



The illustration of Calacas (skulls) on the front and back cover of *The Kids on the Block*, are considered poetic representations of someone or something in abstract form. The Calacas also stand symbolically for the sad, happy, and tragic faces of life in the journey to adulthood. They stand as a symbol of transition from beginning to end, from childhood to adulthood, and from life to death.

Mario Chavez, Author

The Kids on the Block

by

Mario Chavez

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Mario Chavez

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dedicate this book to
Mrs. Betty L. Evans,
my eighth grade teacher.



Betty L.
Evans
T.W.C

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Also to Yvonne Cano who was instrumental in convincing me to take the manuscript out from the dusty drawer and finish the book.

Here I will borrow a phrase from the great author Stephen King who said, “To write is human, to edit is devine.”¹ And my publisher, Joan R. Neubauer, editors and company, were simply “devine” in helping me make this book possible.

¹ Stephen King. *On Writing* (Pocket Books, New York, 2002), p. xix.

*The choices we make,
dictate the life we lead.*

Father Arturo Bañuelas

Chapter 1

The New Kid on the Block

Summer finally arrived. Birds sang and flowers showed off their beautiful blooms as old folks watered their lawns and hosed off their sidewalks before sunrise. Everyone else slept late and concerned mothers braced for the unthinkable: all the kids from the neighborhood out of school for the summer. I could hardly wait to get together with the rest of the kids from the neighborhood. I had heard about a new kid on our block.

After finishing my chores, I went looking for the kids on the block, and headed straight for the vacant dirt lot where we played baseball, marbles, and tops.

From a distance, I saw almost all of them. They formed a circle. Some knelt to play marbles, while others stood behind, watching.

I recognized everyone except one figure. Though I could see only his back, I knew him as the new kid on the block. As I got closer, I noticed everyone pensively watching the new kid shooting into the pile of marbles in the center of the circle. This kid played marbles like a pro. I wanted to know what shooter he used. The rest of the group contributing marbles to the circle knelt, waiting for a turn to shoot from outside the circle into the center pile of marbles.

Everyone greeted me as soon as they saw me. “Hey,

Soapsuds, how you doing?”

Right away, the group introduced me to the new kid, and to my great amazement, I found the new kid was a girl! Yes, Cha Cha, as they called her, fit the tomboy description.

“So how’d you get that name?” I asked.

She just shrugged. “You know, Cha Cha... short for *muchacha*—girl. Everybody calls me Cha Cha. So what’s your name?”

“Uhh, just call me Soapsuds.”

“Soapsuds? Soapsuds as in soap?”

“Yeah, right, it’s a long and tragic story.”

“Tragic?”

“Ah, well, yeah, I consider my nickname a tragic event.”

Everyone laughed except her.

Almost everyone in our neighborhood had a nickname. My mother caught me saying damn one time and washed my mouth out with soap. She used so much, that for three days straight, I simply puckered my lips, and shaping the bubbles with my saliva, blew air into them. The kids on the block nicknamed me Soapsuds from then on. Others in our block went by Vagón, Superman, Guero Flu, La Plaga, Sparky, Casper, and Horns. The remainder had nicknames considered short for their actual names as Tochi, Kiki, Tury, Mon, Art, Rick, and J for Javier, and we were the good kids from the block.

Everyone with a nickname did something to earn it. Superman got his nickname after he jumped from the roof of his house with a red cape, thinking he’d fly as Superman. He almost broke both legs.

The flu epidemic hit devastatingly hard one year and medical technology had not advanced adequately then to control it. Guero Flu caught it first and passed it on to everyone else, nearly wiping out an entire neighborhood. Therefore, he got the nickname Flu, and Guero because of his light skin and blond hair.

We had slumber parties occasionally, and during one of the slumber parties, Casper's mother didn't let him sleep on the floor with the rest of the group at his house. Casper's mother made his bed and all of us noticed his bed had Casper bed sheets, Casper pillowcases, and Casper blankets. To make things worse, his mom made him wear his Casper PJs and Casper booties. The nickname Casper stuck with him from then on.

