

## “The Invitation”

By Dr. María J. Estrada

Stella stared back at the Cocopah [indios](#)<sup>1</sup> on the bus. They sat uninterested in the flying gossip or lewd jokes from the barrio boys. And the [chavas](#)<sup>2</sup> with their make-up were boring murals to them. Today, there were two girls and one guy. The one girl with the silver bridge smiled at her, so Stella gave a shy wave.

On every bus she remembered, they had sat way back. Her brother, *el Huilo*, had told her, “Don’t mess with those Indians. Leave them alone. They’re quiet and don’t want to be bothered.”

But she was bothered. For years now, her father had raised her on bad *indio* jokes and *indio* stereotypes. *There was once an important gringo who visited Mexico because he wanted to buy a brain. So the Mexican scientist offered the brain of Pancho Villa. ‘oh no. [esta no ser buena](#)<sup>3</sup>’ said the gringo. So the man brought out the brain of Cortez. ‘no no’ the gringo said getting more frustrated. On down the line went the poor scientist, but no brain was good enough. At the end of the exhibition was an indio brain, which he hadn’t bothered to offer. The gringos eyes became moon sized, ‘[yo querer esta](#)<sup>4</sup>!’ So the scientist asked him, ‘why? why that brain? And the gringo said, ‘this one has never been used. ser virgen.’*

Her father laughed hard, but she couldn’t. That was it. No more *indio* jokes for her. No more *pinché novelas*<sup>5</sup> with fancy cowboys and half naked *indias*. ¡[Ya tenia el buche lleno de piedritas](#)<sup>6</sup>! Fed up!

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<sup>1</sup> **Indians.**

<sup>2</sup> **The chicks or girls.**

<sup>3</sup> **This one is no good.**

<sup>4</sup> I want this one.

<sup>5</sup> **Small graphic novels.**

<sup>6</sup> She was fed up!

She looked back one last time, and a sharp pain made her eyes tear up. Danny Romero, the shortest kid on the planet, shot a spit wad in her eye. He was four feet tall, so he claimed, with dirty skin and malnourished orange hair. His smile was too big for his face and too small for all the dirty words that came out. One time he had straddled Lisa in the fifth grade and play humped her. Not understanding sex, Stella had ratted him out. They had been archenemies ever since.

“Fuck you, dwarf dick!”

Paper planes froze in midair, i-Pods went mute, and everyone turned to look at her.

Her best friend, Chenchu, a serious altar girl, with a horrified look peeped, “What did you say?”

Like Stella, she was also an altar girl. A reader. A greeter. A weekly confessor. She was even going to be the youngest Eucharistic minister in the church—at 13 years old. Stella had never said the “f” word. Not out loud. Not even when somebody gave her a banana with Jose and Mikey’s boogers, in the first grade, which she ate.

“Well, that jack ass threw a spit wad the size of my *nalgas*<sup>7</sup> into my eye!”

The bus roared. Chenchu crossed herself and babbled an exaggerated prayer to St. Jude. Rubbing her eye indignantly, Stella looked at the back of the bus. “Silver Smile” was nowhere to be seen, but she was sure her friends were tittering. She glanced at the bus driver who had highly tuned ears, but Blonde Momma ignored the whole exchange.

Outside their orange circus, the sun was fading. The lettuce fields had vanished and were replaced by a large expanse of sand and ugly desert trees. To Stella, they had the look of stiff pubic hairs. A lonely dust devil raged without destination. She muttered, “Enjoy the empty ride.”

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<sup>7</sup> Butt cheeks.

Blonde Momma stopped at the Cocopah Corner on County 15<sup>th</sup> and Ave B. Blonde Momma hollered, “15<sup>th</sup> and B!”

Stella stood up, shot Danny Romero a dirty look with her good eye, and walked off the bus as erect as possible. Her eye throbbed, and the other eye was crying uncontrollably. When Huilo found out what had happened, he would kick Danny’s midget ass all over the pavement. On her way home, she kept a vigilant eye on the ground for scorpions. She was wearing thick leather sandals with no socks and a thin cotton dress. Her dress had once been a light blue, but after so many dryings in the sun, it had turned white. The desert was a traitor that housed ugly things, Danny Romero things. She hated living there.

