

alley, where we hid behind boxes breathing hard and smiling from our adventure. When no one came to get us, we shouldered our mannequins and walked away, thinking that we could sell them. When no one came to mind, we decided to make them fight.

"You're an idiot," I screamed at his mannequin.

"You're a double idiot," Jackie said. He held his mannequin like a club and smacked mine right in the face, which cracked and chipped. I swung mine, and his mannequin's head fell off.

"You're a triple idiot," he threw at me, swinging his mannequin so that it thudded mine in the chest, almost knocking me down. I swung, then he swung, and I swung again and again, and he swung again and again, until only the arms were left, which we used as swords in our fight all the way back home.

The Small Faces

I was sixteen and unable to find a summer job, so instead of moping around the house I volunteered to become a recreational assistant for the City Parks Department. I had read about the need for volunteers in the *Fresno Bee*. I called a phone number, left my name with a woman, and waited several days before my call was returned by the same woman who lauded my goodheartedness before she came down to business.

"Young man, there are a number of schools and parks. Take your time and just tell me which one sounds nice to you." She read down the list and I almost shouted when she said "Emerson Elementary."

"Emerson. I want to go there!"

"That one is still open," she said, and I could hear a pencil scratching an imagined index card. The woman gave me the name of Calvin Jones, the recreation leader, and said that I could start Monday at six if I liked. She again thanked me for my goodheartedness, asked me to spell my last name, and hung up.

That Monday, after dinner, I walked the four miles to Emerson, across Belmont, Tulare, and Ventura Avenues, where the houses, poor and dilapidated, slowly gave way to industry and shops—bakery, auto parts stores, a tire company, machine shop, and the import car dealer, Haron the Baron. There was a house for every vacant lot,

a working car for every car that was rusting on flat tires. So this is what it's like, I thought. I walked in wonder and in quiet happiness because this was the area where I had spent my first six years. My entire family, including aunts, uncles, father, brother, and even little sister, had gone to Emerson Elementary for at least one year. I walked through the vacant lots that gleamed with glass, burst mattresses, gutted refrigerators, a TV like a large one-eyed robot without legs—all the wonderful treasures that kids like.

As I slowly approached Emerson I made out the screaming of kids at play. When I got closer I could see a line of them, wet and with their hands pressed together as if in prayer. They were shivering but anxious as they waited their turns at the "Slip & Slide," that long runway of plastic, to dive onto, chest first, its surface of beaded water. To my surprise the coach was a black man—surprise because, aside from garbage men, I had never seen a black person employed by the city. He was leaning against the chain link fence, gazing almost in wonder at the grass at his feet. I approached him and he looked at me slowly and without response. Smiling, I told him who I was, a summer volunteer. He wrinkled up his face: "Summer volunteer? No one said anything to me." He played with his chin, rubbing and pinching at his fuzzy goatee, and again gazed at his feet. Realizing that his welcome was unkind, if not rude, he burst out a hearty, "Well, it's good to have you here," and touched my shoulder. We exchanged names and bits of information, like I was a high school student and he was a college student.

We looked up together at the kids, all of them Mexican, all shiny in the twilight. One looked at me, curious about who I was, but the others had their eyes locked on the "Slip & Slide." I watched them for a while until I became uneasy at having nothing to do. Calvin stood watching the kids, though I sensed his thoughts were elsewhere. His

brow lined with worry, then relaxed, then lined again, while his mouth, slightly puckered, moved as if he were getting ready to say something. But we leaned against the fence in silence, hands behind our backs holding onto the fence. After a while I braved a question, "What kind of programs do the kids have?" When I was their age, between five and eleven, my playground had crafts contests and baseball games, as well as swimming lessons.

Calvin pursed his lips, sighed, and jingled coins and keys in his pockets. "Well, Gary, we play a lot of dominoes." He pointed to a green shed, which he said was the game room. "We play over there." I followed his pointing arm to a picnic table. Next to the table stood a tree, thin as a hatrack, with only a few of its leaves moving in the breeze. But most were wilting and pale. I scanned the baseball field, the bungalows, and the school building itself. Even in the early evening the place looked dry and abandoned. I squinted hard and saw someone walking toward us, a girl about fourteen who was dressed in a T-shirt and cut off jeans. She stared at me and I stared back, unsmiling but interested because she wasn't bad looking. She clip-clopped in rubber sandals toward the line of kids where she bent to talk to one who seemed to be her younger brother. She looked up at me—or maybe Calvin—and several of the kids turned to look in our direction.

Calvin pushed away from the chain link fence and announced that time was up, the "Slip & Slide" had to be put away. He looked at his watch as he walked over to shut off the faucet. The kids moaned, begging him to turn it back on. Some took last dives, even as Calvin began rolling up one end of the plastic runway. Wanting something to do, I helped by coiling up the hose while the kids watched me with interest. Finally one asked me, "Who are you?" Without looking up, Calvin said my name and

told them I was his recreational assistant. I tried to look friendly but grown up and serious too.

