

THE GOSPEL OF THE SISTER

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1.

"There were many other things which Jesus did," wrote our dear brother John, "which if every one of them were to be written, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written." To this I would add, there are some things that can never be said unless it is first said that they could not have happened.

She was not born in a manger nor did a star foretell her birth nor did wise men arrive bearing gifts and adoration. Mary was in her own bed. Joseph, with gnarled hands, was by her side. Three old women of Nazareth came and went with pots of water and cloths. When Samantha was born and swaddled, her brother Jesus was brought in to meet her. He said nothing. He had the air of a witness. Samantha opened her eyes. Immediately she had sight, there was none of the blindness of the newborn in her. For those who look for signs, this was the only one. Every movement of her tiny wrinkled hands, the faintest curl of her lips as if her smile had been invited for him alone, thrilled his slender flesh. Her mother lifted her in Jesus' direction so that he might have a better look. Mildly, in fear, he put out a finger and touched her nose. At his touch, she closed her eyes.

I, the poor storyteller, have neither the power nor the liberty to say if he recognized her then. Recognized her, which is to say, in the infinite intimacy of their bond. But I would say that their Father's plan was already in her heart. As has been said that the first shall be last, so it was to be with the Son and the Daughter of God. Nor would Samantha ever come to resent the glorious humility into which her brother had been born.

Some would say that in order to become fully human, Jesus voluntarily put aside his divinity a little while; others, that voluntarily he became fully human a little while in order to perfect his divinity; I give no opinion, but to say that it was the same with Samantha. Their little whiles together are what I have to tell about.

2.

Mary returned often to her bed. As glorious as was her destiny, she was troubled. She could not understand why it was she who had been chosen, nor why her virginity was still with her. It was as if an enormous thickness of clouds, impenetrable, kept her from the other side of something. She suffered headaches and chills. Her rosy complexion paled. The joys of her children, the children of God, were lost on her. She nodded at their play and cooked their meals in silence. The weight of what had happened to her would not let her go.

Joseph was a good and sturdy man but his frustration grew. He attended to her bed, just as when she gave birth. He performed her chores as well as his own. He wondered at the greatness of God and the wonders of his children. He prayed for the end of Mary's virginity but he did not blame God.

Rather he took solace in his work. He built sturdier tables than he had ever built and beautiful chairs from olive wood and oak. He said little to others and became bent with care. When his sons from before Mary came around, James and the others, he hid the signs of his grief. They were hearty men as they had always been, and the sons played with little Jesus as if he were their brother, which they did not know that he was not.

Now Jesus was eight years old and Samantha was six. It is said that girls know their mothers best. Also it is said that girls grow faster than boys to perception. Her mother's distress gnawed secretly on Samantha. She prayed to her Father to reveal His plan for her but received no reply. Her gnawing deepened. One day Samantha said to her brother, "Is that a box between your ears or don't you see that our mother Mary is unhappy?"

Jesus was then immersed in his studies. "Pray to our Father," he said, scarcely looking up.

He was not an unkind boy but he was busy. God had tasked him with being a boy, and learning the Law.

"He didn't answer," Samantha said.

"Then there is no answer," Jesus said, not looking up at all.

"You're an idiot," Samantha said.

"Quite correct," Jesus said.

"Jesus!" Samantha shouted, and her shout woke their mother in the next room. She appeared in the doorway, thick with her nap, her hair askew, her fret lines deep, her smock around her loosely.

Every such sight of her mother now crushed Samantha. Jesus had been another story but on this occasion he perceived his mother's distress in the deepest reaches of his mind. "When there is no answer, we must wait," Jesus said, and went to his mother in the doorway and placed his arms around her waist and buried his face in her bosom.

3.

But in the spontaneity of his sister, Jesus knew his own deficiency. "I feel because my mind tells me to. I am like a prisoner in a cage and my mind is the jailer with the key that turns it when it wishes. Is this what it is to be human?" he thought to himself.

Later Samantha found Jesus weeping. "Dear brother, do not weep. I can't stand more unhappiness, which I fear I myself have brought about."

4.

In the courtyard of the synagogue, the boys recited and discussed. Jesus excelled at his studies. The other boys could not keep up with him. He was the first to memorize the five books and the youngest to be permitted study of the traditions. He was a prodigy. Already his teachers were imagining that one day he would be among the greats.

Jesus did not yet speak in riddles. His mind was straightforward, like a saw that loves the wood.

Samantha did her mother's chores in the morning. When she was done, she sat outside the synagogue gate and watched her brother recite. Each time he was called on, or took it on himself to challenge another boy's interpretation, she felt the pride of kinship. She herself did not study the Law. It was not permitted. Nor could she follow precisely when he argued for compassionate exceptions to the Sabbath day or the duty of care to the stranger, even the Phoenician, or when he expounded the most obscure and hidden prophecies. The clear and confident tone of his voice, as though it came from a great room of smooth wood, thrilled her. She loved it each time he said "Phoenician."

Yet to see him sitting in the synagogue courtyard, for long hours, his face gaunt with the pallor of the scholar, saddened her. She knew his commission from their Father just as she knew her own, but she saw how it consumed her brother's boyhood, and she grieved for how soon that boyhood would be over, and the sacrifice that was being made. Or was it a sacrifice, she wondered, or did he simply not know better? She thought again of when she called him an idiot and he had replied, "Of course." Dear Father, she prayed, is it wrong to think it is my task to show my brother the bigness of this world that he has come to save? He has all but said so himself, how he has learned words for everything but not the things themselves.

