their efforts were valiant and doomed. After several seconds they dressed quickly and went back downstairs, leaving so much more behind and so much left unsaid.

The girls had just finished up breakfast by the time their parents walked into the kitchen. Their father kissed the foreheads of his three beautiful girls, speaking a prayer of blessing over each of them as he went, and then left for work. Alone now with her two girls, Sarah brought them close to her breast and started to comb their hair. It didn’t need combing, but she did it anyway. She glanced at her watch again, 6:50 am, the bus came in five minutes.

“Mommy,” Alayah said, “Those boys are still teasing me. They keep pulling my hair and calling me names and telling me my eyes look funny. I...I cried in class yesterday. I hate them! And I hate Jake the most! He always says the meanest things! Why won’t they leave me alone?”

“Still? Oh Aly, I’m sorry. Did you try to use our super-secret friendship plan?” Sarah loved her girls; she loved them more than life itself. When Alayah developed a lazy eye at three, Sarah immediately started building up a well of self-confidence within her daughter so that she would be able to withstand the playground cruelty of children. Four years later, it was unbearably painful to see that the well hadn’t been dug deep enough.

“I did try it! After school yesterday I found Jake and I gave him the cookies we made. I said, ‘Here Jake! Me and my mom made these for you. They’re chocolate chip peanut butter and they are very yummy and maybe we can be friends now and you can stop saying mean things

about me.’ He took them and said they were really good! But then he went back to his friends and they kept on shouting, ‘Lazy Eye-ly! Lazy Eye-ly’ whenever I walked by. I don’t WANT to be nice anymore! Being nice doesn’t work! I hate them and I want them to die!

Sarah started to reply but before she could Jannah jumped in and said, “There are always going to be bullies Aly—little kid bullies, big kid bullies, and grown up bullies. But you have to stay tough. They only have power over you if you let them.”

“Listen to your older sister Alayah,” Sarah said as pride threatened to choke her voice. “You must be strong, the strongest, bravest, kindest girl in the world, especially if people are mean to you. I need you to be the best girl you can be even if no one is around to tell you that. Can you do that for Mommy?”

Alayah’s little mind carefully considered her mother’s words. “Yes, I think so. Well, I’ll try. But I’m not making Jake any more cookies.” Her sincerity was enough to break Sarah’s heart.

“I know you can do it. You have such a beautiful soul Alayah. Now,” said Sarah with her eyebrows raised, “What are you to me?”

“I am your sunshine, your only sunshine.” Alayah had said the words so many times before that now she was starting to roll her eyes whenever prompted for the phrase. Sarah didn’t mind though. As long as she knew.

“Yes you are. And I’ll never, ever, ever have another. But, please, go upstairs and put your shoes on. You don’t want to miss the bus.”

A flash of fear briefly swept over Alayah’s brown face and she rushed off to get her shoes. Turning to Jannah, Sarah asked, “Since when did you become such an adult?”

“I’ve always been an adult,” proclaimed Jannah triumphantly.

“Have you? Because adults go to bed with their chores undone?”

“No,” replied Jannah sullenly, her gaze dropping to the floor.

“No they don’t. You have grown so much over the past few years, but you are still only thirteen. I’m proud of you for combing your own hair as well as your sisters, but adults take care of all their responsibilities, not just half. Do you understand?”

“Yes mother.”

“Jannah, listen to me very carefully. This isn’t about chores anymore, this is...this is bigger. You are growing into such a beautiful woman. It’s time I started talking to you like one.”

“Mommm,” Jannah wrinkled her nose. “Is this another boys’ talk?”

Sarah laughed. “No sweetheart, not another boys’ talk. I just...I just want you to be prepared. When you get older, people are going to say terrible things about you, about your family, and about your beliefs. You may hear it so much that you start to believe it. But it’s not real Jannah. This is real. The big family dinners were real. My hugs, the songs we sang before bed time, your father teaching you softball, the weekends we spent in the cabin, those were real. Don’t let anyone take those memories be taken from you. Do you understand what I’m saying?”

“I understand.”

Sarah wasn’t certain that she did; how could she? But it would have to do. If she didn’t understand now, she would soon enough.

“Don’t worry mom,” Jannah continued, “I’ll be good. And when I grow up, I’m going to be just like you.”

Sarah paused, suddenly unsure of how to respond. What she wanted to say conflicted with what she knew she should say. She tried to find a middle ground, but it was a very fine line.

“I want you to be just like you,” Sarah whispered as she wrapped her arms tight around her daughter. It was the only thing she could think of.

