

# THE MISS FIRECRACKER CONTEST

Beth Henley

## THE MISS FIRECRACKER CONTEST

By Beth Henley

**The Play:** The tale of Carnelle Scott, a young woman with bright red hair, who dreams of escaping her humdrum existence in rural Mississippi. She enters "The Miss Firecracker Contest," the local 4th of July beauty pageant, and puts her tap-dancing and baton-twirling talents to use in a "Star Spangles Banner" routine. With a few sparklers tossed in, she's sure to take the title and find her way out of town in a trail of glory, unless falling in love along the way with a fellow who was recently released from a mental institution gets in the way.

**Time and Place:** Late June and early July. Brookhaven, Mississippi, small Southern town.

**The Scene:** Carnelle confides her hopes and dreams to Popeye Jackson, her new friend and the seamstress of her patriotic ensemble of red, blue, and silver. Note: The dialogue in brackets can be eliminated to allow a solo speech.

• • •

CARNELLE: Well it's just like my aunt Rondelle fixed it up. It's got her special touch. This old spinning wheel; these lace doilies; these old pictures in frames here. I'd prefer something more modern and luxurious, but—that's just me.

[POPEYE: *You live here with your aunt?*]

CARNELLE: [Oh, no.] She died. She had cancer.

[POPEYE: *I'm sorry.*]

CARNELLE: It happened just a few weeks before last Christmas. We were very close. It was a tragedy.

[POPEYE: *I'm sorry.*]

CARNELLE: (As she pours Popeye's tea.) You may of heard about her; Ronelle Williams? It was a famous medical case—ran in all the newspapers.

[POPEYE: *No.*]

[CARNELLE: *Well, see what it was—Do you take lemon?*]

[POPEYE: *Please.*]

CARNELLE: Anyway, she had this cancer of the pituitary gland, I believe it was; so what they did was they replaced her gland with the gland of a monkey to see if they could save her life—  
[Just help yourself to the sugar—]

[POPEYE: (Moving to sit on the floor.) *Thanks.*]

CARNELLE: And they did, in fact, keep her alive for the month or so longer than she was expected to live.

[POPEYE: *Well that's good.*]

CARNELLE: (Pouring herself some tea.) Of course, there were such dreadful side effects.

[POPEYE: *Mmm.*]

CARNELLE: She, well, she started growing long, black hairs all over her body just, well, just like an ape

[POPEYE: *Gracious, Lord.*]

CARNELLE: It was very trying. But she was so brave. She even let them take photographs of her. Everyone said she was just a saint. A saint or an angel; one or the other.

[POPEYE: *It gives me the shivers.*]

CARNELLE: It was awfully hard on me losing my Aunt Ronelle—although I guess I should be used to it by now.

[POPEYE: *What's that?*]

CARNELLE: People dying. It seems like people've been dying practically all my life, in one way or another. First my mother passed when I was barely a year old. Then my daddy kinda drug me around with him till I was about nine and he couldn't stand me any longer; so he dropped me off to live with my Aunt Ronelle and Uncle George and their own two

children: Elain and Delmount. They're incredible, those two. They're just my ideal. Anyhow, we're happy up until the time when Uncle George falls to his death trying to pull this bird's nest out from the chimney.

*[POPEYE: He fell off from the roof?]*

CARNELLE: That's right. Tommy Turner was passing by throwing the evening paper and he caught sight of the whole event. Boom.

*[POPEYE: How awful.]*

CARNELLE: Anyhow, my original daddy appears back here to live with us looking all kinda fat and swollen. And after staying on with us about two years, he suddenly drops dead in the summer's heat while running out to the Tropical Ice Cream truck. Heart failure, they said it was. Then this thing with Aunt Ronelle dying right before Christmas. It's been hard to bear.