Samantha loved all of nature, this transient world was her secret garden. When her chores were done, or when her sadness at her brother's straightened schooling overwhelmed her, she ran for the nearest stand of trees. One day Jesus was disputing in such a way as to make her head spin. He was arguing that to be human is to be in time, so that in order for man to have a glimpse of it, God's perfection must unfold in time. Samantha sensed that Jesus must be justifying

not only Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, but also himself. And not only himself but herself as well, even if she was a little quicker than he to unfold in time. It exhausted her even to think of it.

When recess came, Jesus joined the other boys kicking the stomach of a goat in the courtyard dirt. The boys had long ago kicked the air out of it so that it barely flew. Being the youngest, Jesus was smaller but he was quick and often got to the stomach first and he kicked it so that it made almost a circle in the air. Some of the boys were envious of him but to others he was as it were a mascot. "Jesus, come play with me, come run in the woods with me!" Samantha shouted.

The boys chided Jesus for being called by a girl, let alone his sister. Jesus shrugged them off and walked to the synagogue gate. He had continued since the day of her birth to adore his sister before all others save God. But he had his Father's instruction to consider. "How can I? I have my studies."

"Your brain could turn into a pine cone. Do you really think you're smarter for all that study?" Samantha asked.

"Of course," Jesus said.

"Of course of course," Samantha said. "But what about walking with me later?"

The boys ragged Jesus harder for not saying no, yet after school he went with her to the wooded glen that lay outside Nazareth's wall. Shadows already fell on the path, with only occasional beads of sunlight. Jesus had never been on such a path, whereas to Samantha it was as familiar as her own bed. She stooped to put a beetle in her hand and showed it to Jesus, who turned it over and delighted at its swarming legs. A fox ran by, with a glint of the sun on its silky pelt. Samantha loved the furtive beauty of a fox. Jesus had heard only of the fox's predations. They came to a trickle of water and Samantha

put her feet in. She held his hand and beckoned and Jesus did the same. The boys would chide him again if they saw this, but Jesus began not to care. A frog jumped from his sister's hand to his. Jesus yelped in surprise. Then his heart felt the heart of the frog.

How grateful Jesus was then. Many things he had understood as a matter of his Father's Law, now he began to see in themselves. He smiled at Samantha as he seldom smiled, with his teeth that were a little crooked but rarely seen. They were brother and sister and at this moment there was no need for them to say a word to each other.

5.

On another day they wandered farther from town. Although, in truth, it was not quite wandering, as Samantha had passed that way before and wished to find one certain place again. Jesus had no idea where they were going. Now when his sister suggested an adventure, he simply went along. In a putrid cave on an arid hillside, they found a colony of lepers.

These were the poorest of the poor. Kindly strangers left packets of food at the entrance to their cave. These, and carrion for which they had to fight the birds, were all they had to eat. There was little left even of their rags. When one of them died, he was put out for the birds, as if to offer a fair exchange. But the birds wanted it all, the meat of both man and beast, and their fights continued.

Samantha led Jesus into the fetid depths of the cave. The lepers had no candles. Even their eyes had withered. They were like the sightless fishes of the deep. Jesus was amazed at such misery. Samantha had not prepared him. Out of the gloom a child approached them. His father followed, gripping the boy's rags from behind. "We heard your approach. What can we do to escape our fate?" asked the boy. "All hope has left us," he said. He was Samantha's age, or Jesus'

age, it was impossible to tell, nor would the boy himself have known.

"Believe in us, that we are the children of God, and you will be eternally saved," Jesus said. "Your misery will fall away in the healing light of our Father."

The lepers did not leap with joy at the news, nor did Jesus weep for them. Without fear Samantha hugged the boy and his father to her, and they were comforted by her touch.

When they came out of the cave, Jesus said to her, "Ought we not go back and heal them?"

"Is that what your rule book tells you to do?" she asked, and appeared angry with her brother.

He was taken aback.

"How could you not weep for them, nor reach out to them, nor hold their suffering in your hands?" she continued. "Did you not notice that when you 'saved' them, they didn't exactly leap with joy? You said the words that must be said but you didn't feel what must be felt. And they knew it! Even trampled on, miserable and despised, yet in their human souls they knew it!"

Jesus had no answer. He felt the shame of being human.

Nor did Samantha answer him then why they should not go back to heal the lepers. They were alive in time, she thought, she and her brother both, and some things must wait.

6.

The children observed how the distraction of their mother grew. She had begun to take leave of the house. Each day she left and when she returned she was silent or she wept in her bed, stifling cries so that they would not be heard. But they were heard. One day Jesus stayed home from his studies and the brother and sister followed their mother. Mary walked with furtive steps to a street of shame. She

mounted an oxcart and concealed herself in it. It is said the hidden do not seek the hidden. The children waited a distance away, concerned for their mother's oddness, and went unnoticed by her.