I asked the kid who looked like a cousin of mine what his name was, but he averted his eyes and ran away in the direction of the game room. Some other kids, after staring openly at me, ran after him while two left for home. Calvin and I walked together, with me dragging the hose and him the "Slip & Slide." He took the hose and told me to join the kids who sat at the table pounding their fists as if they wanted to eat. Joining them I again told them my name and still they paid me little attention. I tried again by telling them where I lived and what high school I went to.

"Are you a 'Mescan'?" the cousin look-alike asked.

I felt as if a spear had been thrown at my feet. I wanted to collar the kid for asking such a naked question, but I smiled, wagged my head, and told him that I was.

"Are you getting money for coming here?" another kid asked.

"No, maybe next year I can get a job," I answered feebly. I was embarrassed because I couldn't explain why I'd come to their playground as a volunteer. I was crumbling inside but on the outside I remained calm. Trying to be happy, I told the kids that I didn't know how to play dominoes but maybe one of them could teach me.

"What's your name?" I asked the cousin look-alike.

"Alfonso." He offered no more information and lowered his head to pick at a sliver in his palm.

"And yours?" I asked, turning to an older boy about nine.

"Roberto. Alfonso's my brother." He was about to ask me a question but stopped. He looked away in the direction of Calvin who was returning with a coffee can of dominoes.

"What is it?" I coaxed him. But when Calvin was within earshot, I went silent and made an eager face be-

cause I wanted badly to be liked by these kids, as well as by Calvin. My eyes followed the coffee can as if it were a birthday cake or a present. Calvin dipped his hand into the coffee can and placed the dominoes face down. Roberto, the oldest of the kids there, helped turn them over while the two other kids, Marsha and Esteban, sat quietly watching. Alfonso ran a domino up his arm, all the while whining like a car turning a corner.

The game was interesting to me. Calvin won the first one but Roberto came back to win the second one. Grinning, Roberto challenged him to another but Calvin said that I should be given a chance to play. "You're just scared," Roberto taunted him. Calvin smiled back, shook his head, and stood up to look at a slow rattling truck, piled high with grass clippings and brush.

Roberto shoved the can at Alfonso, telling him to play with me, and ran toward a boy walking outside the fence with Coke bottles under his arms. Shamelessly, I turned to a seven-year-old Alfonso whose hand was already in the can scooping out dominoes, which he turned face down so the dots did not show. He smeared them with an open palm to mix them up, although they didn't circulate very well because he just moved them back and forth so they were in their original places when he stopped. I turned over a domino—a six. Alfonso turned over an eight, so he went first, slowly building a spine of dominoes.

"You do it like this," he said. He connected a four to a four that ran in a new direction. "And don't use your blank ones until you gotta." In the end Alfonso won, and wanting to try again I turned them over to mix them up.

I smiled, eager now that I understood the game. "Let's play another." Instead of answering me he swung his legs from under the table and ran to the game room, leaving a small impression of wet cut offs on the bench. He came

back with a large four-square ball that was pressed to his chest like a bag of groceries.

"Let's play this."

With Marsha and Esteban, I joined him on the asphalt. He was only seven but he played like a tiger. I had to crumble to a knee on one shot and pick up my glasses from the ground when he hooked a shot at my feet and the ball rolled up my chest to my face. I won by two points. We played once more, and again I won. Marsha, a quiet girl with stringy hair, played next and I let her win a few points. She played without looking at me, and I played with my attention locked on her face: She looked like my sister at her age, except Marsha's eyes were greenish-brown and her disposition was soft and almost angelic.

I called her by her name every time she made a point or tried to make a difficult play.

"Good girl, Marsha. Almost, Marsha."

Esteban, her younger brother of about six, stepped into the square, and I played exaggeratedly slow, carrying the ball instead of tapping it across the line. He was like his sister, so shy that he wouldn't look at me; he looked downward at my feet and when I said "Good, Esteban" his face wouldn't answer back with a smile or words. As with his sister, I let him get a few points in our game to eleven.

Alfonso was ready to play again, but Calvin, who had been talking with a neighbor at the fence, returned to say that it was closing time. Alfonso moaned. He bounced the ball in mock irritation. Marsha and Esteban ran to the gate without saying goodbye, although Marsha looked back at me just before crossing the street to her house.

I said good-bye to Calvin who thanked me for coming and said he hoped I'd come the next day. I left walking up Marsha's street and, although she didn't show herself, I sensed she was probably watching me from her porch. I

walked quickly up the street whose houses were ill-kept and broken: ripped screen doors, dirt where grass once grew, and the paint fading into chalky dust. I followed the shortcut through vacant lots to Ventura Street on my way home.

