

## Sally

Sally went to the store, I say.

Immediately you protest. Who is this Sally, and why should I be interested in her purchasing habits? Shush, I say, I am telling you a story. Now listen.

Sally is 45, a working mother. She has a son who is going on 18 and a daughter going on 12. In her life she has had three miscarriages and two abortions but now, as she is entering perimenopause, she thinks with relief that there will be an end to all *that* business; she can submit to nature's flawless birth control. Sally has black hair. She is walking into the drugstore, the Eckert on the corner of Oak and 3<sup>rd</sup>. Across the street the boys are riding bikes and skateboards in the concrete pit. Sally's son is not among them. Sally's son is interested in plants, genetics, and chess. He has already completed his first year of college, a year ahead of everyone else in his preschool class. One of the things Sally plans to buy at the drugstore is condoms for him though she can't guess when he will actually use them.

I get it, you say. This is a story that already has a lot of sex in it.

That is not an interesting statement, I say. It is trite and imprecise to say that all art is about sex and death, and what is not about sex will be about death. You have been limiting your reading to Freud and the Greek tragedians, all that *eros* and *thanatos* and Oedipal urges. You are not being a student of life. You want to make generalizations such as, "This story is about fluids and their properties and functions, the itchy and awkward problems of our bodies—how they need coverings

and incisions, cosmetic aids and cleansing powders, how they are at every moment grieving or sweating, bloating or dying, each cell lurching madly toward decay.” To you I would say to be a student of life you must pay close attention to things. Shush now, and listen.

The other things Sally is on her way to buy are these: cold medicine pills that taste like cherry candies; a small—just a small—bag of potato chips, salt and vinegar; a greeting card for her father’s birthday, which she will only select after having opened all the possibilities and determined upon one that is not crude, not familiar or colloquial, neither flowered nor gushy and also not layered with transparent papers, one that is sober and manly, meaning it is composed in strong dark colors (brown, gray, navy blue) and its sentiment is appropriate and reserved (wishing you all the best on your birthday, Dad). She will review the price of digital thermometers and decide the old underarm model will have to last another year; she will sift through the clearance rack looking at picture frames but find they all have some flaw, a scratch on the plastic, a dent in the wood, which makes them inadvisable to give as gifts. In the end she will buy a box of yellow highlighters for herself, for her work as an administrative assistant at the local college, where diminishing budgets have corresponded to a dwindling stack of her favorite office supplies. She will also purchase, on sale, a box of slender regular tampons for her daughter who is not menstruating yet but may begin any day now and likes to have the cabinet underneath the bathroom sink stocked with absorbent things as though she expects a flood to emerge from her when the time comes. Also Sally will buy a gardening magazine (though it is September) and a pack of chewing gum (mint).

As she is selecting and then paying for these purchases it will not occur to her that she is supporting consumer industries that rely on psychological manipulation to sell products and make things out of non-renewable resources using energy-intensive processes that are already straining an over-used environment. It is tiring to be thinking of these things all the time. She will not know that the 2.5% fee the store will pay to her credit card company for this transaction will go directly to fuel the bank CEO's private jet for a trip on which he takes his mistress to a celebrity basketball game where they have private seats. Sally has no idea that even while she is going about this innocent part of her day, the elected and appointed officials who run her federal, state, and municipal governments are making decisions that will cut the interest rate on her retirement fund, limit the aid available to support her son through college, widen the bridge that leads from one of the residential neighborhoods to the city's shopping district, and ensure that Sally's grandchildren, once she has them, will receive sex education classes in their public schools starting at age five. Not to mention that four American lives were lost in foreign wars—one of which, being of a secret nature, will not even be fully explained to the family—in the time it took the cashier to ring up Sally's gum.

There needs to be a conflict, I hear you objecting. This isn't a story. There has to be a *change*.

Fine, here's a change for you: Sally will die when she is 68, of heart disease, a leading cause of death for women in her age group. Her son will grow up to be a brilliant plant geneticist and write six very important articles on his discovery of how to recombine certain vascular plant DNAs to process greater levels of carbon

dioxide, and his discoveries will be touted as a great stride in the effort to stop climate change. He will be widely revered in his field and nominated for a Nobel Peace Prize, though it will not be awarded to him. He will teach at a prestigious university and never marry. He will die at 76 of a heart attack.

