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A heart -and-lung transplant changed Claire Sylvia's personality. She started drinking beer, eating fast food and ogling girls - just like the dead boy who helped her live. But is this proof that the human soul exists in the body rather than the mind? Russell Miller investigates.

Yale New Haven Hospital, Connecticut, May 1988. The hospital has just performed its first successful heart-lung transplant on a woman patient, Claire Sylvia, a 47-year-old drama teacher from Boston. This being America, five days after the operation, journalists bare invited into the hospital to interview her in the intensive care unit, where she is sitting on an exercise bicycle wearing yellow silk pyjamas and a pink dressing gown. During this bizarre press conference, a reporter asks: "Now that you've had this operation, what do you want right now more than anything?" "To tell you the truth," she replies, "right now I'd die for a beer."

She is momentarily stunned by what she has said, not so much by its flippancy as by the fact that she does not like beer, indeed has never liked beer.

It is this incident that first prompts Sylvia to believe something strange has happened. She knows, because she has wheedled the information out of the nurses, that her new heart and lungs were removed from an 18-year-old youth killed in a motorcycle accident in Maine. It is, she thinks, safe to assume that he had liked beer.

Five weeks after the operation, when she is allowed to drive for the first time, she heads straight for Kentucky Fried Chicken, a fast food she had never previously enjoyed. She cannot explain it. Nor can she explain many other apparent changes in her personality: why she is starting to look at women the way a man might look at women, for example, or why her favourite

colours are now green and blue rather than the hot shades of pink, red and gold she used to prefer.

Months later, she has a dream about a young man called TL. When the time comes in the dream to leave, they kiss, and as their lips meet she seems to inhale him, suck his whole body into hers. She wakes convinced that "Tim" is the donor of her heart and lungs.

Determined to learn more about him, she tells her story to a psychic, who promptly has a dream in which he sees Tim's obituary in the middle of a page in a Maine newspaper. Sylvia looks up the back issues in her local library and finds a brief report about a fatal motorcycle accident that occurred on the day before her operation. The victim was a young man, aged 18. His initials are TL, his full name, Tim Lamirande.

Sylvia visits the Lamirande family and discovers that, yes, Tim liked beer and loved chicken nuggets; in fact, he was carrying a box tucked inside his motorcycle jacket when he crashed. His favourite colours were - you've guessed it - blue and green.

Sylvia is soon hard at work on a book, in collaboration with her dream analyst, about her amazing experience, about how she has apparently assumed much of the identity of the young man whose vital organs are now keeping her alive. The project becomes a very hot property when William Novak, a respected ghostwriter gets involved and a frenzied bidding war breaks out between publishing houses in New York and rival studios in Hollywood.

In March this year, Little, Brown & Co triumphantly announces it has acquired the US rights to *A Change Of Heart* by Claire Sylvia and William Novak. The trade press reports that the deal is worth upwards of \$800 000. Hollywood pictures, part of the Disney Empire, buys the movie rights for Sally Field, who will both direct and star in the film, due out next year.

If Sylvia has really inherited personal characteristics from her donor, the implications are astounding, not just for all transplant patients but for medical science, which at present states firmly that such an event is impossible. It would mean re-evaluating the accepted view that all memory is stored in the brain, like data held on the hard drive of a computer. And it would seem that further transplant patients might want to know quite a bit more about donors before accepting an organ.

Thus the medical establishment awaits the publication of the book and the release of the

movie with considerable trepidation. "This kind of nonsense can set the donor programme back by years," explains a leading transplant surgeon. "There is absolutely no scientific evidence that memory can be transplanted with organs. It is hard enough getting agreement for organs to be donated. These fantasies will make it harder. If you lost your teenage son, you might think it worthwhile for his organs to be used to keep other people alive. But you might think twice if you thought it would lead to his personality walking around in the body of a middle-aged woman."

Claire Sylvia is divorced and lives in the small seaside town of Hull on the Massachusetts coast. She candidly admits to being a "spiritual" person, much more predisposed to new-age mysticism than the unforgiving rigours of medical science. She was certainly predisposed to believe that transferring organs from one body to another might be a lot more complicated than any doctor would admit. From the moment she learnt she might need transplant surgery, she made it her business to read everything she could about the subject and soon became conversant with the theory of "cellular memory", the controversial notion that human experience is instilled in the cells throughout the body, rather than just stored in the brain.

