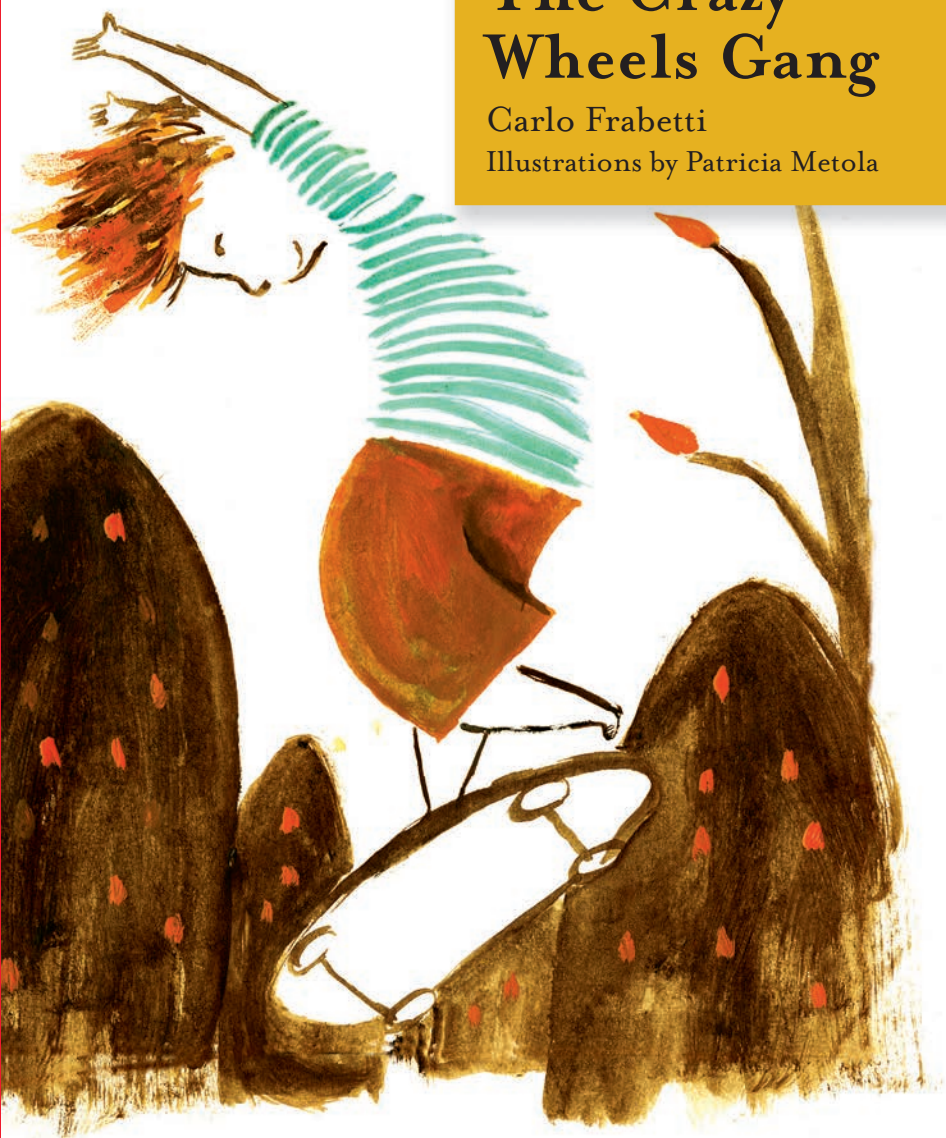


Fundación **MAPFRE**

The Crazy Wheels Gang

Carlo Frabetti

Illustrations by Patricia Metola



The Crazy Wheels Gang

CARLO FRABETTI was born in Italy and lives in Spain. He has been writing in Spanish for many years. He is inquisitive, observant and incredibly skilled at merging seemingly unconnected worlds. He combines his mathematical background with his passion for classic stories, humor with narrative rigor, complex novels for adults with successful collections of children's books and scripts for well-known TV programs.