Every neighborhood group has its bully, and we were no exception. We called our bully *La Plaga*, the plague, because the nickname fit his personality. It also fit because during a lice epidemic, he caught lice.

When the kids on the block saw him approach they'd yell at top of their lungs, "Ay, *viene la plaga!* Here comes the plague. Run, guys, run!"

At that warning, we'd run off in all directions in an attempt to save our lives.

Sparky, the electronic whiz of our group, enjoyed toying with anything electrical. As long as it had an electric cord attached to the end of it, you'd find Sparky at the end of it as well. We nicknamed him Sparky after he blew up his mom's black-and-white TV set, long before color TVs came onto the market.

Sparky promised we could watch the *Mickey Mouse Club* in color. Sparky's mom had the only TV set on the block, and we kids packed into her living room when the program came on. You'd have thought she had the only TV set in the whole world. And when Sparky blew up that TV trying to make the program come up in color, we missed the *Mickey Mouse Club* for three months.

The railroad tracks ran by our neighborhood and all of us waited for the trains to go by twice a week. As soon as we heard the locomotive chugging closer, we ran to see it. We rode bicycles we'd put together from parts we got from the boxcars carrying scrap metal.

We started the bicycle-building collection project by accident. As we goofed off one day, watching the conductor shift rails, Casper noticed a bicycle frame sticking out from one of the boxcars carrying scrap metal. The shifting of railroad tracks took about half an hour, and that gave us plenty of time to climb up and go into the open boxcar looking for bicycle parts.

One day as Vagón and the rest of us hunted for bicycle parts, the train started moving. All of us leapt off and got away except Vagón.

We called out to him to get off, but he said, “No, guys. I found the frame for a racing bike. I gotta get it off.”

The frame stuck to a huge piece of scrap metal and when he couldn’t get it out. Vagón yelled, “The darn frame is stuck, but it’s getting loose. I almost got it out.”

“Get off, Vagón. The train is picking up speed,” Sparky yelled.

Rick, afraid, and frenzied, blared, “It’s picking up speed! It’s picking up speed! Get off, Vagón. Get off!”

Vagón screamed back, but nobody heard what he said.

Before we knew it, the train got rolling very fast. We yelled at Vagón again to get off. We watched him disappear into the distance, scaring all of us.

The next morning we went to Vagón’s house and found him home and unhurt, except for stinking like cow manure.

He said, “The train changed tracks to pick up boxcars filled with cow manure from the dairy farm about fifteen miles up the tracks. Once the train neared the dairy farm, I just jumped, bike frame and all, into a pile of cow manure.”

From that point on, we dubbed him *Vagón*, boxcar. We stayed away from him for three weeks, until he got rid of the cow manure smell. His mother made him sleep outside on the roof of their house at night for three weeks as well, because she couldn’t bear the stench of cow manure.

Occasionally, we took our BB rifles to shoot black birds that hung around the dairy farm. We saw it as a hunting expedition, especially since we had to walk several miles to get there. We imagined traveling to Africa for a safari and we played the role to the hilt.

Once we got to the farm, Horns thought he saw a small calf—with horns. Ignorant, we didn't know the difference between a calf and a bull, Horns climbed over a fence to get a better view of a huge black bird, when the calf started to rush toward him. Horns threw his BB rifle away and grabbed, what he now recognized as a bull, by its horns.

The small bull dragged and shook him all around the stall. Horns (By now the kids had started calling him Horns.) held onto the bull's horns for dear life. Everyone started cheering and encouraging him to hang on as long as possible.

“Yeah, Horns, run that bull!”

“Yippee, cowboy,” shouted Tochi.

Cha Cha waved her new BB gun. “Go, Horns, go. Ride it, Horns, ride it.”

Casper, just as wide-eyed and scared as Horns asked me, “Is that really a bull, Soapsuds?”

“Yeah, Casper, that's a bull, isn't it Sparky?”

“I think so, but I thought bulls were big and fat.”

Superman said, “Nah, some bulls are short and skinny with hardly any horns. Isn't that right, J?”