Now Joseph had finally been worn by the restraints of Mary's virginity. He was not a man born to celibacy. He was a workman and a father and had not asked to be chosen by God from among his fellows, nor to be the consort of a queen. For years he had been chaste but he felt his life passing and was tempted. In his daily occupation, making and selling, women presented themselves, as Nazareth was a town like any other. He had met a woman of the quarter and a barter had ensued.

Mary blamed only herself, for she would blame neither her husband nor God. Instead she waited in an empty oxcart. There was no one in the world to speak to. All she could do was offer her eyes with which to torture herself.

In time Joseph came out of the house that Mary watched. It was a low brick house and a woman stood in the door. She was a stout red-haired woman with a smile and she kissed Joseph off as if not for the first nor the last time. For Joseph had made her a fine new bed.

Jesus had seen enough. He ran to Joseph and confronted him and tugged at his shawl to pull him away. The red-haired woman wished to know who this impudent boy was. Joseph commanded the woman to go inside her house. Jesus let go Joseph's shawl and upbraided him as follows: "Do you not know that our mother the blessed Mary is discovering you this very moment? Have you not guessed the shame you would bring all of us? Have you no love for my Father? For assuredly you are not He!"

Joseph was ashamed before the boy that he had raised whom he knew to be not his son. But he loved the boy nonetheless and reached out to him, to touch him in sorrow and shame; from which

embrace Jesus shrunk away, and his anger was not assuaged.

Samantha then made her approach. She stood before Joseph like a witness. Joseph wished not to lie but neither did he wish to tell the truth. He appealed to her with his eyes. It was then Mary rose from the oxcart and lifted her leg over its side to descend. All expected Mary to come to them, but instead she stopped in the road and spun herself in a circle, so that others, even strangers, could think her mad. As he had run to Joseph, now Jesus went to Mary. He held her up so that she wouldn't fall. Samantha took Joseph's hand, which the others didn't take.

And now the family made its way home. The red-haired woman surveyed them from her window and wondered, and later would consider if she should change her life entirely. They went two-by-two, as if going to the Ark, Jesus with his mother, Samantha with Joseph, who was bent like the wood that he worked.

It is said there are words to God and words from God and words that are God. Jesus stayed at his mother's side and would not see Joseph. Finally Samantha spoke. "For pity's sake, Jesus. Joseph bears the sin of Adam, nothing more nothing less. It is our Father who has put him in this bind. Our mother is yet a virgin. Do you even know what that means?"

But Jesus did not. And Samantha promised to tell him later.

Mary then kissed Joseph's hand, which was the sort of thing that Mary would do. When she was most oppressed, she was most divine. It was left to Joseph to ask forgiveness, which he did.

7.

In order to become fully human, there was much that Jesus had willed himself to forget. Samantha had done the same but being a young

girl, and tasked by God to teach her brother, she had more quickly re-learned such things. She said to him, "How is it, do you suppose, that babies come into this world?"

"I don't know," Jesus said, for he never lied.

She didn't wish to shock him, so she said, "Imagine what must be necessary for a father to be the father of a child, with hair the same or cheeks the same or eyes or nose or feet."

Jesus imagined it, and at once knew how babies come into the world.

"Then imagine," Samantha continued, "what must be necessary for a mother to be the mother of you and me."

Jesus imagined this as well, and at once knew what "virginity" must be. He knew it as Samantha herself knew it, in its beauty and purity and hurt. And because he knew it, he knew Joseph's hurt as well, his helplessness and weakness and confusion.

"Sister, you see every side of a situation," he said to Samantha. "You love Joseph as you love our holy mother Mary."

Samantha felt it was beneath her to answer. Was Jesus flattering her? Was he still naive? Her silence was the stricter answer.

8.

Now Jesus was totally in love with her. He ignored his friends and their games. He neglected his studies. And his schoolmates' playful taunts strained into concern. They remarked without laughter on the unseemliness of Jesus spending his time with a girl. But Jesus could see that they were envious, for although he neglected his studies, he was no less superior on account of it.

Samantha was as much in love with him, and she was in awe of him as well. Together they redoubled their care of their mother. Mary brightened, and again cooked the meals, and took up her crocheting.

Joseph's repentance was fragile but holding. Divine mission was an idea that still challenged him and yet he had warmed in his family's embrace. In the evenings Jesus read to Samantha and they sang songs.

One evening after more time had passed and Jesus had grown taller, she said to him: "I would like to go to the great lake. Would you?"

By this "great lake" she meant the Sea of Galilee, or Kinneret, which truly is a lake.

Jesus hated to say no to his sister, but he did not wish to go nor did he see how it would be possible. His studies, their family. It seemed a very long ways.

He said to her, "Your ideas, sister, exhaust me. Truly they are inexhaustible. You yourself are inexhaustible."

"Our Father made me that way," she said, and the laugh she tossed off was such that Jesus cringed for his own dullness.

She continued: "I've been dreaming of the great lake. The parched stream of our own little woods, where I can barely wet my feet, would be enough for me, but my overwhelming delight would be the lake. Jesus, can't you think of a way that we might go there?"

"What about our blessed mother? And dear Joseph, who may yet slide backwards into disgrace at any moment? And at the synagogue they will rightly criticize my absence. Mustn't I always set the best example?"