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The Challenge

Paul was an expert rollerskater, Lou was unbeatable on the skateboard and Gary was the king of street BMX. Together, they were thirty-two years old (ten plus eleven plus eleven) and had fourteen wheels – two on Gary’s bike, four on Lou’s skateboard and eight on Paul’s roller skates. And together they formed the dreaded Crazy Wheels Gang.

Gary, Lou and Paul usually hung out in one of those squares where the



grass and the trees have been replaced by concrete and stone benches with no backs (to stop people from getting comfortable and staying too long). There, they would do all their stunts to the astonishment of insiders and outsiders. The insiders were their classmates who often went to watch them practice. The outsiders were passersby, who regularly stopped to watch the show.

One day, however, while the three friends were sitting on a bench planning new tricks and moves, someone came up to them who wasn't an insider or an outsider.

It was a girl around eleven years old. She didn't go to their school, so she wasn't one of the insiders. But they had seen her around, so she wasn't a total outsider either.

'Hi, I'm Alex,' said the girl, introducing herself with a smile, 'and I want to join your gang.'

The three friends looked at each other in disbelief. A few seconds later Gary, who had an answer for everything, said with an ironic tone, 'That's such an honor, but there's a bit of a problem. This is a boys' gang. Not girls allowed.'

'OK,' said Alex, nodding her head.

A few minutes later, realizing that she wasn't leaving, Gary added, 'You are dismissed. This meeting is adjourned.'

His two friends were laughing their heads off, but Alex didn't bat an eyelid.

'Well, if this meeting is over,' she said, 'why don't we start practicing?'

'Boys *on-ly*,' added Lou. 'Which of the two words don't you understand?'

'You're saying it as if it were three words,' replied Alex. 'What makes you think I'm not a boy, anyway?'

'Are you for real?' exclaimed Paul. 'It's obvious you're a girl!'



‘Really? Because of my curves?’ asked Alex defiantly.

The girl was as flat-chested as they were. Paul went red and said, ‘Your name is Alex, right?’

‘Yes, but it can be a boy’s or a girl’s name,’ replied Alex.

‘That’s not true,’ responded Paul.

‘I’m afraid she’s right,’ said Gary, who really knew his stuff when it came to anything language-related.

‘In any case, you’ll have to prove you’re just as good as a boy,’ said Lou.

‘OK,’ agreed Alex, ‘I’ll prove it when you do.’

There was an awkward silence. A few

seconds later, Paul, who was pretty good at math said, ‘It doesn’t matter, there’s another important reason why you can’t join the group. It’s a mathematical reason.’

‘Really? And what is this mathematical reason that’s so important?’ retorted Alex.

‘Gary rides on two wheels, Lou rides on four and I ride on eight,’ answered Paul. ‘We make a very harmonious sequence and we can’t break it.’

‘That sounds pretty good to me,’ said Alex. ‘I ride on six wheels, so we’ll make an even more harmonious sequence $-2, 4, 6, 8-$ the sequence of even numbers.’

‘You can’t ride on six wheels!’ exclaimed Lou.

‘Of course I can,’ replied Alex. ‘For your information, I ride inline skates.’

‘But inline skates have four wheels each, just like regular ones,’ objected Gary.

‘Mine don’t,’ said Alex with a grin as she took the skates out of her backpack.

They were a very uncommon kind that none of the three friends had ever seen before and they each had three wheels.

‘There is one last reason why you can’t join our gang,’ said Paul after a

long pause. 'If we're going to let you join, you have to be just as good as us.'

'No way!' exclaimed Alex with a disappointed look, 'I don't meet that requirement.'

'So you admit you're not as good as us?' said Lou with an air of superiority.

'I do,' replied Alex, 'I'm not as good as you... I'm better!'

