

harsh afternoon light. We got into a blue car I had never seen before.

At the funeral there was crying. I knelt with my brother and sister, hands folded and trying to be patient, though I was itchy from the tiny coat whose shoulders worked into my armpits and from the heat of a stuffy car on our long and slow drive from the church in town. Prayers were said and a eulogy was given by a man we did not know. We were asked to view the casket, with our mother and the three of us to lead the procession. An uncle helped my mother while we walked shyly to view our father for the last time. When I stood at the casket, I was surprised to see him, eyes closed and moist-looking and wearing a cap the color of skin. (Years later I would realize that it hid the wound from which he had died.) I looked quickly and returned to my seat, head bowed because my relatives were watching me and I felt scared.

We buried our father. Later that day at the house, Grandma could not stop shaking from her nerves, so a doctor was called. I was in the room when he opened his bag and shiny things gleamed from inside it. Scared, I left the room and sat in the living room with my sister, who had a doughnut in her hand, with one bite gone. An aunt whose face was twisted from crying looked at me and, feeling embarrassed, I lowered my head to play with my fingers.

A week later relatives came to help build the fence Father had planned for the new house. A week after that Rick, Debra, and I were playing in an unfurnished bedroom with a can of marbles Mother had given us. Behind the closed door we rolled the marbles so that they banged against the baseboard and jumped into the air. We separated, each to a corner, where we swept them viciously with our arms—the clatter of the marbles hitting the walls so loud I could not hear the things in my heart.

## 1, 2, 3

When I was seven years old I spent most of the summer at Romain playground, a brown stick among other brown kids. The playground was less than a block from where we lived, on a street of retired couples, Okie families, and two or three Mexican families. Just before leaving for work our mother told us—my brother Rick, sister Debra, and me—not to leave the house until after one in the afternoon, at which time I skipped off to the playground, barefoot and smiling my teeth that were uneven and without direction. By that hour the day was yellow with one-hundred-degree heat, the sun blaring high over the houses. I walked the asphalt street with little or no pain toward a mirage of water that disappeared as I approached it.

At the playground I asked for checkers at the game room, unfolded the board under the elm that was cut with initials and, if he was there, I played with Ronnie, an Okie kid who was so poor that he had nothing to wear but a bathing suit. All summer he showed up in his trunks, brown as the rest of us Mexicans, and seemed to enjoy himself playing checkers, Candyland, and Sorry. Once, when I brought him an unwrapped jelly sandwich in my hand, the shapes of my fingers pressed into the bread, he took it and didn't look into my eyes. He ate very slowly, deliberating over each move. When he beat me and had

polished off his sandwich, he turned away without a word and ran off to play with someone else.

If Ronnie was not there and no one else challenged me, I just sat under the tree stacking checkers until they toppled over and I started again to raise that crooked spine of checkers a foot high.

If there were only little kids—four or five-year-olds who could count to ten—I played Candyland, a simple game of gum drops and sugar canes down a road to an ice cream sandwich. I remember playing with Rosie, a five-year-old whose brother Raymond got his leg broken when he was hit by a car. I was not around that day, but I recall racing a friend to where it had happened to look at the dried blood on the curb. My friend and I touched the stain. I scratched at it so that a few flakes got under my nails, and no matter how I picked and sucked at them, they wouldn't come out. We both ran home very frightened.

Rosie sat across the picnic-like table from me, her stringy hair spiked with a few flowers, and called me "Blackie" when it was my turn to spin the wheel and move down the candyland road. I didn't hit her because she had six brothers, five of them bigger than me. To smack her would have meant terror that would last for years. But the truth was that she liked me, for she offered me sunflower seeds from her sweaty palms and let me spit the shells at her.

"Spin the wheel, Blackie," she said with a mouthful of her seeds and sniffing from a perennial cold, a bubble of snot coming and going.

"OK, tether-ball-head," I countered. Both of us laughed at each other's cleverness while we traded off spitting shells at one another, a few pasting themselves to our foreheads.

One Saturday morning a well-dressed man let his daughter try the slide. Rosie ran over to join the little girl,

who was wearing a dress, her hair tied into a neat pony tail. Her shoes were glossy black and she wore socks with red trim. Rosie squealed at the little girl and the girl squealed back, and they both ran off to play while the father sat with his newspaper on the bench.

I went and sat on the same bench, shyly picking at the brittle, green paint but not looking up at the man at first. When my eyes did lift, slowly like balloons let go, I took it all in: His polished shoes, creased pants, the shirt, and his watch that glinted as he turned the page of his newspaper. I had seen fathers like him before on the *Donna Reed Show* or *Father Knows Best*, and I was pleased that he was here at *our* playground because I felt that we were being trusted, that nearby, just beyond our block, the rich people lived and were welcoming.

