

**MY SARA**

**BY**

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Looking back at your life, you can see it is split into three distinct stages; childhood, adolescence and adulthood. Often, the gap between childhood and adolescence is blurred, and by the time you realise, your childhood is already firmly in the past. But the gap between adolescence and adulthood isn't so fine, and often you can pin-point the exact moment or moments when you grew up - maybe you were forced to.

That's how it happened for me, anyhow.

When I was seventeen, a kid still really, my family - mum, dad, brother - and I had emigrated to Australia from England, and I'd started at a new High School. New school, new people, new country.

Disorientated was a mild way of putting how I'd felt. And, to be honest, I hadn't much liked the other kids either - no one had actually picked on me or anything like that, and everyone had been terribly civil, but no one had actually wanted to be friends.

I soon discovered I wasn't the only lonely kid in school. I'd heard all about Sara Cooper from the chatter of my fellow students - she had been away for a few weeks, on holiday or whatever - and they had said that she was weird, freaky, reclusive and a downright pain in the ass. But the first day she actually showed up, I'd fallen in love. Not that I believed in love at first

sight - I still don't, it had taken months for what I felt for Sara to develop into real love, when I'd gotten to know and trust her - but I'd known straight off she was something special. Her long, flowing dark curly hair, as much of a mess as my own dark curly hair (though mine wasn't long or flowing, thank goodness!), her anarchic, scruffy clothes and delightful disregard for school uniform rules, and her face, not traditionally pretty, somewhat sharp, but beautiful, to me anyway (hardly "freaky" by any standard) and warm, mischeivous eyes had totally blown me away. When I'd discovered she had the best brain in the class - no doubt another reason why the sport-loving jock assholes in class despised her - and a wicked sense of humour (mostly at the expense of the teachers and fellow students who irritated her), I knew I had to talk to her. I didn't, of course. I didn't have the guts. I'd never asked a girl on a date - and certainly had never been asked - for fear of rejection and humiliation - and I wasn't about to break the cycle of longing and insecurity for this girl, no matter how much I wanted her to like me. I probably would never have spoken to her, ever, had we not been thrown together for a Practical Experiment in Biology. Everyone had partners - except of course, for Sara and I, neither of whom anyone had wanted to partner, and so the teacher had put us together. So I'd talked to her.

For the first hour (it was a special two hour lesson for the sole purpose of the experiment), we'd talked about how to make the experiment work (for the life of me, I can't even remember what it was now!) and I'd been

concentrating on it only so she wouldn't think me a fool, but gradually we'd started to relax and talk about ourselves. But there was still a distance, a quiet ice between us, preventing friendship.

Sitting back, watching to make sure the Biology teacher, Mr Elliott, didn't notice we weren't working, I'd gone for broke. "Got a joke for you, okay?"

I still didn't dare actually address her by her name.

"Okay," Sara had replied, but in a listless voice, not really encouraging.

I'd carried on anyway. "I'm in Hell, right? And I've been there fifty-odd years, right?"

Now Sara looked at me - strangely, I thought. "Why?"

"Hunh?" I was distracted from the flow of the joke.

"Why are you in Hell?"

"I died," I'd told her. "Decapitated by a runaway shopping trolley."

"Obviously you died, smart-alec," Sara had replied stingingly. "But why did you go to Hell? What did you do?"

"I'm an axe murderer. It's not important, stop being awkward," I couldn't believe I'd snapped at her. I thought I'd blown it for sure.

We sat in silence for nearly a minute, then Sara said "And?"

"And what?"

"The joke?"

"Oh," I was surprised. "Er - where was I?"

Sara groaned tiredly. "You were in Hell." She'd looked around the classroom. "I know the feeling."

"Oh yeah, I'm in Hell, right?" I picked up the flow of the story. "I've been there for forty years, and it's like, really bad, really awful, yeah?"

"Hell," Sara replied.

"Right," I nodded. "Then one day the Devil comes up to me - please don't ask me what he looks like - and says I can leave. I can go to Heaven - on one condition. I have to go to Room 666 on corridor 666, and make love to the woman inside." Sara said nothing, but the corners of her mouth had flickered slightly. "I figure, okay. So I go to Room 666, corridor 666, go in, and sure enough, there's a woman in there. About seventy, weighs about ten tonnes - all blubber - she stinks, she's spotty, ugly, no tits, no hair, crooked nose, missing front teeth, bloody horrible." Sara just looked at me, and I hadn't been able to tell if she was amused or disgusted. If it was the latter, I knew I was dead already, so I figured the hell with it. "I say "no way, man!"! The Devil reappears, says if I don't, I'm stuck in Hell forever. No second chances. So I do it. I have sex with her. And it's disgusting, it's awful, I'm being sick all over her and she's *liking it* - " Sara gave a definite, if all too brief, smirk, " - so I do it, the Devil comes back, I say "Well?", the Devil says - "

"April Fool," Sara interjected.

