

Ever This Day (Sally Pepper)

I'm in love with Sally Pepper. She is always here when I wake up. She's my nurse and the prettiest girl I've ever met. I usually don't care for girls much older than me. She's in her twenties, I think. I'm thirteen years old, but I'm pretty grown up for my age. I used to be the top student in my class at school.

I'm here in Our Lady of All Angels Hospital. This time there's something growing in my chest and it's getting bigger. Mom and Dad and everyone are all smiles, but as time goes on I can tell they're faking it.

"You don't think I'll make it," I tell Mom.

"Oh, honey," she says, "don't say that. I know you're doing your best. Daddy says so, too."

My best? What the heck is that supposed to mean? I can't do anything about it. Not when I'm facing a monster. First my blood turns to sewer water and then my kidneys feel like they're exploding and now this terrible thing is inside me. Well, I'm going to beat it. Even if they don't think I can. I see how they look at each other when they think I'm asleep. Mom just sits here with me all the time until she goes home at night. I wish she'd leave, just leave. But I don't want her to go. Not until I'm asleep.

I sleep and I dream a lot. Mostly of standing in a river. Not a mighty river like the Yukon. It's more like a gentle river you can stand in and fish. In the dream I think at first I'm fishing, but then I realize I'm just standing there as if I'm waiting. The sound of water flowing is so neat. It feels like some kind of a bath, like being cleaned. I want to go out farther, deeper. But I can't. I'm waiting. The dream comes back almost every night, but I never wade out from the shore into the deeper part of the river.

I try to stay awake late at night, waiting for Sally Pepper. I lie in bed hoping for the door to open. I fall asleep and dream and then wake up a few times before she finally gets here. She always seems glad to see me. Her face lights up with the biggest smile. The other nurses here are nice, but they don't act *that* happy to see me. I think Sally likes me. It would be terrific if she fell in love with me. When I get out of the hospital I want to keep seeing her. Maybe she would move to my neighborhood.

When my Dad comes to visit he is always antsy and goes out for a smoke a lot. I ask Mom later if he's mad at me about anything. She says he's just upset and hates to see me sick. I think he might be mad about my not wanting to go to school. When I was home for a while, he thought I should go back to classes.

"I don't feel good enough," I told him.

"But all the kids miss you," he said. "They want to see you."

"They want to make fun of me," I said.

He threw up his hands and got up and left the room. The front door to the house closed a few minutes later. I wanted to tell him why I just couldn't go back to the school. Then, maybe we could have talked about fishing. We used to go fishing most weekends. Just because I'm sick doesn't mean I don't remember hooking that big trout in the river. And all the fun we had.

Dad must think my going back to school is pretty important. Well, I did go there for a visit once. Last March. A few of the students laughed when I came into the classroom. My face was bloated from the medicines. Mr. Bellinger tried to make me feel welcome by asking me questions like he did with all the other kids. But I hadn't done any of the school work he sent home and I couldn't answer the questions. I felt so stupid. I had the highest average in eighth grade, but now I'm just like Stephen Walters, the class dummy.

When I get better, I'll have to start eighth grade all over again next year with those idiot seventh graders. I will definitely get better, but I won't go back to school. I'll get a job with a big company and work my way up. I won't need school. Things will be terrific. I'll marry Sally Pepper and we'll have a family. Everything will be just fine.

But today the thing in my chest presses down more than ever. It's worse than yesterday. Breathing is tough. The doctor never really answers me when I ask if I will get better. All he ever says is, "We'll see, we'll see."

"Are we in the right hospital for what I've got?" I ask Mom.

"They're doing their very best for you," she says. "If I knew there was somewhere else for better treatment, I'd have you there in a heartbeat, honey."

I wake in the middle of the night and I'm afraid. It's so quiet, like a cemetery. I wish Sally Pepper would hurry up and come on duty. She'll smile at me and maybe ask about the time I won the essay contest, or tell me she hears I play the piano wonderfully. She'll say I'm handsome and all that silly stuff while she brushes the hair out of my eyes and rubs my chest where it hurts.

Mom brought a new magazine today and while I wait I try to read a story about fishing for salmon in Alaska. I hear a rustling sound and look up and Sally is here. She is so beautiful. I'm turning a hundred shades of red. That smile is gorgeous. I love her.

"Where did you come from?" I ask.

"The river," she says. "Can't you hear it?"