He looked up from the newspaper at me and forced a quick smile that relaxed back into a line as he returned to his paper. Happily I jumped from the bench and rushed to play with Rosie and the little girl, hoping to catch the man's eye as I swung twice as high as the girls and parachuted with great abandon to land like a frog. He looked up to smile, but dropped his eyes back to the newspaper as he recrossed his legs.

But then it happened: The little girl fell from the swing while Rosie was pushing her. Startled by her sudden crying, the man's eyes locked on the scene of Rosie hovering over his daughter crying on the ground. He jumped up yelling, "You filthy Mexican." He picked up his daughter who had stopped crying, and then, turning to Rosie who was saying that she hadn't done anything, he shoved her hard against the chain link fence so that her sunflower seeds flew in every direction. She got up bent over, her breath knocked out, mouth open wide as a cup and a string of saliva lengthening to the ground.

Three of her brothers were playing Chinese checkers under the tree, and when they saw what had happened

they ran to fight the man with handfuls of redwood chips that they had scooped up from the play area. Like the rest of us, the brothers, who ranged from eight to fourteen, wore T-shirts and cut-offs but with no shoes—sons of the very poor. But unlike the rest of us, they were fierce brawlers who would go at it even with older kids as they flew up like chickens against those who got them mad.

Yelling, "You nigger people," his raised arm blocking the puffs of redwood chips, the man was backed into the merry-go-round while his daughter, some distance away, clung to the chain link fence. He charged one brother and pushed him to the ground only to feel a handful of redwood chips against his face. Coughing, he grabbed another brother and threw him to the ground while still another threw a softball at his back. In pain, the man turned around and chased the brother, but was stopped by the coach who had come running from the baseball game on the other side of the playground.

"Don't touch him," the coach warned the man, who was shouting whatever wild insults came to his mind. The coach tried to coax him to calm down, but the man, whose eyes were glassy, raved rabidly as his arms flailed about.

I had been watching from upside-down on the bars, but got down to help Rosie gather her seeds. She was on her knees, face streaked and nose running. I pinched up three seeds from the ground before I turned to stand by the brothers who were still taunting the man with Coke bottles they had pulled from the garbage. Suddenly the man broke down and as loudly as he had screamed names, he screamed that he was sorry, that he didn't know what he was doing. He gathered his daughter in his arms, repeating again and again that he was sorry. The coach ushered him to the gate while the brothers, two of them crying, yelled that they were going to get him.

"You are no one, mister. You think you can do this to

us because we're little," one said with his Coke bottle still cocked and ready.

I wanted to run for them as they left for their car, to explain that it was a mistake; that we also fell from the swings and the bars and slide and got hurt. I wanted to show the man my chin that broke open on the merry-go-round, the half-moon of pink scar. But they hurried away, sweaty from the morning sun, the man's pants and shirt stained with dirt and the little girl's limp dress smudged from her fall, and in some ways looking like us.

I returned to Rosie who was still collecting her seeds, and feeling bad but not knowing what to do, I got to my knees and asked if she wanted to play. I touched her hair, then her small shoulders, and called her name. She looked up at me, her face still wet from crying, and said, "Go away, Blackie."

That summer my eyes became infected. My brother and I had had a contest to see how long we could stare into the table fan without looking away. I was there for an hour, my head propped up in my hands, pretending all along I was in a biplane and the earth far below was World War I France. (That summer we watched *Dialing-for-Dollars*, a morning program that featured many war movies. Together we sat in a rocker-turned-fighter plane and machine-gunned everyone to death, both the good and the bad.)

An hour in front of the fan, and the next morning I woke with my eyes caked with mucus and unable to open them. I screamed to my mother who was in the kitchen stirring oatmeal, and when she came to the bedroom she screamed louder than me and fainted, dropping to the floor like a bundle of laundry. My brother rushed into the room with my sister following behind him, and both of them screamed when they saw Mom moaning on the ground. Looking up, they screamed as my hands searched

the air, and flew to the living room. My mother woke with an "Ay, Dios," bundled me in her arms, and carried me to the bathroom where she rinsed a hot wash cloth and rubbed it across my eyes, until the mucus softened and my lids fluttered open.

She screamed again because my eyes were not red but milky. She called the doctor who suggested an eye specialist, and that afternoon she took me to see the specialist with my eyes covered by a bandana. We were seen immediately. The nurse ushered us into a dimmed examining room where we were met by a doctor who lifted me into a chair whose motor whined until I was tilted far back. He pointed a small, chrome flashlight at each eye and with a Q-tip he tapped mucus from the corners of my eyes. With the lights back on, he squeezed eye drops between my spread lids, gave my mother instructions, and said it was important that I wear special sunglasses for the next three days. He fitted me with plastic smoke-colored glasses with paper earpieces.

