

Ol' Sally

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That boy Dashawn towered in front of Walter's car, middle of Arbor Drive, bouncing his basketball like an African drum. The gallows leaned into the street: rusty, portable hoop with cracked backboard and frayed net dangling from one string. Walter clearly signaled the left turn into his own driveway, but didn't lay on the horn or make eye contact. Dashawn wanted that; that was the game: feign oblivion and make The Man wait. Walter's white hair made him a bullseye for polar bear hunters playing the knockout game (he read the news), and the last thing he needed was a gang of Dashawns looking to blindside him in the Walmart parking lot one night. Blast the thawing Hungry Man dinners and Neapolitan ice cream in the trunk of his Buick. Walter had all day.

He inched closer, bumper almost nudging Dashawn from behind.

Dashawn dribbled with his eyes closed, Red Bull in his free hand, head bobbing side to side like a cobra, rapping out loud over his headphones, "My chain heavy, yeah, yeah, my chain heavy, my chain heavy, my chain too heavy."

Walter turned up Glenn Beck.

Dashawn tilted his head like a Pez, downed his energy drink, ambled to the curb.

This was Walter's chance. But he had to wait for a Rent-to-Own truck.

Dashawn deposited the empty Red Bull into the knot of the Norway Maple in Walter's yard.

Walter strangled his steering wheel. He lurched into the driveway. Spinning tires sprayed crumbling asphalt and debris all over Arbor Drive.

He wanted to spring from his car and rip that can from Ol' Sally's knot and shove it in Dashawn's thirteen-year-old face, "Lose this?" If the City of Syracuse finally got around to sending the Rick Turk Tree Service to cut down Ol' Sally, garbage from the neighborhood "kids" would spill from her trunk like that scene from *Jaws*. Doritos bags and crushed Newport packs and a spent Chivas Regal. Empty 40's.

But the neighborhood was no longer carpeted bluegrass and Geranium window boxes and manicured Yew. It was flaking bungalows, buckling sidewalks, foot-long grass gone to seed. Shrubs flirted with roofs. Grass tufts sprang from driveway cracks like the Brillo in Walter's ears.

And it wasn't like Helen and Walter's initials were carved into the bark. There was no wise, old face if you looked at the knots right. Walter never hung a tire swing from the branches, never watched with Helen from the porch as Kimberly pushed her little brother Kevin higher and higher in the swing that was never there. It wasn't third base for stick ball games. It wasn't the home for any particular family of robins. Walter didn't fill the tree with cobwebs at Halloween, didn't hide with Helen as the giant spider he never rigged dropped onto trick-or-treaters. The family never crackled in a pile of raked leaves, teasingly calling for Bess, the dog yipping and dancing and howling for them to get out of there. Walter never hung Christmas lights to blow away the neighbors, never hung Easter eggs or American flags or yellow ribbons. There was no tree house.

Walter never even called the tree “Ol’ Sally” until the day he stood on his porch and read the notification that the Norway Maple was condemned. He never knew it was called a *Norway Maple*. So it wasn’t like when the Rick Turk Tree Service came, Walter was planning to chain himself to the tree with that old bicycle lock from the basement and swallow the key. His arms weren’t going to chafe and burn, wrapped around the trunk, splinters in his face, spitting bark, swarming black ants. He wasn’t going to contact Greenpeace, or get himself arrested, or wave around a shot gun and commit suicide-by-cop. There’d be no throwing himself under the trucks, or dousing himself with gasoline and lighting a match, or climbing the tree to jump into the chipper, or beheading of the Rick Turk Tree Service guys with their own chainsaws, “LA LA LA LA LA” - while teen mothers circled their strollers, yelling into cel phones, “Man, that’s dope!”

It was out of Walter’s wrinkled hands. According to the City of Syracuse, the tree was unbalanced and structurally unsound and it was fascist policy to maintain a safe and healthy tree population. They didn’t say when. The red “ASAP” implied the tree might fall down before it was cut down, and every morning Walter braced himself to find Ol’ Sally sprawled in the yard. Arbor Drive was the death row of trees. Maybe Dashawn’s Red Bull can was Ol’ Sally’s last meal.

“My chain heavy, yeah, yeah, my chain heavy, my chain heavy, my chain too heavy.”

Walter heard it over Glenn Beck, even though he’d gone deaf in one ear - half blind, too, from his pregnant mother contracting rubella. Walter heard everything in the neighborhood over anything, even in the house. He was an idiot savant. It was a curse. Rap music over his white noise machine, the guttural bark of pit bulls over Barbra Streisand, the shattering cry of Dashawn’s grandmother, “DAY-SHAWN!” over *Cops Reloaded*.

He'd probably hear Dashawn's grandmother later, whooping Dashawn for missing school again. That wouldn't be so bad.