The three friends looked at each other perplexed. The girl certainly didn't lack guts.

'We'll see about that,' said Paul, who, as the skater in the group, felt her remark was directed especially at him.



‘OK, let’s see right now,’ suggested Alex and she started putting on her skates.

‘Fine,’ Paul said with a shrug, ‘if you’re so keen on making a fool of yourself...’

‘Wait a minute, wait a minute,’ said Gary. ‘We don’t have to pay attention to the first person to...’

‘To what?’ interrupted Alex defiantly.

‘To, to...’ Gary couldn’t think of anything and Alex was already standing up with her skates on.

‘How about an obstacle race?’ suggested Paul.

‘I love overcoming obstacles like you,’ replied Alex.

‘You mean “like you do”,’ Gary corrected her.

‘No, It’s correct to say “like you” because you are the obstacles. What are the rules of the race?’

‘Bad start, doll,’ said Lou. ‘If you want to join the Crazy Wheels Gang, you should know we only have one rule.’

‘Really? And what rule is that?’ asked Alex, undeterred.

‘That there are no rules,’ replied Lou with a sneer.

‘So we can push elderly people out of the way and knock over baby buggies...’ said Alex.

‘Don’t be stupid!’ exclaimed Gary,
‘We’re not animals.’

‘Then don’t say there are no rules,’
retorted Alex.

‘Well, we follow the...rules of com-
mon sense,’ said Paul.

‘And we ignore the rest,’ added Lou.

‘And who decides what the rules of
common sense are?’ asked Alex.

‘We do. Who else?’ replied Gary.

‘Right, well, tell me what the rules of
common sense are for a skating race,’
asked Alex.

‘You’ll pick them up as you go,’ said
Paul, noticing that his friends didn’t
know how to answer. Neither did he.

‘OK, OK,’ said Alex as she pulled a deck of cards out of her pocket. ‘Let’s see who gets to pick the spot.’

‘What are those?’ asked Lou, realizing that they weren’t normal cards.

‘Have you never seen a deck of signs before?’ said Alex, surprised.

‘A *what?* Yeah, of course,’ said Lou.

‘Well shuffle them and start laying them down on the bench one by one. We each take turns speaking first’, said Alex pointing at Paul, ‘to say what the sign is called. The other person can agree or not. You get one point for each one you get right. Whoever gets a two-point lead wins and gets to pick the spot. Got it?’

‘OK,’ confirmed Paul.

‘You go first,’ said Alex.

While he shuffled them, Lou noticed that they were very interesting cards.

Each card had a road sign on the front of it, with a description on the back.

After shuffling them for a few seconds, he put the first sign on the bench. It was a red circle with a horizontal white line through it.

‘Do not enter,’ said Paul.

‘Do not enter,’ repeated Alex.

The second card was an upside-down equilateral triangle with a red border and a white centre.

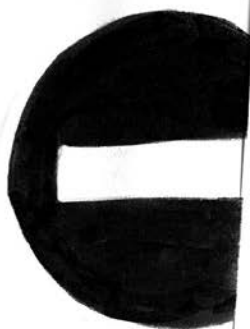
‘Yield,’ said Alex.



‘Yield,’ repeated Paul.