But Samantha had anticipated these arguments coming from him. Everything he said was true yet so too was the purity of her desire. It was so pure that she knew it must come from their Father and be a part of his plan.

She said, "Our blessed mother Mary and Joseph could do with a few days without us. Surely they still have wounds, which though we may point the way, only their own free will can heal."

"And my studies? The scriptures whose perfection God commands me? I've taken enough time away. I can't altogether abandon them."

"Oh my God! I can't believe you'd use that pitiful excuse, again and again and again! You'll study at night!"

"Study what, then? I'm to take scrolls from the synagogue?"

"You'll study the moon and the stars," Samantha said.

"Are you a pagan? My own sister?"

"Not at all! But is there a part of the universe that doesn't have a clue to our Father's oneness?"

And so Samantha won her argument with Jesus, as she knew she would. And as he knew as well. She perhaps hadn't the better argument but still the one that prevailed, for Jesus secretly wished to please her. He felt this was also God's command.

Is there a greater command of God than to love?

They arranged for James to look in on Mary and Joseph, in the morning and again at night, and Mary prepared food for their journey; for although she was afraid, and warned them of all the dangers, of falling boulders and snakes and leaping frogs and highwaymen and the like, she was the most generous soul in our transient world, and she knew who her children's Father was, and that He would not lead them far from their destiny.

Jesus and Samantha departed for the great lake.

9.

There was not a road to the great lake but rather many paths, that linked one to the other like the bones of a skeleton and that made the journey a very long way; nor was there an inn. Jesus and Samantha crossed hill and dale. The dust of the many paths settled on them.

The descent from Nazareth was the hardest on them, for they were leaving home for the first time.

At night they slept on the ground. There they slept close to one another, as the ground was colder than their beds at home. Jesus and Samantha were older now. Jesus had reached his twelfth year. One night the question of Jesus's manhood arose, for was he not as well a descendant of Adam? He kept this hidden from Samantha. He was ashamed as well. Then he slept a little apart from her. She was cold from the cold ground and wanted to know the reason he slept farther away, but he would not say. After that, Samantha knew why. For everything they did was pure.

On the third day they had eaten all of Mary's food and were hungry. They had climbed mountains. Now they descended into a land of vines. They picked wild berries that grew at the roadside. And when they passed a stranger's vineyard, Samantha said to him, "Jesus, would you pick us a bunch of grapes?"

For he was taller than she was. But the grapes belonged to the stranger, who was not to be seen.

Jesus said to her: "This man has many bunches of grapes and if we take a bunch he may not even notice, but it would be against our Father's commandment."

"Is it our Father's commandment that those in need not gain help from those that are not? You yourself see that this man has many grapes," Samantha said.

"Is your need any greater than Eve's, for whose crime all humanity has paid?" Jesus asked.

"What need did Eve have? That was her whole problem. She was in the Garden, she had no need whatever, which is what made her crime the greater," Samantha said.

Now she knew that she was challenging Jesus in the area of

his greatest perfection, in which his expertise as to the fine points of their Father's Law was as far superior to hers as the great lake of her imagining was to the dry brooks of Nazareth. So she braced for his next question.

But all he asked was: "What is your need, Samantha?"

"My need is for delight," she said. "My need is to see you become still more human. You are more human than you were, but you could be a great deal more human still."

"I will not steal but if you insist," Jesus said, "I will bend down on my knees and if you care to climb up on my back so that you can reach high and take the bunch of grapes yourself, I will not stop you."

"Aha! An accomplice to theft!" Samantha shouted. "I am delighted! Already you've given me my delight!"

So Jesus bent down and Samantha climbed on him and onto his shoulders until she could reach a bunch of the stranger's grapes, which she cut off from the vine with her teeth.

When they resumed their walk, Samantha divided the bunch of grapes in two and offered half to Jesus, but he refused.

"Now don't be grumpy," Samantha said.

"I'm hardly grumpy," Jesus said, but then quickly corrected himself. "I'm a little grumpy," he said.

"You're as hungry as I am," Samantha said, and put a grape into her mouth and it was delicious.

"But I love to see your face, as now, light up," Jesus said. "It's as wonderful as the face of our Father's moon."

"I would like to see your face light up as well," Samantha said. "We have a long way to go and we are trying very hard to be human, as our Father commanded us," she said. "And if you fall down from hunger, I'll have to wait for you and you're too heavy for me to carry."

This was a logic that at last Jesus could see. She proffered half the grapes and he took them. "Dear Father, I am destroyed by my sister," he said, but his crooked teeth showed the hint of a grin.

Together they ate all the grapes and they were delicious. And for the rest of their journey, they were sustained.

It is not written whether the stranger missed his bunch of grapes.

10.

Early on the morning of the fourth day of their journey, they reached the shore of the lake. Tiberias, the great town, lay in mist to the north. Fishing boats were shimmering dots far out on the water. The great expanse of blue was everything that Samantha had dreamed of. It was as if a portrait of her Father, indistinct of course, and with appropriate veils drawn over the infinite, had been painted on earth on a vast scale. Jesus was less impressed. To him it was simply more water than he had ever seen. As with everything, he pondered its usefulness for his future mission.

