

## 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 and a half years old.

I've been here in the Children's Ward of Our Lady of All Angels Hospital for 3 weeks and the mass is growing bigger. Mom and Dad and everyone are all smiles, but as time goes on I can tell they're faking it. I know Mom doesn't think I'll make it this time. I've heard her whispering to Dad when they thought me asleep. She says I'm being shortchanged and I'll never have a life like her and Dad. But I've had a good life and thirteen years is a long time.

Something is in my chest and it presses down more every day. Breathing gets to be an effort. Sometimes I wake in the middle of the night and I'm afraid and I wish Sally Pepper would hurry up and come on duty. I want her to smile at me and ask about school and say I'm handsome and all that silly stuff she tells me as she brushes the hair out of my eyes and rubs my chest where it hurts.

When Sally leaves, 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.

Sister Hy says she has never heard of Sally Pepper. She's a little forgetful, I guess. Maybe it's a nun thing to not remember the prettiest nurse in the hospital.

I get needles in the rump all the time and it makes me wonder if Sally Pepper ever has a shot in the buttocks. It's hard to imagine such a mundane act violating the sacred. How profane to think of the doctor saying, "Sally, pull down your pants and give me a cheek." Not to be irreverent, but it would be like hearing the

Blessed Mother fart. Sally isn't a saint, I hope, but her exposed bottom would be holy to me. If I were giving her a shot, I'd light a candle, put on Mahler's 9th Symphony and reveal only the tiniest piece of skin necessary. Probably. Maybe I'd bless myself as I pushed in the plunger. I wonder if Sally Pepper is a virgin.

I sense that Sally Pepper has always been with me, since the day I was born. I can't explain how or why that could be. I've seen her only these past few weeks and so I wonder how I've overlooked her presence.

I guess I'm sleeping most of the day now. I dreamt of learning to sew. I cut out the white fabric and stitched a beautiful fitted gown to embrace Sally Pepper, lovingly forming every fold of the fabric to accommodate each curve of her body. 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.

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, somehow. I could feel us. 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.

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.

Sally Pepper is beside me, dressed in the most stunning gown I've ever seen. I wish I had sewn it. She is absolutely beautiful and I've never seen her so radiant. We are walking hand in hand and she brings me to the top of a hill. Down the green slopes of the other side is a valley. I can see a river down there. I can feel the wind and the warm sun on my face. I am laughing. I am crying. I can breathe.

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