

In Toobaloo

It was a very early South Texas morning in 1937 or 1938, and Sally had just chopped up a dozen onions, the first task given her by her mother that day. She offered the wet piece of bread from her mouth to her dog Butchy, a mottled little mutt she'd found—part beagle, part pug, part coon, from the look of him. Butchy turned up his nose at the strong onion vapors. Sally stood tiptoe on her footstool to peek out the open kitchen window at her mother Annette, who leaned over the huge iron cauldron in the backyard. The bones boiling at the very bottom were always clumped heavy with the beans, and even her mother had to throw her weight onto the heavy wooden ladle to move the porridgy mass.

“Nothing on the damn bones,” Sally heard her mother complain as she stirred. “We’re like’ta lose money on this batch.”

Sally got a sick feeling in her stomach. It wasn't Sally's fault they had no meat. Everybody else had country friends to bring them food, but though her parents had both relatives and *parientes*, they had no friends. Sally ducked out of view, as though her mother would know what she was thinking. Sally loaded the chopped onions onto the cutting board and toted them outside, trying to think better thoughts.

Butchy trotted after Sally as she stepped lightly toward the cauldron, keeping the cutting board level. Birds were singing, the sun just about ready to come up. Her mother released the massive ladle, leaned down to take the board from Sally and swept the white chunks into the pot with her bare forearm.

Her mother stirred and frowned. Sally stood on the plank bench and looked in. It had no smell. Even hungry people wanted flavor and the city soup kitchen groused last time that they weren't getting their two dollars worth. Sally hoped *they* wouldn't have to eat it. Sally would rather go hungry.

"Go with Daddy this morning and get us something for the soup, Sally."

"Yes, Ma'am," Sally said. She hated this job the most, but she would do it for Butchy. She went to her room to grab the rubber belt and burlap bag and then ran into her parent's bedroom to find Daddy. Going with Daddy was fun, sometimes.

Daddy was staring in the mirror and ran his hand over the surface of his chin. He was a *guero*, fair, with deepset green eyes. Sally wanted to ask Mama if he was handsome, but Mama would just snap at Sally to make herself useful. Sally wondered if everyone from Illinois was so ornery. Daddy rinsed his razor under the tap and crooked it in his shaving cup.

"Mama told me to go with you," Sally said.

"She told you that, huh?" He towed his face dry and put on a work shirt.

Sally nodded and raced back to the kitchen. She heated a thick white mug with boiling water, emptied it and then filled it with hot coffee. She had the two spoons of sugar stirred in before he got to the kitchen. She handed him the mug.

"Get yourself in the truck, then," he said.

Sally kissed Butchy, told him to stay out of Mama's sight, and ran out front to the pickup to swing herself up from the running board onto the seat. She looked up and down the street. It was empty. Sally took the bag and belt out from under her shirt and tugged the door shut. Daddy got in and gave her the mug to hold as he shifted into gear and backed onto the street.

Sally felt happy when they hit the main road that took them out of the neighborhood toward the naval air station. The engine hummed. They were probably going to one of the navy housing projects going up on the bluff on the east of town, past Six Points, toward the ocean. She handed the mug to Daddy and he took it. He smiled.

"*Estamos madrugando*," he said, even though the yellow-gray sun had already poked its head above the bay, turning it orange. This was his best time of the day. He harmonized with the engine hum as he drove. He pulled into a rich neighborhood of painted houses and old trees sheathed in dark glossy green. Sally pulled her legs onto the seat and squeezed the burlap bag to her chest. She bounced as the road turned to dirt where the new development began.

They climbed a rise at speed. The pickup bucked as it approached a large dusty field, empty except for an old ranch windmill. Men were moving about, brandishing shovels, transits and wooden stakes with thin strips of colored cloth tied about their ends. Daddy stopped the pickup, put on his yellow hardhat, and dismounted.

Sally sat as he walked over to a metal shed. Daddy looked shorter than he used to on the ranch, Sally thought. Maybe your legs stayed longer when you rode horses, because they were hanging down all day. Daddy opened the shed door and went inside. Sally hoped this was the only place they would have to go this morning; that rich neighborhood was so close, and so promising.

She kicked her heels against the bottom of the bench seat. Finally Daddy came out, frowning, but then smiled and gave her the thumbs up. He jogged over to the pickup. "It's only half a day," he said. He rubbed his hand over her shoulder a few times, sending chills over her skin. "You be back here by eleven."

Sally nodded. Half a day was good, because Mama had to have the soup ready by evening. If he had needed to work all day, Sally would have been walking home. She jumped out of the car with her bag and strap and skipped away from the construction site toward the neighborhood.

The trees became tall and round and after a stretch the streets were paved and had concrete sidewalks.