“Heck, I dunno know. I've never seen a bull in my life. Have you, Guero Flu?”

“Yeah, I've seen many bulls. The short, small, and skinny ones come from Texas. The big, heavy and furious looking ones come from Spain.”

Everyone looked at Guero Flu but didn't believe a word he said.

Luck accompanied Horns that day. One of the farmhands

heard the commotion, saw the unfolding drama, and, without hesitation, took his lasso and roped the bull's hind legs. Both Horns and the bull fell to the ground. A cloud of manure dust enveloped them both, and Casper picked little chunks of manure from his nostrils.

We headed back to the neighborhood after that incident. We had killed our quota of 1,000 black birds; Horns had wrestled a bull; and Cha Cha had let everyone try out her brand-new pump BB rifle. Everyone else had the old-fashioned lever action kind. What else could anyone have possibly asked of such a hunting expedition? Nevertheless, we made sure Horns stayed behind us to keep the smell of manure away.

Not only did Cha Cha know how to shoot black birds, but she also excelled at playing marbles, spinning and cracking *trompos* (spinning tops), the yo-yo, and *baleros*.

She carried a leather pouch filled with marbles tied to her left hip, a yo-yo inside her left hind pocket, the *baleros* peg stuck inside her right hind pocket, and the *trompo* inside her front right pocket. Cha Cha *never* wore a dress except when we went to church every Sunday, and she looked funny in a dress anyway.

Cha Cha armed herself for conflict, always ready to do game-warfare with anyone anytime! In marbles she used her favorite shooter with a tear-drop-leaf inside. Unique, the leaf showed a rainbow of colors, which turned out to be a production error. No other shooter similar to that existed in the entire world.

We all saw the marble shooter as the personal marble weapon. When someone cracked a shooter, that meant the end of life as the owner knew it. Finding and getting comfortable with another marble shooter took a long time.

Cha Cha understood every yo-yo trick in the book. Her favorite one, and the toughest, was walking the Dog around the World. The yo-yo holder had to "stroll" the dog in front, and then give it a big kick, sending it around the world. Next, she'd catch

the yo-yo when it returned spinning back to her hand ready for another trick. But Cha Cha did them all: walking the dog, the creeper, buzzsaw, subway, the speedboat, walking the dog and jumping him through a hoop, and walking the baby stroll.

You didn't want to play *baleros* with her, either. She'd eat you alive. She used to skip the 1-, 5-, 10-, 20-, 25-, and 100-point *balero* score maneuvers. She'd score against you using the 500- and 1000-point maneuvers. I, myself, did the 500-point maneuvers best. That one consisted of flipping the *balero*, then yanking it down, and pegging the peg back into it.

Missing the *balero* meant hitting the top of your hand instead. You could tell right away if someone used the 500-point maneuver because of the purple bruises on top of the hand you acquired every time you missed pegging the *balero*.

The 1000-point maneuver score consisted of pegging the peg into the *balero* instead of the *balero* into the peg. That's how Cha Cha beat you. She also ranked as the best top spinner and top cracker. She'd out spin you and split your top in no time flat to boot!

She didn't know fistfighting, though. Everyone knew how to fistfight because that's the one way you survived in the neighborhood with La Plaga around. She liked to hang around with me when the rest of the group went its way.

Cha Cha stuck to me like Bazooka bubblegum sticks to the sole of a shoe. We used to spend a lot of our time in the clubhouse Casper's mom let us built in her backyard. We made it from an old storage shed and turned it into a clubhouse, fully stocked with all different kinds of comic books. On the walls, we pegged hundreds of Davy Crockett trading cards.

Looking at the walls in a gestalt way, you got a sense of history. We nailed the front door shut and made a small, square trap door on top of the roof. We climbed to the top of the roof by using a ladder we made out of old two-by-fours. If you looked at

the ladder, you'd know carpentry wasn't our expertise, and to say the least, our destiny, but the funny looking, crooked ladder served its purpose.

The first time Cha Cha went to the clubhouse with me, she asked, "Soapsuds, how come we don't use the front door instead of coming in through the small entrance on the top of the roof?"

