

That Evil Club

Sally Graham

I was six, running away from school and I knew I wouldn't need much to survive where I was headed. You might think this was an impulsive decision but you'd be wrong. I foresaw a future of failure with figures and I knew a life without arithmetic was my only hope.

After another round of staring blankly at the evil club on the back page of my math book, I told Miss Pogue, my first grade teacher, I didn't feel well and asked if I could go call my mother. All the teachers knew my mother. She was the Hospitality Chairwoman for the P.T.A. and hosted many faculty teas.

My mother had named me after two Miss Arkansas pageant winners: Sally Ann Miller and Suzanne Scudder...Sally Suzanne. Mother and her identical twin sister were two years-old when they entered their first pageant. They won. In the faded Arkansas Gazette article from 1933 they are sitting on the grass, wearing swimsuits and frowns. Maybe they'd eaten too much potato salad, maybe the sun was shining in their eyes and they were hot, but maybe they didn't care that much about the Greater Little Rock Grocers' and Butchers' Picnic Baby Contest. My grandmother is kneeling behind them in the grass. She's wearing a long-waisted print dress and her brown hair is parted on the side in a fashionable bob. She, too, looks weary.

Miss Pogue sent me to the office to make that call. While Miss Henry, the secretary of Sunnyside School, was not looking, I held the button down on the black phone. I then carried on a conversation with the receiver about my stomach ache. I felt just AWFUL! Soon, Miss Henry told me to take care of myself and that I could wait outside Sunnyside's red brick walls for my mother.

Instead, I skipped down the block right past Miss Pogue's classroom windows, past the monkey bars and the t-ball field to my friend Wylie Branch's house. The white shutters on his yellow house had black flourishes that resembled tiny smiles. Mr. Branch had painted the notes on the piano keys for Wylie to learn his scales. No one interrupted and no one spoke out of turn at their dinner table like we did at ours with me and my seven brothers and sisters. One time, when Wylie visited me for supper, he asked my mother why everyone fought. The Branches were the living example of Gallant from the Highlights Magazine I rushed up the front steps to grab from the postman each month. I knocked on their back door, and within minutes was eating a peanut butter and jelly sandwich only Miss Branch could make. She combined the grape jelly with Jiff to create a smooth, velvety food of the gods and spread it on white bread, crusts removed. I began sipping the glass of milk she placed before me and rushed to explain I was moving in with Wylie and his twin brothers.

Miss Branch stared at me, raised her reading glasses up to her nose and started flipping through pages in the phone book.

"Guess what? I have a visitor today," Miss Branch began. Her voice was soft. My mother years later would tell me this part of the day's events. I had already visualized moving my own toy box into the vast, rectangular room in their attic. My pink bucket would be a nice complement to the boys' red, blue and green trunks.

"Oh, you do?" asked my mother.

"Yes. Miss Sally knocked on my door this afternoon. She's left school, she says."

"SALLY!"

I had entered Miss Pogue's first grade class a year after I'd failed as a southern beauty queen. It's true my family didn't go around saying, "Little Sister what a failure you are," but the notion hung in the air like turnip greens boiling on the stove.

My mother enrolled me in the triple-crown of a southern girl's education—baton-twirling, tap dancing and ballet—before I had entered kindergarten. A photograph shows me in first position, wearing a pink and white sequined leotard, a pink tutu, pink lip gloss my sister Mary dabbed ever so slightly on my top lip and white tap dancing shoes I insisted on wearing. They were a better match with the white tights no matter that this was our ballet photograph for Miss Sarratore's School of Dance.

This was the preparation I needed to win the Miss La Petite Chattanooga pageant. But when it was my turn to smile, pivot, turn and twist, I got distracted by the stage props. I was wearing a new lavender dress, a color my mother called orchid, with appliquéd flowers. I had my eye on the potted plants next to the white picket fence. Instead of standing on the masking tape star downstage, I broke from the line of contestants during the grand finale and walked upstage, opened the gate and began rearranging the daisies. I am told the other La Petite wannabes turned toward me while people whispered then roared with laughter. Sarah Wadley, an employee of my parents and my mother's confidante, thought I spoke like Zsa Zsa Gabor, and began calling me Lucy, in honor of Lucille Ball, after that night.

Miss Pogue said I talked too much and wrote that on my first report card. I earned an "S" for satisfactory on all of my math assignments but that did not stop me from turning the book over and peaking at the imposing fortress of 11 x 11 and 12 x 12 columns some people call multiplication tables. The symbols mocked me, yet I'd flash the back of the book just like I'd tongue a loose tooth to feel the pain.

My mother had been working alongside Sarah in the basement office packing up pictures for customers across the southeast. She quickly ended the call with Miss Branch and relayed the story to Sarah. Sarah worked for my parents mostly cleaning convex glass with vinegar, stapling cardboard boxes together and answering the phone, “Natural Portrait Company.” She befriended me with our secret “bad word of the day” game where she’d whisper “damn” or “Hell!” in my ear and I giggled.

I hadn’t even finished my glass of milk before Sarah and my mother whisked me away up the hill to the principal’s office. Sarah was convinced I had been molested at school. Mr. Wolfe, our fast-walking and fast-talking principal, was the only adult male besides the janitor, Raymond, and Side the Cat, a—well—cat, that walked the halls of the school and was featured in Mr. Wolfe’s loving arms in all of our class photographs.

“Has Mr. Wolfe done anything to harm you, Sally?”

He peered at me as I hid beneath his desk.

“No sir,” I said while folding my knees into my chest, my arms wrapping around my bent legs.

I can only imagine Sarah’s broad head bending down, eyebrows raised, lips pursed. My mother probably had her purse in her lap, her shapely legs crossed.

By this time, Miss Pogue and my mother joined Mr. Wolfe leaning over, crowded into the small space between his desk and the window where the late afternoon sun cast a shadow on a photograph of the Chattanooga Boys Choir where Mr. Wolfe volunteered outside of his duties as principal. I didn’t cry. There was no point. I was a young girl facing a fear of symbols on top of the fact I preferred Brainerd Drug Store après-ballet chocolate malts to dance routines. I had made up my mind and that was that.

My mother says I stayed under the table for an hour before I admitted it was math that compelled me to quit school. They didn't believe me!

Miss Pogue volunteered to retrieve the book and then I flipped the book over to expose the culprits.

“But, Sally! School has only just begun! Don't you think Miss Pogue will prepare you for multiplication?”

I really didn't give that much thought. The wood floors of Sunnyside School still had a waxy, slick shine, not scuffed up yet. I did look forward to more running and sliding near the cafeteria entrance when the teachers weren't looking. Did I have what it took to conquer the enemy?

I wasn't convinced.

But, my mother was having none of that.

“Listen Young Lady, you're going right back to class with Miss Pogue.”

I got out from underneath the desk, accepted my math book from Miss Pogue and walked, not skipped, past the school office, past the teachers' lounge and past streamers on the bulletin board. For the first time I heard the wood floors of Sunnyside School groan, and creak under my laced-up clogs.