

chuckled to myself, and climbed the fence into the alley to look around for something to do.

This would continue all through the summer of my twelfth year, and by fall Mom said I didn't have to go to church because she had seen an improvement in my ways.

"See, I told you, *m'ijo*," she said over dinner one night. "The nuns would be very proud of you."

I swallowed a mouthful of beans and cleared my throat. "Yes, Mom."

Still, when relatives showed up at the door to talk to my mom in Spanish, I hung around to comb my hair and wait for them to open their purses or fiddle deeply in their pockets for a nickel or dime. They would pat my head and ask me what I wanted to be when I grew up. "A priest," I would answer, to which they would smile warmly, "Oh, Gary," and give over the coin.

Catholics

I was standing in the waste basket for fighting on the day we received a hunger flag for Biafra. Sister Marie, a tough nun who could throw a softball farther than most men, read a letter that spoke of the grief of that country, looking up now and then to measure our sympathy and to adjust her glasses that had slipped from her nose. She read the three-page letter, placed it on her desk, and walked over to the globe to point out Africa, a continent of constant despair. I craned my neck until, without realizing it, I had one foot out of the wastebasket. Sister Marie turned and stared me back into place, before she went on to lecture us about hunger.

"Hunger is a terrible, terrible thing," she began. "It robs the body of its vitality and the mind of its glory, which is God's."

Sister Marie cruised slowly up and down the rows, tapping a pencil in her palm and talking about death, hunger, and the blessed infants, which were God's, until the students hung their heads in fear or boredom. Then she brightened up.

"With hunger, heavier people would live longer—they have more fat, you see." She tapped her pencil, looked around the room, and pointed to Gloria Leal. "If we didn't have any food whatsoever, Gloria would probably live the longest." Hands folded neatly on her desk, Gloria

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