"How's that, young man?" he said, trying to be cheerful. "You'll be just fine in a couple of days." He patted my knee and gave me a candy.

While Mother paid the receptionist I looked around the room, from the ceiling to the pictures of ships in a rough sea. It was smoky through the glasses. When we left the air-conditioned office the heat of the afternoon overwhelmed me, and I wanted to take off the glasses to wipe my nose of sweat, but Mother said that the light would make me go blind. We drove home in silence, past the smoky church and the smoky furniture store. I looked at my mother and she was smoky. Our block was smoky as we turned into it. My brother and sister, who greeted me with laughter, were darker than we'd left them. My mother scolded them and told them to water the lawn while we went inside where I was given a bowl of ice cream. I took this treat to the front window and looked

out on a knot of smoky neighbor kids who were staring in silence. One of them asked if I was blind.

"No, Frostie," I called through the screened window. "I can still see your *mocos*."

That night I was pampered by Mother; Rick and Debra grew envious because I was served more ice cream, more this and that, and was allowed to stay up until nine-thirty to watch *Dobie Gillis* in my smoky sunglasses. I could hear my brother in bed trying to talk to me.

"I'm going to get you, Gary," Rick said. I laughed especially loud at each funny scene, and when the program ended I said, "Boy, that was real good."

When I was sent to bed, I took off my sunglasses carefully and fogged them with my breath, rubbing them clean with my T-shirt. I placed them on the bureau and climbed into my bunk bed, while Rick muttered threats because he felt that I was being spoiled.

The next day we were again warned by our mother, who worked until four candling eggs for Safeway, not to go outside the house until one or the police might arrest her. The neighbors should not know that we were being left alone.

"But, Gary, you have to stay inside. I don't want you to go out in the sunlight." At the door she reminded me with a shake of her finger, "You heard what the doctor said. You can go blind, *m'ijo*."

I watched the morning movie in which John Wayne, injured in an attack on an aircraft carrier, had lost the ability to walk, but later, through courage and fortitude, he pulled himself out of bed, walked a few stiff steps, and collapsed just as the doctor and his girlfriend entered the room to witness his miracle comeback. I saw myself as John Wayne. Nearly blinded by a mean brother, I overcame my illness to become a fighter pilot who saves the world from the Japanese. I took a few Frankenstein steps across the living room, shouting that I was healed by the

Lord. My brother countered with "You're not funny." He got up and went to the garage with Debra where they hammered on boards they said were going to be a scooter.

At one o'clock Rick and Debra went outside to ride their bikes in front of the house as I sat at the window yearning to join them. They rode by slowly, then with great speed, as they made certain to turn to me and smile to show they were really getting a kick out of riding their bikes. They rode for a while, their brows sweaty and their cheeks reddening, before an ice cream truck jingled up the block. They pulled together from their pockets seven cents for a juice bar which they took turns licking slowly under a tree. Rick looked at the window where I sat with my sunglasses on, and, very exaggeratedly, called out, "Ummm, good!"

They came inside, cooled off with Kool-Aid, and watched a game show neither of them cared for. Bored, Debra turned off the TV and went to her room to play with her dolls while Rick disappeared into the garage, where the rap of the hammer started up again. I peeked out the kitchen door that led to the garage, but he warned me that if I came out he would tell Mom.

Minutes later he came back into the living room where I was drawing and asked if I wanted to go to the playground.

"But Mom will get mad," I said.

"Ah, don't worry," he argued. "We'll be back before four. She won't know."

Debra returned to the living room and stood by Rick. Reluctant at first, I gave in when I saw them walk down the street without looking back, and trotted after them while holding onto my sunglasses so they wouldn't fall off.

At the playground I was a celebrity; the kids milled around me and asked if I was blind, did it hurt, would I have to wear the sunglasses forever? I played checkers and Candyland with Ronnie, happy that I was noticed by

so many. Even the coach asked how I was, touched my hair and tenderly called me "knucklehead." This made Rick mad and when he said it was time to go home I told him it was only three-thirty and that Mom wouldn't get home until after four. Upset, he left with Debra tagging along in his shadow, but turned around before he was out of sight and said that he was going to get me. I played with Ronnie and sucked on a juice bar the coach had bought me, but left in a scramble when I discovered it was close to four.