Something wet poked Stella’s ass through her skirt. She jumped and screamed. Watcho, the three-legged bastard wagged his tail erratically. “What the fuck, you yellow son of a bitch?” She looked around for onlookers. No one was in sight. She continued walking with a bowed head and her hands holding her skirt tight. The wind began to pick up, assaulting her with sandy projectiles. When she stormed into the house, half of her face was streaked with brown colored mud.

Huilo, who was busy memorizing soccer moves, didn’t even say hello. He was wearing slick black slacks with perfect pleats, a thin cotton t-shirt, and a white headband, signifying that he was no longer a gun-carrying member of the West Side, a facsimile gang that hung out at the park. Huilo still participated in *bambas*, birthday beatings, and fistfights because the wannah be gang didn’t wannah carry guns.

“*¡Mija!*” cried her Nana, “*¿Que te paso?! ¡Huilo, mira a tu hermana!*”<sup>8</sup>

“What happened?” Huilo glanced and glued back onto the TV.

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<sup>8</sup> What happened to you? Huilo, look at your sister?

“Danny Romero shot a spit-wad into my eye!”

“Short fuck?” Huilo took in his sister’s tear-streaked face and looked away, “You can take him.”

Before she could retarget her anger, Nana pulled her towards the kitchen. Stella wasn’t in the mood for a home remedy. Memories of chicken grease up five-year-old noses colored years of home remedies afterwards. She eyed her grandmother suspiciously. Nana was wearing a purple moo-moo with bright orchid prints. Her thick hair was down in two *trencas*, weaved evenly like Comanche women wore in Old West movies. On her feet, she sported large fluffy Mojo Jojo slippers. Stella laughed out loud.

“A ver hija, cuéntame lo que te paso”<sup>9</sup>.

She stuck a warm teabag on Stella’s eye and gave her a shot of Brandy Viejo Vergel and a sugar cube. The sugar was for the scare and the brandy for Stella’s bad mood. Stella poured out all her frustration. The *indio* jokes. The huge missile. The damn dog goosing her. When Stella was done explaining, Nana gave her a tight hug.

“Mucho de eso no importa, pero a mi tampoco me gustan esos chistes,”<sup>10</sup> she looked at Stella with comforting black eyes, “Invítalos a tu party.”<sup>11</sup>

Of course her grandma wouldn’t think her tragedies were a big deal, but her solution was brilliant! Stella was having an eighth grade graduation party in a couple of weeks, but it had never occurred to her to invite the Cocopahs. It sounded like a great idea. She would possibly be the first person to invite a Cocopah to the barrio!

“Pero Papa, Nana. Va ha hoder,”<sup>12</sup> argued Stella because her father was the problem.

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<sup>9</sup> Let me see my daughter, tell me what happened to you.

<sup>10</sup> Much of that doesn’t matter, but I also don’t like those jokes.

<sup>11</sup> Invite them to your party.

<sup>12</sup> But, Dad, Nana. He will bother me.

Nana chuckled. She vanished into her hallway and returned with a faded piece of paper.

“Tu great-grandma y grandma de tu Mami—Tila.”

The faded print showed a dark woman, with unmistakable features. Stella stared open mouthed, while her Nana nodded. The picture showed Tila standing outside an adobe prison window with a withered hand sticking out.

All her life Stella had heard sacrificial stories about Tila. Sacrifices upon sacrifices. Tila had walked late at night feeling the dancing feet of hanged revolutionaries on her head. Her great-great-grandmother had worked hard to give her daughter opportunities. In the end, her daughter married a rich rancher and left her to die in a broken shack. This was a story she and Huilo knew, but no one ever mentioned that she was an *india*.

“*No se quien estaba en jail,*” Nana stroked Stella’s hair, “*Mija, todos somos indios.*”

Of course, by their very nature Mexicans were a bastardization of *indio* and Spanish blood. But this looked like a full-blooded *india*. A full-blooded *india* in the closet.

Stella scrutinized the picture. It was the color of old museum pictures, the faded orange of dated cameras. Tila stood silently, staring to her left. She wore dark *naguas* with thousands of pleats, a large intricately embroidered shirt, and a thick belt around her waist. The *trencas*, Stella calculated, were four feet long. She peered at the prison window. The withered hand was turned up in a pathetic plea. Nana gently took the picture and returned it to its secret place.