Walter never skipped school, and his half deafness and half blindness never stopped him, back in the day, from working seventy hours a week. He payed taxes so Dashawn would have a school to skip. He payed for the new Section Eight housing at the end of the street. Walter paid off the mortgage three years early, and there was always cash (never credit) for Helen when she walked the kids to Sears on Salina Street on Saturdays. Kimberly toddled in that white, English cotton party dress while she pushed her baby brother's stroller. Everyone stopped to smell the Schultz's roses. Helen waved to Bob Johnson, perpetually troweling dandelions across the street, "The American dream, eh Bob?" Not that Walter ever got to join his family for those shady strolls. He worked Saturdays. Somebody had to work Saturdays.

Terrorists rented the Schultz's next door. Cel phones, backpacks, hijab. At least they were quiet neighbors.

Bob Johnson left, replaced at first by a family missing a lot of teeth who parked their truck on Bob Johnson's old dandelions. Then the Dashawns.

They boarded up Sears on Salina Street forty years ago, sold the building to an out-of-towner for one dollar.

It wasn't long after Sears that Walter explained the U-Haul in the driveway to Bob Johnson - "It's a good thing, a positive thing, all very amicable" - while Helen's friends solemnly carried out half the furniture, half the dishes, half the books. Walter would still see the kids, once in a while. He even helped the movers disassemble Kevin's crib. (Where had Helen met all these people? Night school? Martial Arts?) He smirked at Bob Johnson, "What a way to celebrate the

Bicentennial.” He admitted to Bob Johnson he was looking forward to walking around the house naked. (He told Bob Johnson don’t worry. He told Bob Johnson he’d close the curtains.)

After Helen’s U-Haul left, Walter discovered things. He called Helen and asked if she had meant to leave Bess’ dog food, if she had simply forgotten the Kodak in the kitchen drawer. She said he was being *manipulative*.

Walter invited everybody for Thanksgiving years later, and Helen said the same thing. *Manipulative*. Walter wanted to fill the empty Kodak with group shots of Helen and her new husband, What’s-His-Name, and their baby boy and Kimberly and Kevin and all those grandkids. He’d take pictures of Helen’s pies, pictures of Kevin’s five-year-old coming to terms with a drumstick bigger than his head.

Manipulative.

Kimberly and Kevin were busy with work, anyway. And Walter was clueless how to cook a turkey.

“My chain heavy, yeah, yeah, my chain heavy, my chain heavy, my chain too heavy.”

Dashawn pulled at his crotch like a holstered gun, cradled the basketball against his hip. He couldn’t be oblivious to Walter, even with the headphones and the dark sunglasses and the crooked Yankee cap. Dashawn was deliberate, absolutely one hundred percent deliberate. This was all about White Privilege. This was all about White Flight. This was all about Racial Profiling. Reparations. Whatever. Dashawn pulled his junk out and urinated on Ol’ Sal.

Walter turned off the car. He struggled with the seat belt, arthritic hands trembling like tectonic plates. His back popped like bubble-wrap, but he got out. He straightened up to his full

five feet, seven inches. He adjusted his pants, came around the car with his hands on his belt. He sauntered across the yard like it was the O.K. Corral.

Dashawn swiveled his head and hopped. “Oh, snap!” He dropped the basketball to Walter’s lawn with a muffled *ping ping ping*. Dashawn tucked away his penis with both hands, frantic, dribbling a little in his pants.

Walter trembled. Walter dribbled a little in his pants, too.

Dashawn backed into the street. He abandoned the basketball, turned and sprinted to his grandmother’s house. He slammed his front door shut. It echoed like a bomb. The glitchy storm door that Bob Johnson installed fifty years before creaked open with the retort.

Dashawn’s urine stained Ol’ Sally’s bark. Yellow foam pooled in the grass. His Red Bull can shone like a coat of arms, teetering atop a crumpled KFC bag in Ol’ Sally’s knot. Walter drew it out, studied the can like divorce papers. Then he hurled it across the street into Dashawn’s yard.

Dashawn’s mini-blinds moved. Walter furiously kicked at the basketball, grazing the top, straining his hamstring. The ball rolled feebly across the street and settled against the curb. Walter was a superhero, fists on hips. “Game on,” he wheezed.

Walter yanked refuse from the knot, like a magician pulls flowers from his sleeve. One hand at first, then two. He found a rhythm, like Helen’s tai chi, or whatever she was doing back in the day. Feminism. He showered the neighborhood with McFlurry cups and Thank You bags. He didn’t care what he touched. He was old. We’re all going to get something, someday. Ebola. Aids. Whatever. Wet Kleenex trickled from Ol’ Sally’s knot like vomit. There were styrofoam

boxes and chicken bones, a broken Captain America and bandaids, used condoms and graded homework. The garbage accumulated like snow.

