

Labor

“Well done, Sally. You’ve done your country a great honor today.”

The doctor flashed a row of straight, white teeth at her as he lowered her legs and adjusted the cloth draping. The nurse had already whisked the baby away, past a row of eager nursing students, and set it on the warming table to run the state mandated genetic tests. The students took notes and stood as close to the sterile zone as they were allowed. No one was looking at Sally anymore. The baby screamed louder as the nurses took blood samples. Slowly its cries turned to whimpers, after another minute it stopped making noises all together.

It, Sally Brooks thought. I don’t even know if it’s a boy or a girl. She assumed the baby had fallen asleep, after the ordeal they had both been through Sally could sympathize, all she wanted was to be wheeled back to her room and take the sedatives the doctor had promised her when she felt her first contractions. She looked around the hospital room, her blue eyes taking in the sterile walls and beeping machines. Sally was average height and prettier than most women in her Sector. Her hair was honey blond and naturally wavy when it wasn’t plastered to her forehead with sweat.

She had been lucky to get a room to herself. Only seven other women had been in the Sector 4 pregnancy center during her stay and none of them had gone into labor that day. This was her first child and Sally was blissfully unaware of the how busy the center could be when it was full to capacity.

The few other patients she had met were not first timers. They spoke candidly about the process of pregnancy and labor. They told her the same platitudes as the doctors. The baby would be born for the good of the country. Strong young men and women were

needed to keep the country running. In her old age she would be able to appreciate the support of the next generation as she used social security to enjoy her retirement. They eyed her round belly and told her to be proud and not to worry. They told her the pain would soon be forgotten. Sally had not worried about her labor, she knew it would be hard but there was nothing she could accomplish by worrying. She allowed herself to relax and enjoyed the good meals and beautiful scenery. Like most women, Sally found being pregnant a nice escape from real life. She worked in a factory six days a week, putting the wheels on office chairs. She would never have been able to afford a vacation of this caliber. Sally dutifully listened to the directions of the nurses and doctors, even after she was assigned to bed rest for her final two weeks of the pregnancy. Sally knew having a healthy child would earn her more respect and possibly a promotion. She would be able to stay in a center similar to the pregnancy center for up to a month after the child was born. Then she would go back to the factory. The last floor worker who gave birth came back to a managerial position. But that woman had given birth to twins. Sally hoped for a pay raise and to be moved to a position where she could sit down more often. Small hopes were easier to get fulfilled. She was pregnant for the first time at 33 and did not expect to have the same luck again

Sally could not ignore the pain she currently felt and was starting to doubt it could ever be forgotten. How did those women go through childbirth and decide to do it again? Not that they had much of a choice. Contraceptive devices were few and far between. Abstinence was the only guaranteed way to avoid pregnancy, but it was frowned upon during the childbearing years. Special permits and prescriptions could be obtained if a doctor thought another pregnancy would endanger a woman's life. Or if they found any

genetic anomalies in the children she had already conceived. Sally wondered about the baby but was too tired to do more than twist her head and look in the general direction of the gaggle of nursing students. They were gone. She felt a moment of panic. How did they leave so quietly?

“Where’s my baby?” Sally asked the doctor. He muttered something unintelligible. He was sewing her up and did not lift his head from his work. Sally asked again, her voice reaching a higher pitch, as she grew more concerned. After receiving no answer a second time she remembered another thing the other pregnant women had told her. The women said it wouldn’t hurt to give up the baby. She hadn’t been sure if she believed them at the time. Now she knew they were wrong, about the physical pain and the emotional. Sally knew she had been forming an attachment to the baby even as she tried not to. She loved when it kicked and moved inside her. In her dreams she named it and they lived together, even though thinking of such atrocities make her sick during her waking hours. Whenever she had asked about seeing it after it was born the nurses smiled sweetly and she got a small white pill added to her daily vitamins and prenatal medications. It calmed her in a way the other pregnant women in the center could not. The pill stopped the inappropriate dreams as well.

The doctor stood up and removed his surgical cap. Sally tried to calm herself and asked again to see her baby in as reasonable a tone as she could manage. It didn’t work. The doctor gave her the same empty smile as the nurses had and attached an IV to her arm. As Sally fell asleep she wondered how the doctor could smile like that after all she had been through and how he never looked her in the eye.

That night Sally struggled to fall asleep. Tears filled her eyes whenever she

thought of the baby. It was somewhere in the center, it might even be on the same floor and she would never see it. When the nurses wheeled in her new roommate Sally wiped her face. Tears wouldn't bring her baby back; they would only get her more little white pills.

