

3 1/2 pages
(same as Dictionary)

TAPED

Little-town Beauty Contests

Don't bother calling our only beautician for a haircut on beauty contest day in Echols County. She's booked. And if you're visiting our little school--pre-K through grade twelve--don't be shocked to find that more than half the girls are missing. They're at the beauty shop. Some even drive twenty-five miles into Valdosta, Georgia, our closest big town, to get their hair done.

Sponsored by the Future Business Leaders of America, and the Future Homemakers of America, the contest reaches out and grabs prospective members as young as the age of four. In other words, when you sign up for pre-kindergarten, you have signed up for one of these clubs; and when you've signed up for one of these clubs, you have signed up for the beauty contests. Long before the age of consent, you have consented to fourteen consecutive years of beauty contests. And being ugly as a toad won't save you. One little girl with wispy white hair that barely covered her scalp, and a grin that looked like a bad cut, would march out on that stage and face the audience and turn and march off, spring after spring, contest after contest, till the girl finally graduated from Echols County High School having never met the qualifications for semifinalist.

After the Jon-Benet Ramsey tragedy brought national attention to such competitions, some wondered whether little towns, such as Statenville, Georgia, would take the media jabs to heart. Not at all-- we saw it on the TV news, we read about it in newspapers, we cared, but didn't take the contest criticism to mean us: we're too disconnected, too busy, too innocent. Our contests are for fun, for raising money for our school. Besides, except for basketball and softball games, without the contests, we'd have no entertainment. Well, other than TV, that is. Even the grumpy old ladies go to the contests, if for no other reason than to get out of the house, or to reminisce--"In 1925, I was standing on that very stage." But if you think we don't keep up with the latest, check out our hairstyles and pageant dresses: tumbling hair and seal-sleek gowns split to the thigh. Even the children wear diamond stud earrings and shine their teeth, aiming for the little-big-girl look. Sure, there are still a few younger girls in poufy net from the fifties, home-sewn dresses and baby-doll curls. Still a few older girls in borrowed dresses from another decade and fixed hair. But make no mistake, we are up on what's happening--fashion and feminists' condemnation. An entire brigade of feminists in helmets couldn't halt our quest for the princess fair enough to crown.

The old portwine brick auditorium, which seats about two hundred, and was built more than a half-century ago, is packed with parents and grandparents, uncles, aunts and other assorted kin--just about everybody in Echols County is related, which makes for some difficult choices when considering which girl to root for. It's a magic night: still, with stars--foil stars twirling on string from the small stage curtained with kelly green velvet, our school color.

Smells of hairspray and new cloth mingling with the pencil-lead smell of school. Fresh flowers and ferns, murmuring, whoops and whistles--no booing, please--while one of the local church pianists plays everything in her repertoire (rep-a-twar) before all three categories--Little Miss, Junior Miss and Miss Echols County High--are presented, picked out and crowned. No swimsuit competition, no interviews and no talent; otherwise, we'd never get through the parade of glimmering Dianas and plain Janes.

So, you disagree with the decision of the judges! That's too bad. You can't claim they're biased, or paid off--they're from out of town--Valdosta, which seems a million miles away because it's city and we're country. You can't get revenge either, because as soon as the contest is over, the judges are out of there. And the contest losers--well, Mama and Daddy still love them, still take them out to eat. And the winner...

if cut here *the winner is a beauty for life*

The winner gets to go to the Miss Sweet Potato Contest in some other little town, which you get to know first-hand because you are paraded along the streets with the other contestants like bulls before the big fight. Past vendors with barbecued sweet potatoes and candied potatoes on sticks, and Coca-cola wagons with the sun bouncing off slick white plastic canopies. The stutter of drums and the bull-frog croak of tubas from a high-school marching band in faded maroon and dull brass. You are tucked somewhere between the Hells Angels with their honeys latched to their waists, and the clowns in go-carts, and the Shriners in yellow shoes with horns on the toes. And it is post-autumn, hot as hell, harvestime. Hay dust and wood smoke and you in a red wool suit to look sophisticated for

the street-side crowd in shorts and sandals. Smiling like Miss America, because, miserable as you are, you've "made it."

And then the big moment: the beauty contest, in some dusky auditorium, where booing and smoking are permitted. And now you can hold on to the styrofoam Christmas balls in your bosom while flashing your Vasolined teeth. And if you stumble in those stiletto heels, you can bet your beehive the audience will laugh. Look out for those pageant moms who will slit the seat of your swimsuit, formfitted to your tan, and you won't know till you step on-stage and somebody in the audience yells out that your white is showing. And the winner goes on to the Miss Watermelon Contest, and that winner goes on to the Miss Peach Contest, and on, and on across Georgia till they run out ^{of} vegetables and fruit. And the losers have to go on back home-- still little-town winners, still beauties for life.