The Sally-Anne Test

by Henry Vauban

Sally-Anne is in a graveyard. A girl about her age and height died two years before. Sally-Anne is digging up the bones. Her parents Aaron and Rebecca think she is at her piano lesson. Rebecca finds it strange when she comes home covered in dirt.

"What happened to you?" she asks as Sally-Anne enters the front door. Aaron is doing web design across town. Rebecca will call him after this conversation is over. She knows he is at work, but this will be important enough to disrupt him.

"I didn't go to piano today."

"Where did you go?"

"The park."

"You know you are not allowed to go to the park alone. Now hop in the shower and get cleaned up. We'll talk about this more when your father gets home."

Rebecca is a modern woman. While her daughter showers, she goes outside and chops wood for the fire out back. She thinks heating her home with wood is better for the environment. Aaron and Rebecca could afford a house more representative of their affluence. They chose this one for its modesty.

Sally-Anne takes a quick shower while her mother is out back chopping wood and goes to her room. The week before she hid a disused hammer and some nails under her mattress. She puts them to quick use, nailing all the windows shut. It is winter and the windows have blinds. No one will notice.

Aaron pulls up to his modest house in a modest car. He could have handled the monthly payments, but he bought both cash with part of his inheritance. He would never tell his wife he considers the house and car to be his because of this. They put both names on big purchases, just to be sure.

Sally-Anne greets her father warmly as he comes through the front door.

"Daddy!" she squeals and puts her arms around him.

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Aaron says he is disappointed she did not go to piano. He tells her he pays good money for piano. He tells her piano helps build synapses in the brain. He tells her she will not go to the Ivy League without piano. Sally-Anne apologizes. She says she won't do it again. She is not lying.

Rebecca comes in sweaty from chopping wood. She makes herself a tea and sits down at the kitchen table.

“What do you think has gotten into her lately?” she asks her husband.

“Damned if I know, but she promised it won't happen again.”

“And you believe her?”

“We didn't raise her to lie,” he says exhausted, cutting vegetables for another dinner of raw vegetables.

Aaron is a vegan at home, but sometimes eats a steak for lunch at a restaurant near his work. Afterward, he puts on a little dash of cologne and brushes his teeth in the hope that Rebecca will not find out. Rebecca knows all about this. It burns her watching him chop vegetables for dinner, knowing he would rather eat meat.

“There's my little ray of sunshine!” Aaron exclaims with a wide smile as Sally-Anne enters the room.

“What's for dinner she asks?” knowing full well that Tuesday is raw vegetable night.

They eat their dinner in relative peace. NPR is playing in the background. Rebecca scolds Sally-Anne for skipping piano and Aaron for being too easy on her.

“We just want the best for you,” Rebecca pleads.

Sally-Anne likes to play hide-and-go-seek after dinner. Her favorite hiding places are cardboard boxes in the attic. Due to her earlier misdeed, there will be no hide and seek tonight. Sally-Anne is not sad. She is anxious. She is picturing the world of possibilities outside her home.

“Wash up the dishes. Then it's time for bed.”

Prayers are said and Sally-Anne is tucked into bed. She waits for her father to start snoring. She starts to fall asleep, but pinches herself. This is not the night to fall asleep.

Rebecca asks Aaron for a foot massage. He rubs coconut-scented lotion on her feet. The sounds she makes in response are as close to sexual sounds as Aaron has heard since the birth of their daughter. Their modest house has thin walls and Rebecca is terrified Sally-Anne might hear something.

When her father starts snoring, Sally-Anne quietly puts on her outside clothes. She unpacks the bones from her bag and arranges them on her bed. It takes her some time, but she thinks she has put them in the right order. She tiptoes down to the basement.

The can of kerosene is old and green. Sally-Anne does not like the smell, but she pours it anyway and goes back up the stairs, leaving a trail of liquid behind her. The alarm system is disengaged with a four-digit code. She pours what is left of the kerosene on the front porch and lights it with a match. After a couple minutes, she sees the light come on in her parents' room.

“Do you smell smoke?” Rebecca asks in a panic as she pokes Aaron awake.

“Huh?”

“Smoke!”

Not waiting for an answer, she hops out of bed and runs to Sally-Anne's room. The room is dark. She goes to scoop up her child and comes up with bones.

“Sally-Anne! Sally-Anne!” she shrieks. Aaron comes hurried into the room.

“What's wrong?” he asks and switches on the light.

He sees the bones, but does not react. Rebecca begins to sob.

The house is burning slowly from the bottom up. Rebecca alternates between “Oh my god!” and “Sally-Anne!” Aaron says nothing and looks for his daughter everywhere. Consumed by terror, they have forgotten about the bones.

Sally-Anne is watching the house burn from a tire swing in the front yard. She turns clockwise until her feet barely touch the ground and pushes off. Through her eyes, the house looks like an impressionist painting of a village burning.

“Attic!” Aaron exclaims, remembering his daughter's favorite hiding place. He motions Rebecca to follow him there. She points to the phone. She is talking to the fire department. Smoke is slowly filling the room. The operator tells her to open the windows. She is choking. A floor above, Aaron is running around the attic emptying boxes and calling his child's name.

“They're nailed shut!” Rebecca yells into the phone, looking at the emergency ladder she bought when her child was born.

“I need you to stay calm and get out of the house as quickly as possible. An engine is on the way.”

Rebecca sees the flames for the first time and realizes the only way out is through the attic window. She wraps a t-shirt around her face and runs through the flames to the attic stairs. When she reaches the top she sees Aaron on the floor unconscious.

“Where is our daughter? Where is Sally-Anne?” she screams and beats him in the chest. He does not move. The room is dark with smoke. She breaks the window and counts to three before jumping out, landing on her white picket fence.

Sally-Anne traces the trajectory from the window to the fence with her finger. Rebecca struggles to turn her skewered neck toward her daughter. Their eyes meet. Rebecca gurgles something.

As sirens approach, Sally-Anne walks away.