Again, after dinner the next day, I walked the four miles to Emerson Elementary, all the while thinking of Marsha and her brother Esteban. I wondered about them, why they were so shy, who their father and mother were, how they were doing in school. When I arrived sweating from the long walk, Alfonso waved at me from the line of kids who were in line at the "Slip & Slide." Calvin was nowhere in sight.

"Where's Calvin??" I asked. Two kids pointed in the direction of the school. I wondered why he was over there and was irritated that he wasn't with the kids. He should be doing more, I thought. He's the one getting paid. But I let this drop from my mind and turned to say "Hi" to all the kids—six of them—who just looked at me or made playful bird noises at me. Calvin returned shortly and together we leaned against the fence in the shade of a sycamore. We watched them in silence before Calvin suggested that he and I go play dominoes.

"Now you kids mind yourselves," he warned them. Some made faces while others made bird noises and cow sounds. We walked slowly to the game room and, in spite of his disinterest in the kids, I still wanted to be his friend. I tried to start up a conversation about college.

"Is it really hard work?"

"Not really. Just algebra. I didn't do too well in math. Never did." We talked awhile about college but our talk slowly dwindled to phrases, solitary words, and finally nothing. We played three games and Calvin took the time to point out my errors after each loss. He then got up and said that he was going to put away the "Slip & Slide." I heard moans in the distance and the slap of feet running

in the direction of the table, with Roberto shouting to the others, "I'm going to play him first."

"You're in trouble," I told Roberto who said that I'd be sorry. Squinting, I watched Calvin disappear into the school building and then lowered my attention to the scramble of dominoes. I smiled at Marsha and Esteban and pulled sticks of gum from my back pocket.

"This is good," I said. I held them fanned out like cards. "Take your pick." They did. And so did Roberto, Alfonso, and another boy by the name of Danny.

I played three games and lost them all. Tired of losing, I suggested to Marsha and Esteban that we could play two-square. They swung their legs from under the bench and headed for the asphalt while I went to get the ball. We played several games. Again I let them get a few points and played so slowly that my movements were like a swimmer's under water. After this we played a made up game in which I bounced the ball into the air while they staggered underneath in an attempt to catch the ball. The higher I bounced it, the more they screwed up their faces and showed their tiny teeth, somewhat scared when the ball slapped their palms or bounced off their chests. With every attempt to catch the ball, I cooed, "Good, Marsha, 'atta boy, Esteban."

They played without once looking at me. I could have continued bouncing the ball, calling out, "It's high as a kite—get it," but the game had grown tiresome and I wanted another chance to play dominoes with Roberto, who was taunting me and chewing his gum loudly. I bounced the ball to Marsha, told her to play with her brother, and, rubbing my hands together, told Roberto he was in trouble, that he was dead, that he was going to be sorry that he ever came to the playground. Smiling, he made his own predictions, which were truer than mine. Again he won by luck and my mistakes. He rubbed his hands together, mocking me. Instead of playing again, I

shoved the can to Roberto's friend, made a feeble joke, and joined Esteban and Marsha.

"Let's play some more!"

Again we played our made up game while I cried out, "It's high as a bird—get it," until Calvin walked slowly from the school building clapping, "Closing time." Marsha and Esteban ran to the gate on their way home, but this time Marsha didn't turn to look back with that wide-eyed look of "Who are you?" She crossed the street into the house with an orange tree and a dirt yard. When I passed her house that night I could make out a TV and a person I imagined to be her father, his face blue from sitting close to the screen.

The next day Calvin brought magazines for cutting out pictures to paste on milk carton collages. Only Marsha, Esteban, and Alfonso joined us. Trying to make them like me more, I again passed out chewing gum and Life Savers, which they cheered over and sucked with pleasure. Calvin refused these treats with a "no, no," and sat apart wearing his sun glasses, and thumbed through a magazine, stopping at ads for cars.

I worked with Marsha, helping her dot glue on the pictures, and turned to Esteban's collage to suggest that his needed some blues, maybe a sea or a picture of the sky. We found a bathtub, skyblue, with a little girl shampooing her shaggy dog. "This is funny," he said, and snipped it very carefully from the page.

"That's a good one," I beamed at him. I dotted glue on the back and held the clipping up like a fish for him to grab. He pasted it on the milk carton, stared at it, and made a half attempt to smile like the girl shampooing her dog.

I turned to Calvin. "What do you think?" He looked up slowly and smiled slowly. "Esteban, you're too much." We worked on the collages that day but on the next I brought a bag of pinto beans, which I spilled carefully like

diamonds onto the table. I handed out chewing gum and jaw breakers as I explained that we were going to write out our names using beans. They sucked, chewed, rolled their gum and jaw breakers; they considered the beans, then my moving mouth, then the beans again.