A crow announced the end of the day, and it dawned on Stella that she now had a weapon against her father’s hypocrisy. Every joke was a slap in her face and no self-respecting father would let his daughter be insulted.

Stella smiled all the rest of the evening. She bustled around the kitchen in a synchronous rhythm to her Nana. While Nana cooked the flour tortillas on the stone *comal*, she would roll out

the wheat *testales* into near perfect circles with the end of a Fanta bottle. Her Nana carefully fried the rice for a *sopa*, and she cut the potatoes, onions, and tomatoes that would go in at the precise moment. And although Stella was never satisfied with the cramped kitchen, the enormous table for six at the center, the surrounding pine cabinets, and the stove that all left a short perimeter for movement, she loved to cook. The heat did not suffocate her then, and the persistent ants and their fly cousins did not bother her one bit.

The kitchen was directly connected to the living room. The only difference was the Mexican tile floor and the varied furniture. One floor had a vomit orange pattern and the other a soiled line pattern. It was the type of house where everyone's farts were heard at night and where conversation carried through the poorly designed ducts for the swamp cooler. She looked at the walls in the kitchen. They were beige now from handprints and desert storms. Once they had been a lively yellow. They were not the smooth walls of H.U.D. housing or Rebecca Stewart's house. Rebecca's walls were smooth and clean. These ones were a dangerous rough brick type. Everything was rough and suffocating, but she didn't mind then.

"Mmmm! Something smells good!" Her mother, Sophia, walked in a little more wilted than she was at 4am.

"¡Mami!"

Stella still ran to give her a hug. She ran to give everyone a hug, except for Huilo who was afraid her zits would rub off on his immaculate shirt. Sophia reeked of cauliflower and sweat. She wore a thick straw hat, a purple-checkered shirt, lime green pants, and men's work boots. Rodeo clowns matched better, but in the work fields there was no room for pride. Stella kissed her mother's cheek. It was hot. Up close Stella noticed new lines and the brown patches of

overexposure to the debilitating sun. The only beautiful feature her mother still had was her long black hair, which she protected under a thin head scarf.

“Mija? Why are you looking at me like that?” her mother frowned. Stella counted two new lines.

“Oh, it’s just that when I grow up, I want to be as beautiful as you.”

“Ass kisser,” Huilo shot.

The door slammed, “What about me?”

Her father, Ezequiel, swaggered in and posed. Stella grinned with an evil twinkle in her eye, “¿Usted Papa?” and paused, “Well, Pedro Infante has nothing on you Papa. *Usted podría ganarse el título de Mister Universo.*”

Huilo retorted, “Yeah, he could be mister universe on a planet of short fat people!”

Everyone howled the family howl in contempt.

Papa cooed, “¿Ya ves Sophia? I still got it!”

He embraced his wife and danced to a fast *ranchero* tune. Unlike her mother who was much fairer, his complexion had few wrinkles or spots, but his head had many sporadic white hairs. It saddened Stella to see her father wearing the same outfit all damned week. The same boring brown Levi’s. The same khaki shirt. The same work boots she bought him for Christmas last year.

Huilo protested, “¿Apa! ‘i’Stoy mirando el fútbol!”

The dance ended abruptly. Papa went to pen the chickens, and her mother to take a quick shower before dinner. Stella stared at Huilo.

“You know, *pendejo*, some day you’re gonna wish you could see mom and dad dance again, and no soccer game will be as interesting. Besides, you’re not that good because all you do is stare at *gringas’* tits.”

Huilo matched Stella’s stare but was unable to rebuttal.

Nana refereed, “*No se peleen*. No fighting, *mis angelitos*.”

Stella went to her room. The dust hung in the air. Walls once filled with young blue-eyed boys were bare except for the occasional religious icon and one large red tapestry of *El Che*. She had bought it a couple of months, after she had torn all the pictures down of blonde blue eyed boys, that had never asked her out, and spray painted the ceiling, black with white stars. Che had cost her \$15 after negotiating with an angry Korean for almost half an hour. She loved the warm look in Che’s eyes; they never accused her or followed her around.

Her beat up bureau was empty now. Just last week, it had been a ballerina nightmare, but she realized the figures were ridiculous. After all, her parents would never afford a single lesson and besides, the only ballerinas she ever saw were half starved *gringas* with perfect skin.