A square white truck with writing on the side was driving down the street. Sally hid behind a red tufted bottlebrush bush. The side of the truck said United States. No one had taught her, but she could read it anyway. She looked forward to starting first grade next year. Sally was about to resume her search when the truck made a U-turn and came back. It stopped, then started, then turned right and disappeared. If it was going somewhere it was going to take it a long time driving like that.

Sally came out from the bush and crept across a lawn, listening carefully. The windows of the houses were dark. Sally ran down the street until she was out of breath.

She heard a door creak open in the house to her right, a voice yelling, then a slam as a screen door banged shut on someone's back porch. She heard the clatter of little toenails. The house was painted a light lemon color, with a black shingled roof and concrete steps going up to the front door. A berry bounced onto the sidewalk beside her. Sally jumped. She looked up and saw a tree full of round green chinaberries. Sally scuttled sideways down the drive alongside of the house, pretending she was a crab, searching for oysters, searching for pearls. She looked through a knothole in the big fence between the drive and the backyard. The backyard grass was spotty because of the shade of a big tree, but it was freshly cut and she heard crickets chirping.

The screen door creaked open. "Dominique!" a woman's shrill voice called out.

"Dominique, come here!"

Sally listened for Dominique, but heard instead a big engine harrumphing toward her. The engine was very close. At the end of the drive, a black Model A missing two wheels sat on bricks in front of the garage. She crouched behind it. That big white truck she'd seen circling the block pulled into the drive and began coming toward her. The police?

"Dominique!" the woman called out again, rattling a box.

The truck stopped. Sally watched as a man got out. He wore a uniform, but was not like any policeman Sally ever saw, because he was a Negro. In fact, Sally had never seen a Negro in this part of town. He got a big cardboard box from the truck and walked up to the front door. Sally heard a doorbell ring inside the house.

"What is it now?" the woman's voice said out back. The screen door slammed shut. Sally quietly opened the gate and stepped into the backyard. She looked around for Dominique, but the yard was empty. The crickets had stopped chirping. Sally crept up the stairs to the back porch and looked straight through the screen door into the house. The woman was buttoning up her blouse and then tying back her gray hair. She was a white lady, like Mama, but old. The doorbell rang again.

"Who *is* it!" the lady yelled. "Just a *minute*!" She smoothed her skirt front and opened the door wide.

"Oh!" she said, closing the door halfway.

The man said something Sally couldn't hear.

Sally leaned to the left to get a better view. She was afraid of getting caught, but she wanted to see the Negro. With his shiny buttons and smooth dark forehead he looked like a prince from a foreign land, called something like Toobaloo or Colorandia. He held the box toward the woman.

"No," the woman said. "No. Set it there."

The man said something else and held out a piece of paper.

"No, no," the woman said, closing the door a little more, clutching the doorknob the same way Daddy had held the burning newspaper torch shaking in front of him last Saturday as he crept up under a turreted home that paper wasps had built under the eaves—afraid, and yet determined to destroy. Mama kept yelling "burn them, Andy! Burn them!"

"I said No!" The old lady closed the door. She leaned against it, stroking her face under her eyes, as though her cheeks were sweating. The doorbell rang again. The woman went to a window and looked through its white lacey curtains. The doorbell rang once more, a tiny, half-hearted buzz. The woman began a fast shuffle back toward Sally. Sally ducked down.

The lady rattled the phone hook. "Hello. No. Get me the sheriff."

The lady must have seen Sally. Sally sat quietly, thinking. The lady was waiting on the phone. She and the policeman were going to put Sally in the box, she decided. But why was the lady calling the police when the policeman was standing out front? Sally wasn't going to wait to find out. She tiptoed down the stairs and back to the gate. She looked through the knothole in the fence. The Negro policeman was waiting by the truck. He looked angry. She had to find some other way out. The high fence went all the way around the yard. The big tree had huge white blossoms like hats, but there weren't any branches she could reach to climb out. Sally ran to the back of the yard, behind the garage. If they caught her, Mama was going to be mad. But Sally wouldn't tell. She would say nothing at all.

Sally saw a fresh-looking little hole in the fence near the garage. She snaked her hand into it and felt around. The hole was too small for her. She could hear the woman talking on the phone now, but Sally couldn't make out her words. She found a stick and began digging, but the stick broke. Sally sat on the dirt. It was getting muggy. If she went back emptyhanded, Mama would beat her good.

She heard a snuffling sound on the other side of the fence. She put her hand through and felt around the grass on the other side. She hoped she didn't touch an asp. Something licked her hand. She jerked her hand back and pressed her face to the hole. She saw something black and curly, a dog. She snaked her hand through and the dog licked her again. Sally tickled her chin. The dog barked.

"Dominique," Sally whispered. "Shhh." Sally looked up at the house. There was no sign of anyone. The dog barked again.

