

The Sally Anne Test

"It's been reported that people taste like pork, but babies taste like fish."

Sally's father was fond of this twisted anti-axiom. He repeated this statement as part of his lessons on perception and reality. He would record her response and add it to a file that was separate from the notes he took when working with the other children, his clients.

At times, he only said the first part, pausing to allow her to fill in the remainder of the sentence. Pausing to allow her to add the most gruesome tidbit, the tantalizing aspect, the provocative element. A smile like the tip of a candy cane would appear on the right corner of his mouth, only there was nothing sweet about his expression or what he wanted from her.

The other children, his clients, were never told about the pork and the fish. Instead, they were given the Sally Anne test. The Sally Anne test could be fun, if one was unaware that they were being tested. The test told the story of two dolls: Sally and Anne. Sally had a basket and Anne had a box. The tester would pretend that doll Sally placed a marble inside her basket and "walked away." While she is "gone," doll Anne takes the marble and places it in her box. The tester has doll Sally "return" and asks the observing child, "Where will Sally look for her marble?"

Girl Sally knew that marbles were easy to hide. They were small and round, like the size of a fish's eye, like the eye of a baby that tasted like fish. When hearing the question "Where will Sally look for her marble?" girl Sally imagined fantasy places. Doll Sally would look under the sea, in a castle, on a mountain top, anywhere far away from her father's office where the dolls were kept in a satin-lined pine box. If girl Sally said any of these answers to a psychiatrist other than her father, she would have failed the test.

Most of the children that work with Sally's father understand that doll Sally believes the marble is still safely tucked away in her basket. That girl Sally would answer otherwise did not signal failure on her part. Her training included expanding her mind in accordance with her father's special project. *She* was his special project. Sometimes he gave her a homemade tea to drink while he spoke about pork and fish and marbles and baskets. Other times he ordered her to write letters to him listing her greatest fears and largest mistakes. Her father found humor in using her fears against her. His candy cane smile would curl all the way up and his laugh would escape in short expulsions through his nose. This kind of laugh was called a "chortle." Sally thought the laugh sounded evil.

The sessions Sally liked the least were the ones where her father had her climb inside a satin-lined box. He closed the lid and had her listen to recordings. He knew that she feared closed spaces, but he did not hesitate to confine her. She could not move inside the box. She could not rearrange her arms or legs. She knew the lid hovered only inches above her. She could tell because her breath would ricochet back at her upon exhalation. Her breath, like Sally, had no escape.

The recordings were of voices chanting. Sally did not understand the words, but they made her feel uncomfortable, ill even. Her father did not care how nauseous or anxious Sally became inside the box; he determined when she could emerge. He determined when she could quench her thirst or satiate her hunger. He determined what she could consume.

When she was at her hungriest, he made her thank him for the smallest portions of food. When she was fatigued, she was to praise him for allowing her to climb into the “restful” pine box. When she was scared, she was to thank him for that, too.

Her father took copious notes of each session. He planned to publish his findings, his study on false beliefs. Experiments involving children were discouraged as children are classified as a vulnerable population. With Sally’s mother gone, there was no one to question the ethics of his studies. And Sally was no longer a child, the experiments had gone on for that long. He would persuade Sally to tell him that he was a good dad, that she loved him, that he deserved her love.

Sally was not the perfect specimen of false beliefs as she was not convinced of the veracity of the things he demanded she say. Nor did she believe that good dads put their daughters in boxes. Her loyalty to him was confusing and confounding, but she didn’t know how to escape to the sea, or a castle, or a mountain top, or anywhere where doll Sally’s marble might be. She wasn’t even sure of where doll Sally’s marble had truly gone.

All girl Sally knew was that she had never tasted fish.

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To mentally disengage from her father’s teachings, Sally lost herself in books with wonderful artwork. Her father agreed to bring her books from the library and she became obsessed with graphic novels. She did not have to hear voices when she stared at the images, the pictures spoke for themselves. She liked the horror books the best. It made her feel less alone to know that there were atrocities in the world that equaled hers, or were even worse. She admired so many of the artists and their ability to capture thousands of words with a few inches of ink. She loved Templesmith and Backderf and Crandall, but her absolute favorite was Gavin Cornell. He drew pictures that looked like the sounds the chanting voices made in her head when her eyes were closed in the dark box. Because of this, she felt like she had a connection with Cornell. Her father would call this a false belief and he would be proud of it. He encouraged Sally to rebel against what others labelled reality, just as he encouraged her to not definitively identify the location of doll Sally’s marble.

When Sally heard that Gavin was scheduled to appear at EpicFearCon, she became desperate to attend. The only thing she knew, besides people tasting like pork and babies tasting like fish, was that costumes were worn to these types of conventions. A costume sounded enormously freeing—she didn’t have to be Sally at all. She wanted to be something scary and strong and big. Something that would never fit inside a box.