A former professional dancer, Sylvia was working as a teacher when, in 1983, she was diagnosed as having primary pulmonary hypertension, a rare progressive disease which causes blood vessels in the lungs to collapse and is often fatal. Her condition slowly deteriorated until she was forced to give up her job and was left house bound, dependent on oxygen and only able to move around with difficulty in a wheelchair. A heart-lung transplant was her only hope, although the risks were considerable. When she was driven to Yale hospital with her teenage daughter, Amara, after being told that a donor had been found, she noticed a brilliant rainbow arching across the sky. She viewed it as a good omen and was confident she would survive the surgery.

Almost as soon as she came round from the anaesthetic, she began to fret about the psychological implications of the operation, what it meant to have someone else's organs working in her body. Her surgeon, Dr John Baldwin, was unsympathetic. When she asked him for psychological help to deal with what had happened to her, he apparently replied: "I don't believe in all that stuff. All you need to do is exercise." Dr Baldwin is now a senior transplant

surgeon in Houston, Texas, and refuses to comment on his former patients claims.

Convinced by her sudden craving for beer and chicken nuggets that she was being influenced by the donor's "cellular memory", she sought help from Robert Bosnak, a Jungian dream analyst with a practice in Boston. "She started working with me because she was having nightmares, which I was certain were connected with the transplant, although at the outset I did not know how. She was getting images of great destruction along with very strong images of a little boy drowning. I came to the view that these images were partly to do with an ambivalence towards the transplant experience itself, which on the one hand gives a whole new life and on the other is terrifying. An organ like the heart is not psychologically inert and has to be integrated."

Bosnak believed that his client needed to establish a relationship with the donor in order to help integrate the new organs into her psychological system and he encouraged her to make contact with the donor's family. Sylvia telephoned the transplant co-ordinator at the Yale New Haven Hospital, but medical ethics strictly forbade any such contact. She was advised not to continue looking;

Around this time Sylvia had a strong, apparently inexplicable desire to visit France. On her return, the name Tim surfaced in her dreams and she was able, with the help of her psychic friend, to track down the Lamirandes and arrange to visit them at their home in Maine.

Bosnak went with her. "She was very apprehensive because she didn't know what she was going to meet, but she was warmly received, particularly by Tim's sisters. They were very positive and said how much Claire's atmosphere and behaviour reminded them of their brother. What was important to was that we had come to the conclusion from her dreams that the donor must have been a hyperactive person, and the family confirmed this, saying that when he was little he had to be kept on a leash because otherwise he would run off, and at the time that he died he was holding down three Jobs as well as attending college."

Other strange similarities emerged. Sylvia started eating green peppers, a vegetable she had formerly meticulously picked out of salads. Once she had established from the family that Tim adored fried chicken, she also asked if he had liked green peppers. Sure enough, he had- he used to fry them up all the time with sausages. And

Sylvia's burning desire to visit France was also explained, she felt: the Lamirandes were French, or at least, French Canadian. The family took her to visit the scene of the accident and Tim's grave, where, in the Jewish tradition, she placed a pebble on the gravestone. She also read great significance into the inscription "Together forever", taking it to refer to the fact that she would be together for ever with part of him.

Sylvia would later recall the visit as one of the most profound and significant moments in her new life, particularly when the donor's mother - "my hearts mother"- took a photograph of Tim, aged five, off the wall and gave it to her to hold. "As I look into this child's eyes, it feels as if time is standing still. He looks so vital, so full of life. . . . By now the emotion has been building up to the point where I can barely stand the excitement. Then a ridiculous idea hits me: what if my heart bursts from all this emotion, and I die right here in their living room? No, please! What a terrible thought. Tim's heart has come home and they can't go through all this again. If I have to die, let it be somewhere else!"

One night, after visiting the family, Sylvia dreamt that 22 motorcycles were being revved up to be driven round a town to commemorate some event. In the morning she realised it would be Tim's 22nd birthday. To celebrate, she asked a dancer friend with a motor cycle to take her for a ride. It was, she says, "exhilarating".

The visit to the family will undoubtedly be the weepy high point of the proposed book and movie, but what probably will not be mentioned is that Sylvia and the Lamirandes fell out. They appeared together on Donahue, a popular daytime television chat show, at which a raucous audience jeered as Sylvia's story unfolded. Later, the story was featured in a loopy series called *Strange but True*. Relations between the Lamirandes and Sylvia rapidly cooled; the Lamirandes, it was rumoured, rather felt that their dead son was being exploited.