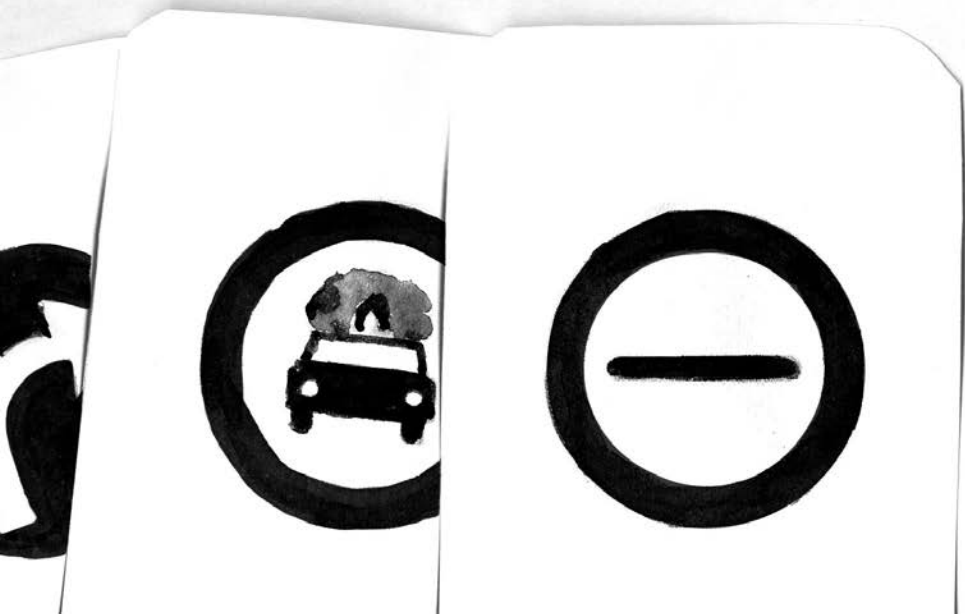
The third sign was a white rectangle with a black border and a black arrow pointing to the right and the word “ONLY” written underneath.

‘Mandatory right turn,’ said Paul.



‘Mandatory right turn,’ repeated Alex.

They continued to draw cards until a white sign with a black border and the black letters “HM” inside a red circle with a diagonal red slash across the letters appeared.



‘Not heavy metal?’ said Paul hesitantly.

‘Why would heavy metal music be prohibited, silly?’ exclaimed Alex.

‘OK then, smarty-pants, what is this sign?’ asked Lou, who had already peeked at the answer on the back.

‘No vehicles carrying hazardous material,’ replied Alex confidently.

Paul kept up with her for a few more until he drew a circular yellow sign with a black border and a black ‘X’ on it with the letter ‘R’ to the right and left of the ‘X’.

‘No idea,’ he admitted.

‘Railroad crossing,’ said Alex with a triumphant grin.

‘That’s right. You won,’ said Lou reluctantly, ‘You get to choose the battleground.’

‘We’ll race in the park next to the statue,’ said Alex, still smiling.

The Race

The statue wasn't very far from the square where the Crazy Wheels Gang usually hung out.

The three friends went to the scene of the challenge doing the "train". Gary was at the front on his bike, Lou was behind him sitting or crouching on his board and holding onto the seat of Gary's bike, and Paul was at the end holding onto the top of Lou's cap. That didn't mean that Gary was the only one who did the

legwork. Sometimes Lou propelled his skateboard forwards with his foot and in doing so pushed Gary forwards and pulled Paul along, and other times it was Paul who skated and pushed his two friends forwards. Their “train”, as they called it, was powered by all three cars.

They got to the statue before Alex, who took a few minutes to catch up with them.

‘You’re such a slow poke,’ mocked Gary.

‘That’s because I don’t cheat,’ replied Alex.

‘Cheat? What do you mean?’ asked Paul, taken aback.



‘Only bikes can go on the road,’ said Alex. ‘Skaters and skateboarders on the street have to follow the same rules as pedestrians. We have to go down the sidewalk at a reasonable speed, cross at the traffic lights...and on top of all that, you’re doing the train, endangering your own safety and the safety of others! Instead of the Crazy Wheels Gang, you should call yourselves the Stupid Wheels Gang.’

‘Someone as sensible as you shouldn’t be one of us,’ said Lou with a theatrical gesture of resignation. ‘We don’t deserve you.’

‘You can be sure of that,’ replied Alex.

‘I’m going to win this race to make you let me join your gang, and then I’m going to leave it.’

‘Enough talking,’ intervened Gary. ‘You have to go up to the entrance gate, put your foot on the sidewalk and come back. Whoever gets back first, wins.’

