

forced a smile but didn't look around the room at the students who had turned to size her up.

Sister Marie walked up another row, still tapping her pencil and talking about hunger, when she pointed to me. "And Gary . . . well, he would be one of the first to die." Students turned in their chairs to look at me with their mouths open, and I was mad, not for being pointed out but because of that unfair lie. I could outlive the whole class, food or no food. Wasn't I one of the meanest kids in the entire school? Didn't I beat up Chuy Hernandez, a bigger kid? I shook my head in disbelief, and said "nah" under my breath.

Sister Marie glared at me, almost bitterly, as she told the class again that I would be the first one to die. She tapped her pencil as she walked slowly up to me. Scared, I looked away, first up to the ceiling and then to a fly that was walking around on the floor. But my head was snapped up when Sister Marie pushed my chin with her pencil. She puckered her mouth into a clot of lines and something vicious raged in her eyes, like she was getting ready to throw a softball. What it was I didn't know, but I feared that she was going to squeeze me from the waste basket and hurl me around the room. After a minute or so her face relaxed and she returned to the front of the class where she announced that for the coming three weeks we would collect money daily for Biafra.

"The pagan babies depend on our charitable hearts," she said. She looked around the room and returned to the globe where she again pointed out Africa. I craned my head and pleaded, "Let me see." She stared me back into place and then resumed talking about the fruits of the world, some of which were ours and some of which were not ours.

## The Beauty Contest

It had been a sticky and difficult week of two nose bleeds from bigger kids when Karen, the coach at Romain playground, announced that there was going to be a children's beauty contest. I was in the elm tree above the picnic table where we played Old Maid and Sorry. Two kids were bent over a game, and I was bombing them with small pieces of bark, thinking all along that their shaved or tangled heads were World War II Germany. They laughed when the bark landed quietly as flies, and shook them from their hair so I would do it again.

I asked the coach what a "beauty contest" was, and she answered that it was like a game to see who was the best looking. "But you're too old, Blackie," she told me. "It's for little kids." Since I was nine I dismissed it from my mind and went on dropping bombs, but later, when I returned home to smack together a peanut butter and jelly sandwich, I thought of my smaller brother, Jimmy. A tough kid, he was jumping up and down on the couch with a sandwich in his hand—a chipped front tooth showing gray when he was ready to bite. As I worked on my second sandwich I thought more and more about entering Jimmy. Strong build, a chipped tooth, half Mexican and half white—he might win, I thought.

Jimmy was not yet four, so when I told him about what

I wanted him to do, he said OK. I ran to his drawer and searched for a bathing suit—an orange thing with an anchor in the front and a paint stain on the back. Undressed, he tugged his way into it and that afternoon he practiced walking.

“Leave your hands at your side,” I instructed him as he marched from the kitchen to the living room. “Look left and then right, like you’re going to cross the street. Yeah, that’s good—and smile like you’re going to eat some chicken. They want to see that tooth.”

I combed his hair and shined his face with Jergen’s lotion and made him walk until he got it right. After that we turned on the television and waited for the week to pass.

On the day of the event I dressed Jimmy in his bathing suit with a clean T-shirt and lent him my rubber thongs. They were too big, like snowshoes, but I thought them more appropriate than his high top tennies. I slipped into hemmed cut-offs, a white shirt, and shoes that gleamed black as roaches. I smeared his face with Jergen’s lotion and combed his waxed hair until it followed a stiff but clean grain. As we walked through the street a few neighbor kids were playing a game of “pickle”; they stopped for a few seconds to ask where we were going. Why were we so dressed up? They looked at us in awe, and I felt important at telling them that we were off to a “beauty contest.”

We got to the playground just as mothers arrived in station wagons—mothers in bubble-shaped sunglasses, straw hats with different fruits on the brims, and shark-skin skirts. Cameras dangled from their wrists; purses were pressed under their armpits. Some banged aluminum folding chairs from car trunks and set them before the swimming pool where the contest would be held. Jimmy and I looked happily at the balloons that tossed softly on the gate and the strings of plastic flags—those familiar ones from used car lots—drooped on the fence.

