**MISS FIRECRACKER CONTEST  
by Beth Henley**  
CARNELLE

Popeye’s going to be using this red material to make my costume for the Miss Firecracker Contest. You see, I registered today. See, Elaine was Miss Firecracker way back when she was just eighteen. Anyway, it was way back that first year when I came to live with them. She was a vision of beauty riding on that float with a crown on her head waving to everyone. I thought I’d drop dead when she passed by me. Anyway, I just thought I’d give it a whirl. I’m twenty-four. Twenty-five’s the age limit. I just thought I’d give it a whirl while I still could. Course, don’t expect to win--that’s crazy. I’m just in it for the experience---that’s’s the main thing. That’s actually why I dyed my hair red; I thought it would be more appropriate for the contest. Did you bring that dress along with you that I asked you about on the phone? You know, the beautiful red antebellum dress that you wore at the Natchez Pilgrimage the first year you got married. See, it’s gonna be perfect for me to wear in the contest. I’m trying to make crimson red my thematic color. I’ll just need them in the actual contest for the opening Parade of Firecrackers. Why do you think I should just wait until after the audition and see if I make the pageant? Don’t you think I’ll make it? I know they only pick five girls. I’ve thought about it, and I, frankly, can’t think of five other girls in town that are prettier than me. I’m speaking honestly now. Course I know there’s Caroline Jeffers, but she has those yellow teeth. I know why you’re worried. You think I’ve ruined my chances, cause of my reputation. Well, everyone knew I used to go out with lots of men and all that. Different ones. It’s been a constant thing with me since I was young and---I just mention it cause it’s different now, since Aunt Ronelle died and since I got that---disease. Anyway, I go to church now and I’m signed up to where I take an orphan home to dinner once a week or to a movie; and I work on the cancer drive here just like you do in Natchez. My life has meaning. People aren’t calling me Miss Hot Tamale anymore like they used to. Everything’s changed. And being in that contest--it would be such an honor to me...I can’t explain the half of it. I’m not all that ugly. I wish you had about a drop of faith in me.