Her father was not keen on letting Sally attend events. He feared that others would interfere with his work on her perception and ruin his years of scholarship. She constructed her costume in secret, using their rarely visited shed to hide her creation. She had decided on a dragon, one based on a drawing by Gavin Cornell. She admired the dragon’s strength. Its focus on guarding its treasure was also admirable. If only doll Sally had watched over her marble as carefully.

Girl Sally took paper clips from her father’s office and bent them to fashion scales for her tail and torso. From old cardboard and paper she constructed a mask with a long, toothy snout. She was a direct replica of Cornell’s creation, and she was fearsome. Lastly, she took marbles from her father’s Sally Anne Test and used them for eyes.

She was invisible inside the costume. She was invincible inside the costume. A dragon is unable to climb into a pine box; furthermore, a dragon would never allow it. And Sally, inside the dragon costume, decided that she was now in charge of her days and nights. No more experiments, no more empty thank-yous and apologies. She would sleep when tired and wake on her own time. She would eat what she wanted, when she wanted.

And if her father disapproved, he would be forced to face the dragon.

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Sally worked on her costume after her father went to bed. He had repeatedly told her that danger waited in the night for girls, that safety could be guaranteed by going to bed early. He had also told her that there were people who wanted to hurt her. That people would pretend to care about her and they would say they were “helping her” but that they had ulterior motives. The bad people and the dangerous night were false beliefs and Sally understood that her father was trying to program her into accepting them as reality. She proved it to herself by fabricating her costume in the night unscathed. She wondered what else her father might be wrong about; a curious part of her wondered if he were right about the pork and the fish.

Working at night caused her to sleep later than she was allowed. From her dissipating dreams, she heard her father bustling around, looking for breakfast, but she found herself too tired to get out of bed. The expectation was that she rise before him and have everything prepared, but she was no longer interested in meeting his expectations. She kept her eyes tightly shut when she sensed her door being cracked open. She imagined him peering in, the corners of his mouth turned down, his venomous chortles trapped in his nostrils as she had been trapped in the box.

Then, the house was still. She believed he was working in his office, but when she ventured from her room, she saw that was a false belief. Had she learned nothing from doll Sally about the devious happenings that occur when one is not looking? Girl Sally saw the door to the shed hanging open and her stomach sank.

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“Drink this tea and tell me if it tastes of pork or fish.”

Intellectually, Sally knew that tea tasted like neither, but when faced with those words, the tea tasted like a combination of both. The tea had come from a box labelled “apple cinnamon” and yet it hit her tongue with a smoky, thick flavor. She found herself chewing the liquid and pulling gristle and bones from her teeth after swallowing.

The tea made her very groggy. It also made her feel brave. As Sally drank and chewed, she could not remember if her father had made the tea, or if she had. She could not remember who had asked her what the tea tasted like. She had left the house, to check on the shed, and then everything had changed. Like doll Sally, she was unsure of all that had happened while she was gone.

She picked up a copy of *Doroheduro* the she regularly renewed and flipped it open. It was one of her favorites. She felt like it was written about her: that she was the amnesiac lizard-head who had unjustly been experimented on. Normally, she could lose herself in its pages, she could be seduced by the dance

between the alternating inky images and vivid colors of the volumes. Now, she felt restless. The energy in her house was different, it tingled, and it made it difficult for her to concentrate.

Finishing her tea, girl Sally walked into her father's office, but he was not there. She looked at the Anne doll and smiled. "Of course he's not here, you moved him when I wasn't looking." Doll Anne did not argue against this accusation, so girl Sally figured it was true.

Sally went to her satin-lined box and lifted the lid. Inside the box was a marble. "Doll Sally," girl Sally called, "I finally know where your marble went."

The marble had a tiny image carved into it. The image was of doll Sally and a dragon. The two figures were entwined, their open mouths facing each other, as if about to devour the other one. The lines of the drawing were clean and simple and they looked like a sketch she had seen in an early Gavin Cornell book.

Sally examined the marble. She knew this was a test, but who was she to be: Sally with the warped perception or Anne the trickster?

She rolled the marble between her fingers, trying to anticipate the outcome of each action. Should she leave the marble for doll Sally to find or move it?

The marble warmed between her fingers, a soothing warmth that crept through her entire body. She could no longer remember what had brought her to her father's office or why she was holding the marble. She could no longer remember why she felt gristle stuck between her teeth and lodged in her gums.

The marble settled into her palm, sticking to her skin. The phantom adhesive would not give. The marble buried into her flesh, raising a large bump as it sunk beneath her skin. The bump slid down her arm to her elbow, slithering like a snake, leaving a trail of pink and puckered skin in its wake. The bump traveled up to her shoulder and across her chest. When she felt it drop into her heart, she gasped and fainted.

Sally woke to find herself curled tightly like a millipede, curled over herself in a pretense of protection.

She was no longer in her father's office. She was in their shed and beside her were a pair of gardening shears that were doused with blood.

Her mouth tasted like pork.