The Day Sally Miller Had Leukemia

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The two girls stood in the waist-deep, brownish green water of the Missouri, their feet anchored in the muddy sludge bottom. The sky was a clear cornflower blue. And the sun, too bright to look at, sent shivering streaks of light across the slicing green edges of waves. The two girls stood with their bodies erect and let their arms drift loosely in the cold water that flowed around their legs and hips. The chill in the water reminded the girls of the growing coldness of the late August nights.

The dark-haired girl, Diane, had a thick white coat of zinc oxide over her nose to protect it from becoming a burnt brick color. The water made her a little nervous, it was obvious, and she was prepared to guard her body from its hazards. From the waist on up she was smeared with a slick sunscreen oil. Every so often, she would blink her eyes to make certain that her contacts were still in. A pink rubber noseplug hung on a pink string around her neck.

The fair-haired girl, Sally, was a larger girl than Diane, burnt brick red by the sun. In one hand, she held an old green diving mask; and if one could have seen through the muddy water, he would have seen that she had a pair of floppy green frog's flippers on her feet. She was resting now, but a few minutes earlier she had been giving Diane a diving demonstration. She was a comical diver. For amusement, Sally had done her alligator imitation. Then she had stood on her hands with her red legs flailing dismemberedly out of the water. Worn out now, she stood and swirled the water into little whirlpools with her hands.
So the two girls stood, bodies erect, churning up the mud-clouded water with their hands. The sun, getting lower and lower in the sky gave a strange, almost blackish and brown cast to the water.

Diane shivered. "If this water gets any colder, I’m going to have to call it quits for the summer. It cramps up my legs. It’s starting to smell fishier and fishier around this place every year."

"I’m going to stick it our for as long as I can," Sally said. "I want to have a real nice tan when I go to college. I want to be tan. And I want to lose five more pounds. And I’m thinking of getting a haircut. How do you think I’d look with my hair layered?"

Diane was laughing. "Oh, forget it, Sally. You can’t come up with a presto-chango new personality for college when it’s only three weeks away. As far as I’m concerned, they can take me as I am or not at all."

"Then you might not get taken," Sally snickered.

Diane scowled at Sally and flicked a dead bug off of her swimsuit with a shudder. "That’s not what I mean. It’s just that I’m not that worried about college. I don’t feel like I need to make any changes to be acceptable to the ‘college crowd’."

"Okay, suit yourself. I just think it will be fun to make a few changes. It’s like getting a fresh start. Of course, as roommates we will be constant reminders to each other of our old high school days."

"So?" Diane shrugged. "Who says I want to forget my high school days?"

On impulse, Diane reached behind her and snagged a floating strand of seaweed between her long fingers.

"Here, Sally. Have a snake," she cried, and threw the slimy seaweed across her friend’s shoulder. Sally jerked back and snatched the seaweed from her arm.

"Oh, ick, Diane," Sally gasped, "I hate the feel of that junk on my skin. It’s so . . . slimy." Sally dramatically grasped her arm as though she had been bitten. She
looked up at Diane, and laughed.

"Maybe I better suck the blood out of the wound before I die of snakebite poisoning." She looked at Diane and paused when she saw Diane's frown.

"What is wrong with you?" Sally crooned in a mocking voice. "You don't think nothing I do is ever funny. You know what's wrong with you? You don't have no sense of hilarity."

Sally was irritated with Diane's serious face. "Come on, Diane. Don't be such a dud. What's your problem, anyway?"

"Your arm," said Diane, staring with beetle-browed scrutiny at Sally's arm.

Sally laughed. "So, you're admiring my arms. Lovely, aren't they?" She rotated her shoulder and fluttered her eyelashes. "The Venus di Milo has nothing on me."

Diane kept staring intently at Sally's arm. "Sally," she asked, "did you bruise your arm? Look at those purple spots on your upper arm? No, the left one."

Sally looked down at a circle of purple spots on her arm and shrugged. "So? I can't remember doing it, but I probably bumped it. Maybe a gar bit me. Maybe a catfish gave me a hickey."

Diane screwed up her mouth into a pout. "Well, maybe. I'm not trying to scare you, but last night on Marcus Welby, M.D., a girl had spots on her arm—just like yours. And you know what? The girl had leukemia. Leukemia, Sally. And spots on her arm . . . just like yours."

Sally frowned and her voice became mockingly serious.

"You're probably right, Diane. I probably have leukemia. Well, just remember, when I go you get all of my Osmond Brothers albums. And take care of my cat, will you? This will come as quite a blow to old Tuffy. Ah, I'm so young to go so soon. What a pity, for one so full of life as I. . . ."
Diane did not smile. In fact, she looked a little peeved. “Sally, I don’t think it’s all that funny. You can never tell. Everyone always thinks ‘it can never happen to me,’ but it always happens to someone. Maybe you should see Dr. Herbert, just to play it safe.”