The shoreline was flinty with pebbles and shells. Samantha took off her sandals but Jesus kept his on. His feet were tender. He squinted in the brightening sunlight. It was a deserted stretch of shoreline and soon Samantha removed her clothes and placed them on a rock. Jesus averted his eyes until she was well out in the water, where she swam and splashed. Then Jesus entered the water himself. He kept his clothing on his back and his sandals on his feet.

"Could anything on earth be more wonderful than this?" Samantha shouted at him. Her black hair glistened. Her eyes squinted in the sun. "Come out! Don't be afraid!"

Jesus plodded towards her, his sandals sinking into the ooze of

the bottom, so that each time he raised a foot it made a plopping sound. He kept his arms high as if the water were something to be avoided by as many parts of him as he could manage. As he approached her, Samantha laughed. "Isn't this the best? Just throw yourself forward! You can swim!" But Jesus hesitated, so she splashed him and when he cringed, she splashed him more, still laughing. "It's not even cold. Do you think this is cold?"

"Yes!" Jesus yelled. But the word was barely out of his mouth when Samantha lunged forward so that her hands that were cupped together landed like a helmet on top his head and they pushed him down. It could be said that this was his first baptism.

But as she regained her footing, Samantha stepped on something sharp, for the bottom of the lake was not entirely ooze. It may have been a shell or it may have been a stone. She suppressed a little cry, but the pinch subsided and she thought no more of it.

In the meantime, Jesus was having fits in his first attempt to swim, thrashing and sinking and straining to keep his head above the little waves. "Relax! Your body will float!" Samantha called.

"It won't! It sinks!" Jesus cried.

"You're not giving it a chance!" she assured him.

But she had scarcely time to blink when another scene altogether presented itself to her. Jesus was standing taller than the water, in his sandalled feet, walking on the waves. And he appeared pleased with himself. "Now this is more like it," he said. "I could get used to this. Who needs to get wet and cold? I hate this whole swimming business. Way too human, to be given god-like powers and immediately want to be no more than a fish."

Of course, Jesus was only having a little fun at his own expense when he said these things. But Samantha was quiet. And she again felt a stinging in her foot, where she had stepped on whatever she had

stepped on.

When they were on the shore again, Samantha dressed herself in her dry clothes and Jesus shivered in his wet ones. "I'll be dry in a minute," he said. "The day is warming."

"It is," she said, but with distraction, as she sat on the rock where her clothes had been and examined her foot. Now she could see that it was her little toe alone that was cut. She went to the lake and washed it.

In the evening, when she had made a fire of dried wood and they sat by the shore, she said to her brother, "You know you really shouldn't perform miracles just for fun. Our Father gave us miracles so that we could help humankind. Someday you may need miracles so that people will believe you. If they see you horsing around, what will they think?"

Stung by his sister's words, Jesus asked, "How do you know I didn't walk on water because I was afraid I would drown? Then where would humankind be?"

"Is that what it was?" Samantha asked carefully, for she hated to see him in a funk. "Or were you trying to show me that you were a fun-loving brother after all, that you weren't the stuffed tunic I sometimes tease?"

Jesus could only shrug. His feelings were still hurt.

"Jesus?"

"A little of both," he finally said.

Now she wanted to cheer him up. "Maybe I was the stuffed tunic this time," she offered.

"No, no, you were right. We have to use our strengths wisely."

"How about this?" And she pulled her face so that her nose was underneath her mouth.

Jesus grumbled. He didn't wish to be humored. But he could

see how hard she was trying, and in turn he didn't want to hurt her feelings. So he flipped his eyes so that they were hanging from his ears like earrings.

She laughed and switched her arms around, so that left was right and right was left.

Jesus said, "Top this!" and made his navel come out of his forehead.

"Alright. This!" And she reversed her head so that her chin was up and her hair was down.

Now he made one of his eyes black and the other blue and the lobes of his ears all the colors of a rainbow.

Now she stuck her tongue out so that it tickled the top of her head.

They could have gone on, but it was enough that they felt a little better now, laughter being the same with the Divine as the rest of us. And their bond that was closer than breath was restored.

But later her toe bothered her again, so that she didn't sleep well. While Jesus slept, she watched the stars. There were many shooting stars that night and she saw them all.

11.

The next day they started on their return. Although he had spent this time with his sister alone, Jesus felt closer to all those for whom he had been sent on account of it. The world of their mortal habitation seemed still more varied and beautiful to him, as though a man's sojourn here could be pleasant indeed, and thus the thought of leaving it the more poignant and difficult. He did not doubt his Father's plan, but he had begun to remember more of the subtle pieces of it that he had willed himself to forget. For all this he credited his sister, who

continued to leap ahead of him as if she were the genius at a great game.

As they climbed towards the Horns of Hattin, Jesus observed his sister's wound for the first time. She had scraped it on a rock and now it was bleeding again. The redness of her blood distressed him. "Sister, what have you done?"

"It's only one toe," she said, as if she could easily do without any toes whatever. And she reprimanded it: "Toe, what a mess you've made. And you're making my brother nervous! Stop it now, please, at once!"

But the toe continued to bleed. Jesus insisted they stop so that he could bandage it. They sat down on a storm-fallen log and he tore his tunic to make a bandage to stanch the flow, which it did.

"My kind brother," Samantha said. "My kind Jesus."