I don't know if she means what she's saying or she's joking. I don't care. I grab her hand and say, "I love you."

"I love you more than you know," she says.

"No, I mean I love you," I say.

She smiles, but her eyes turn serious for just a moment. She laughs lightly.

"In your dreams," she says.

We talk a little and then I get quiet and close my eyes for only a second. But when I open them she's gone.

In the morning old Sister Mary Hymantum comes in to give me the bed bath, a cleansing of the face and pits. Sister Hy says any work below the belt is my duty. Thank God.

This morning her face is more serious than usual. I wonder if there is bad news from yesterday's tests. I'd ask her, but she always says the doctors never tell her test results.

"And how are you feeling this morning, young Mister," says Sister Hy.

"I'm feeling like I'm going to beat this thing," I reply, wondering how she will answer.

"Well, that's good, that's good," she mumbles without much enthusiasm. She starts my bath.

"Sally Pepper thinks so, too," I say.

"Uh huh," says Sister Hy. "Sally who?"

"The night nurse, Sally Pepper," I say.

"Never heard of her," she says. "Hold your other arm up, now."

I'm surprised. She's a little forgetful, I guess. Maybe it's a nun thing to not remember the prettiest nurse in the hospital.

"Young man, I have a heavy heart for you this morning," says Sister Hy.

"I'm doing fine," I say. I do not want to hear this. Sister Hy has my arm in the air and she keeps scrubbing my arm pit, over and over.

"You know," she says, "no one here is talking to you about ..." She drops the arm and begins to wash my chest.

"About what?" I say.

"About ..." she says, "the future."

"The future is great," I say. "I'm going to pull through this. I am. I definitely am."

"It's not my place to—" she begins

"That's right," I say, interrupting her. "It's not. We'll let the doctor do the talking."

Sister Hy gathers up the towel and pan of water and starts to leave. But she stops, leans over me and places a kiss on my forehead. She walks away and out the door and I feel relieved. And rotten.

Later I ask Sally if she is my night nurse.

"I am here for you," is all she says.

"Why don't you ever give me a shot or take my temperature?" I ask.

"They do that for you during the day," she says.

Yes, they do. I get needles stuck in me all the time. They're painful, but Sally Pepper says to pray, "Ever this day be at my side" while the needle goes in. It hurts less and I remember a prayer Mom taught me when I was a little kid. It goes "Ever this day be at my side, to love and guide." I can't remember the rest. I'll have to ask Sally if she's ever heard it.

I think about Sally getting a shot in her bottom. I suppose I shouldn't. If I were her doctor, I wouldn't be embarrassed. I'd just say, "OK, Sally Pepper, give us a cheek." I really don't know if I could say it that way. It sounds profane. I've been thinking a lot lately about how I would give her a shot. She'd have to raise her skirt, and I've never had a girl do that in front of me. And I guess you can't give someone a shot through their underwear, so who pulls it down, me or her? Do I sit or do I stand behind her? This would be kind of sacred for me, you know? Maybe I'd light a candle or put on some music, like a CD of a symphony. Dad would probably choose Mahler's 9th. He always plays that when something important happens, like when he got promoted at work. I'd be a gentleman, of course. I wouldn't touch more of her skin than necessary. I promise not to. I'd bless myself as I pushed in the plunger.

Sally hasn't been to see me the last few nights. I hope she's not upset that I said I loved her. I'd be humiliated if she could read my thoughts ... some of them. I keep praying she'll come be at my side, but she hasn't come back. When I try to think of us being together after I get out of the hospital, something in my mind won't let me see the future. I get upset and almost cry. It's as if the future is on the other side of the river and I can't get to it.

It's strange, but I think Sally has always been with me, since the day I was born. I can't explain how that's possible. I've seen her only the last few weeks and I wonder how I overlooked her before.

I guess I'm sleeping most of the day now. Of all things, I dream of learning to sew while I sit by a river. Sister Hy shows me how to use the scissors in a way that doesn't fray the material. She puts a thimble on my finger and helps me to thread a needle. I look around the river bank, hoping no one sees me doing a girl thing.

"I don't like doing this," I say.

"But it's no different than tying a beautiful Royal Coachman trout fly," she says

"Well, I'd certainly say it is *very* different," I reply.

"We're making something for your beloved. You're sewing a dress for Sally Pepper. It's for a very special occasion."