Sally sighed. “Oh Diane, he’d laugh me right out of the office. This wouldn’t even make it as a good bruise.” She looked down at her arm. “You’re getting shook over nothing, as usual. Maybe things are getting too much for you. With college so close at hand, you might be under too much of a strain. I know how it is, not feeling ready for the big school.”

Diane glared. “I’m more ready now than you are, Sally. I’m not the one who’s doing the big make-over. And I’m not getting shook. You always think I’m silly. Just because I take better care of my own health than you do, you think I’m a hypochondriac or something. It just might be a good idea for you to take me seriously once in a while.”

“Look, Diane. It’s just the way you are. You always get upset over little things. It’s typical. I just think you’ve got too much on your mind right now. That’s all.”

Diane grabbed Sally’s arm and jerked her friend so that she almost dunked her completely in the muddy water. Sally sputtered and spit out the water angrily.

“Come on, Diane. Don’t act like such a doughhead. I think I would know if I had leukemia.”

“How could you know? You’re on cloud nine half the time. I wish that you would pay attention to me for once, Sally Miller. I wish that you could take me seriously, for your own sake. You could catch this thing before it’s too late. Nobody ever finds out until it’s too late; but you could be different.”

Sally ignored her friend and let her body relax into an easy back float. Diane’s voice had hit a high pitch now; and a few people up the beach turned to see what was
happening. Disappointed that no one was drowning, they turned back again.

"Sally, how can you be so nonchalant? Aren't you the least bit nervous? What if I am right? What if you have leukemia and you waste away and it was all because you ignored my warning? That would show you just how much of a hypochondriac I am, Sally Miller. That would show you just how far your smugness is going to get you in the world. This is one time that you just might regret being such a smart aleck." Diane stood anchored in the muddy water. Her body was bent towards Sally; and her eyes flashed.

Sally pushed herself upright and stood up just a foot away from Diane. "Well, thanks for letting me know how you feel, Diane. You never did have any sense of humor, and you never will. You can never forgive me for having a good time, while you sit around and worry like an old grandma. You always start something to spoil my day. I bet you're worried about my leukemia. You don't care. You'd probably be glad if I had leukemia and died. Just to prove you right. Well, don't think I'll leave you anything if I do. I wouldn't leave you my dirty socks."

Diane backed off a few feet and put her hands on her hips. "What a sickening thing to say, Sally. As if I would be glad that you're dying, just so that I could be in your will. Well for your information, I wouldn't want anything of yours—not with your lousy taste. Besides, I'd swim in your clothes. You're so damn fat."

"FAT. Well, I guess that anyone would look fat next to you. You're such a stick. That's just what you are, standing here in the lake, a stick-in-the-mud." The two girls were pretty loud now. Quite a few people were looking in their direction and frowning. But the girls seemed oblivious to everything except each other.

"SO," cried Diane, "now we all know what you think about Me."
"Tell us about it, Diane. As if you ever cared anything about me. I'll just show you what a wonderful friend I really am. I'll die of leukemia tomorrow. Just to make you happy. How about that?"

"Don't do me any favors. You've always thought that I was stupid and silly. You've never believed anything I've ever said. Well, you're probably right this time. You don't have leukemia, so don't expect to wring any tears out of me. In fact, Sally, it's worse than leukemia. You're mentally ill. You're deranged . . . a hopeless case. Your warped sense of humor proves it. You're SICK."

"Sally violently shoved a floating piece of seaweed away from her arm. "Maybe I take life a little easier than you do, Diane. But at least I don't mope around always thinking I'm sick like you do, either. I've felt bad lots of times; but you'd never know it, because I don't advertise my illnesses like you do. You know, I have been feeling really run-down, lately. In fact, I haven't felt very good this whole past summer, now that we're on the subject. But you don't see me bawling around like a sick cow, do you? Even if I do have leukemia, I bet I won't make any bigger deal about it than you do one of your stupid chest colds."

Diane finally began laughing. "You idiot. I suppose that you really believe that you have leukemia. You've only got a little bruise on your arm. This is just another attention-getting tactic of yours. If your sick humor doesn't get you enough attention, you're going to try for sympathy. Is that it?"

Sally posed her arm delicately above the water and waded heavily toward the beach. "That's just like you, Diane. I know how you feel. Nobody can be sick but you; being sick is your specialty. Well, maybe I will go to the doctor's this afternoon. In fact, I've been meaning to for a long time, but I just didn't want to upset you by saying anything about it. But don't expect me to satisfy your
sadistic mind by telling you what he says. Even if I do have leukemia, you'll be the last to know."

Diane had been plodding along behind Sally through the murky water. She stopped, shading her eyes from the setting sun, and kept her gaze on Sally as she flapped up the beach in her old green flippers sending sprays of sand flying with every step.

"If you've got leukemia, Sally Miller," she yelled, "I'VE GOT BUBONIC PLAGUE."