

Little Big Girls

It's a real come-down, if you ask Cammie Lawson, to have to move back to this hick town and enroll her daughter Temple in this hick school, just so she can compete in another Little Miss contest. No talent, no swimsuit or personality competition, only pageant dresses in the one coming up tonight. But that's the way of it: 1994's Little Miss Valdosta, and 1993's Little Miss Sweet Potato Princess, is now too old--old! at seven!--to compete on the Little Miss circuit. By moving to Cornerville, where the school board has permitted Temple to be held back in first grade--emotional immaturity, Cammie claims--Cammie is delaying Temple having to compete in the Junior Miss category in which the older you are the better you do.

Of course, the same is true for the Little Miss category; Cammie figured that out from watching Temple progress year after year from precious to sophisticated. Not that the Swanochee County Little Miss contests call for sophistication. Quite the opposite.

Cammie's eyes light on Temple's fair doll face in the beauty shop mirror, those gold-lashed brown eyes, without mascara. Though she is seven years old, she looks four, and has lived the two numbers combined. Now she is tonguing a loose front tooth childishly, and Cammie wags her head for her to stop.

Chanell, the beautician in Cornerville, is winding Temple's sheer blond hair on pink rollers. Chanell is dark, busty and loud in faded blue jeans and a white sweat shirt, in perfect contrast to bony, blond Cammie in the north section of the wall mirror, which is framed in silver tinsel for Christmas. "Sugar, I don't know who that tooth's bothering more," Chanell says to the smallest person in the mirror, "you or your mama." She always talks to her customers' images in the mirror, and now she is talking to the mother through the daughter, as if she can get away with such jabs if she doesn't look you straight in the eye.

Cammie laughs and sits on a wooden stool before the only window in the narrow shop. She is used to comments like that: from her husband, Wendall, a CPA, who she used to work with at his office in Valdosta before he sent her packing--trophies, pictures and all (he stays on her butt for "manipulating" Temple and not taking her Lithium); from her mother, in Birmingham, Alabama, who accuses Cammie of trying to relive her life through Temple; and from her daddy, the only one who isn't making like a psychologist, but who blew up when Temple wore diamond cluster earrings and a strapless gown in Birmingham's Little Miss pageant.

Cammie stares out at the blowing moss in the liveoaks along the slope of Troublesome Creek. Sunny but cold, the coldest December in South Georgia in her recollection; and when it is cold, Temple tends to stiffen her neck and grit her teeth, which just might cause the loose tooth to let go tonight.

Usually, before a contest, something like that would make Cammie feverish, but not this contest, not with these daddies' little darlings in sweet pastels. Pastels, you can bank on it, for a Little Miss Christmas contest! Cammie should be relieved that she can relax for a change, but she misses the tension, the edge--contest fever. In fact, in the honeysuckle-shampoo aura hanging over the walled-in front porch shop, she feels almost dazed, and hopes it's not a bad sign--you never can tell about these hick-town judges--and almost believes that her previously hiked shoulders have bolstered Temple through her recent winning streak.

She pushes up the left sleeve of her red Lacoste parka--old enough to look rich but not pretentious, though she doubts anybody will notice around here. Truth is, she cannot afford fashionable clothes, even if she had the time or desire to dress fashionable. She still wears her bleached hair in the classic curled do from her own pageant days (she was Miss Valdosta in 1962 and went on to compete in the Miss Georgia contest). All pageant mothers dress down, at least by a decade, as if attempting to stop time when they were at their brightest. But with the high cost of pageant entry fees, outfits, training, and travel, pageant mothers settle for looking presentable and understated, yet classy enough to keep from shaming their dressed-up daughters.

Cammie checks her watch. It is now 5:20; the contest will start at seven. Chanell's dark sloe eyes in the mirror shift from Temple's sprouting crop of pink rollers to Cammie checking her watch. Cammie doesn't care if Chanell feels she is rushing her. She is. She should have taken Temple to her regular hairdresser in Atlanta. But in Cornerville, all the little girls come to Chanell on beauty contest

days, and the judges might like, actually like, the signature bangs and bows of Chanell's sweet creations.

"OK, sugarbooger," Chanell says to Temple, "you can hop down now and get under the dryer."

Temple climbs down from the pine plank across the shampoo chair arms and kittenwalks in her red-plaid jumper and white blouse to the dryer chair directly behind Chanell. She looks left at her mother, as if expecting a scolding for the mismatched headdress, then sits anyway and scoots back till her white Keds and red socks stick out. She looks like a doll twisted to sitting position.

Chanell lowers the peened chrome hood over the hood of rollers and turns the temperature and time knobs on the side of the chair, and the old dryer starts with a whine, then levels out to a roar, gusting perfumed heat like fabric softener from a clothes dryer.