"Cha Cha, the front door has been nailed shut, that's why we can't use it."

"Why is the front door nailed shut? Isn't that kinda dumb?"

"No, it's not dumb. Every clubhouse has to have a secret door, otherwise, you shouldn't call it clubhouse. A clubhouse isn't a clubhouse if it doesn't have a secret door."

"Oooh," she said in understanding.

Cha Cha worried that she didn't know how to fistfight because she assumed La Plaga wanted to pick a fight with her someday.

"Nah, I wouldn't worry about it. I don't think he'd pick a fight with a girl," I told her.

"Just the same, Soapsuds, do you think you can teach me how to fistfight?"

Silence.

"Why do you really want to know how to fistfight, Cha Cha?"

"Well, you know, hanging out with you guys, I thought it would be nice to know how. Besides, I think you're wrong about La Plaga."

Silence.

"I don't know. Fistfighting isn't easy to learn. And that, you being a girl and all, learning fistfighting will have bad implications."

Silence.

"Implications? Soapsuds, you just don't think I'll be able learn do you? And you really don't want to teach me, do you? And

you want La Plaga to beat me up, don't you? And you think...."

"Alright, alright, alright, Cha Cha I'll teach you starting tomorrow here in the clubhouse. Don't tell anyone about it though."

"Great, and don't worry, I won't tell anybody about it. I want to keep it a secret also. Should I bring some band aids and stuff like that?"

Silence.

"Nooo, just be here tomorrow."

I spent many hours and days in the clubhouse teaching her how to fight. We picked the days and times when we'd have the clubhouse to ourselves, because she wanted to keep it top secret. She didn't want the rest of the kids to know she didn't know how to fight. I spent the better part of three months teaching her and practicing with her. She got good at it.

La Plaga made a pest of himself, always trying to upset us in one way or another. When we played marbles, he'd come by and all of a sudden yell, "*Garruña!* Mass grabbing!" and try to pick up all of the marbles inside the circle and run.

Other times he'd run to the circle where the marbles lay and, scream, "Submarine," and stomp the marbles, burying them deep in the ground. Then he'd run.

Cha Cha had La Plaga figured out right. Before long he picked a fight with her. One day he joined all of us in playing spinning tops. When Cha Cha took her turn, she quickly split his spinning top in half.

"You split my top!" La Plaga shouted.

"Yeah, so? I did it fair and square," she yelled back.

"That wasn't fair and square. Let's settle it right now, fair and square." He balled his hands into fists and held them at the ready.

We all stood aghast! Before anybody knew what happened, Cha Cha rushed him. A dust cloud rose around them. We couldn't

see who had the upper hand until the dust cleared up, and we saw La Plaga flat on his back, unmoving.

“Did you kill him?” Horns asked.

“He’s not moving,” Vagón added.

As Cha Cha patted the dust from her clothes, I took a big gulp. I had created a killing machine!

A closer look at La Plaga revealed an ashen face and fluttering eyelids. He eventually opened them to stare at the sky. He seemed to lie there for an eternity, but then he shook the dust off his face and started blinking again.

Even though he was the neighborhood bully, none of us wanted to see him dead, and we all felt relief when he started moving. La Plaga got up, dusted his shirt and trousers, and walked away.

“Wow, Cha Cha, you knocked the daylights out of him!” Sparky crackled.

“Yeah, man, did you see that punch she gave him?” Casper added.

“Soapsuds, did you see that punch she gave him?” hooted Superman.

“Yeah, yeah, yeah,” J said. “Did you see the punch she gave him, Soapsuds? Right jab, fake upper hook with the left, and then whammo a hard right to the lower chin. Man, didn’t she look good, Soapsuds? Soapsuds, didn’t she look good?”

Stunned, I didn’t say a thing. Cha Cha stood next to me and I think her success astounded her as well. Good thing we didn’t have ticker tape, confetti, noisemakers and rattlers, because we’d have polluted the entire neighborhood for a whole week in celebration. After that, everyone respected and fully accepted Cha Cha into our group.