A wide, downhill concrete path that was once a road led off the small square with the statue. At that moment, there were quite a few pedestrians and some skaters moving along the path in both directions.

‘Better along the other path,’ suggested Alex, pointing at the old road that

crossed the park from north to south, 'there aren't as many people.'

'Precisely,' replied Lou, 'We said it would be an obstacle race!'

'And *they* are the obstacles,' added Gary, pointing at the pedestrians, opening his arms out wide.

'Ready, set, go!' said Lou.

Paul shot out like a bullet. Alex took a second longer to react but she didn't get left behind.

On the way out, moving downhill, both skaters quickly built up a considerable speed. At first, Paul was quite cautious but when he saw that Alex was catching up with him he got nervous



and it looked like he was clinging to the idea that the shortest distance between two points was the straight one. A couple holding hands had to let go of each other so that Paul could pass between them and he almost knocked over an elderly woman who didn't get out of the way fast enough.

In spite of that, they reached the entrance gate almost at the same time but they were slower going back up the hill and pedestrians had time to move out of the way – or rather Paul, who made them move out of his path with no qualms, reached the finish line a few seconds earlier.



‘An obstacle race is when you dodge the obstacles, not swallow them up!’

‘I didn’t swallow up any pedestrians,’ replied Paul with a smile, ‘I’m a vegetarian.’

‘Fine, I give up,’ said Alex after a pause. ‘You were right, I’m not as good as you at cheating and breaking the rules.’

And she sped off along the old road on her skates.

‘You have to admit, she’s good,’ said Paul watching Alex disappear into the distance, elegantly using her arms to keep her balance. ‘She could have beaten me if...’

‘If she wasn’t such a stickler for the rules,’ added Lou. ‘But yeah, you have to admit – she *is* good.’

The Robbery

Since they were already there, the three friends decided to stay and practice calmly around the statue.

But while Lou practiced a difficult grind on the curb, something happened that shattered their newfound sense of calm.

A couple of well-built boys, around fifteen years old, wearing inline skates leapt on an elderly woman (the same one Paul had been about to knock over a few



moments earlier), and while one of them held on to her, the other one grabbed her purse as pedestrians looked on in astonishment. Then, the thieves sped off.

Paul, who was closest to them, went after the thieves without a second thought and his friends followed him in the chase.

The thieves went all the way down the old road up to the park entrance and then continued skating down the sidewalk bordering the park.

They were approaching one of the gates when Paul reached the slower skater, who was carrying the stolen purse, and snatched it from behind.

The thief spun around and managed to grab Paul's arm but Paul threw the purse to Lou, who was right behind him on his skateboard, and the chase did an about-turn and was now going in the opposite direction.

Paul managed to block the thieves for a few seconds but they were a lot stronger than he was and they knocked him over with a strong shove.

In a spectacular move, Gary used his bike to block their path. Although he also ended up on the ground, Lou gained a slight advantage and managed to get back into the park through the same gate they came out of.

But the skaters were very fast and really good.

As they rimmed the pond, one of them overtook Lou and blocked his path as the other one grabbed him from behind. Not only did they take the purse away from him, but they also threw his skateboard into the water.

‘That’s so you learn to keep your nose out of other people’s business, midget,’ said one of the thieves, giving him a smack on the back of the head, and the two sped off.

Dismayed, Lou watched his precious skateboard slowly sink into the calm waters of the pond.

A few minutes later, his two friends caught up with him. Gary was strenuously pushing his bike along and Paul, carrying his roller skates, was limping.

‘My chain came off,’ said Gary with a resigned gesture.

‘And I’ve twisted my ankle,’ complained Paul.

‘Well, I’ve lost my skateboard,’ said Lou. ‘Those idiots threw it into the water.’

‘Well, you were saving up to buy a new one, right?’ said Gary trying to cheer him up.

