

"Power Rangers"  
Caroline Bybee

The building was a neighborhood of its own, a neighborhood of thin walls, where everyone knew everybody else's business. The old women traded gossip like the young boys traded baseball cards, swapping juicy tidbits from their plastic lawn chairs in front of the building.

The children would play tag until they were slick with sweat and the sun had disappeared, and the women would sit in those lawn chairs, sipping warm tap water like it was the finest champagne and stretching tales as far as they would go. It was from those chairs that the women asserted their dominion over all they could see: the grubby children with the scabby knees and the hungry bellies; the pitted streets populated with rusted cars; the crumbling old building at their backs, with its dripping plumbing, its unsteady floors, its peeling paint. They were the queens of the block, queens who ruled their childish subjects with an iron fist so that, by the age of four, the children had learned not to cry.

That was what it meant to be a child on the block: to suck back tears and hunger and laugh even when the older kids played too rough. It meant fuzzy T.V. reception, and sugary cereal for breakfast, and sometimes for lunch and dinner too. It meant sleeping on a lumpy mattress in a tangled web of siblings' limbs and nightmares, under a raggedy blanket that never quite covered your feet. They didn't know any other life.

Appearances were everything in the building; whose children had the filthiest clothes, or whose had their hair perfectly combed back. It was for this reason that the women spent hours every morning preparing their children, who in the winter spent their days watching T.V. because they had no shoes to protect their feet from the cold. Winter always came too early and too cold - despite the weather, the women would still dip their flailing children into tubs of cold water every morning, despite their protests.

The children hated winter. They hated that there was no hot water and no heat in their building. They hated the hours

of harsh scrubbing and the sharp-toothed combs. They hated fighting over the threadbare blankets, especially because they hardly made any difference, anyway. Winter was when the squabbled more, when they complained even though their mothers would smack them over the heads if they were close enough. It was when the most children got sick, and when sometimes the littlest ones even died.

In the winter, and whenever they watched T.V., the girls - who were too weak to stop their brothers from bullying them - had to settle for watching "Power Rangers". All of the children watched "Power Rangers," even the families that had only girls, because it was the common thread that connected the children, like gossip for the women. They compared notes on which Rangers were the toughest, on who had the shiniest armor, on who had been the most heroic in the past episode. Ancient "Power Rangers" tapes made their way through generations of children until every child in the building had seen every single episode, until they could quote them by heart.

When they played games, the children fought over who got to be which Ranger. It was an unspoken rule that there could be no duplicates - girls were often reduced almost to tears once the Pink Ranger had been claimed - and the games became a status symbol, with the biggest and toughest kids getting to play the Rangers, and the smaller ones with the snotty noses stuck as the terrified victims. It was another rule that the villains were never played by children - they already had too many real-life villains to dream up new ones. The brave Rangers would fight off cold baths, static-y television, and spankings.

In an ironic twist of fate, the kids who always played the part of the Rangers were the ones who grew up to join gangs. They were big, and tough, and used to fighting to get their way. The victims, too, never got to change their roles, cowering in their apartments first for fear of their childhood villains and later to hide from stray gun-shots, or violent fire-fights.

Despite this damning destiny, the children never lost faith in their beloved Rangers. Once, a little girl in apartment 6B asked her father when the Power Rangers were coming to save her. He didn't understand. Again she asked him who was going to save her. Still not understanding, he answered "no one." That night and every one after it, she cried.