

his pants. When I asked if I could come along he said no. David said no. They were two years older so their affairs were different from mine. They greeted one another with foul names and took off down the alley to look for trouble.

I went inside the house, turned on the television, and was about to sit down with a glass of Kool-Aid when Mom shooed me outside.

"It's still light," she said. "Later you'll bug me to let you stay out longer. So go on."

I downed my Kool-Aid and went outside to the front yard. No one was around. The day had cooled and a breeze rustled the trees. Mr. Jackson, the plumber, was watering his lawn and when he saw me he turned away to wash off his front steps. There was more than an hour of light left, so I took advantage of it and decided to look for work. I felt suddenly alive as I skipped down the block in search of an overgrown flower bed and the dime that would end the day right.

Deceit

For four years I attended St. John's Catholic School where short nuns threw chalk at me, chased me with books cocked over their heads, squeezed me into cloak closets and, on slow days, asked me to pop erasers and to wipe the blackboard clean. Finally, in the fifth grade, my mother sent me to Jefferson Elementary. The Principal, Mr. Buckalew, kindly ushered me to the fifth grade teachers, Mr. Stendhal and Mrs. Sloan. We stood in the hallway with the principal's hand on my shoulder. Mr. Stendhal asked what book I had read in the fourth grade, to which, after a dark and squinting deliberation, I answered: *The Story of the United States Marines*. Mr. Stendhal and Mrs. Sloan looked at one another with a "you take him" look. Mr. Buckalew lifted his hand from my shoulder and walked slowly away.

Mrs. Sloan took me into her classroom where, perhaps, the most memorable thing she said to us all year was that she loved to chew tar.

Our faces went sour. "What kind of tar?"

"Oh, street tar—it's like gum." Her hands were pressed into a chapel as she stared vacantly over our heads in some yearning for the past.

And it was an odd year for me because there were months on end when I was the sweet kid who wanted to

become a priest. In turn, there were the months when I was your basic kid with a rock in his hand.

When the relatives came over to talk to me and pat me on the head, they often smiled and asked what I wanted to be when I grew up.

"A priest," I would say during those docile months, while if they caught me during the tough months I would answer, "A hobo, I think."

They would smile and chuckle, "Oh, Gary."

Although I was going to public school, my brother, sister, and I were still expected to go to church. We would dress in our best clothes, with Debra in a yellow bonnet that she would throw into a bush just around the corner. "Stupid thing," she muttered as she hid it under the leaves with the intention of getting it later.

After a month or so Rick and Debra didn't have to go to church; instead they lounged in their pajamas drinking hot chocolate and talking loudly of how they were going to spend the morning watching television. I was, as my mom described me, a "short-tail devil in need of God's blessings."

So each Sunday I put on a white shirt and stepped into a pair of pants that kicked around my ankles, my white socks glowing on my feet in the dark pews of St. John's Cathedral. I knelt, I rose, and I looked around. I muddled prayers and knocked my heart with a closed hand when the priest knelt and the altar boy followed with a jingle of the bell.

For the first few weeks I went to church, however reluctantly, but soon discovered the magazine rack at Mayfair Market, which was only two blocks from the church. I read comics and chewed gum, with only a sliver of guilt about missing Mass pricking my soul. When I returned home after the hour that it took to say a Mass, my mom was in the kitchen but didn't ask about the Mass—what

the priest said or did I drop the quarter she had given me into the donation basket. Instead, she handed me a buttered tortilla as a reward for being a good boy, and I took it to eat in my bedroom. I chuckled under my breath, "God, this is great."

The next week at the magazine rack I read about Superman coming back to life, chewed gum, and took swigs of a Coke I had bought with money intended for the far-reaching wicker basket. But the following week I came up with another idea: I started happily up the street while my mom looked out the front window with hands on hips, but once around the corner I swung into the alley to see what I could do.

That Sunday I played with Little John, and the following week I looked through a box of old magazines before dismantling a discarded radio. I gutted it of its rusty tubes and threw them, one by one, at a fence until a neighbor came out and told me to get the hell away.

Another Sunday I went up the street into the alley and climbed the fence of our back yard. Our yard was sectioned into two by a fence: The front part was neatly mowed, colored with flowers and cemented with a patio, while the back part was green with a vegetable garden, brown with a rusty incinerator, and heaped with odd junk—ruined bicycles, boards, buckled wheelbarrows. I climbed into the back part of our long yard and pressed my face between the slats: Rick was hoeing a flower bed while Debra was waiting to clean up with a box in her hands. My mom was washing down the patio.

I laughed to myself and then made a cat sound. When no one looked up, I meowed again and Mom looked in my direction for a second, then lowered her eyes to the water bouncing off the patio. I again laughed to myself, but quieted when Rick opened the gate to dump a load of weeds into the compost. I was smiling my evilness behind an old dismantled gate, and when he left I meowed again,

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