‘Yeah, but at the rate I’m going, I might as well put it on my Christmas

list...' said Lou, exasperated. 'By the way, I think the tallest guy was the one they call Atila. He's notorious for stealing.'

'You're right!' exclaimed Gary.

'It *was* Atila! I knew his face was familiar...we can report him.'

'Yeah, of course...' replied Lou shrugging his shoulders.

'Well, maybe the woman will get her purse back... and they might even compensate you for the skateboard and you can buy a new one,' thought Paul, who was the most optimistic of the three.

Battered, bruised and weary, the Crazy Wheels Gang walked back to the square.

When they reached the scene of the crime, they saw the elderly woman who had had her purse stolen sitting on a bench, crying uncontrollably. A man was offering her a hanky and a woman was encouraging her to drink from a bottle of water.

‘Have a drink,’ she said to her, ‘you’re very worked up.’

‘What I am is exasperated!’ sobbed the elderly woman. ‘I just collected my pension and decided to walk home through the park specifically because there are a lot of people at this time and I felt safer here...what will I live off this month?’



The three friends looked at each other in dismay. They went over to tell the elderly woman that they had tried to get her purse back and that they thought they had recognized one of the thieves, but the three of them were too embarrassed to talk.

‘Madam...’ Paul finally began to say.

The elderly woman looked at him through teary eyes, and suddenly her expression turned from one of pity to one to fury.

‘You were the first one to try it!’ she shouted pointing at Paul. ‘You came towards me while I was going up the hill!’

The elderly woman's cries caught the attention of a few people and soon a large crowd had gathered around the bench.

'Hey madam, you've got it all wrong, my friend Paul tried to help you,' said Gary.

'The three of us tried to help you,' added Lou. 'We went after the...'

But he wasn't able to finish his sentence. A middle-aged man who had just joined the crowd, very well groomed and elegantly dressed, exclaimed, 'I saw them with the thieves at the pond! They're accomplices!'

'You saw us with the thieves because



we were chasing them,’ replied Paul indignantly, but his words were lost in the murmur of the crowd.

‘And they hit my friend and threw his skateboard into the water!’ added Gary, but they didn’t hear him either.

‘Don’t let these kids get away,’ said the elegantly-dressed man. ‘We have to call the police. I’m a lawyer and I’ll make sure they pay for this!’

‘How awful, criminals are getting younger and younger,’ said one woman, shaking her head.

‘They can’t be more than eleven years old,’ said another. ‘Who knows what they’ll be capable of when they’re older.’

If they start out bad like this, there's no hope for them.'

The three friends looked at each other in silence. In different circumstances they would have run off but Paul had a twisted ankle and Gary's bike was totalled. And so...

'Don't panic,' said a slightly high-pitched voice all of a sudden.

Everyone turned around and saw a girl wearing inline skates, carrying a purse.

'My purse!' exclaimed the elderly woman. Her hands trembling, she took the purse Alex was holding out to her and opened it.

‘All of the money is there!’ she exclaimed happily.

The crowd shouted with joy.

‘How did you manage it?’ the man who said he was a lawyer asked Alex.

‘My friends distracted the thieves so I had a chance to get the purse back when they thought they were out of danger,’ said Alex pointing towards the three friends, who still couldn’t believe their ears.

‘Wow, boys, I owe you an apology,’ said the man looking at Lou. I heard that those thieves threw your skateboard into the water. Please accept this in compensation for my unfounded accusations.

And before Lou realized what was happening, the man put a fifty dollar bill in his hand and hurried off toward the pond.

‘No need to wait until Christmas for a new skateboard anymore,’ whispered Gary.