As I returned home, happy as a pup, Rick jumped out from under a neighbor's hedge. "Now you're gonna get it, punk." His grin was mean and his eyes were narrowed like the Japanese I had seen on television that morning. Wrestling me to the ground, he scratched off my sunglasses, laughed a fake laugh, and ran away wearing them. Crying, and with my hands shading my brow, I rolled under the hedge Rick had jumped from because it was dark in there. The earth was cool and leaves stuck to my hair and T-shirt. I sat up Indian-style, squinting and calling for help, although no one came.

I tried to move but a branch stabbed my back and ripped through my shirt, so I sat under the hedge calling out now and then, thinking that it was only a matter of time before I would go blind. An old woman with a shopping cart passed, and I called to her that I was going blind. She stopped, looked inside the hedge, her glasses slipping down from the bridge of her nose, and said, "Dear, I know just how you feel. Sometimes when I wake up in the morning, I can hardly make out where things are without my glasses." She turned away and continued down the street.

I started crying because I knew that when Mother discovered me under the hedge she would be mad. There would be no excuses. She would drag me home for a spanking while the neighbor kids watched.

Finally, about an hour later, I heard my mother's voice calling my name. I heard the clip-clop of my mother's sandals, her stern voice: "Where are you, *Chango*?"

"In the hedge, Mamma."

She bent down with her hands on her knees and squinted into the greenery. I squinted back and begged her not to hit me. Squatting, she waddled into the hedge, grabbed my wrist roughly, and tugged until I was standing up with my hands over my eyes. She fixed the sunglasses on my face and asked me what the hell I was doing in there.

"I didn't want to go blind. Rick took my sunglasses. They made me go to the playground," I whimpered incoherently, spilling it all. Once home, Rick got a spanking and Mom was raising a belt to punish me when I pointed to my sunglasses and cried out that I might really go blind. She stopped, her lips pursed, and just wagged her finger at me and warned that I would get a double dose the next time I misbehaved.

From the bedroom I could hear Rick whimpering into his pillow, "You're gonna get it, punk!"

One day the woman coach at the playground announced a crafts contest. The word went out in the morning when the kids gathered around her to hear what she had to say. Two kids sat in her lap while another played with her blond curls as she broke the contest into categories: Drawing, lanyard, clay, and macaroni. First place winners would receive baseball caps. We oohed and aahed. The second and third place winners would get certificates. We oohed and aahed again.

"Now, kids, it's important to be original," she said. Someone asked what "original" meant.

"You know, different. . . . You know, unique," she answered, and emphasized the definition with her hands.

I thought about this, and the next day for crafts period I

came to the playground with a Frostie root beer bottle. At the picnic table under the tree I spray-painted it gold, let it dry in the sun, and after smearing it with glue rolled it into a pie tin of peat moss which shimmered a mystical gold. Pleased thus far, I then glued macaroni noodles that I had painted red to the neck of the bottle.

I worked in deep concentration as did the other kids, and when I finished I carried it very carefully to the game room where the coach sat on a stool behind a Dutch door thumbing through magazines. I looked up at her, smiling my happiness. She squinted and furrowed her brow when she saw my creation. "Ummm, interesting, Gary." She took it and placed it on a shelf.

The next day I made an ashtray. I rolled clay into a ball, pressed it out into a circle, and then raised the edges with a spoon. I made four dents where the cigarettes would rest, sticking colored buttons on each side of the dents.

That afternoon I also attempted a lanyard, but my patience with "loop and tuck, loop and tuck" gave out and I threw it into the garbage can. "Damn thing," I said under my breath as I walked to the game room to check out a four-square ball. I bounced it inordinately high in hopes of attracting the kids who were still working at their crafts under the tree. Few looked up and none left to join me; their dirty legs dangled motionless under the table.

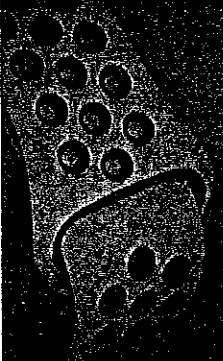
At dinner that evening my sister and I described to our mother the excitement of the contest, each sure the other was out of the running.

"You should see my Frostie bottle," I said to her as I ripped a tortilla and chewed loudly. "It's beautiful—like gold."

Debra described the toilet roll she had painted red and black with macaroni glued in a spiral like a barber's pole.

"Mine's the best, Mom!" Debra tore off a piece of tortilla and chewed louder than me, with her mouth open.

"Mom, I can see Debbie's food," I pointed with a fork.



Debra chewed even louder, mocking me with her eyes spread wide like a bug's.

"OK, you kids, behave yourselves." Mom cleared the table as we scooted outside to play.