She stood before the expansive mirror and took stock of her nose. It was almost the shape of Tila’s nose, but not as flat or nearly as dark. Her eyebrows were almost sophisticated, but she didn’t bother to pluck them. Her eyes were burnt sugar brown, and her mouth was way too small. Huilo called it a chicken butt mouth, and as much as she hated to admit, he was right. The ears were unmistakable *indio* ears, large and ready for take-off. Her hair was a thick dark blanket that went to her neck. She skipped her embarrassing B cup breasts and pudgy abs and noticed that her hips were curving out. She hoped she would not have a large ass like her aunts in Durango. That would simply *ruin* her life. Without question, she had sexy legs, a fact all the Jr. High perverts pointed out.



“B+” definitely. She inspected her teeth.

“*Put a* insurance company.” They were yellowed and crooked but not monstrous. She thought of Silver Smile. Her hair was darker and her skin the color of café con a little leche. Silver Smile was heavier but not fat. Stella thought of her yearbook and pulled it from the brick and plywood shelf. Her Nana had bought the book as a late Christmas gift, so she wouldn’t feel left out when all the other kids had their books signed. There she was on page 87, Karen Little. She looked for her friends, but they had either changed dramatically or been absent on picture day.

“Karen Little.”

She searched the top drawer and pulled out the homemade invitations. She had carefully glued red tissue on white construction paper. There were thirty total, but she only planned on giving 20 out, and even then, she didn’t feel completely comfortable inviting all her friends to her dilapidated house. But her father had purchased *two* cow heads to roast in the pit next to the chicken coop. Nana had been planning on making a large pan of rice, and her mother planned to bake and decorate an elaborate cake. Huilo for his part promised a couple of roaches and not to invite any of his friends. Her mouth watered just thinking about it.

She opened an invitation and wrote, “For Karen Little,” and as an afterthought, added, “and friends.”

“*¡Mija! ¡Ven a comer!*”

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That night, Stella had no hormonal dreams. She watched over her, but not carefully enough. At 2:00a.m., she awoke to discover movement on her privates. She woke up startled thinking it was a scorpion, but these invaders were much smaller. Stella turned on the lights and

nearly cried out. To her disgust, she realized that she had an early period, accompanied by four confused and hungry ants. Instinctively she wanted to cry for her Nana but was too embarrassed. She grabbed a Kleenex from her bureau drawer and removed them. They ran around, and for a moment, she considered throwing them out, but decided the little bastards would tell the foreman ant about their new food source. She smashed them fast and threw them in the trash. Walking down the hall, she kept a vigilant eye for scorpions and snakes, cleaned up, and promptly went back to bed.

The next morning over Nana's oatmeal, she quietly strategized the best way to give Karen the invitation. The bus would intimidate her, so P.E. class was probably the best approach.

It was their 11:00a.m. class, but it did not come soon enough. The economics teacher went on and on about supply and demand. Her English teacher had them read some boring poem about a sailor. Math put her to sleep. By the time fourth period came around, she was tired.

Doubts began to form. The nasty what if's. *What if she thinks I'm a dork? What if she can't come? What if she doesn't talk to Mexicans?* She crawled into the locker room. Chenchu smiled at her hesitantly. The incident of Danny Romero was still too fresh in her mind.

Stella looked around for Karen who was nowhere. Discouraged, Stella put on her stupid white outfit and graying Nikes. She stuffed the invitation in her back pocket. Ms. Can who ran a squad, barked and barked.

"Today you ladies will be playing three-on-three volleyball! I want to see action and determination out there! If you fail to perform up to my expectations, you will run laps around the court until you feel motivated enough to play tough. If you do not..."

Stella was brought back by the abrupt volleyball that nearly winded her. She smiled at Ms. Can and ran to the court. She was a decent athlete, which is why she got the balls or gloves

on a regular basis. Looking around for Karen one last time, she served a perfect arc. Stella played a robotic game, and still, her team managed to win by three points. She took a time out and went to get a drink at the far end of the gym.

“Damn, that woman needs to get laid.”

Stella looked up. Karen was sitting in the corner, behind the bleachers.

“Hey!”

“Hey yourself.”

Stella stared at Karen. There were no broken bones or bandages.

“Why aren’t you playing?”