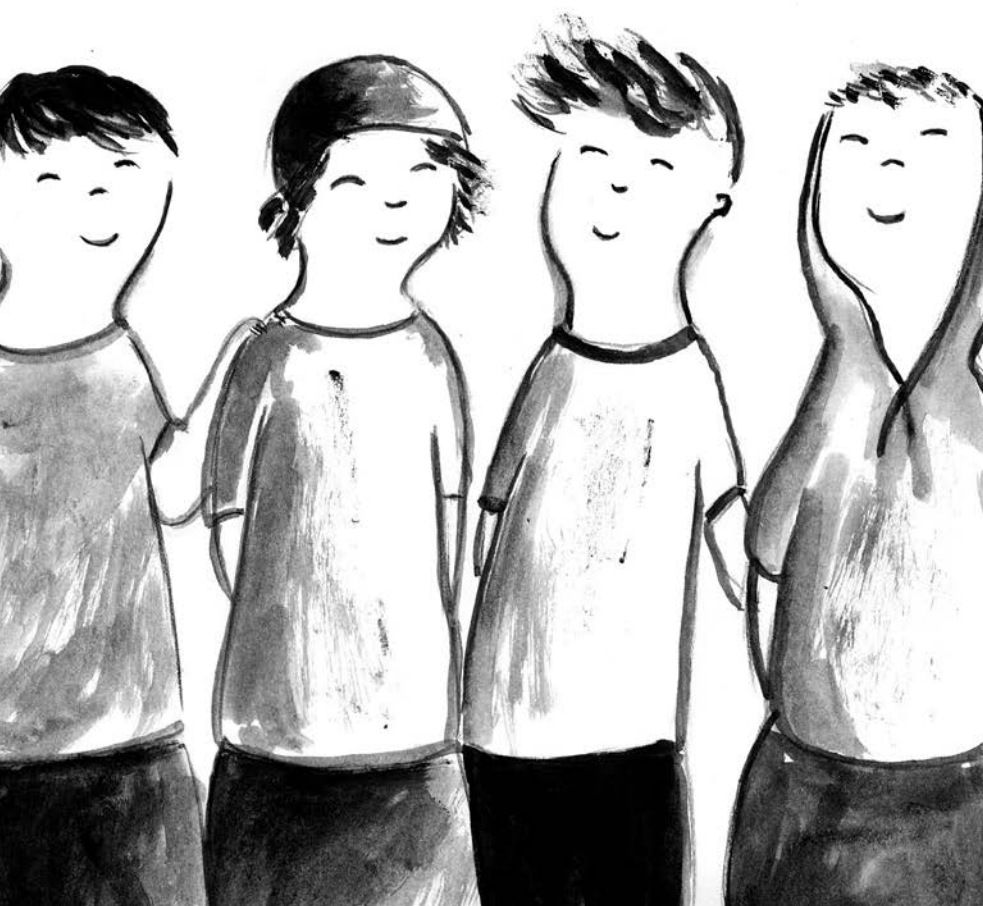
‘And it’s all thanks to Alex’, said Paul.

Epilogue

The elderly woman left with a couple of women who had offered to accompany her home and the crowd slowly began to disperse. After a few minutes, Alex, Gary, Lou and Paul were alone on the bench.

‘How did you do it?’ asked Paul after a pause.

‘Just like I said,’ answered Alex calmly. ‘I followed you from a distance while you distracted them and when that



pair of idiots thought they had nothing to be scared of anymore, I sped up, approached them from behind and snatched the purse off them. Simple as that.'

'That's exactly what I did,' commented Paul.

'Yes, but you're a slow poke,' laughed Alex, 'and that's why they grabbed you. Plus, by the time I got to them they were tired out, thanks to you guys. It was really a team effort, even though you didn't realize it until now.'

'I think you've earned the right to join the Crazy Wheels Gang,' said Gary.

'Absolutely,' agreed Lou.

‘Of course,’ added Paul, ‘it would be an honor to have you in the gang.’

‘Even though I’m a girl?’ asked Alex with a grin.

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One day, however, while the three friends were sitting on a bench planning new tricks and moves, someone came up to them who wasn't an insider or an outsider.

ages 9 to 11



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