Every neighborhood, including ours, had a baseball team, but ours bore the scars of jokes from members of other teams. We never won a single game! In fact, we kept changing our team name so that no one could peg us as losers.

Well, what do you know? Cha Cha played excellent baseball, too! Her father, who worked for the highway patrol, and who also bore some resemblance to Broderick Crawford, star of TV program, *Highway Patrol*, taught her everything he knew about baseball, and he knew a lot.

In preparation for our first game, Cha Cha taught our dilapidated, ragged, and losing team all her father had taught her. In addition, we practiced as if the end of the world drew near. We knew the other neighborhood teams would play against us anyway, because we made good practice mats.

First, we played the Black Hawks, some rough kids who'd chew tobacco if they knew it existed. They couldn't stop laughing and jeering when they saw we had a girl in our team.

They even asked us, "What's your name this time? Tootsies?" Then they bent over and laughed at us.

We made history with our first game. We beat the Black Hawks 20 to a big fat zero. At the conclusion of the baseball season, our team wound up in second place compared to last place for a thousand years in a row! All of the kids on our block accepted Cha Cha without reservation. We didn't have to change our baseball team name anymore, and we called ourselves "Cha Cha's Team."



Everyone in the neighborhood celebrated birthdays with a piñata and party except La Plaga. His stepfather never made him one or gave him anything. Maybe that's the reason he acted the way he did. We didn't see him for a long time after Cha Cha beat

the living daylight out of him, but when he showed up again, he'd turned into a different person. So, we kids decided to throw him a birthday party.

Everyone met at the clubhouse to make plans. Horns' mother made the best *mole*, and El Indio, owner of the "Lost Indian" grocery store, had the best chicken coop in the neighborhood. El Indio owned one of the two neighborhood stores in our block.

El Indio didn't appreciate the kids on the block, because he claimed they had thrown 1,000 water balloons inside his store on Halloween. He claimed it took him two weeks of constant mopping to get rid of the water. I guess some of the kids bombarded El Indio with water balloons because he never gave the kids candy on Halloween, unlike the owner of Buenos' Grocery store.

Planning a successful birthday party for La Plaga was not easy, especially since we'd all depleted our funds from mowing lawns, painting and fixing fences, cleaning yards, and things like that. We evenly divided the funds we had saved for a whole year and bought bicycle parts at Western Auto. Western Auto had the best bike parts in the world. In addition, we'd spent all the money we'd made on other things.

Horns said his mom agreed to make the *mole* as long as we brought her the chickens.

Casper said, "I told mom about the party and she said she'd make the birthday cake."

"That's great," Sparky said. "I told my mom about La Plaga's party and she said she'd buy the piñata. She told me that as long I stayed away from any electrical cords, she'd help."

Everyone contributed in some way or another, and we had everything set except for the chickens. We didn't have money to buy the chickens. That's when Tochi came up with the bright idea of "borrowing" the chickens from El Indio's chicken coop. Then

we wondered who'd do the borrowing.

We decided to draw straws. We prepared six short straws out of fifteen for the expeditionary event. Whoever picked the first two borrowed the chickens from El Indio's chicken coop. Whoever picked the other four short straws had to kill and clean the chickens, making them ready for the *mole*. Those remaining agreed to clean the mess we left behind.

After picking the straws I said, "I'll be darned, I picked the first short one!"

"Oh, boy, I picked the second short one," Cha Cha said.

"Hey," said Tury, "I got the third short straw."

Rick said, "Yeah, I got a short one. What about you, Mon? What did you pick?"

"I think it's a short one too, and I see J has the fourth one, because he picked after me."

"Mine isn't short," J said. "Looky, measure it with the one Soapsuds picked."

I said, "That's the fourth short one, J. And don't try to scoot out of it."

"I don't want to be a chicken killer," J cried. "I've never killed a chicken in my whole life."

Tochi said, "Face it, J. You're a chicken killer whether you like it or not."

After settling the issue of the short straws, we continued with the planning.

We knew better than to ask El Indio for some burlap sacks to put the chickens in, but we asked him any way. Just as we thought, we couldn't get everything from El Indio so we decided to ask El General.