Sylvia is an intelligent and sincere woman, and no doubt she genuinely believes that she has inherited personality traits from the unfortunate 18-year-old Tim Lamirandes. But there are more prosaic explanations for what has apparently happened. The first, and most obvious, is that people who undergo the profound experience of transplant surgery feel different when they have recovered simply because they feel better, often after years of debilitating poor health. If they then take up some sporting activity and discover that the donor enjoyed a similar sport, it might be

tempting to conclude that the donor's enthusiasm has been transferred with an organ.

Drugs used to help prevent the rejection of transplant organs also have side effects that might appear to cause personality changes. A drug called Prednisone, for example, creates a craving for sweet food. If a transplant patient suddenly discovers he or she cannot get enough chocolate, it is more likely that Prednisone is the cause than the fact that the donor liked chocolate.

Since the human mind is highly suggestible, hospitals strive to keep details of organ donors strictly confidential, in the belief that nothing can be served by putting organ recipients in touch with the donor families.

Sylvia not only disagrees but claims that learning about her donor has played an important psychological role in preventing the rejection of his organs. Some 1000 heart- lung transplants have been carried out around the world, but only 50 patients are still alive, and Sylvia is among those who have survived the longest. "Being in touch with the family has helped me enormously," she says, "and I believe it could help others. My story is individual and I cannot speak for everyone; all I can say is that this is the way it happened to me. But research has uncovered other people in similar situations saying similar things. This is blossoming all over the world."

Dr Marc Lorber, head of the transplant unit at Yale New Haven Hospital, makes no secret of his concerns about Sylvia's forthcoming book. "If transplant surgery becomes linked in some way, either emotionally, subliminally or otherwise, to the supernatural, it could be highly problematic for the future of transplant surgery. It has the potential to generate negative feelings about organ donation. Despite tremendous success of transplant surgery, we still only have a consent rate of about 50%, so we have a long to go before the notation of organ donation is generally accepted.

"I have obviously heard the stories being circulated by Claire Sylvia, but it should be made clear that the concept of cellular memory has no medical foundation. To the best of anyone's knowledge it does not exist."

Tell that to Robert Bosnak. "It is simply not true to suggest that cellular memory does not exist. Research in Israel indicates that 34% of those people who have undergone heart transplants have had some kind of experience of what is now known as 'trait transfer'. I think the reason more

people have not come forward is that there is a great deal of denial going on."

Bosnak co-operated with Sylvia in putting together a support group of heart transplant patients from Yale New Haven Hospital, but was disappointed to discover few examples of 'trait transfer'. Of the 7 patients involved, only one felt any sense of identification with her donor. She was the 3rd woman in the world to give birth after a heart transplant operation and she sensed that the donor of her new heart had also been a mother with young children, which later proved to be true.

A number of variously fanciful books about transplant patients assuming the identity of their donors have already been published in the US under struggling new-age imprints, and Sylvia's would almost certainly have joined them in obscurity had William Novak not become interested. Novak is sometimes described as 'ghost writer to the stars', since he has collaborated on bestselling books with people such as Lee Iaccoca, Magic Johnson, Nancy Reagan and Oliver North.

Novak first heard about Claire Sylvia at a swank dinner party given by the holistic guru Deepak Chopra in Boston. He remembers the evening well because Michael Jackson was amongst the guests, though he sat with the children and refused to meet with any of the adults. Chopra told Novak about Sylvia and explained the concept of cellular memory, but Novak thought it was probably nothing more than some new-age urban legend. Then, when he was looking for a new project he read in the Boston Globe that Sylvia was hoping to write her story.

While Novak was intrigued, he says he wanted to make sure that Sylvia was not a 'flake' before he got involved. He was convinced that she was entirely credible and threw his considerable weight behind the project. He hopes the manuscript will be finished by the end of the year, although he admits he is having difficulty finding people with similar experiences - he has placed advertisements in three nursing journals asking for help.

Novak rejects the suggestion that the book and the movie might damage the donor programme. "Actually, I think it could work the other way, if people thought maybe there was a way of preserving some element of the soul. The point is that Claire is not claiming that you take on the entire personality of the donor, just fragments that come through. One of the things I like about her

is that she doesn't make grand, sweeping, hard to believe claims. She doesn't claim she is two people at once, but she does believe that something unusual has happened."

"What we are saying is that if there is something to it - I'm not a scientist, so I don't know - the implications are so mind-boggling that it deserves to be looked at."