

My Favorite Children's Story



Pepper was the title of my favorite book as a little boy. Rita gave it to me on my fifth birthday. I teared up more than once over that silly little book, and just looking at the cover makes me smile more sixty years later.

Pepper was a dappled-gray horse who gave carriage rides in the park. Mr. Jones was his owner and friend. Pepper loved the park and the people, but he was sad—because Mr. Jones was sad. Mr. Jones finally shared the reason for his heartache. “Good old Pepper, we’ve been together for a long time but it seems now we’ve got to part. Your Mr. Jones is going to lose his cottage, his carriage, and Pepper if he doesn’t get some money quickly. I have used up all my savings for doctor bills.”

Billy, the boy who loved Pepper, played in the park while Mr. Jones dozed in his carriage. His new red ball rolled into the

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street, and Billy ran after it—into the path of a city bus. Pepper reached out and grabbed Billy by the belt with his strong teeth, pulling him to safety.

Pepper's picture was on the front page of all the papers, and Billy's father gave Mr. Jones a big check in gratitude. The money was enough to pay all the doctor bills and take care of Pepper for the rest of his life.

The author captured the fancy of a five-year-old boy—a boy Billy's age. It was endearing to me, but it was also enduring—Pepper still occupies a place in my heart. I kept it all these years because of the way it made me feel when I was little, and it made me feel that way, largely because of who gave it to me.

I was the youngest of five children and the only boy. I loved all four of my sisters, but Rita was the one who showed she loved me. Rita would take me places and do fun things when we were young. As an adult, she told me how she had prayed for a little brother. "And I promised God that if he gave me a little brother, I'd take care of him and never be mean to him—like they are to me." She kept that promise. I was seven or eight when she was finishing high school. I remember where I was the evening she told me she would move away to start college. I cried inconsolably. She attended a business college in Spokane, and

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she never moved back. After college, she got a job and married John. We saw less of each other, but she was always special, and we were always close.

Years later, she became one of my heroes. Alzheimer's is more often an old person's disease, but Rita began struggling with it at about fifty. The disease didn't make her a hero. It was how she faced it that showed her courage and her character. When she was in her mid-fifties, our mother underwent cancer surgery, and all four of my sisters and I were visiting her in the hospital. Mom had reacted badly to the medication. Confused and disoriented, she had thought she was in another city. She said, "It was terrifying. I hope I never have to go through anything like that again." Rita listened for a few moments, folded her arms in front of her, and rolled her eyes. "Oh mom, there are those of us in this family that never know where the hell we are. You get used to it." The courage she showed—in the face of a debilitating disease with no cure—has been an inspiration for the last twenty years.

I loved Pepper. I've always loved fairy-tale endings. Even as an old man, I like stories, books, and movies to end with; "And they lived happily ever after." Life isn't always like that. Rita died on December 11, 2012. I cried, but I also thanked God for Rita's example of courage and humor. I did not want my beloved sister to suffer, but when I look back at the inspiration she was to so

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many, I believe she would have said it was worth it.