El General, the owner of Buenos's Grocery, loaned us two burlap sacks. We told him we needed them to play bunny-hop. We nicknamed him El General because he meticulously and excessively watched over everything in his store. You couldn't

touch a can of vegetables unless you wanted to buy it. If you picked up a can or something and decided you didn't want it, you had to put it back exactly the way you found it, with the label to the front and centered. To him, it was a cardinal sin, with no chance for penance, for anyone to go pinching the avocados, touching the tomatoes, smelling the melons, or for that matter, handling anything in his store, without buying the item.

But he gave the neighborhood kids candy on Halloween. In general, he treated us well. He acted as tough as any general should, but he also had a heart of gold, especially for the elderly whose Social Security check didn't extend far enough to complete a monthly grocery list. What mattered for now, though, was the loan of those burlap sacks.

Cha Cha and I had planned to borrow the chickens on Wednesday night. Ash Wednesday had long since passed, but we got the old palm leaves given out on Palm Sunday a year ago, and burned them to make ashes. We took a small jar filled with ashes to church late that afternoon and imprinted the sign of the cross on our foreheads for protection from the evils of the night. Cha Cha and I laughed a lot about going to borrow a couple of chickens with the figure of a cross imprinted on our foreheads.

We planned the birthday party for Friday night. That gave us kids plenty of time to prepare the chickens for the *mole*.

The night we went to the chicken coop, regardless of the cross on my forehead, I felt more nervous than in my entire life. The chickens looked like buzzards. I sensed Cha Cha felt the same way and even worse. For her benefit, I pretended that I wasn't nervous.

We looked at the fluffy, white chickens falling asleep on their perches. We carefully grabbed one, then another, then another, then the last one. The actual time it took amounted to minutes, but it felt like an eternity.

Once we secured them in the burlap sacks, (We made sure

they didn't make noise by closing the top of the burlap sack tightly.) we took the chickens to the clubhouse.

Once in the clubhouse, I said to Cha Cha, "Wasn't that a piece of cake?"

"No, it wasn't! I was scared to death!"

"Oh, come on, Cha Cha. We should do that for everyone's birthday."

"No, not me. I won't be a chicken snatcher anymore!"

The chickens had to stay in the clubhouse until the next day when the rest of the kids took them to Tochi's backyard. Tochi had asked his mom if he could invite his friends to the house. He told her we'd stay there for only a short while. Tochi's mom went to work in the morning and always came home in the afternoon for lunch. Tochi didn't tell his mom that he and several friends planned to kill chickens. The rest of the kids who didn't pick the short straws planned to clean up the mess the chicken killers made.

By the time Cha Cha and I got to Tochi's backyard, the rest of the kids had arrived. Tury, Mon, Rick, and J prepared for their duty. They looked whiter than the chickens. After I started thinking how they must feel, I was glad I hadn't drawn their straws. The rest of the kids, Vagón, Superman, Guero Flu, Sparky, Casper and Horns, came armed with brooms, rakes and trash bags, ready to clean up the mess. Tochi's backyard looked like a battle zone!

J, holding a huge firefighter's ax said, "Vagón, do you want to trade?"

"Are you kidding? Ask Horns."

"Heck, no," Horns said. "I've got my part and I'm keeping it. Maybe Casper will."

Casper bellowed, "Not me! I've got my part also and I like it. Sparky has the killer look this morning, maybe he'll trade."

"Believe it or not, but I feel sicker than a dog, even with my own dingy part," Sparky said.

"Forget about it, just forget about it," J said. "I'll swing this

ax with hatred in my veins.”

That worried all of us. Some of us wished they’d traded places with him at that point.

We knew, however, that killing the chickens would take more than a short while. First, they had a difficult time holding the chickens’ necks against the huge cottonwood tree stump in Tochi’s backyard. Second, when they finally managed to hold them against the tree stump, they couldn’t go through with the motion of killing them. J, with the huge firefighter’s ax, froze in the swinging mode and said he couldn’t stand the eyes of the chicken staring at him and didn’t swing at all. Third, they spent a great deal of time chasing the chickens around the backyard every time they got loose. White chicken feathers scattered all over the place.