"Won't take long," says Chanell, hands on her sides and arching her spine, "not thin as her hair is."

"Makes thirteen little heads of hair I've done today, and I got Linda Gay coming any minute with her little girl." She stands straight, staring in the mirror over the fake-marble shampoo bowl, and lifts her shoulder-length brown hair from the crown with her fingers. She leans in closer, as if checking for signs of damage to her thick face, but her eyes soon drift toward Cammie. And linger.

Cammie wonders if Chanell is curious about her, maybe envious of her for going away and marrying a CPA. She feels a sudden brightening behind her eyes at the notion of competing with Chanell again. But the gloss of high school memories dull when she considers that Chanell is Nobody now, or that maybe Chanell has heard she is crazy and feels sorry for her. Or is afraid of her?

"I think I'll go get me a glass of tea," Chanell says. "You want some?"

Cammie shoves up her jacket sleeves on her pale planed arms. "No thanks, I'm not thirsty." Checks her watch again to let Chanell know she is timing her, that she will not be baited into giving up Temple's trade secrets. She expects the next question to be, Have you finished your Christmas shopping yet? Which of course will lead straight into talk of Temple. Cammie crosses her arms. Closed to questions. Chanell grabs a damp white towel from the shampoo chair and heads out the door with her white athletic shoes toeing in and her round buttocks jutting out.

While waiting, Cammie tries to conjure up the old contest fever by mentally listing things to pack, things to do, prior to pageant time. Instead, she ends up listlessly thinking about what she doesn't have to pack--the Dallas cheerleader outfit, the gold lame~ swimsuit with ostrich plumes, high-heel shoes; what she doesn't have to do--coach Temple on that tricky slow-but-brisk walk, including head rotations and pivots. All in the eyes and rotation of the head--slow, slow as if activated by heat. Smile and blare those brown eyes, and never give out your trade secrets, baby. Cammie does manage a faint tug of the gut when she realizes that she has forgotten to remind

Temple to forget all of the above and simply concentrate on looking girlish and sweet. Just for tonight.

The shop door opens and Linda Gay in her same-old-blue gabardine suit tiptoes in, like somebody slipping in late for church. Prissy, in navy tights and sweater to match her eyes, follows in the tan-suede loafer tracks of her mother. She is stocky, strong and duck-chested with thick sandy hair growing low on her forehead. A head full of it. But she is as timid and clumsy as Temple used to be before modeling classes.

"Getting co-old out there," Linda Gay says and fake shivers and goes back to shut the door. "Say hey to Miss Cammie," Linda Gay says to Prissy, who is standing next to the shampoo chair, grinning at Temple. Linda Gay places her multi-pocketed bone purse on the counter by the door. "And look who's under the dryer, will you." She tiptoes over and spansks Temple on her right leg and speaks high-pitched in a tiny voice. "My, don't you look Christmasy in that red dress! What's Santy Claus bringing?" Then to Cammie, "I bet you're all up in the air about the contest tonight, huh?"

"Just anxious to get it over with," says Cammie and rises from the stool to get a magazine from the table beside the dryer.

"Aren't we all?" says Linda Gay. "You ready for Christmas?"

Cammie pretends not to hear.

Linda Gay turns toward the door, speaks low to herself:

"Chanell, come on here."

As if Chanell has heard her, she steps through the door with a jelly glass of tea. "I thought I heard your big mouth, Linda Gay."

"Tell Miss Chanell about your report card, Prissy."

Prissy just stands there, fiddling with the lift lever on the shampoo chair.

"All A's, I bet." Chanell pats the pine plank for Prissy to sit there. "Smart like your mama," she says. "Couldn't none of us ever keep up with Linda Gay in school, could we, Cammie?"

Cammie's eyes are suddenly fixed on the child's cheeky, bisque face in the mirror, the deep blue eyes and pink bow lips. What if she should win? Nah, not possible. No presence.

"You OK, Cammie?" says Chanell, rotating the chair with the child in it then tipping her back to the shampoo bowl.

"Don't even ask her," says Linda Gay. "You wouldn't know, and you with no children, what us mothers go through to get ready for these contests. I'm not doing this one next year, not with Christmas shopping and all, I don't care whether or not the churches meet their quota for needy children's Christmas toys. And I don't care how hard Prissy begs."

Chanell laughs. "I heard that last year."

"I mean it." Linda Gay's raddled, earthen face fills the tinsel-edged mirror; her beige hair looks like damp linen. "Sugar, tell Miss Chanell what Mama said."

Chanell snicks on the water sprayer, dousing Prissy's hair. "Listen, y'all, it'd make my life a whole lot easier, I can tell you, if the churches did away with the contest at Christmas and the school did away with the one in the spring."

Linda Gay jabs Chanell in the ribs and snorts. "You love it, girl, don't say you don't."

