

Being Mean

We were terrible kids, I think. My brother, sister, and I felt a general meanness begin to surface from our tiny souls while living on Braly Street, which was in the middle of industrial Fresno. Across the street was Coleman Pickles, while on the right of us was a junkyard that dealt in metals—aluminum, iron, sheet metal, and copper stripped from refrigerators. Down the street was Sun-Maid Raisin, where a concrete tower rose above the scraggly sycamores that lined Braly Street. Many of our family worked at Sun-Maid: Grandfather and Grandmother, Father, three uncles, an aunt, and even a dog whose job was to accompany my grandfather, a security guard, on patrol. Then there was Challenge Milk, a printing shop, and the 7-Up Company where we stole sodas. Down the alley was a broom factory and Western Book Distributor, a place where our future step-father worked at packing books into cardboard boxes, something he would do for fifteen years before the company left town for Oregon.

This was 1957. My brother Rick was six, I was five, and Debra was four. Although we looked healthy, clean in the morning, and polite as only Mexicans can be polite, we had a streak of orneriness that we imagined to be normal play. That summer—and the summer previous—we played with the Molinas who lived down the alley from us right across from the broom factory and its brutal

"whack" of straw being tied into brooms. There were eight children on the block that year, ranging from twelve down to one, so there was much to do: Wrestle, eat raw bacon, jump from the couch, sword fight with rolled-up newspapers, steal from neighbors, kick chickens, throw rocks at passing cars. . . . While we played in the house, Mother Molina just watched us run around, a baby in her arms crying like a small piece of machinery turning at great speed. Now and then she would warn us with a smile, "Now you kids, you're going to hurt yourselves." We ignored her and went on pushing one another from an opened window, yelling wildly when we hit the ground because we imagined that there was a school of sharks ready to snack on our skinny legs.

What we learned from the Molinas was how to have fun, and what we taught them was how to fight. It seemed that the Sotos were inherently violent. I remember, for instance, watching my aunts going at one another in my grandmother's back yard, while the men looked on with beers in their hands and mumbled to one another, perhaps noting the beauty of a jab or a roundhouse punch. Another time the police arrived late at night in search of our Uncle Leonard who had gotten into a fight at a neighborhood bar. Shortly thereafter, I recall driving with my mother to see him at what she said was a "soldier's camp." She had a sack of goods with her, and after speaking softly to a uniformed man we were permitted to enter. It was lunch time and he sat on a felled log laughing with other men. When he saw us coming, he laughed even harder.

In turn, I was edged with a meanness; and more often than not the object of my attacks was Rick. If upset, I chased him with rocks, pans, a hammer, whatever lay around in the yard. Once, when he kicked over a row of beans I had planted in the yard, I chased him down the alley with a bottle until, in range, I hurled it at him. The

bottle hit him in the thigh and, to my surprise, showered open with blood. Screaming, his mouth open wide enough to saucer a hat inside, he hobbled home while I stood there, only slightly worried at his wound and the spanking that would follow, shouting that he had better never do that again. And he didn't.

I was also hurt by others who were equally as mean, and I am thinking particularly of an Okie kid who yelled that we were dirty Mexicans. Perhaps so, but why bring it up? I looked at my feet and was embarrassed, then mad. With a bottle I approached him slowly in spite of my brother's warnings that the kid was bigger and older. When I threw the bottle and missed, he swung his stick and my nose exploded blood for several feet. Frightened, though not crying, I ran home with Rick and Debra chasing me, and dabbed at my face and T-shirt, poked mercurochrome at the tear that bubbled, and then lay on the couch, swallowing blood as I slowly grew faint and sleepy. Rick and Debra looked at me for a while, then got up to go outside to play.

Rick and I and the Molinas all enjoyed looking for trouble and often went to extremes to try to get into fights. One day we found ourselves staring at some new kids on the street—three of them about our age—and when they looked over their picket fence to see who we were, I thought one of them had sneered at us, so I called him a name. They called back at us, and that provocation was enough to send Rick to beat on one of them. Rick entered their yard and was punched in the ear, then in the back when he tried to hunch over to protect himself. Furious as a bee, I ran to fight the kid who had humbled Rick, but was punched in the stomach, which knocked the breath out of me so I couldn't tell anyone how much it had hurt. The Molinas grew scared and ran home, while Rick and I, slightly roughed up but sure that we had the guts to give them a good working over, walked slowly

home trying to figure out how to do it. A small flame lit my brain, and I suggested that we stuff a couple of cats into potato sacks and beat the kids with them. An even smaller light flared in my brother's brain. "Yeah, that'll get them," he said, happy that we were going to get even. We called to our cat, Boots, and found another unfortunate cat that was strolling nonchalantly down our alley in search of prime garbage. I called to it, and it came, purring. I carried it back to our yard where Rick had already stuffed Boots into a sack, which was bumping about on the ground. Seeing this, the cat stiffened in my arms and I had trouble working the cat into the sack, for it had spread its feet and opened its claws. But once inside, the cat grew calm, resigning itself to fate, and meowed only once or twice. For good measure I threw a bottle into my sack, and the two of us—or, to be fair, the four of us—went down the alley in search of the new kids.