Jimmy and I sat under the elm with Rosie, Raymond, Caveman and a few others, and although none of us said anything we were awed by the blond and fair-skinned kids in good clothes. They looked beautiful, I thought, with their cheeks flushed red from the morning heat. The kids stood close to their mothers and wore fancy shirts, sundresses with prints of zoos or bright balloons, and tiny hats—sailor, farm boy, or grassy things with plastic animals holding hands.

With a bullhorn the coach called for the girls to line up. Mothers bent to give hugs and whisper last-minute instructions to their daughters before they were pushed gently through the gate where the coach smiled, pinned numbers on the backs of their suits, and lined them up by height. When they were called out to walk around the pool, some of them looked scared as they searched for their mothers, who clung to the fence or took pictures; other girls looked down at their feet, with fingers in their mouths. They paraded around the pool until they had been sized up by the three women judges who scratched notes behind card tables. The girls were then asked to sit down on the lawn that outlined the pool as the boys were called through the bullhorn to make a line at the gate.

Jimmy and I ran to the gate. I reminded him what to do and, somewhat scared by it all, he nodded his head “yes” and tugged at his bathing suit. The coach called for the line to march in, and it moved slowly into the pool area with most of the boys looking down at the blue of the water, not at their mothers.

Because he was the smallest, Jimmy went out first and did as I had instructed: He looked left, then right; he smiled like he was going to eat chicken, pulling back his lips to show his tooth. He walked stiffly before the judges and took his place behind the tallest boy.

I clung to the fence, with Rosie and Caveman at my side, as one after another the boys marched around the

pool and past the judges who tapped their pencils and looked at one another before they scratched notes. Rosie touched my arm when one of the boys, just before he was called, put on a pair of sunglasses with pistols at the corners. As he started, I heard laughter from the elm tree and the words: "Sissy boy."

When all the boys had circled the pool, they, too, were asked to sit on the lawn with the girls who were reddening like crabs from the warm weather. The judges craned their heads together, whispered seriously, and then whispered again.

With the bullhorn the coach asked for the boys and girls to join hands and parade around the pool. They looked at one another, unsure of what she was saying. The coach talked with the bullhorn again, but still they were confused at what to do. One kid stepped up to the edge of the pool and, looking up at the coach, asked: "Do you want us to jump in?"

The coach climbed down from her station, smiling and shaking her head as she passed the parents to go over to explain to the kids what they were supposed to do. Finally, hand in hand, they paraded awkwardly—the boys looking at the water and the girls waving at their mothers.

The judges converged behind the children who once again had lined up by height. One judge took control and waved a paper crown of glitter over the girls while the parents clung even harder to the fence. When the crown dropped softly on a little girl with curlicues, moans were let out. One mother squeaked, clapped her hands like a loud rain, and looked around for someone to share her excitement. The other mothers looked away and tapped the cameras in their palms. When another crown dropped on a boy's head, there were more moans. Another mother smiled but contained her happiness as the boy was given a trophy and tickets to see the Fresno Giants. Raymond, who was lost in the green leaves of the elm, called down

at the winner: "You're a sissy." A mother searched the tree, with a sour and disgusted look, but couldn't spot his brown legs.

I was disappointed. Rosie and Caveman ran away to play on the swings without saying anything as I stepped away from the fence and sat under the elm. Raymond dropped a piece of bark on my head and made the sound of a bomb exploding. Without looking up, I told him to leave me alone, and he did. The tree shook as he moved to a higher limb.

The Prince and Princess again went around the pool while a reporter from the *Fresno Bee* on one knee took pictures. At the ceremony's end, the gate was swung open and the losers were handed ice cream sandwiches as they left to join the onlookers. The coach spoke through the bullhorn, thanking everyone for coming. From a top branch Raymond called his own thanks through cupped hands: "See you later, alligator; after awhile, crocodile." He laughed at his joke and the tree shook again as he moved to another branch. The coach, Karen, walked over and, shading her eyes, squinted into the branches. Raymond dropped a piece of bark on her and made the sound of a bomb exploding.

"Raymond, is that you?" she shouted. "Raymond, is that you?" he mimicked. "Get down here right this minute," she warned. "Get down here right this minute," a branch said. More bombs fell, followed by explosions.

Karen shook her head at the mothers who were gathering chairs and lugging ice chests back to their station wagons. "These kids are so terrible." She shook her head, tsssked "Is he in trouble," and sent me to the game room for a football to knock Raymond from the tree.