I wonder how Sister Hy knows of Sally and that I love her. Once I start working, I realize I'm happy for the first time in weeks. I cut out the pieces and lovingly form every fold of the white fabric to fit each curve of her body. I stitch a beautiful fitted gown to embrace Sally Pepper. It's like dressing her. It feels almost as nice as it would to touch her.

It's getting harder to breathe now. I take long, slow pulls through my nose and each time the pain is worse. I've lost track of everything around me. My whole world is my breathing and the pain. It always seems like late afternoon. It's cold and I haven't seen the sun since forever.

Sister Hy comes to me again in a dream, but this time she doesn't want to sew.

"Come with me," she says. We're not at the river, but instead in a desert. The sun is impaled on the edge of the sky, its top half above the far hills. I can't tell if it's dawn or evening. Sister Hy stays ahead of me and leads the way. We walk for quite a distance and the ground gets steeper. The sun never moves. It sits there with one leg over the horizon and watches us. A thick mist swirls up ahead of us and the path disappears into it. I stop, but Sister Hy reaches back and pulls me into the fog. We edge forward, pushing our feet ahead, as if we were nearing the edge of something. I hear a river, but this time it's not a lazy flow. It is running from my left to my right, a huge and powerful flood of water pounding a course from horizon to horizon. I can't see it and I don't want to get any closer.

"Come ahead," says Sister Hy. "You need to see this." I can't. I am thoroughly frightened. I don't want to see what is beyond. My stomach churns and moans, and I have to go to the bathroom. My head is throbbing and I can feel my heart thumping in my chest. I do not want this. Why does this have to happen?

"I can't come with you," I say to Sister Hy.

"You must." She answers. "I won't let you fall in, but you must see this."

"I'm not going anywhere," I shout. "Why are you doing this to me? I want to go back to the hospital. Where is Sally? I want to go home. I want to see my Dad. Why is he always leaving me?"

I awake soaked to my skin. I am bawling like a two year old. I realize I'm back in the hospital. Someone is holding me.

"I'm dying," I say through my tears.

"I didn't want to tell you," says my father. He pulls me closer into his arms and kisses the top of my head. Then he lets go and stands up. He crosses the room and leaves. I can hear him crying.

I dream that Sally Pepper and I make love. I don't see anything. It must happen in the dark. I only know we do it. I can tell. It's strange, as though I'm in a dream while I'm dreaming about it.

Later, I see our children. I'm proud of them and of myself. I come home from work wearing a shirt and a tie and Sally Pepper is cooking supper and feeding the baby in a high chair. Our little boy plays under the kitchen table. He looks like me.

I say to him, "Why don't you come out and be with Daddy?"

"I'm busy," he says.

"Busy with what?" I ask.

"You know," he says. "I'm dying."

It's very dark now. The pain isn't gone, but it feels like it belongs to someone else. I haven't taken a breath in a while. I tried and tried and then I just gave up. It's very quiet, except for the breeze that blows at my back and nudges me forward. I can hear the sound of flowing water again. I'm on the edge of the world. It's not a dream. I want to call out for Sally Pepper, but I can't get enough air to speak.

I know I'm leaving. I'm not afraid. I'm awfully sad. I will never be here again.

I hear a shout and turn. Behind me in the distance great dark clouds rise up into the sky above a raging river that makes no sound. My father stands on the far shore, almost hidden in the shadow of the storm. Although he is at a distance, I see him place a fist over his heart. His other hand comes up and closes over the fist. He will always hold me in his heart. I feel tears start, but I have no breath to cry out to him.

Turning back to the path my eyes feel as if they are opening and the world begins to glow with a new light.

Sally Pepper is at my side. She is stunning, dressed in the gown I sewed. She is absolutely beautiful and I've never seen her so radiant. There are gorgeous velvet hills all around us and the sky is a perfect robin's egg blue. We walk hand in hand and she brings me to the top of a hill. Down the green slope in front of us is a valley. At the bottom a river flows away as far as I can see. A small group stands on the shore and they look up at us, waving. Three or four of the young women carry bouquets of flowers. Sally Pepper walks a few steps forward, then turns and invites me to follow. I walk up to her and she takes my hand and places it over her heart. She leans into me and whispers in my ear, "Ever this day be at my side." The sun is warm on my face and the wind caresses me. I am laughing. I am crying. I can breathe.

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