The next day I made a drawing of a dragster on fire. I outlined the lean body carefully, deliberating on each feature from the spoked wheels to the roll bar, and then scribbled the flames a vicious red and black, all the while whining like a car turning a corner. Finished, I carried it stiffly, as if I were in a pageant, to the game room. I handed it proudly to the coach who asked what it was.

"A dragster. That's the engine." I pointed out the eighteen pipes that hung on the side. I showed her the driver who had been thrown from the car. He was dead.

That afternoon the coach announced a special contest in which we could do anything we pleased.

"But it must be a secret," she said. All of the kids huddled in the shade because of the afternoon heat that rose above a hundred degrees. We listened quietly as she explained that we had to do it at home with our own materials and that we should be original. And again we asked what "original" meant, and again she explained, "You know, different. . . . You know, unique," with her hands flashing out for definition.

Starry-eyed, my mind blazing with a seven-year-old's idea of beauty, I ran home because I knew exactly what I intended to produce. From the garbage I pulled a Campbell's soup can, ripped off the paper label, and in the garage painted it red with a stiff brush, the stifling heat wringing sweat from my face. I let the soup can dry in the sun, and that evening I glued rows of bottle caps that I had dug out with a spoon from a Coke machine: One row of Coca-Cola caps, then a row of Orange Crush, then one of Dr. Pepper, and so on. When I finished with this detail I packed dirt into the can, poked two pinto beans into it,

and watered them carefully so the bottle caps wouldn't get wet and fall off.

I was pleased with my craft. When my mother came home that afternoon I took her by the hand to the back yard to show her.

"Very pretty." Her face was plain and unmoved, tired from a day's work of candling eggs, but still I grinned like a cat, already imagining that on Monday when the judging took place I was sure to win.

It was Friday when I finished the "special" craft, and I assumed that the next day the sprout of a pinto bean would break through the moist dirt. Nothing was there in the center of the can, so I watered it again with great care, every few hours checking to see if the beans had sprouted. Nothing.

Sunday arrived with still no sprout of greenery. Only two ants salvaging a feathery seed. I blew them from their task and again watered the beans, after which I placed the can on the fence rail in full sun and skipped off to play for the day, believing that when I returned home I would find the pale head of a bean plant pushing up from the dirt. I took the can off the fence. Nothing.

I brought the can into the garage where I pasted back the bottle caps that had fallen off from the sun's heat. I tapped the dirt, and it was hard. I again watered the seeds, praying they would grow.

"Come on, plants, get up. Tomorrow it's Monday."

Monday morning the plants had not come through, and although I was disappointed I still wanted to enter the can in the contest. With Debra, who had made a pencil holder from a toilet roll encircled with popsicle sticks, I went to the playground where I handed over my craft piece to the woman coach. That afternoon there was no crafts period; instead the man coach, along with a lady we didn't know, came to judge.

"How can you kids stand the heat?" the lady asked as

she stepped into the game room fanning herself with a paper plate. She wore a white dress with a shiny red belt and a red hat, and looked very clean with her made-up face.

All the kids gathered around the Dutch door to try to hear what they were mumbling as they hovered over the crafts.

Caveman, an Okie kid whose closely cropped hair sloped at a forty-five degree angle, climbed the Dutch door, and before the woman coach could stop him he went up to the lady and tugged at her dress. Looking up to her with a face covered with snots, he asked her for a nickel. "I'm hungry."

Embarrassed, the woman coach apologized and scolded Caveman as she carried him from the game room. She told the rest of us to go and sit under the tree. Caveman ran off as a brother of Rosie's trailed him with his fists closed.

Finally, about half an hour later, the coaches, along with the well-dressed lady, came out and announced the names of the winners. Among them were Ronnie, Rosie, Weasel, Raymond, and even Caveman. They repeated the names because two prizes had been left out. That time around I had won third prize for my Frostie bottle! I screamed loudly, and screamed again when I saw the man coach lugging a bucket of iced Cokes that gleamed like fish. The woman coach arrived with popcorn and cookies, and we all screamed and laughed and argued throughout the afternoon.

When the party was over, my sister and I left with the crafts that hadn't won first place. Debra had won two second place certificates, and bragged all the way home and into autumn. Still, I was happy and taped my third place certificate to the bedroom wall. That evening after dinner I took my can to the front yard where I sat on the lawn sucking a blade of grass and wondered why the

plants had not come up. My brother Rick rode by on his bike and yelled, "I told you I'd get you." I looked up at him as he rode off, and then looked at the can with realization. I scratched the surface of the dirt lightly and then dug with the full force of my fingernails. Nothing.

I looked up from the can and, with moist eyes, muttered, "My brother has to die."