"Come here, Dominique," Sally said. "Come here, doggie, or I'll beat you good."

Dominique stayed put.

"Good doggie, come on," she crooned softly.

Sally heard the truck engine start with a roar. The sound grew smaller and was gone. The policeman had left.

Sally clapped her hands with glee. Dominique poked her head through the hole at the sound and squeezed her body through. She sat next to Sally, looking at her and pawing the ground. "Bark," Dominique said. "Bark bark!"

"Shh, Dominique, come 'ere." Sally held out her hand. That usually worked.

"Bark, bark," Dominique said, rearing back. She was a good size, not too big, not too small.

"Dominique?" the woman's voice sang out. "Is that you darling?"

The dog's ear perked up and she looked toward the porch, wagging her tail. Sally grabbed her and held her muzzle shut.

"Dominique?" the woman called out. "Dominique honey?"

Sally wrapped the rubber belt around the dog's mouth and pulled it tight. Dominique tried to whimper, but nothing came out. She clawed at Sally, but Sally held her still.

The stairs creaked heavily, one after the other. Sally looked around. There was a space between the garage and the fence, overgrown with a mesquite. The woman's feet shushed across the grass. Sally squeezed with Dominique into the space, avoiding the thorny mesquite as quietly as she could.

"Dominique?"

The dog wagged her tail again and squirmed toward the woman. Sally pressed the dog against the side of the garage. Her eyes teared up as mesquite thorns scratched her skin.

"Dominique!" the woman called. "You come here!" Sally could see the woman's sharp thick toenails poking out the front of her house slippers.

"Well, you naughty dog," the woman said, under her breath. She appeared to be bending down now and examining the hole by the fence. The woman had a round black mole on her upper lip by the end of her mouth. A single hair grew from it. Dominique started to wiggle. Sally held her firm. The woman wiped sweat from her forehead with the back of her hand. "Where could you have got off to?" she muttered. She sounded lonely. She turned and walked back into the house.

Sally held still. She heard the porch door swing shut and let out a breath. The woman closed the house door. She was gone.

Sally now noticed the fence on the other side of the mesquite did not meet the garage. She worked her way toward the gap and into the next yard. When she got free of the branches, she put the bag around Dominique and pulled it tight so Dominique couldn't wiggle too much. Sally walked around the garage to the neighbor's gate. She cracked it open. The truck was really gone. She ran out to the sidewalk and down the street.

The sun was up high now. Sally stopped at the corner to rest. It was nearly eleven. When she looked up the other street, she saw the Negro policeman watching her. He looked unhappy.

He nodded to her, but didn't smile. He was eating something. Sally felt hungry. She had to get back to Daddy's pickup. She ran down the street back toward the dusty field.

There was no one in sight when she topped the rise. She ran to the Ford, put Dominique on the ground and pulled open the big door. She set Dominique on the seat. Dominique whimpered. Sally touched the seat. The black plastic was scalding hot. She moved the dog to the shaded floor and opened the bag enough for Dominique to poke out her head. Sally took the strap off the dog's mouth. Dominique panted. Sally went to the shed, but couldn't see a faucet. She tiptoed up the steel steps and looked through the door window. A man inside saw her. He stood up from his desk and walked over to the door. There was nowhere to run. The door opened.

Sally looked up at him. He was fat and round.

"What's wrong, darling?"

Sally said nothing.

"What happened to your face?"

"Nothing."

He leaned down a little—not very far cause he was fat—and tried to reach for her chin.

Sally stepped back. In the shed she could see one of those upside-down glass bottles that keep water cool. He tried to grab her chin again, looking at her funny. Sally stepped another step back, but didn't run away.

The man looked inside the shed. "You want some water?"

Sally looked at him. His eyebrows were bouncing up and down, trying to get her to say *yes*. He reached for her again and this time she let him touch her chin. He moved her head side to side, examining her face. Then he let go and went inside. He gave her a pointy cup with cold water in it. She took it.

"Want to wait inside?"

Sally shook her head. She stepped down the stairs.

"You sure now? It's mighty cool inside. Hot day for a little girl to be outside," he said, cocking his head at her.

"That's okay," she said. "I'm going to back to my grandmother's house." She got off the steps and started walking down the road. He watched her. When she got over the rise, he went back inside. Sally then went over to Daddy's pickup and pulled the door open.

Dominique looked up at her. Poor Dominique. It was really hot in the car and she was a nice clean dog. Sally held the cup of cool water to Dominique, who lapped it up. Sally took her to the shade behind the pickup, loosened the top of Dominique's bag and sat petting her soft black fur until Daddy scuffed up to the Ford. He tossed his hardhat in the back. He looked tired and was frowning.

"Let's go, daughter," he said. He opened his door and got in. Sally got in the other side with the dog.

