

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 a young woman in her twenties. I'm thirteen years old, but I think I'm pretty grown up for my age. I used to be the top student in my class at school.

I've been here in Our Lady of All Angels Hospital for over a month. This time there's a mass in my chest and it's growing 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 told Mom the other day.

"Oh, honey," she said, "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 *think* my way out of this. Not when I'm facing a monster. First my blood turned to sewer water and then my kidneys felt like they were exploding and now a lung tumor. Well, I'm going to beat it. Even if they don't think I can. I saw how they looked at each other last night when they thought I was 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've tried to stay awake late at night, waiting for Sally Pepper to get here. I lie in bed hoping for the door to open. I fall asleep and 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 has taken a liking to me. It would be terrific if she fell in love with me. We could leave here together and find a place where we'd be with each other all the time. I've read that's illegal, but I'd go before the judge and explain that I'm not really a child. I'm way beyond my years. And besides, I'm ill and she's a nurse.

When my Dad comes to visit he is always antsy and keeps going out for a smoke. I asked Mom if he was mad at me about anything. She said he's just upset and hates to see me sick. I thought he might be mad about my not

wanting to go to school. A few weeks ago I was home and feeling pretty good and 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. I heard the front door to the house close in a minute or two. I wanted to talk to him about why I didn't want to go back to the school. Or we could talk about fishing like we used to. Just because I'm sick doesn't mean we can't talk about hooking a big trout in the stream where we used to have so much fun.

I guess he thinks my going back to school is more important. The last time I went in to visit, a few of the students snickered when I came into the classroom. They could see 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 haven't been doing 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 and now I'm just like Stephen Walters, the class dummy. If I get better, I'll have to start eighth grade all over again next year with those dopey seventh graders. Of course 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 OK. I'll marry Sally Pepper and we'll have a family. Everything will be just fine.

But today the tumor in my chest presses down more than ever. It is worse than yesterday. Breathing is getting to be an effort. The doctor never really answers my questions. He just keeps saying , "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 says I'm handsome and all that silly stuff while she brushes the hair out of my eyes and rubs my chest where it hurts.

Sally Pepper acts like my big sister, but I think of her differently. I grabbed her hand the other night and said, "I love you."

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

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

I watched her face. Her smile remained, but her eyes turned serious for just a moment. She laughed lightly.

"In your dreams," she said,

Then she left. Like she always does. I looked over at the television and I guess I got interested in it and the next thing I knew she was gone.

In the morning old Sister 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. One day the medicine knocked me out and I woke up to find the old nun busy down there, knocking things around in a hurried effort to get the job done. I was sore the rest of the day.

This morning when she comes into my room her face is more serious than usual. I wonder if there was 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," comes the reply. "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 this morning," says Sister Hy. "And it's for you."

"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.

"Well ... " she says. "You know God loves you. He can't wait for all of us to come home. Coming home is a happy occasion and ..."

"I'm not going anywhere," I say. What is she trying to tell me? I am going to pull through this. I am. I definitely am.

I miss my books. I really can't read in bed. I get a neck ache when I try. I miss my music, too. Uncle Dan plays in the local symphony and ever since I was a little kid he has taught me how to play some really beautiful pieces on the piano. The other kids in school listen to that drivel on the radio. I played some of my music to Billy French a few months ago and he said he was sure I was playing it too slow and I should speed it up. What a dope.

I asked Sally last night if she was my night nurse.

"I am here for you," was all she said.

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

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

Yes, they do. I get needles stuck in me all the time. They're painful, but Sally Pepper said to pray, "Ever this day be at my side" while the needle goes in. It hurts less.

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, give us a cheek.". How profane that sounds. I've been thinking a lot lately about how I would give her a shot. She'd have to raise her skirt, and I guess you can't give someone a shot through their underwear, so who pulls it down, me or her? Do I sit, do I stand behind her? This would not a casual chore for me. It would be sacred. I'd want to light a candle and put on a symphony, maybe Mahler's 9th. I wouldn't touch more of her skin than necessary. I promise not to. I'd bless myself as I pushed in the plunger.

I wonder if Sally Pepper is a virgin like me. She's not like a sister and I don't know if she'll ever be my girlfriend, as much as I'd like that. It's strange, but I sense Sally has always been with me, since the day I was born. I can't explain how or why it could be. I've seen her only these past few weeks and so I wonder how I've overlooked her.

I guess I'm sleeping most of the day now. Of all things, I dreamt of learning to sew while I sat by a river. Sister Hy showed me how to use the scissors in a way that didn't fray the material. She put a thimble on my finger and helped me to thread a needle. I looked around the river bank, hoping no one would see me doing a girl thing.

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

"But it's no different than composing a symphony," she said

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

"No," she persisted, "It's the same when you make something for your beloved. We're sewing a dress for Sally Pepper. It's for a very special occasion."

Because it was a dream I didn't wonder why Sister Hy knew of Sally and that I loved her. Once I got going, I forgot my fear of being seen. Happy for the first time in weeks, I cut out the pieces and lovingly formed every fold of the white fabric to accommodate each curve of my beloved's body. I stitched a beautiful fitted gown to embrace Sally Pepper. It was like dressing her. It felt 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 came to me again in a dream, but this time she did not want to sew.

"Come with me," she said. We were not at the river, but instead in a desert. The sun was splitting itself, half down on the horizon and I couldn't tell if it was dawn or evening. Sister Hy stayed ahead of me and led the way. We walked along for quite a distance and the ground steadily became

steeper. Smoke billowed ahead on our path. In a few minutes the lip of what I guessed was a deep canyon could be seen. I stopped walking. Whatever it was, it ran from my left to my right, from horizon to horizon. I could not see into it and I didn't want to get any closer.

"Come ahead," said Sister Hy. "You need to see this."

I could not. I was thoroughly frightened. I did not want to see what was beyond. My stomach churned and loosened, and I had to go to the bathroom. My head was throbbing and I could feel my heart thumping in my chest. I did not want this. Why did this have to happen?

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

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

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

I awoke soaked to my skin. Someone was holding me. I was back in the hospital.

"I'm dying," I said.

"I didn't want to tell you," said my father, and he let go of me. He pulled me back into his arms and kissed the top of my head. Then he let go and stood up. He crossed the room and left again. I could hear him crying.

I dreamt that Sally Pepper and I made love. I didn't see anything. It must have happened in the dark. I only know we did it. I could tell. It was strange, as though I was in a dream while I was dreaming about it.

Later, I saw our children. I was proud of them and of myself. I came home from work wearing a shirt and a tie and Sally Pepper was cooking supper and feeding the baby in a chair. Our little boy played under the kitchen table. He looked like me.

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

"I'm busy," he replied.

"Busy with what?" I asked.

"You know," he said.

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'm in a new place I've haven't been before. It's not a dream. I want to call out for Sally Pepper, but I have no breath.

I hear a shout and turn. Behind me in the distance is a storm with great dark clouds rising up into the sky. Beneath them on the horizon is my father. Although he is far off, I see him place a fist over his heart. His other hand comes up and closes over the fist. Somehow I know he is telling me he will hold me in his heart.

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 lush and verdant hills all around us and the sky is a perfect Robin's egg blue. We are walking 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 of people stand on the shore and 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 beckons me to follow. When I join her she offers her hand again and says, "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.

*Angel of God, my Guardian dear, to whom His love commits me here,
ever this day be at my side, to light and guard, to love and guide.
- prayer to a Guardian Angel*

copyright, 2008/2012 David Griffin

The Windswept Press
Murrells Inlet, South Carolina

www.windsweptpress.com