A beeping alarm interrupted their hug. It was 6:55 AM and the bus would be at the corner any second now.

“What are you to me?” Sarah asked, anxiety creeping into her voice.

“I am your moonbeam, your only moonbeam,” replied Jannah dutifully.

“Yes you are. And I’ll never, ever, ever have another. Promise me you will remember that.”

“I promise.”

“Okay. Okay,” said Sarah satisfied. “I love you so much. Now go get your sister and hurry outside. I think I hear the bus.”

Jannah gathered up her school things and headed to the door. After Alayah came running downstairs, still fearful she would miss the bus to school, and consequently, the world would end, they both waved goodbye to their mother, took each other’s hand, and walked outside. Sarah watched from a window as her children boarded the bus and slowly disappeared from view around the corner. Her watch read 6:58 am. For the next two minutes she sat down at her kitchen table, basking in her memories, regretting her missteps and beaming at her successes. She wondered if what she was about to do would still be blessed even if she was doing it for the wrong reasons. She thought back to the day when her husband first asked her if she would be

willing, as the task would be much easier for a woman to accomplish rather than a man. Of course she was willing, she had said immediately, if only because he asked. Unfortunately, that was the problem. A chirping alarm suddenly interrupted her thoughts. It was time to go.

She carefully packed her backpack, triple checking everything to ensure that nothing was forgotten. Then, grabbing her cell phone and a marked up map, she left the house and walked to the nearest bus stop. The bus arrived a few minutes later and, at 7:55 am, she was let off at the train station. She was several minutes early for the main morning train so she decided to sit at on a nearby bench and wait, paying extra attention to anyone who looked suspicious.

While she waited, she noticed a teenage couple sharing an iPod on a bench across from her. Their fingers were interlocked, she was leaning on his shoulder, and both of their eyes were closed. They looked perfectly happy. To her left was a Hispanic family who also appeared to be waiting for the main train. They held signs saying, “Congratulations Sergeant!!!”, “We’re so proud of you!” and “Welcome Home Mijo!” in block, multi-colored letters. Closer to the tracks was a man in an expensive suit arguing on the phone with someone who, Sarah imagined, was also in an expensive suit. It sounded like he was trying to convince the person he was talking to not to “short the stock”, but Sarah wasn’t sure she heard correctly. She knew she should be focused on the task at hand, yet she couldn’t stop her mind from wandering to her kids. So many questions kept popping into her mind. What type of man would they marry? What could she have done differently in raising them? How would they remember their childhood years? Would they question her love for them? *Please God, she thought, don’t let them question my love for them.*

Seven minutes later, the sound of the train jolted everyone’s attention. The female teenager elbowed her boyfriend and they began to gather their things. They spoke excitedly about their plans for the prom taking place this upcoming weekend. The family with the signs began jump and cheer. Children pointed at the train eagerly and the eldest woman started to cry as she hugged someone who looked to be her husband. The man in the suit snapped final instructions into his phone and ended the call. He kept glancing at his watch impatiently and cursing under his breath as if he was running late. Sarah just waited. A few seconds later, the train pulled into the station and people surged in and out of the doors. At precisely 8:02 am, her alarm clock chirped once more.

Sarah turned off the alarm and breathed deeply to steady her shaking hands. The time had come; there was none left. Yet she hesitated. The blackness in her conscience had been gnawing at her all day, so she felt obliged to bring it into open thought. Her motives were wrong, she had always known that. But now that it was almost over, she was surprised to find out that she no longer minded. Even though she believed in the promise and she knew what her faith required of her, if truth be told, she did this just for him. Their marriage, however currently blissful, was nothing but a shadow compared to the closeness that awaited them—a rich purple juxtaposed against a pale, almost white pink. In her better moments, she wished that her motivation was more spiritual, more ideological, or more pure. And maybe it was at first, but it had all been a cheap façade. It was always for him, not for God, for him. It was selfish, she knew, but it was all she had. This was his fight, and though she believed in the cause, she believed in him more. She prayed again that God would forgive her shortcomings, and as she

did a peaceful calm gently came over her spirit. Her sacrifice, stained though it was, had been accepted.

With her husband on her mind, she got up from the bench and merged with the crowd getting on the train. When she reached the doors, she opened her cell phone and slowly dialed the number that would trigger the blast mechanism in the bomb hidden deep inside her backpack.

Five hundred and twelve people were found dead in the wreckage.

She was right, however.

She did love him more.