And they continued their climb, over the Horns and down again to the fertile plain. They passed the vineyard where Jesus had bent over and Samantha had climbed on his shoulders and taken the bunch of grapes. A new bunch had grown in its place. "You know, Jesus, we're really very lucky," Samantha said. "Of all the worlds we might have been born to, we were born to this one."

But Jesus did not quite understand, for he could only imagine this one world. Their walk was easier now, through olive woods and cultivated fields. Jesus asked frequently if she was in pain. Samantha denied it, although it was obvious to anyone with eyes to see.

"If you keep asking me, it's going to get troublesome," she finally said.

"Why don't we fly home like angels?" Jesus said.

"If we did that for every little thing that happened to us, how could we ever be human? Look at what men and women face every day, every year. And so many face pain without having even a loving

brother to bandage them."

Jesus felt chastised then, and did not bring up the subject of miracles again.

But the length of the journey was wearing on her now, the path was smooth yet appeared quite endless, and Samantha weakened. Her steps slowed. Jesus pretended not to notice, even as inwardly he fretted.

At night she slept with her foot raised in the air. This lessened the pain. Jesus kissed her toe and changed her bandage for a fresh one torn again from his tunic. This was by an olive grove and the Sabbath had begun.

"I could carry you," Jesus said, when once she opened her eyes.

"With those skinny arms?" she said. And she smiled, and fell back to sleep.

By now she knew what her injury must be, and what it must signify for her earthly task. There were no words for it but she knew the truth with both intimation and certainty. Jesus, as he watched her sleep, knew this truth as well, though he denied it with his human will.

When the Sabbath was over, and this most sustaining of their Father's gifts had allowed her strength to recover somewhat, they limped towards Nazareth together. Jesus had taken on a portion of her pain and she had taken on a portion of his. On the eighth day of their journey they were accosted by highwaymen of whom they had been warned. The highwaymen were three and they blocked the path, but Jesus and Samantha had nothing to give. "Let us pass," Jesus said in his sternest voice. "Look at my sister's foot and consider your Father."

Was it the light they saw in the eyes of the brother and sister that so impressed the highwaymen? Was it an aura, a halo, a warning

of God? Or was it simply the Daughter of God's blood seeping through her bandage? Regardless, they said not another word, neither of demand nor regret. Instead they lifted Samantha and Jesus up and carried them along the path a little while. Then the highwaymen had other business to attend to and excused themselves and went on their way.

On the ninth day of their journey, brother and sister arrived, and their mother Mary greeted them and was relieved.

12.

As it was his twelfth year Jesus went up to Jerusalem with his holy mother Mary and Joseph at the Passover. Samantha stayed behind. James and his brothers made the pilgrimage as well while Samantha fulfilled her promise to look after the family's animals. This promise was her delicate veil, so that the unease she felt would not be revealed entirely to the others.

Samantha's heart had weakened and she had little strength. Her toe was painful and white in color and had grown large. The doctors of Nazareth had not seen such a thing. But at the same time, fearing they would be thought incompetent, they said: "This is only a toe. She has ten of them." And so Mary and Joseph were reassured, and the family left for Jerusalem, as was their duty. Many of their neighbors departed also, so that a caravan was formed. They traveled by Herod's road and the journey was three days.

All these days Jesus held Samantha in his heart and mind. He had argued with her that he should stay behind, or that she come along and be carried by him, but she refused. Once more she laughed, with a sweetness, at the thought of his skinny arms carrying her. He protested that his arms were strong, and she then laughed again so

that her teeth showed and chattered and he feared for her heart. Now he walked alone on the road to Jerusalem. He asked himself: was there no cure on earth for his sister? The others of his family walked far ahead of him.

In Jerusalem the Jews baked unleavened bread and the Passover was remembered. Each man praised our Father as many times as there were hairs on his head, but Jesus was silent now. Others who saw him thought him impudent while he was lost in prayer that had no words. Nor can the storyteller describe that prayer, but surely it was about Samantha.

On the next day, he proceeded to the Temple in order to be questioned by the teachers. His mind was in distraction, yet he amazed them with his understanding and his answers. They could not guess his spirit's turmoil. Is it possible this very turmoil deepened his words to the point where the rabbis could but wonder? How unhappy Jesus was. Even the praise of the great teachers could not lighten his mood; nor the praises of Mary and Joseph when they learned what the teachers had declared.

The following morning the caravan of Nazarenes gathered for their return journey. Jesus was not to be found among them. He had spent so much time by himself at the rear on the outward voyage that neither Mary nor Joseph nor the brothers truly noticed his absence. Surely he would be along, they said to themselves, as he was one who lived life to his own music. Meanwhile Jesus spent that day and the days following in Jerusalem seeking out physicians, whom he thought must be more wise than those of Nazareth.

On the first day he consulted a Jewish physician, who recommended Samantha's sins be removed by the anointing of oil. But Jesus had already anointed her with oil.

On the second day, he consulted a Greek physician, who

proposed the setting of anatomical votives. But Samantha had already made an image of her toe, which had come close to the Law's prohibitions and which like the oil had done nothing to heal.

At last on the third day he consulted an Egyptian physician, for there were all races and kinds in Jerusalem, and the Egyptian said Indian hemp should be ingested in her food. This was as brother James had suggested, and already placed in her bread, but it was no cure either.