We looked for them, even calling them names at their back porch, but they failed to show themselves. Rick and I believed that they were scared, so in a way we were victors. Being mean, we kicked over their garbage cans and ran home where we fought one another with the sacks, the cats all along whining and screaming to get out.

Perhaps the most enjoyable summer day was when Rick, Debra, and I decided to burn down our house. Earlier in the summer we had watched a television program on fire prevention at our grandmother's house, only three houses down from us on Sarah Street. The three of us sat transfixed in front of the gray light of the family's first TV. We sat on the couch with a bowl of grapes, and when the program ended the bowl was still in Rick's lap, untouched. TV was that powerful.

Just after that program Rick and I set fire to our first shoe box, in which we imagined were many people scurrying to get out. We hovered over the fire, and our eyes grew wild. Later, we got very good at burning shoe boxes.

We crayoned windows, cut doors on the sides, and dropped ants into the boxes, imagining they were people wanting very badly to live. Once the fire got going, I wailed like a siren and Rick flicked water from a coffee can at the building leaping with flames. More often than not, it burned to ash and the ants shriveled to nothing—though a few would limp away, wiser by vision of death.

But we grew bored with the shoe boxes. We wanted something more exciting and daring, so Rick suggested that we brighten our lives with a house fire. "Yeah," Debra and I cried, leaping into the air, and proceeded to toss crumpled newspapers behind the doors, under the table, and in the middle of the living room. Rick struck a match, and we stood back laughing as the flames jumped wildly about and the newspaper collapsed into ash that floated to the ceiling. Once the fire got started we dragged in the garden hose and sprayed the house, the three of us laughing for the love of good times. We were in a frenzy to build fires and put them out with the hose. I looked at Rick and his eyes were wide with pleasure, his crazed laughter like the mad scientists of the movies we would see in the coming years. Debra was jumping up and down on the couch, a toy baby in her arms, and she was smiling her tiny teeth at the fire. I ran outside flapping my arms because I wanted to also burn the chinaberry that stood near our bedroom window. Just as I was ready to set a match to a balled newspaper I intended to hurl into the branches, our grandmother came walking slowly down the alley to check on us. (It was her responsibility to watch us during the day because our father was working at Sun-Maid Raisin and our mother was peeling potatoes at Reddi-Spud.) Grandma stopped at the gate and stared at me as if she knew what we were up to, and I stared back so I could make a quick break if she should lunge at me. Finally she asked, "How are you, honey?" I stared at my dirty legs, then up to her: "OK. I'm just playing."

With the balled newspaper in my hand, I pointed to the house and told her that Rick and Debra were inside coloring. Hearing this she said to behave myself, gave me a piece of gum, and returned to her house.

When I went back inside Rick and Debra were playing war with cherry tomatoes. Debra was behind the table on which the telephone rested, while Rick crouched behind a chair making the sounds of bombs falling.

"Rick," I called because I wanted to tell him that Grandma had come to see how we were doing, but he threw a tomato and it splashed my T-shirt like a bullet wound. I feigned being shot and fell to the floor. He rolled from behind the chair to hide behind a door. "Are you dead?" he asked. I lifted my head and responded: "Only a little bit."

Laughing, we hurled tomatoes at one another, and some of them hit their mark—an ear, a shoulder, a grinning face—while others skidded across the floor or became pasted to the wall. "You Jap," Debra screamed as she cocked her hand to throw, to which I screamed, "You damn German." We fought laughing until the tomatoes were gone. Breathing hard, we looked at the mess we had created, and then at each other, slightly concerned at what it might mean. Rick and I tried to clean up with a broom while Debra lay exhausted on the couch, thumb in her mouth and making a smacking sound. I can't recall falling asleep but that's what happened, because I awoke to Rick crying in the kitchen. Our mother had come home to an ash-darkened living room, a puddled kitchen, and tomato-stained walls. She yelled and spanked Rick, after which she dragged him to the stove where she heated a fork over a burner and threatened to burn his wrists. "Now are you going to play with fire?" she screamed. I peeked into the kitchen and her mouth was puckered into a dried fruit as Rick cried that she was hurting him, that he was sorry, that he would never do it again. Tears

leaped from his face as he tried to wiggle free. She threw the fork into the sink, then let him go. She turned to me and yelled: "And you too, *Chango!*" She started after me, but I ran out the front door into the alley where I hid behind a stack of boards. I stayed there until my breathing calmed and my fear disappeared like an ash picked up by the wind. I got up and, knowing that I couldn't return home immediately, I went to the Molinas. Just as I turned into their yard I caught sight of two of them climbing, hand over hand, on the telephone wires that stretched from above the back porch to the pole itself. A few of the younger Molinas looked on from an opened window, readying for their turn, as the radio blared behind them. I threw a rock at the two hanging from the wires, and they laughed that I missed. The other kids laughed. Their mother, with a baby in her arms, came out to the back porch, laughed, and told us to behave ourselves.