I do. I tell the world I do." Chanell hoots and tosses her nylon brown hair. "Every winner I take the credit for. Every year." And then to the little girl with a blue towel draped over her head like Mary's mantle in a Christmas play, "I'm gone set you up now, honey."

"Course you do the losers' hair too." Linda Gay cackles and nods at Cammie-in-the-mirror for reaffirmation. "Ever think about that?"

"I can take it," says Chanell and steps to the dryer chair to check Temple's hair. "Just another minute, baby," she shouts and lowers the hood again. Temple remains still, as if in a trance, though her blistered face looks like a ripe peach. She nudges the loose tooth with her tongue and glances at Cammie.

"You know what, Cammie?" Linda Gay faces the other woman, who is backlit by the cold sun. "I wouldn't put it past Chanell to have a pick and mess up the other little girls' hair so the one she wants will win."

Cammie wonders if anyone in Memphis ever suspected her of doping that little girl's Sprite with Syrup of Ipecac a couple of years ago. "Hair isn't all there is to it," she says and lifts her keen face from the magazine on her lap.

"Well, I know that," says Linda Gay and crosses her arms over her blue suit coat with her stomach pooched out. "If you ask me, I think they oughta have talent too. I know for a fact Prissy--pretty as you are, baby--would stand a better chance of winning if she could play her piano recital piece."

Cammie watches Chanell comb out Prissy's wet locks. Abnormally thick for a child's hair, in her estimation.

"Look at all that hair!" says Chanell, hefting it from the nape.
"You're blessed, baby. I do love doing this hair."

Cammie feels light, flushed, her old self.

"Sure didn't get it from Mama, did you baby?" says Chanell.

"Prissy," says Linda Gay, "tell Miss Chanell if she'd get Mama's perm right, Mama's scalp wouldn't shine." And immediately follows with, "Cammie, what color is Temple's dress?"

"Pink," says Cammie, though Temple's dress is royal blue with a silver net overskirt and none of her business.

"You're kidding!" squeals Linda Gay and places one hand on Prissy's arm. "Sugar, tell Miss Cammie what color your dress is."

"Pink?" says Prissy, staring hopefully at Temple under the dryer in the mirror.

"Judges is gone have a hard time of it tonight," says Chanell, winding the front of Prissy's hair on the same pink rollers as Temple's. Same style.

"Honey," says Linda Gay to Cammie, "they're gone look just alike. I told Joy Beth just this morning, if Prissy can't win, I hope Temple does, them being best friends and all."

Friends? Best friends. What else has Temple been up to at school?

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The dryer timer buzzes and the motor shrieks, hums, dies. No sound, save for the click of rollers inside the plastic bin and Linda Gay's nasal breathing.

Chanell steps back and raises the dryer hood. "Sugar, you wanta walk around and rest a little. Or go in the house and watch TV?"

Temple looks at Prissy, smiles and pries a roller from her parched scalp. It pops free and tumbles to the white tile floor.

"Temple!" Cammie stands and picks up the roller and tosses it into the lavender bin next the Chanell.

"Linda Gay, check to be sure Temple's hair's good-dry for me," says Chanell.

Linda Gay sticks a finger inside the tube of hair. "Dry as can be," she says. "One good thing about having thin hair. Right, sweetie?"

"OK, Miss Priss, it's your turn," says Chanell and helps Prissy down. The two girls eyeball each other, snigger, swap chairs.

Chanell resets the dryer, then begins unwinding the rollers on Temple's hair.

"Cammie, how old were you when you won your first beauty contest?" says Linda Gay.

"Five, I think," says Cammie. "Five or six."

"And every year went by," says Chanell, "I thought I'd beat her."

"Well, honey you did," says Linda Gay, standing between them. "Finally."

"Yeah, once in high school. In high school I did.

"That was just because of your big boobs." Linda Gay laughs.

"True," says Chanell. "I pure hated them things."

"Beauty contests or your boobs?" Linda Gay is fishing in her purse for a Kleenex, blowing her pinched nose.

"Both," says Chanell. Then, "One thing I can say for beauty contests is, they save a pile of money for mamas and daddies in the long run."

"Ha!" Linda Gay's watery gray eyes in the mirror seek out Cammie's. "You don't know what Prissy's dress cost me if you think that."

"What I mean is," says Chanell, "by the time a girl gets ready to get married, she's over wanting to look like a beauty queen at her wedding. Generally don't want nothing to do with no fancy dress and big wedding."

"Well, I tell you one thing," says Linda Gay, "that little gal right there is going to have a big wedding if it's the last thing I do. I didn't have one but I'm going to see to it she does."

"Linda Gay, you're just as married as anybody else, big wedding or not. Take me, I got married in T.P.'s Mama's living room..."

"And now you're divorced."

Chanell laughs. "And happier on my divorce day than on my wedding day."