Jesus returned to the Temple to ask God's guidance. He began: "Dear Father, is it not the case that if I do a miracle to save her, Samantha will die on me in spite?" For by then Jesus knew too well his sister's humor and mission.

The rest of his words are not known. But it was here in the porticos of the Temple that his family, who had left the caravan in worry, found him. Mary wept in joy and relief. Jesus said to them, "Why this search and why these tears, holy Mother? Didn't you know I would be in our Father's house?"

But she did not, as she had not guessed the reason. Now Jesus explained to her that he was praying for his sister, and Mary wept further. For these were the human worries of Jesus, the worries of anyone who has ever worried for a loved one's illness.

They returned as one to Nazareth. And Jesus grew in wisdom and stature.

13.

Now the infirmity that had begun in her toe spread to her other extremities. Her arms were numb and her legs were shot through with pain. While her family was gone, she had taken loving care of the animals, but now she feared to walk and went to her bed. Jesus

sat beside her and would scarcely leave. It was the time for him to go to Joseph's workshop and to learn his trade, but Jesus dawdled. His obedience was strained with silence. He thought only of Samantha, who was proud of him and happy for him, on account of his triumph with the teachers in Jerusalem. But this meant nothing to him now.

Samantha told him a parable: "The flower will die once its pollen is gone but the bee will make honey later," she said.

And some of her spirit, which had been brash and brilliant, seemed diminished during these days. She had difficulty holding a cup. Jesus held it for her.

Mary likewise fretted and attended. One doctor of Nazareth pronounced gravely: "There is nothing more that I can do." Another prescribed the curling of a snake. Samantha became impatient with these. "Send me no more doctors," she said.

For though she was but a child, God spoke through her clearly.

And Jesus looked at her as he had when she was newborn and her eyes opened to his.

Still one more doctor arrived. He came from the east and he came unbidden. No one in Nazareth knew him. But he said to Joseph who met him in the road that he had heard of an ill child and had come to cure her. Joseph brought him to the house, where Samantha lay asleep. She awoke to the sight of a tall stranger in a blue robe with perfumed curls. He had a courteous smile and a voice of smoke and honey and the beard of a wise man of his country. Samantha was alone with this stranger. She asked him: "Who sent you?"

"My mistress, the Great Goddess," he said. "She has seen your distress." The stranger withdrew from his robe a figure of that goddess who was known by all the names and ruled in east and west. "Kiss this and be cured," he said.

But Samantha would not kiss it. For that Great Goddess known

by Ashtoreth and the other names was a goddess of abominations and idols and Samantha would have nothing to do with her.

She said: "You've come to dishonor me."

And the stranger said: "I've come to save you."

"Your salvation is worth less than the underside of a toad," she said, and the stranger put his figure of the Ashtoreth away.

"Suffer, then," the stranger said, and he left her.

Samantha did suffer, as was her human lot. Her bones ground to dust and her skin was fiery hot. In the evening she bade Jesus and her holy mother to come to her. They gathered around her, unhappy to observe her so.

But Samantha said: "Do not grieve, my beloveds. If my hands are numb, my spirit is not."

And as Jesus wept salty tears, she said, "For I am doing as our Father has planned, and am done to as He also has planned. But I have one thing to beg: do not mention my name to any, also be sure the silence is kept by our dear Joseph and the rest."

"Why is that?" Mary asked.

Samantha answered: "Because the world is not ready for the Daughter of God."

And Mary said: "How can that be, if it is ready for the Son?"

And Samantha answered: "Did you not see today what the world yet believes of woman? It makes idols of us. And worse than what the world believes, is what it fears in us. Dear Jesus, let your love for me guide you. The world will accept your divinity, but it will only shame mine."

And Jesus remembered the stranger who had come with the figure in his robe and his tears fell hot with anger. But Samantha calmed him: "Dear brother, I am not afraid to be forgotten, except by you."

"You will not be," Jesus said.

But then he thought: it was not needed for me to say that. It would have been better had I not. It was as if I were still learning my part.

But Samantha read his heart. "You were always a perfect God, now you are getting to be a better human," she said.

"There is much I must still learn," Jesus said.

Then Mary, whose mind had wandered, said: "I will not tell."

Samantha's numbness increased and she smiled at her mother whose troubles she knew to be many and drew her down to her and embraced her and said: "Some day my story can be told. But not now."

And Jesus remembered the parable she had told, and also the time when they went to the lepers yet did not cure them, and he said: "It was because they would have remembered you in amazement and told your story."

But this, too, he felt foolish for having said. And later he too would speak in parables.

14.

This was the conversation of love between Jesus of Nazareth the Son of God and Samantha of Nazareth the Daughter of God on her last mortal night.

"You are the better messenger because you speak with birdsong in your heart," he said.

"You are the better messenger because you are tall and straightforward and cannot say an unfair thing," she said.

"You are the better messenger because people joy to see you coming," he said.

"You are the better messenger because your teeth are crooked and mine are boring and straight," she said.

"You are the better messenger because there are no walls in you," he said.

"You are the better messenger because there are walls in you that you will burn down and grow stronger from the heat of their flames," she said.

"You are the better messenger because you understand me better than I understand you," he said.

"You are the better messenger because you were born a poet though you speak in prose," she said.