It was just after midnight and Sally was still awake. She knew the nurse wouldn't come to check on her until 4 AM unless her monitor sent a distress signal to the nurses' station. She attached her monitor to the woman in the next bed and crept out of the room. Her new roommate was eight months pregnant with her fourth child. She slept like a rock.

Sally followed the simple emergency map she had removed from the door in her room down to the nursery. There were five babies in identical cream-colored blankets sleeping peacefully in their individual plastic bassinets, small green lights flashed above their heads, monitoring their breathing. Sally wasn't sure which one was hers. The other women she had spoken to during her stay had given birth as well in the last week and all of the babies looked the same. *Maybe I should go back to my room, ask for some pills, and have a nice drugged sleep.* She turned to go back to her room and passed in front of the nursery's doorway. The glass doors slid open noiselessly and the humming machinery beckoned her. She turned into the nursery without allowing herself a second thought and walked between the empty bassinets to the center of the room. It was one of three nurseries on this floor of the hospital. Sally knew from reading the literature on the Center that the building could hold up to 1,000 babies at once. She wasn't sure if that would ever really be necessary, but people could also be housed in the Hospital Center during natural or other disasters. At the time of her admission into the Center, Sally had wondered what would qualify as an "other" disaster.

She didn't know which sleeping child was hers but she felt an affinity for each of them. They were tightly wrapped and their little pink faces tugged at her heart. Each infant had a clipboard at the foot of their bassinet, similar to the one hanging at the end of Sally's empty bed back in her room. She had seen enough medical dramas to know these were the babies' charts. She lifted off the closest chart and looked for time of birth. After going through all of the charts twice she knew which pink bundle was hers.

It was a boy and he was perfect. Sally wanted to undo his oatmeal colored blanket to see his tiny fingers and toes but she held back. She knew this was only a brief respite from her childless life. The baby had been conceived and nurtured in her womb, she had protected it during its first nine months of existence but it was not hers. She couldn't touch it and risk waking it up. Sally forced herself to continue thinking of the baby as "it", although she had finally discovered the gender of her child. *I'm sure it's better this way. I need to distance myself.* Even as she thought this, her hands were reaching for her son's clipboard again.

Name: John Smith

Birth Date: October 9 2520 3:13 P.M.

Gender: Male

Parents' genetic details attached

Sally knew who the father was and didn't bother looking at her own genetic profile. Jason Young was the only man she had slept with in the past year. He was a nice, gentle male prostitute who had come to her apartment twice in a four-month span. The first time had been exactly what she wanted from the experience. The second time had been awkward because they had known each other from the previous sexual encounter.

Jason was the only prostitute fitting her preferences working for the company she called. She vowed never to call them again after he had left the second time. Being with him a third time would have felt like she was breaking a Rule. Even though she wasn't explicitly seeking him out, spending too much time with the same man alone in her apartment was bound to raise red flags. It was too uncomfortable to see a familiar face in the bedroom, anyway. She didn't know she was pregnant until two months later. Being a man, he would never know for sure he was a father, although in his line of work he had to suspect he had a few children out there. Along with the parents' information a list of half siblings would be included in the chart. The baby's DNA would be encoded into his ID card when he was old enough to get one. This would allow brothels and prostitution agencies to prevent any incest.

Sally looked back at the chart in her hands. Someday it would be filled with dozens of pages regarding childhood illnesses, hospital admissions, and progress in school and later the military. Right now it felt light in her hands, so much would happen in this boy's life and she would never know. He would be one of a million Johns, one of a billion Smiths.

She walked over to the charting station and picked up a pen. Before she had time to think about her decision or worry about being caught Sally smudged away the last two letters of her son's first name and lengthened it to Jonathan. To the last name she added an "e" then set the pen down. Sally knew enough about how the government ran to know that someone doing data entry would only be a Grade 1 and wouldn't dare question a Grade 5 Namer's decision. If no one noticed these changes she would be able to keep an eye on him. Her precious son would make a newspaper article somewhere, she would

know if he were elected to office or promoted to colonel, if he died before she did she would see his name in the obituaries, if he moved into her building she would recognize his name on the mailbox. It was the only way to keep track of him and she had to know how his life would turn out.

With all of these hopes pushing down the sob in her throat, Sally placed the pen and chart where she had found them and walked out of the room without looking back. She couldn't steal a baby in a country that had no families, where every school was a boarding school. She had no means of raising a child or keeping it hidden.

It, she thought. I know I gave birth to a son. Maybe now I can sleep.