Angel

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"Mr. Man!" the children shriek, racing in a line, as orderly as ducks, down the dirt drive of the property next to ours. They're bare-chested, brown, all giggles and coated in dust. Five boys and a girl, Veronica. Crossing the street, they gather into a busy cluster, atoms bouncing off one another. We stand in a patch of dried Bermuda where Lucy, my white standard poodle, wags impatiently. Before us stretches our street's adoptive playground—a block-deep, gravel-covered vacant lot, bordered on either side by enormous warehouses.

The boys outshout each other to throw the ball: "First, first, I go first!" Angel, whose diaper half-hobbles him, stamps his feet. Veronica, shy, sucks a finger.

I drop the ball into Fabian's outstretched palm.

"Oooh," he shudders, launching it, "it's slobby." Lucy leaps to snag it on a single bounce.

The boy next in line I don't recognize. The only one to wear an earring, a gold stud the size of a rattler's eye. His black hair's been buzzed Marine-style like the other boys'—except theirs, at the neckline, falls in a sheer cascade, a detail that never fails to delight me.

"How old's your dog?" he asks.
"Eight. How old are you? Did you just move in?"
"I'm nine," he says. "I'm visiting."
"You a friend of Fabian's from school?"
"Nah, he's my uncle."
This time I contain my surprise. One evening last week, I asked José to give a girl I took to be his baby sister a turn throwing the ball. He corrected me matter-of-factly: “Tina’s not my sister, she’s my aunt.”

Until recently, children living next door tended to be a few years older than the current group—and toughened beyond routine hellos to the likes of us, two men in their forties. One boy, a thirteen-year-old, hacked arms from a thriving San Pedro cactus in our back yard. My partner, Gary, confronted his parents. The mother, an obese woman whose slurred, loud ramblings made us think her slightly retarded, bellowed for the boy to get in the house; the father, at least twenty years her senior, a scrap collector with a weathered, sunken face and a few stumps for chewing, promised to give the boy a good beating.

Within a few months, the boy and his parents moved out, replaced by another poor family. Which is how it goes with tenants of the five tiny ramshackle cottages next door. They’re among the most run-down in our neighborhood, where houses, an irregular blend of bungalows, Victorians, and territorials, range from the boarded-up to House and Garden renovations. Tucked alongside downtown Tucson, we’re a human blend as well, Anglo and Hispanic, many of us gay: artists and writers and teachers; people on welfare, some living in Section Eight housing; artsy college students; blue-collar families; and a fair number of homeless. Our street marks the neighborhood’s eastern edge, right up against a warehouse district.

Now that school’s out for the summer, now that our days routinely rise above one hundred degrees, the next-door children gather and disperse all over the block, independent and fearless as insects. The way I remember kids used to, the way Gary and I did in our Phoenix and Tempe neighborhoods in the 1950s. Were we youngsters today,
I can't imagine our parents giving us the run of the streets. They'd enroll us in day camps. We'd get swimming and art lessons or learn to use computers, as do our friends' children.

Sticks are our neighbor kids' most important toys, which they transform daily into guns, horses, swords, magic wands. I used to worry they'd poke out their eyes or otherwise impale each other. But the boys and girls alike wave them expertly as they race from yard to driveway to the vacant lots—the one across the street and another much smaller one bordering our back yard, where two giant tamarisks grow. One afternoon last week, the cicadas humming like transformers, I noticed a plastic orange warning flag wiggling high up among a tamarisk's branches. One of the boys had climbed up, perhaps as a lookout or spy in some war game. He'd probably snatched the flag from the water-line project down the block, a trench surrounded by blinking barricades. Not wanting to spoil his fun, I pretended not to see him.

I confess, though most of these kids have lived here for months, it wasn't till recently I warmed to them. Over the years, too many flowers ripped from our gardens, too much garbage—chicken bones, beer cans, old clothes, broken toys—thrown in our yard by people living in the rentals.

Gary can see the new arrivals as new arrivals; he always manages to hope for the best. I see them as part of one extended family that has caused us so much aggravation.

When kids move in, Gary invites them to help him plant the flower beds. If he sees them trailing African daisies down the sidewalk, he tells them it's okay to pick flowers, if they'll only ask. "We'll put together a bunch for your mother," he suggests. I'm inclined to holler from the porch, "Get out of our yard! I'm gonna tell your father!"

But Angel has changed me. More than once I gasped to see him toddling unattended across the street. I'd run next door, shouting, "Can somebody come get this baby?" Usually Fabian wandered
out, in no particular hurry. His eyes spoke eloquently: *Take it easy, man, what's your problem?*

Then one evening a few weeks back, I was playing ball with Lucy just before nightfall. I'd tossed the ball several times, wondering if one of the kids would spot us and alert the others. I was starting to almost miss them when they didn't join us.

Out marched Angel, diapered and barefoot as usual. Snug to his chest he clutched a skateboard that was as tall as—and wider than—he himself. He crossed the street, then the narrow parking lot sloping gently up to the warehouse.

Down he threw the board, heaving himself on, belly first, launching toward the street. I spotted a car coming and started yelling, "Angel! Angel!" as I ran toward him.

He ignored me, rolling to a stop right at the gutter as the car swept by. From his special vantage, he'd noticed what I hadn't, the pavement's last-second rise, a lifesaving change of a few degrees. Jumping up, he flashed me a smile. He swung the skateboard aloft, then balanced it on his head as he strode up the slope to do it again.