“Hate volleyball. Hate P.E. I wrote a bullshit note saying I was pregnant. Could you believe the teacher didn’t bother checking with the nurse or my parents? I guess my fat belly convinced her.”

Stella snorted and remembered that she had the invitation in her back pocket. She threw it over and ran back to the court.

“Get back and play the game!” hollered Ms. Can.

She turned to look at Karen; Stella looked disappointed because Karen had gone back to her hiding place. She realized she should have been brave and invited her face-to-face. A hard object slammed her face. All the girls gasped. Karen’s friend had accidentally slammed the volleyball against Stella’s face.

“Oh shit,” said the friend choking down a laugh, “I’m sorry.”

Stella’s face throbbed uncontrollably, and she was on the verge of tears or maniacal laughter.

She decided laughter was the best route.

From the back, Stella could hear Karen yelling, “What’d you do that for?!! Stella’s our new friend!”

Can blew her whistle in odd rhythms, as Karen’s friend laughed making more noise than ever.

With an aching face, she smiled wide, “That’s alright, Ms. Can. It was an accident. I can take it.”

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The following Saturday, Stella changed her outfit five times, until she decided on a pair of shorts and bright flowered shirt. She looked slim in it, even though the shirt was way out of style. But she never cared much about fashion, and her parents couldn’t afford more than the Goodwill. Hoping Karen would notice, she decided on long sequenced earrings she had bought at the swap meet from an old Apache woman. The party was just thirty minutes away, but she figured everyone would run on barrio time.

An insistent knock sent her heart leaping to her throat.

“*Ya llego alguien,*” informed her Nana enthusiastically.

*Who the hell was here so early?* Stella thought in a panic. She gave herself one final inspection and tried to walk confidently into the living room. To her disappointment, it was Chenchu.

“Hey hot stuff!” she cried out. Chenchu must have been on a psychic wavelength. She too wore denim shorts and a tank top with a bright rainbow over her breasts.

“You know,” asserted Stella, “We look like an O.P. ad from the eighties.”

“O.P. rules!”

Huilo walked out to see if anyone cute had come over, “Bunch of nerds. Go back to *Baywatch*.”

“Shut up. You used to wear Hawaiian shirts,” retorted Stella.

“Yeah,” he defended, “When I was eight years old.”

“¿*Que dices Huilo?*” asked Nana from the kitchen, not liking the tone of voice.

“Don’t listen to him, Nana,” said Stella linking arms with Chench, “Come on, I’ll show you the new kittens and baby doves.”

“Do you need help setting up?” said Chench looking toward the kitchen.

“Nah, we finished early. Mom’s taking a shower and dad’s around cleaning the yard.”

Stella gave Nana a loving smile and glared at Huilo.

Snorting at her he said, “Hey, I’ll set up the volleyball net and put out some coconuts.”

“Hey, jerko why don’t you set up the volleyball net?” asked Stella.

“No way! I just got dressed!”

Nana understood volleyball and net, “*Andele mijo. No hay mucho que hacer. I help you.*”

Huilo rolled his eyes, “Fuck—”

Before Huilo could go off on a diatribe, Nana smacked his mouth, “*Así no se le habla a su hermana.*” That was *definitely* not the way to talk to a sister.

Stella and Chench walked out giggling hysterically.

“Oh man, I wish your Nana was living with us!” Chench said between guffaws, “My dad curses like a whore from the red zone. It drives me and my mom nuts.”

“Yeah,” agreed Stella, “In a fist fight, my granma could take your dad.”

They continued to the junk area, as Chench fantasized about all the ways her grandma could straighten her dad out. “Hey, your dad’s fixed this place up,” said Chench. It was a

cemetery of old auto parts, useless wires, and an assortment of junk that her father claimed was worth money. Her dad had organized all the pipes in one pile, cinder blocks in another, and the wires in a large bucket. Despite the changes, it was still her cat's favorite area to birth kittens.

"Dad keeps saying he's going to dump them in the canal, but I've seen him giving bologna to FuFu." FuFu, the large longhaired yellow cat emerged from her hideout. She was panting uncontrollably. Stella checked her water bowl. It was full.

"Sorry kitty, can't do nothing about the sun." The other kittens poked their heads out shyly.

"Awe! I like the yellow one!"

He was a miniature of FuFu with a crooked ear and electric green eyes.

