

Run Sally Run

(first published in *The Olive*: nominated for the Pushcart Prize)

No one called me precocious as a kid.

At five or six, I was content to amuse myself with making leaf chains, singing, and doodling, and if I could manage it, watching television. My mother was convinced (how, I don't know) that watching TV made kids blind, so I snuck on tip-toes down to the basement, for my morning fix while my parents slept. My ritual was to arrange cereal boxes in a row so I could synchronize eating with advertising jingles: a spoonful of cereal with its matching ad. That's as much as I recall of my reading instruction: in a matter of days or weeks or months, I could read.

Maybe that's why I didn't bother to explain about the reading aptitude test, which my school had administered in the first grade. The test was based on Dick, Jane and Sally and their dog. First, a row of three pictures, such as a plate, Sally carrying a plate, the plate breaking, and then gave three choices: Sally happy, neutral, or frowning. I got bored: why was Sally supposed to get happy about cakes, and sad about plates? Surely, Sally had bigger problems in her life. I quickly checked off neutral for most of the test questions, and laid down my pencil before anyone else did.

Unsurprisingly, I ended up in the slow, or slower, reading aptitude group. We copied letters of the alphabet while the clever "readers" were given real books about Dick, Jane and Sally. The "readers" sat on one side of the classroom, the rest of us on the other. I didn't care, since I brought in my own entertainment; by that point, I was engrossed in *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*.

For the record, I worshipped my first-grade teacher, whom I thought kind and pretty, and I was not frightened of her. It simply hadn't occurred to me to tell her I read, since the test had dumped me in the slow group—and tests must say something about me. Something bad, I felt. Maybe even very bad.

I apologized when she caught me with a book instead of copying the letters, M, N, O. "I'm sorry, I was reading," I said, and held up the book as my defense.

She seemed flabbergasted. "You can read this? Without help? How did you learn?" I admitted that yes, I could read, all by myself, without help.

That afternoon, I was marched to the guidance counsellor's office. I was seated while three tall grown-ups—the guidance counselor who was a grey-haired woman, the elementary school principal (in my memory, tall and bald), and my first-grade teacher—

stood and stared. I had never been alone with so many adults who were not related to me. They handed me a children's book to read for them, which I read aloud, as fast and as loud as I could.

Afterward, there was an awkward silence. "But the test," the guidance counselor softly began, and she held up a copy of the booklet, *The Reading Aptitude Test*.

I shrugged. There was nothing to say. Besides, I didn't like talking about myself.

Decades later, I understand how much money, decision-making, social anxiety had guided the school's selection of that "instrument." It was a middle-class public school that prided itself on innovation. Probably teachers and administrators had endlessly debated which test was superior, which was "cost-effective," which test helped sift the "gifted" from the merely "average" or the "slow" children. But that day, all I felt was frightened.

The guidance counselor re-tested me as the other two observed, with grim fascination. Question by question, she asked about my choices. Was that what I really meant to check? Hadn't I seen the frowning Sally after the broken plate?

I tried to explain that Sally ought to know that a broken plate is not a broken leg, and if no one got hurt, that's all that counts. Maybe Sally didn't like that plate, maybe she smashed it deliberately just for fun! But their stunned faces told me that my answer was wrong, a broken plate was a big deal—and other kids knew the broken plate was a big deal. The why of it didn't matter.

In a snap, I "got" what tests were: a series of "trick" questions you had to answer the way other people thought. Well, even in first grade, I knew I could master that. Next time, I'd know which box to check. I wouldn't give it a second thought. Broken plate, Sally frowns. Cookies, Sally smiles. Next?

Today, we take multiple choice exams for granted. But such tests were rare until the 1930's; and gained widespread acceptance in schools with the advent of electronic data processing. Tests that could be electronically graded were both cheaper to administer, and faster as well. By 1936, IBM had developed the first automatic test scanner; by 1958, computerized scoring was available nation-wide. Elementary schools quickly adopted them, starting with IQ, then a host of other aptitude tests. Testing mania in America had begun, and it has only accelerated. Oddly, IQ scores keep rising – sometimes dramatically, while people (I think we can agree) are no smarter than they were a century or two ago. And while SATs demand that students discriminate between torpid and turgid, in "real life," such words go unused.

Personally, that afternoon was a success. I advanced to the second-grade reading class, which was reading *The Velveteen Rabbit*. Needless to say, a big step down from Mark Twain. After that day, I began scoring "high" on aptitude tests; from there, I sailed, without too much complaint, through school, college, graduate school.

I wonder, though, how I might have fared if my first-grade teacher hadn't noticed my reading the book, if I had not been re-tested. How long would I have taken to discover my "error." I was intensely shy, afraid of other kids—I never would have asked anyone on my own. Besides, deep down, I felt I was in the right, that a broken plate can mean many things, and it's rarely something to cry about. And every time I hear another lament about children's failing test scores, I think of that lonely hour when I began to pretend that the world can be contained in simple choices, and there is only one answer.

Run, Sally, run, I think, before you believe it.