Cammie is itching from her toenails to her gums: so far she has watched Chanell brush Temple's hair out flat, then under one hand in a sausage roll, and now she is trying to tease it into a bouffant with straight bangs. Now she is parting it to one side and shaping a deep wave over Temple's left eye, which along with the right has been fixed on her mother in the mirror since she sat down. Temple is sharp, sharply tuned in to her mother's whims, moods, desperation (in Savannah, Temple watched as her mother "accidentally" stepped on the hem of another contestant's dress and ripped the waist from the

bodice), even with those brown eyes staring level and calm in that hard face. Brown-eyed blonds are rare, baby, me and you, rare, baby.

"Let's try a bow, sweetie," says Chanell and plucks a pink bow from the standing cardboard display on the counter and snaps up the wave and clamps the bow to a tail of hair.

No tip for you, dear, thinks Cammie, figuring how she will re-do Temple's hair when they get home. But what if the judges like bows? Pink with a royal blue dress!

The buzzer on the dryer sounds and Linda Gay prances over and flips back the hood, lays a hand on Prissy's head and shouts, "Chanell, damn! This dryer's not working."

"What?" Chanell wheels around with a large black brush in her hand. "What you mean not working?" She pats Prissy's crown of rollers, then peels the hair from the one on front and the heavy lock uncoils like a snake on Prissy's wrinkled-up forehead. She whimpers, starts to cry, then wipes her eyes with the dimpled backs of her hands.

"Pile of junk!" Chanell socks the hood, twists the knobs-- nothing. "Don't worry, baby," she says. "I'll diffuse it. I do it all the time to the big girls' hair."

Cammie sucks in, smiles, and her brown eyes in the mirror spike light. Bunch of fools! Whole town full of fools and hardly worth her time. She will not have Temple turn into a fool too. She has made up her mind: she will stay here through the school year, let Temple scoop up the two titles--bonus time!--then move on to her sister Quida's in Boulder, Colorado, where Cammie has heard that for the

right price, you can buy your child's way into the category of your choice.

"Diffuse it?" says Linda Gay. "Chanell, you know better. All that hair's just gonna bush out."

"Well, Linda Gay, if I try to blow dry each curler, it's not gone dry in time for the contest."

What makes Cammie crazy is the fact that the latest rage in Little Miss pageants is the little big-girl look. Scrunched hair. She is so happy she is almost comatose, but what if...?

"All right, Chanell," says Linda Gay, "I trust you. What choice do I have?" She gazes longingly at Temple with the pink bow and precious do.

"Temple, baby," says Chanell, "step down for a minute; I'm not done with you yet, but this is an emergency. What time is it, Cammie?"

"Six-0-four. But no problem. We understand."

Temple is plucking at the bow, making mewling sounds.

On the pine plank, facing the mirror, Prissy, with red-crazed eyewhites, watches as Chanell fluffs and scrunches and diffuses her hair. It looks like a new string mop.

"I don't know, Chanell," Linda Gay yells above the storming dryer. "I really wanted her hair more like Temple's. You know how these judges..."

"Shut up, Linda Gay," says Chanell. "You never can tell, they might go for this look. Put her on some makeup and..."

"MAKEUP!" Linda Gay is pressing her fingers into her temples. "Her Daddy'll die!"

"Let him." Chanell looks electrified as the hair swells from lank wet spirals to spurts of glossy ringlets, framing Prissy's square face. "Listen, Prissy! You gotta hold your head up HIGH with all this hair; look sassy, sling it. You're gone be a knockout."

Chanell steps back with the diffuser aimed like a gun at the whole child in the mirror and the silver tinsel trembles and hisses. "Look at that little figure, will you," she says to convince Linda Gay that the little-big-girl look will do.

"Would you want all the big boys ogling your little girl?"

"Shut up, Linda Gay," says Chanell, blowing and scrunching Prissy's hair again. "I know what I'm doing. There's a first time for everything. This time next year, every little girl in Swannoochee County'll be wearing their hair this way."

"And looking like hussies," cries Linda Gay. "Daddy's gone have a heart attack."

Sitting in the dryer chair with Temple on her lap, Cammie begins frantically brushing her wispy hair, sweeping it back into a french twist and yanking at her bangs to make them look fuller. Standing with one arm hooked around Temple's waist, dummy-fashion, Cammie reaches for the hair spray can on the counter and locks eyes in the mirror with the other child--a doll she would like to break.

Chanell speaks to Prissy now. "You just wait and see if you don't win tonight, Priss. You just wait. Then you tell everybody it was Miss Chanell made you a winner." Then to Linda Gay, who is walking the floor and mumbling, "You want a bow or not?"

"I guess," says Linda Gay, posing breathless and repentant before Chanell. "But I lied about her dress being pink. It's royal blue with a silver net overskirt."