"That one likes to fight. There's a black one and a white one. The litter is weird, but FuFu's been screwing all the cats in the barrio."

Chencha laughed, "They should pay alimony."

"So should my dad," said a strange voice.

Startled, Chencha and Stella turned around. It was Karen Little with two other kids.

"Hey, I hope you don't mind. I couldn't find a baby sitter for my nephews."

Stella smiled a goofy grin, "Yeah sure, as long as they don't break anything. . . . You boys gonnah be good?" They stared at her blankly.

Karen wore black pants and a white shirt. The kids also looked like they were in their Sunday best. Stella shook their hands and noticed the white splotches on their skin. Their names were John and Rick. They were twins with the same dark eyes and near-night colored skin.

"Oh, shoot, I forgot," she said remembering Chencha, "You guys want a soda?"

When they walked into the house, the boys stood close to Karen. She said something to them, and they stood apart. Nana gave them each a cold Fanta. They boys didn't care what flavor they got. They were grateful and drank the soda so fast, Nana gave them another one.

"Slow down," admonished Karen.

Stella tensed as Huilo stared at the boys and then at Karen, "Hey, you shorties want to play X-men?"

"Yeah," they cried in unison.

"OK, but I'm Wolverine."

Stella smiled at him gratefully, and the girls went to her bedroom. Karen sat uncomfortably in the corner of her bed.

"Hey," urged Stella, "Make yourself at home."

"Nice room," she said, staring at the strange ceiling, "How come you got no pictures?"

Chencha looked at the wall, "Yeah, what happened to all the *yummies* and your ballerinas."

"Ah," said Stella, "they're not for me."

"Well, that guy's kind of cute," said Chencha pointing to the tapestry of Che.

"Cute? Chencha, El Che was one of the greatest revolutionaries of his time. . . ."

Chencha and Karen listened politely, until her Nana knocked on the door. Other guests were arriving.

An hour later, to Stella's surprise all of the guests had arrived. There was no room in the house for all of her over made-up friends, so they sat outside the kitchen, underneath a porch her father was trying to finish. It kept the sun out, but the roof needed more work. Her guests sat on old chairs, overturned buckets, and cinder blocks. No one cared because in their neighborhood,

no one ever had enough chairs for parties. She remembered that during one party, she had sat on the tail of a beat up truck.

No one made a big deal that Karen was there, but Stella was sure they were staring when Karen wasn't looking. Stella also would give them *the look* when they started speaking Spanish.

“Are you girls hungry?” asked Stella's dad with over-enthusiasm, “Then put those sodas down!” Her father came out with a cow head in a large bowl. It was a dark brown with grey eyes. Karen and the boys were the only ones that had been taken aback by the enormous head; they stared in awe as her father expertly pulled off meat with a fork and knife, leaving bone white.

“¿*Vieja, las tortillas?* They're gonnah start eating with their hands straight from the pot.”

Stella's mom walked out with steaming tortillas, salsa, and condiments. Stella had only seen her mom looking that good at weddings. She wore a light green dress and had put her hair up. She wore beautiful jade green earrings.

Nana followed with her pot of rice. She didn't bother to change. After all, Nana reasoned that she wasn't trying to attract a suitor.

“Wow, your dad sure can cook, and this *cabeza de vaca* is awesome!” said one of the girls.

Karen and the boys kept staring at the head.

“What?” asked the father sharply, “You guys never tasted the finest part of the cow before?”

Ricky answered quietly, “No. We only eat chicken and sometimes jack rabbits.”

Chencha gave Rick a strange look. No one ate jackrabbits; they had diseases. Karen shushed them and moved toward the “fine meat.” Once their plates were full, she took a small bite, and the boys followed suite. Their fears were lost temporarily, but they resurfaced, when



Nana reemerged with fried brains in onions. The boys grew even more wide-eyed, when some of the girls *ewed* in unison.

“What’s that?” asked John eyeing the pot suspiciously.

“*No les digas,*” said Nana. *Don’t tell them.*

“Food,” answered her father sternly.

Nana chuckled and offered the brains to the little boys. Ricky looked at Karen nervously, but she urged him on. Nana went around with her offerings; she knew the girls were just playing because most of them stuffed a tortilla or two.