He drove. Sally leaned against the door and started to feel sleepy. Dominique set her chin on Sally's leg. Sally pet her head, and she licked Sally. Sally decided to throw Dominique out the window at the next stop sign. But when they pulled up to it, Sally saw the big white truck and a sheriff's car. The Negro looked worried. He was saying something to the sheriff and the sheriff was listening, toying with his hat. The Negro looked up at the pickup, then he looked at it again. He pointed to the pickup excitedly. "That's her. That's the white girl what had the dog in the bag," he cried. Sally ducked down.

"Hurry, Daddy," she said. "Hurry!"

He pulled away from the stop sign. "What?"

"The sheriff saw me."

"*Hijole*," he said. He stepped on the gas and roared away, down the corner and onto Ocean Drive. Sally hugged Dominique to her as the pickup sped through town. It banged over a bump and then stopped. Sally started to look out the window.

"Stay down," Daddy said.

Sally got to the floorboard with Dominique and waited. Daddy turned off the car and looked out the front windshield, clearing the dirt out from under his fingernails with his big

pocket knife. After a bunch of minutes, he started up the engine and drove the rest of the way home.

Sally got out of the pickup and took Dominique into the house to give to Mama. Mama was resting in the radio chair with a glass of water. Sally held out Dominique to her. Mama looked at Sally and the dog and fanned herself. Sally's arms began to get tired. Mama's glass of water looked good. Mama grunted and pushed herself up from the chair and took the dog. She walked with it out into the backyard.

Sally ran into the bathroom and drank warm water from the faucet. She sat on the toilet and rested. It sure was a hot day. She heard Daddy yelling something to Mama out in the backyard. Mama said something back angry. Sally got up, locked the bathroom door, and went back to the toilet. If they came to get her, she would pretend she was doing her business. It was quiet. She heard some squeals and chopping noises. The back door closed, and then the front door.

Sally washed her hands, cleaned up the scratches on her face and opened the door a little, looking to see if anyone was there. No one was. She went out into the living room. She called quietly for Butchy. He didn't come. She was too tired to look for him so she sat down in the radio chair and fell asleep.

Yelling out front woke her. Sally went around to the side of the house where she could see the front. The sheriff was there yelling with Daddy. The Negro man was in the back of the sheriff's car. He still looked worried. The sheriff pushed her Daddy, but Daddy didn't hit him, he just backed up. The sheriff did the same thing again, herding Daddy toward the front door. Daddy turned around and walked to the house, the sheriff following him. The front door opened and closed. Sally waited. Mama was out back. Sally had to warn Mama so she could put up the screen to hide the cauldron. Sally raced around the house to the back. Her Mama was there stirring. Near the base of the cauldron was a pile of curly black fur. Poor Dominique. Sally felt really bad. She crouched by a bush. Mama hadn't seen her. Sally needed to warn Mama before

the sheriff came into the backyard. But Sally couldn't make herself move. Mama stopped stirring and leaned back, wiping the sweat from her forehead. She looked very tired.

Butchy came up to Sally and snuffled her with his nose. Sally hugged him and began to pet him. He sat next to her. She stroked his head. "I love you, Butchy," she whispered.

The door opened and Daddy said something. "We have visitors," he said.

Mama drew in her breath.

She looked toward the door. Sally couldn't see the door from where she was, but she did see Mama look down at the pile of fur and then back at the door.

"What in tarnation's going on here, people?" a man's voice said. "Are y'all crazy?"

"No," Mama said. "We're trying to get by in tough times, like everyone else."

"No, not like everyone else," the man said.

There was a silence. Sally wasn't hungry. She was never hungry. No one was moving or saying anything. Sally held Butchy tight. Then Mama walked toward the back door and disappeared. Sally heard the front door open again and then the doors of the sheriff's car opened and closed a few times. The sheriff's car started up and drove away.

Sally was frightened. She walked over to the cauldron. The coals under it were still going so she gave it a stir. "Come on, Butchy." She and Butchy went into the house and looked into her parents' room and the bathroom. There was no one in the house. They went out front. The Negro man was sitting on the curb.

Sally sat down next to him.

"Are you a policeman?" she asked him.

"No, child, I'm a delivery man. Was. What happened to your face?"

"I scratched it on some bushes. You from Toobaloo?"

"I don't rightly know where that is."

Sally nodded. "You want to come inside and eat?"

"Well, all right," he said.

He followed her into the house.

"Sit there," Sally said, pointing to the radio chair. She turned on the radio for him to listen to. He turned the dial and found some music, a type Sally had never heard before. She got a bowl and went out back to fill it with soup. She gave the man the bowl and a spoon and then sat down with Butchy on the floor beside him. They could live with him now.

"Oh, this is good," he said, sipping some from a spoon.

Sally shrugged her shoulders as she hugged Butchy tight. "I don't care for it."

END