Walter's knuckles bled. He scraped his forearms and elbows. His heart sounded like crashing waves in his head. There was more garbage in Ol' Sally's trunk, but it was down too deep. He wished he could climb into the knot like a squirrel. He'd curl up and die, and they'd take him away when they came for Ol' Sally. Wouldn't even know he was in there.

He limped into the house with his groceries.

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Walter stacked Campbell's Soups against yellowing cans of Alpo in the cupboard, but the cans began to vibrate like chattering teeth. Walter thought 9/11. The house shook. Maybe it was surrounded by armored vehicles, tanks. He moved to the living room window, expecting a war zone.

They were fast and sudden, like a drug bust. Three thundering trucks to tackle Ol' Sal: The Picker, The Chipper, The Claw. Five men stood in orange hard hats, red ear muffs, and lime green Day-Glo T-shirts. They wanted to be seen, but hid their eyes with dark sunglasses.

On one of the trucks, Ol' Sally's branches partially blocked the "Rick Turk Tree Service." It looked like "Fuck Fuck."

This was it. This was Ol' Sally's final moments.

There was a presence up there. Walter couldn't see the man high up in the Picker from the window, but the chainsaw whirred and leaf-filled branches fell like confetti. The Chipper smote wood to sawdust, trilled like a dentist's drill. The Claw wheeled, farted hydraulics, vice-gripped the tree's thick limbs and fed them to The Chipper. It growled in ecstasy. Exhaust tasted like ex-

pired cans of soup. The Claw stabbed the hundred-year-old trunk. Without branches, it looked like a peace sign. A chain-saw sliced through the Jugular. The Claw lifted the trunk. It swung like a corpse. The Chipper swallowed hard and Ol' Sally was gone.

Helen and Walter never sat on the porch in the shade of Ol' Sally on warm summer days, sipping lemonade, as Kimberly and Kevin counted for Hide-and-Seek with their faces buried in Ol' Sally's trunk. Walter never sat out with his wife at night with the lights out, Camomile tea, storm moving in, kids snoring preciously in their beds, wind swooshing Ol' Sally's canopy while rain ticked her leaves like a metronome. Helen never jumped onto Walter's lap, giddy at the booming thunder, wet from the bursting deluge, eyes flashing in the lightning, "Let's take our clothes off." But Walter thought he should have taken pictures. The Kodak had all that unused film. He could have taken a "before" shot of Ol' Sally, and an "after" shot of the empty space. Maybe sent the pictures to Helen.

Or was that *manipulative*?

The men raked the remaining leaves and twigs from Walter's yard. They cleared sawdust from the sidewalk with gas-powered leaf-blowers. They were neat, like the Holocaust, but they left the garbage.

The garbage. Piles of exposed evidence. Had anyone seen him? Dashawn had seen him. They'd shackle Walter, haul him to the Justice Center, throw him in a cage. Was it technically Walter's garbage? He wasn't about to clean up somebody else's mess while Dashawn gloated over him like an elementary school principal. He'd drag Dashawn down with him. He'd find that Red Bull can and they'd take fingerprints. Dashawn started it.

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It was during *Jeopardy*. That voice, like revving chainsaws, drew Walter back to his window. Dashawn's grandmother discovered the boy had skipped school. She was leaving for her night job, and when she got back, she didn't care whose it was, that garbage had to be picked up.

All of it.

She was a fat angel in her starched, white uniform. The ghost of Ol' Sally. She waddled towards the bus stop.

Dashawn shook his head like a neighing horse. He wrestled on yellow dish gloves. He snapped open a Hefty bag, bent over, and dangled his long arm to the ground. He lifted an Oreos wrapper. It was like a heavy brick. He forced it to the bottom of the trash bag. He shuffled through the sea of Bob Johnson's old dandelions, dragging the bag behind him, and slowly and methodically picked up the garbage. When he fired heavier bottles and cans into the plastic bag, it sounded like whips.

Doubled over like that, Dashawn resembled Bob Johnson. Slave to his lawn. Walter stood at this very window one Sunday, laughing at Bob Johnson flailing away at his lawn mower. Bob Johnson yanked the cord so hard his arm would pop out. It was spark plugs. Walter had a box full. He had Bob Johnson's mower going in no time.

But Walter wasn't about to get clocked on the head, kicked in the face, stomped on. He wasn't going to don his cardigan and step into the chill September evening with his trash bag and his garden gloves. He wasn't going to death grip the handrail and shuffle down those porch steps, knees crackling like fireworks. He wasn't about to squat to the curb and start picking up the garbage.

So Dashawn would never grin like a Cheshire cat, cross from his side of the street to put the empty Red Bull can into Walter's trash bag. The two would never silently fill their trash bags with generations of garbage as the street lights came on. It wasn't like Dashawn would give Walter a hand up when it was done.