Huilo walked out confidently, “You girls sure can eat,” said Huilo picking a fight, “You sure you’ll be able to fit in your graduation dresses?”

Nana replied for all of them, “Leaveeee alone!” Huilo sat next to a coltish eight grader and smiled warmly, “What school are you going to next year?”

Stella rolled her eyes, “The same one all the rest of us are. The one where all the teachers are leaving.”

“Karen’s not going to high school,” said John. Stella gasped audibly. Karen for her part smacked John upside the head.

“Why?” asked Stella’s father scandalized.

Karen sat quietly staring at the dirt floor, “I need to help out my mom and aunts. They can’t afford a babysitter.”

“Don’t drop out,” urged Chenchu, “You’ll get stuck watching those kids your whole life.”

Nana looked to the father for clarification.

“It’s not for sure,” said Karen.

But Stella knew it was for sure. She could see it now. Karen would get stuck in a lonely house on the reservation. It didn't seem fair to have a graduation party, when she had no future.

Trying to change the subject, Chenchá asked unstrategically, "What are you wearing for the graduation?" Everyone waited for Stella to start.

Stella had avoided the question for weeks because she couldn't afford a dress. "Well," she said lying, "I'm wearing a quinceañera dress. It's probably too long, but it's pretty."

"What color?" asked someone else.

"Pink."

Karen snorted.

"Well," asked Chenchá defensively, "What are you wearing Karen."

"I'm wearing a pair of pants and shirt. If I wear a dress, I'll look stupid," answered Karen.

"Well," continued Chenchá, "I'm wearing a satin green dress that goes to my knees. I already made an appointment to get my hair *and* make-up done."

*Hair done?* Stella hadn't thought about that either. She looked at Karen who had a similar look on her face. Karen shrugged and smiled widely.

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"*Estos indios nomás vienen a comer,*" accused her father. These indians just come to eat. It was a Mexican insult reserved for guests who didn't bring a gift to a party. Karen had apparently brought nothing.

"*Apa,* don't start," muttered Stella, "I didn't tell anyone to bring anything." Her father frowned as he took pictures with a disposable camera.

Thus far, she had received a make-up kit, which she had no idea how to use. Chenchu gave her a pair of silver earrings that would match her imaginary dress. Someone got her a light yellow journal with a feathery pen. One girl even bought her a pedicure kit, which again, she didn't know how to use. In short, it seemed that all her friends brought her gifts to get a boyfriend. The final gift was a blue box with etched peacocks. The box itself was gorgeous. She opened it expectantly, hoping for a dream. She almost laughed aloud: it was another blonde ballerina. She smiled gratefully; at least this one had a small dog trying to bite the dancer's leg.

Karen also handed Stella something. It was in a white envelope.

"Oooh, money," said one of her guests.

She opened it slowly. Stella knew it wasn't money; it was a white sheet of paper. She unfolded it and to her surprise found a portrait of herself.

"Wow, thanks Karen." She admired the technique. The image looked like it was floating and ready to come out of the picture. She showed it to her guests, making a point to pause for her father.

Her father stared at the chalked picture. Karen had captured Stella beautifully, "Ah, the camera ran out." He walked away to his bedroom, looking for an imaginary camera.

"Wow," said Chenchu, "she draws better than Huilo."

"Bullshit," said Huilo. He analyzed the picture, "Ah, it's O.K."

Someone honked outside the gate; it was Chenchu's parents. On cue, everyone started to use the phone to call for their rides. Everyone, except Karen.

"Great party!"

"Awesome food!"

"Hey," asked one of the Sanchez girls, "You want a ride Karen? My parents own a van."

Karen smiled gratefully and patted Stella on the shoulder.

Stella wanted to say something but her tongue was frozen, so she gave Karen and the boys a hug. She saw them to the gate, “Hey,” she finally said finding her voice, “Maybe we can have lunch together sometime.” Karen smiled, waved goodbye and kept walking.

She walked into the house and began taking stock of what needed cleaning. Her Nana, as always, did an awesome job in the kitchen. Stella went into the living room and cleaned up the paper cups. To her surprise, her dad replaced an old picture of Huilo and stuck in the new portrait. It stared at her with warm eyes, not quite smiling. If it weren't her she might think it was beautiful.

Papa gave Stella a warm smile appreciating the picture one more time and went off to his secret place.