Sally's daughter, frightened by an early sex-talk with her mother in which Sally showed her pictures of her aborted fetuses, will remain a virgin until she is 32, have a handful of awkward heterosexual encounters followed by a series of more satisfying same-sex ones, will eventually marry a woman with the full legal blessing of her state and, at 45—the age her mother is now—she will adopt of family of Namibian orphans (five of them, whose parents were killed in a natural disaster) and raise a happy, well-adjusted bunch of kids who live meagerly but comfortably on her wages as a grade-school teacher, her wife's work as a freelance photographer, and the occasional cruise vacation paid for out of her brother's academic salary. Sally's daughter will die in her late 50s of a swift and malignant cancer and her children will continue to be supported by their uncle until they find jobs in various types of foreign and domestic service—one of them becoming a rather high-placed executive in a multinational corporation that will buy out Eckert many, many years from now. There you have it, sex and death: is that good enough for you?

And all this time, I might add, while you have been pestering me as to why Sally is white (is this yet another, you have asked me, tale of white cultural hegemony), while the workers at the Eckert are what would be classified in the confidential application files as "ethnic" or "persons of color", and why, you ask me,

have I put Sally in a town where yet again class lines fall out by color, and neighborhoods fall out according to class lines, and why do I even bother to mention that in the case of Sally's first abortion (at 16) the father was a black man (older, unemployed) and for the second abortion (at 19) the father was a Kurdish exchange student, and it was with her college boyfriend (mixed race, Asian father and white mother) that she had her first two miscarriages, while her husband—incidentally, white, whom she later, incidentally, divorced for infidelity—should sire two living children, and what troubling political implications lie behind my use of race, anyway?—all this time, while we have been carrying on about Sally, the real story has been going on across the street.

Where Donny Parks, 13, white and of what is politely termed the working class, fought with his mother this morning and has been feeling very angry and self-pitying with himself and the world in general, and in riding up and down the cement bank on his skateboard with the Spiderman sticker he has found that his wheels are beginning to drag, making it impossible to practice the new tricks he has desperately wanted to try, and this circumstance, on top of the fight with his mother, has precipitated young Donny to the verge of an emotional breakdown, in front of all these boys whom he barely knows, in which he may potentially pound his skateboard against a concrete pipe and possibly subside in tears. Seeing the boy's distress, Kayne Stimson, 15, son of a Jamaican father and a Puerto Rican mother who are happily married and solidly middle-class, produces a spare set of bearings from his backpack and the skateboard repair kit within it, and, with a slight shrug and a smile, hands the small plastic package to the younger boy.

And no, this is not the beginning of an extraordinary lifelong friendship; it is not a moment that changed anyone's life; it is not even an exchange that either boy will consciously remember. Donny Parks will not, due to this moment, somehow be redirected from a path of narcissism and mayhem that would result in his opening fire on high school classmates before blowing out his brains with a stolen gun, because Donny Parks is not the type of boy who would ever point a loaded weapon at any living creature, animal or person. Nor will Kayne Stimson go on to a life of humanitarian achievement; he will be married three times, divorced twice, parent several children, change his place of employment on four different occasions, hold at various points in his life three mortgages on middle-class homes, and he will live to see the bankruptcy of the health and social security programs that should have kept him from dying, friendless and unable to remember his name or much of his history, a virtual prisoner in a state-run nursing home at a very advanced age.

All that will happen as a consequence of this exchange is that Donny Parks, feeling a little less low, will go home and forgive his mother and sit with her before the television as they eat grilled cheese sandwiches and tomato soup off TV trays with wobbly legs, and for some reason this will be what he remembers: that the cheese was Swiss, that the soup burned his tongue, and that his mother, divorced, whom he rarely heard laughing, laughed till she cried at something silly said on the sitcom about the lives of married people. And later that afternoon, Kayne, on his way to the sports shop to find replacement bearings for his repair kit, will stop at the Eckert, purchase a soda, and from the number on the inside of the plastic lid will win the latest model iPod, which will be the one event from that day that stands out in

his memory. So the story in its essence is only this: in a world full of war and terrorism, capitalist industry and vanishing ecosystems, a world where all things set in time or place or motion will eventually dissolve, there is still this, one moment wherein one human being showed a small kindness to another, however forgotten or unobserved.

That's it. That's the story.

Shush, now. And listen.