Before we knew it, hours had gone by and Tochi’s mom got home from work. She ventured into the backyard to find out the reason for all the commotion she heard as she came in the house. When Tochi saw her, he turned as white as the chicken killers.

It took us a while to explain to Tochi’s mom our plan. A nice woman, she told us we should have told her all this in the first place. She told J to put the 50-foot-wide, 100-pound firefighter’s ax away. She said she knew a better way to kill chickens. Raised on a farm, she knew a lot about farm animals. She grabbed one of the chickens by the neck, twisted it quickly with a jerk, and placed the chicken on top of the tree stump. She then did the same thing to the rest of the chickens. We stood frozen with our mouths agape in amazement as to how easy it was to kill chickens with no fuss or mess.

She praised our thoughtfulness for making a birthday party for La Plaga, then she said she’d pluck and clean the chickens for us. By this time Tochi had regained his normal facial color, darker than the ace of spades, the chicken killers also regained their normal color and their blood pressure bounced back to normal. J

was glad he didn't become a chicken killer after all.

The birthday party for La Plaga became a fun and memorable event, and the first birthday party ever for La Plaga. Horns' mother had told the rest of our moms about how we had planned to give La Plaga a birthday party, and those who didn't know about it, contributed in one way or other, especially with the gifts. We don't know who gave La Plaga the new Schwinn Flyer bike, but that didn't matter. We celebrated because he now had a bike of his own. Of course, our bikes, made from bits and pieces, looked new as well since we constantly kept them looking that way.

Horns' mother gave a speech before the molé dinner. "These kids are good kids. They're the stanchions, the support pillars that hold this neighborhood together. Someday every one of them will be something better than what they are now. Someday we'll see them as grown men and we'll take pride in their accomplishments. They deserve our support, and our sympathy when needed."

At this point, everyone turned to look at Sparky.

"They need our love and affection above all."

Horns' mom continued her speech for five minutes. Everything she said was good and everyone listened as if listening to the President of the United States.



It took only a short while to raise funds again. We even added to our fund-raising chores the painting of old furniture, storage sheds, or other small, non-critical home objects. We made a mess when we painted, but the entire neighborhood supported us in our ventures. Once we had enough money, Superman got his dad to buy the kids on the block a \$20 post office money order. At that time apples cost five cents, a cup of coffee ten cents, hot dogs

at Coney Island fifteen cents, and the *Captain Video Series* at the Plaza Theater twenty-five cents. Therefore, twenty dollars to send to the El Indio, of the “Lost Indian” grocery store, amounted to a lot of money, but we didn’t mind. We felt grateful El Indio had let us borrow four chickens in a time of emergency!

We sent the money order to El Indio’s grocery store without any explanation inside the envelope, only the money order. We knew we couldn’t make El Indio understand, not even after all the kids on the block paid for the borrowed chickens.

Casper said he felt relieved we planned to pay for the chickens. “I wouldn’t want the chickens’ ghosts to come after me at night when I’m asleep,” Superman said.

A chorus of voices from the rest of the kids echoed the same sentiment.

“Yeah, me neither!” said Rick.

“Me neither,” bellowed Vagón.

“Yeah, me too,” said J.

We faced the end of summer vacation. We’d stop chasing the trains, killing black birds, borrowing chickens, and the other fun things, as riding our self-made bikes, playing marbles, yo-yos and *baleros*. All the moms in the neighborhood knew they’d regain their sanity and relax knowing all of the kids on the block went back to school. The teachers, on the other hand, reshaped their wooden paddles and devised new programs for punishing the kids who misbehaved or didn’t conform to the school’s rules and regulations.

With summer ending, birds didn’t sing anymore, flowers closed their petals for the year, old folks didn’t water and hose-wash their sidewalks before sunrise, and no one slept late. All the kids on the block planned to return to Mrs. Willies’ paddling, spitball throwing, putting thumb tacks on the school chairs and getting bored in Mr. Decay Germs’ (Mr. Hilliard’s) history class.