"No," I'd looked at her befuddled, not yet realising she was supplying an alternate joke because she was enjoying it. "The Devil says "Go to corridor 667, walk down it, go out the exit." So off I go, up to corridor 667, I walk down it, but before I go out the exit, this room door swings open, and inside -

there's Mr Elliott!" Sara arched an eyebrow. "And he's on the bed, having sex with the most extraordinarily beautiful young girl. I mean, really sexy, top of the line HOT! And I go "Jeez Mr Elliott, how did you manage that?!" And the girl goes "Well I've gotta get out of here somehow, haven't I?" Much to my surprise and delighted amazement, Sara had burst out laughing. She snorted, she giggled, she shook, and the force of her hilarity was such that I'd joined in too, despite the fact I'd told the joke a thousand times before, always with a different person as the butt of the joke.

We'd laughed so much Mr Elliott had given us a half-hour detention at the end of the day, which had only made us laugh harder. By the end of the day, we'd made a "date" to go to the movies together that night.

On my way to a different class, away from Sara, Richard Warn, one of my few so-called "pals" who hung around me but did nothing but put me down or laugh at me, sidled up to me. "Gotta little advice for you, kid. You don't wanna go hanging around with that Cooper chick. She's a dog. Don't want people thinking you're weird, do you?" He'd put his arm around me slimily. "Stick with me, kid, I'll see you right."

I'd told him to stick his advice right up his ass.

The date had gone great, we'd laughed, joked, and she'd let me hold her hand during the scary part of the movie. I'd been so excited, I'd spilled my Coke and popcorn, and we'd had to change seats. But she didn't seem to mind.

I'd walked her to her front door, and she'd said "This is the bit where you're expecting a snog, right?" I'd gawked at her. "Well you ain't gonna get one. My breath smells, and I've got mouth ulcers. Wanna go ten-pin bowling tomorrow night?"

I said "Sure" so fast she hadn't even finished the sentence. She'd grinned and, without warning, grabbed me and kissed me, long and hard.

She didn't have mouth ulcers, and her breath didn't smell.

It was my first kiss, and it was great.

Over the next two and a half years, I'd been a frequent visitor to the Cooper house, and been welcomed by her parents, and vice versa. It had been five months after that first kiss that I'd first told her that I loved her. We'd missed the school bus, and had to run all the way home - to her house - in pouring rain. We'd sat by a roaring fire, wrapped in blankets, drinking hot chocolate while Sara's mom dried our clothes. There had been total silence between us for ten minutes, that wonderful, companionable, not awkward in the slightest silence between two people totally at ease with one another, and I'd looked at her, red-faced, hair wet and all over the place, scowling even, and I just came out and said "I love you."

Sara had looked at me for a few moments, then replied "I love you, too." And then we'd fallen silent again, until Sara's mom brought our clothes and we went into separate rooms to change.

Our love had been absolute, we hadn't a single argument, a single drop of jealousy or disappointment, even as she went to University and I dropped

onto the dole. We hadn't had sex, or "made love" as I preferred to call it. I was no prude, but sex seemed to sum up prostitutes on street corners or total strangers "doing it" in trashy movies, not how I felt for Sara. I'd wanted to, of course, and so did she, but we never really broached the subject. We both knew it would happen when it happened, when we were ready, when everything fell into place. Like everything else had for us.

Then one day, my mother woke me in the early morning to tell me Sara and her parents had been killed in a freak car smash the night before.

Lying on my bed the evening after going to her funeral, as the darkness began to cloud the room, one question wouldn't stay out of my mind. Did she feel it when she died? It's a question that still haunts me, even today, thirteen years later.

The police said the car went up instantly, that she would have died in less than a second.

That night, I wished I could believe that. I wished I could have stopped visualising her, trapped upside down in a wrecked car, screaming as the flames reached her and began licking at her flesh.

I'd felt sick, tried to concentrate on the good times.

Like the school play, Willy Russell's "Blood Brothers". I'd been playing a character called Eddie - a five-year old at that stage of the play - and Sara had been playing his mother (what a role for my girlfriend to play!). I'd supposedly learned some "new" words from Eddie's "rough" new friend and Sara (as Mom) hadn't wanted me to see him anymore.

"I know what you are," I'd responded in a petulant, deliberately juvenile fashion.

"What?" Sara had snapped, somewhat enjoying the fact the role she was playing was the one the rest of the school saw her as anyhow - the crazed weirdo.

"You're a....you're a *fuckorf!*" I'd responded, sending the audience practically falling out of their seats with laughter. Sara of course didn't laugh (though she'd practically choked on the first rehearsal) but proceeded to hit me screeching motherly outrages, before sobbing and clutching me to her breast - the point which had taken the most acting on my part, trying to pretend I wasn't as turned on as I was in reality. When the play was over, I'd suggested we do that part for real, at which point she'd clobbered me! Couldn't blame me for trying, though.

I'd smiled, remembering. Then I'd remembered she was dead and gone, and I'd been physically sick for nearly two hours.

All such a long time ago, yet even now, thirteen years on, very happily married, it still hurts. It always will. And even now a little corner of my heart still belongs to her.

To my Sara.