"What for?" Alfonso asked.

I was caught off guard by this question. Almost laughing, I said, "Just to see if we can do it." I searched their faces, again almost laughing. "It could be fun—don't you think?"

They worked diligently as they glued the beans in the shape of their last names on cardboard. When they finished I asked them to dab each bean a different color of poster paint, delicately so the beans wouldn't fall off. Marsha and Esteban worked in silence although Alfonso whined that it was boring. But after awhile even he had grown absorbed and quiet as the other two. When Calvin, who had been hitting fly balls to Roberto and Danny, returned to the table, Alfonso was the first to point out his creation. Calvin smiled wide, like a light turned on, and said "That's beautiful, man." He ruffled Alfonso's hair and called him Picasso.

The next day I brought spray paint, some cans, and a box of macaroni shaped like wagon wheels. I poured the macaroni onto the table and explained, with animated enthusiasm, that we were going to make pencil holders from the cans; that we would spray-paint the cans, glue on the macaroni, and paint each macaroni with water colors.

The following day I brought coloring books which my stepfather, a warehouseman for a book distributor, had given me. But there were no crayons in the game room, so we looked at the pictures—Bugs Bunny, Donald Duck, Felix the Cat—and chewed our gum. The next day I sneaked my little brother's crayons from the house and brought sheets of my sister's typing paper to make airplanes. We folded, drew snarling tiger mouths at the nose,

and let the planes fly from our hands, all the while making the sound of jets.

In my third week at Emerson, Calvin was transferred to another playground, and William, a young white man in a bright yellow shirt and Bermuda shorts, stood in front of us saying that he was the new coach. He smiled at us for the longest time, hands on his hips, and then screwed up his face at the baseball field, the bungalows, and the school building. I was going to introduce myself as the recreational assistant, but knowing that he would say, "a what?" I said nothing and joined the kids at the table, where they were pounding their fists and singing, "We want dominoes, we want dominoes!" Trying to be friendly the new coach smiled, unlocked the game room, and clunked around. He returned with the coffee can and a football.

"How 'bout some catch?" he asked me, and I told him that it was too hot to play. Roberto and I played the first game, then Alfonso took my place. I took out jaw breakers from my pocket and offered them around, including to the coach who declined with a shake of his hand. We played dominoes while William hovered over us, one foot on the bench and arms crossed, and kept asking our names—Roberto, Alfonso, Danny, Marsha, Esteban, Gary.

Tired of winning, Roberto asked William if we could put out the "Slip & Slide."

"Slip & Slide?" he asked, as if surprised.

Roberto showed it to him in the game room, and together they tugged the "Slip & Slide" and the garden hose across the field to the strip of lawn between the bungalows. William stretched and smoothed it flat while Roberto connected the hose and sprayed in our direction to keep us at bay because he wanted to go first.

We jumped back, laughing. "We're going to get you," I yelled and he mocked me with my own words. William

stepped aside, still smiling as if someone were ready to snap his picture, and Roberto sprayed the "Slip & Slide" while looking over his shoulder to keep us back. But Alfonso ran, arms out and making plane noises, and he skidded across the plastic. Danny followed, with Marsha and Esteban skidding on their knees right behind him. I pulled off my shirt, flipped my rubber thongs at Roberto and buzzed low toward the plastic. When I skidded Roberto sprayed my face and yelled, "You're dead and wet." I glided across the plastic to the end, shocked by the cold water but happy and thinking it wasn't so bad.

Bloodworth

As early as kindergarten I had to bob and weave through fights—some I won and some I had to escape holding my nose like a doorknob. My first loss was in first grade over a red crayon. I was busy coloring flames on a neat four-sided house with a crooked chimney when a boy tried to pull the crayon away from me. I shoved him away, called him *menso* and proceeded to slash red flames at the house. But he came back with a girlish over-the-head punch that thudded on my back and, for a moment, stunned me by knocking the breath out of me. But I recovered quickly, turned around, and stabbed his forehead with the crayon, which left a small, red nick and made him run to the teacher, Miss Sue, a Chinese woman who consistently referred to me as "You, you."

Irate, because I had been a nuisance all week, Miss Sue shook me like a wet umbrella and pulled me toward the front of the classroom where she ordered the class, busy coloring, to return to their desks. Pushing her hair from her eyes, she asked, "How many of you want Gary to go to the principal's office?" I had been tugging to get free, but stopped when I saw all the hands leap up like flames into the air, even my girlfriend Rhonda's and my best friend Daryle's. I was shocked, then mad. My girlfriend! My best friend! So off I went screaming "No one likes