"You are the better messenger because if we went on like this through the night I would tire and you would never tire," he said.

"You are the better messenger because if I never tired it would be on account of you," she said.

"You are the better messenger because animals are gentled by your touch," he said.

"You are the better messenger because you know the Law and without the Law we are nothing," she said.

"You are the better messenger because the stars dim to see you ill," he said.

"But the stars will still be there tomorrow," she said. "And they will be bright again, on account of you."

Then she was sated with love from their dueling and slept a little while. Jesus stood by her, but then he went out.

When she awoke, she could see him through the window, at the gate, praying to their Father. Samantha thought: he is becoming a man. Then she thought: how rude of me, he has become a man. And as Jesus prayed, he could feel her vast love, reaching through him to all of humankind, and beyond, to the whole of creation.

All miracles are possible, but the miracle of love is the greatest.

Later he was with her and her pulse weakened. "I am going to get up now, and you must not follow me," she said.

"Where will you go?" Jesus asked.

"Into the woods where we walked, and a little deeper, where I have other friends," she said.

"Who are your other friends who are deeper in the woods?" Jesus asked.

"The wolves," she said, and he felt stupid once more, for asking what he already knew. He was making up words now to keep her alive a little longer.

She rested until her strength was greater, then she got up from her bed and moved away. Jesus' sorrow was beyond measure. "Will you come back? Please, for the love of our Father, only tell me that you will come back," he said.

But she would not say. Now her heart was heavy with the thought of leaving this world. "Don't make such a fuss," she finally said, and finally there were tears in the eyes of the Daughter of God.

She went towards him and kissed the cheek of Jesus. Their tears mingled. Then she walked to the door of the house. She was quiet so as not to wake Mary and Joseph. But she kissed the door of their room, to make a blessing of it. I might have liked to be a mother myself, Samantha thought.

There was a last glance between sister and brother and then the glance was finished and she was gone, and at that very moment of the finished glance a great doubt fell on Jesus. He thought: "Do I not love Samantha before all others? And if I love Samantha before them, how can I preach universal love? I am inadequate. I am a fraud. I am a joke our Father has played on the world."

And Jesus' tears, that had been warm with love when mingled

with Samantha's, turned bitter and cold.

Samantha went into the woods and there she called her other friends to her and bade them to obey her and the wolves devoured her.

15.

Joseph and James and the others searched night and day and they swore to slay the wolves. For they found tatters of Samantha's clothes near the lair. But they could not find the wolves, which had departed in shame and fear. And all of them, Joseph and James and the others, mourned. And the prayers for the dead were said.

Jesus was speechless with grief. Mary flayed her breasts and tore her hair.

But on the twelfth day, when Jesus was still bitter, Samantha came to him as he sat along the path where she had once taken him. Her clothes were not shredded and her body was restored in its proportions and she touched him on the shoulder. "It is I, your sister," she said. Her voice was as it had always been, and she added: "Weren't you expecting me?"

"I was and I was not," Jesus said. And glad as he was to see her, yet he poured the bitterness of his heart out to her.

This bitterness was on account of what he had thought before, that he loved Samantha more than all others.

"How can I preach our Father's universal love if it is not in my heart?" he cried. "I would be a hypocrite, a liar, a fraud." And then he cried: "How could our Father be so cruel?" And he raged against God, as he had never done.

Samantha was quite shocked. For once she was not sure what to say to her brother.

"You'll tell me I've become human! Of course I've become human!" he shouted at her.

Samantha said: "Why should I bother when you're perfectly capable of telling this yourself?"

"You are the only one who ever has, or ever will, mock me," Jesus said.

Samantha then laughed the teasing laugh that was so familiar to him, as if he had called it forth out of her, and Jesus for the last time felt embarrassed for being stupid with his sister.

At last he was becalmed and he said with sadness and pity: "I am remembering the teeth of the wolves."

"There will be human wolves too," Samantha said.

"I cannot do what I am sent to do without you," Jesus said.

"But you can. In your godhood you secretly know this. Don't you, Jesus? Don't you, my brother?"

Jesus did not answer, so Samantha said: "I will always be closer to you than your breath."

And with these words of hers Jesus was cheered and strengthened. He rose to his feet and put his hands on her cheeks, which were of flesh and blood. "Dear God, forgive me," he said.

Then they walked together to their house where Mary was, and Mary could see her also. When she saw Samantha, it was as if Mary threw off her years of care and became again fully alive, and she hugged her and made her food, though Samantha had no need of it. And the son and daughter and mother of God remembered the moments of their life together and were happy; and in everything they remembered, the purpose of their lives shone through.

When Joseph entered, he could see none of it. It was as if no one were there and the food lay on the table for his supper. But Joseph also was forgiven.

When Samantha left, she said to them: "Don't make a fuss."

16.

It would still be seventeen years before Jesus declared himself to be God's Son and healed the sick and did many other miracles and preached salvation through belief in Him. During all those seventeen years, the love that took Jesus past his mind matured, such that She was in Him and He was in Her, in each and every moment of life, in a oneness with God called the Son that could have been called, in another time and place, the Daughter. Verily it can be said Samantha was to Jesus as Jesus was to man. To be fully human is to fully love.

~ THE END ~