

**SHORT
STORY
NIGHT**



GORDO

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**SHORT STORY NIGHT IS BACK! READ THESE STORIES AND
JOIN LIBRARY STAFF FOR A DISCUSSION AT LION'S TAIL
BREWING CO. ON MONDAY, DEC 13TH AT 7:00PM.**

"What's that?" I ask.

"A present," says Pa. It's not my birthday and it's not Christmas. I'm surprised to get a present.

"Really, Pa? For me?" I ask.

"Correcto. It's yours, Gordo."

"Why?"

"Just because," says Pa. Oh my God. My first just-because present! I shake the box. It's heavy and it sounds like there's all kinds of things in there.

"Can I open it?" I ask. Pa smiles and nods his head. I pull and pull on the rope, and even though it's not thick, it's really strong and I can't get it off the box. Pa starts laughing, takes out his pocketknife, and pulls out the blade.

"Here. Use this, Gordo," says Pa. "Pero cuidado, don't cut yourself." I get the knife and hold it in my hand. The handle is made of chrome and red wood. It feels warm and heavy. It's super beautiful, and I've always wanted to hold it. Pa's knife is really sharp, and in one swipe, I cut the rope off the box and open the top.

Ooooooh. All kinds of things are in the box. It's a present full of more presents! I see bags, boxes, and stuff wrapped in plastic. I pull out the first thing. It's a black, leather . . . thing. It looks like a flat pear.

"All right!" I say.

"You like it?" asks my pa.

"I think so. What is it?"

"It's a speed bag. Like a punching bag, hijo," says Pa. "We gotta put some air in it, hang it up, and then you can

El Gordo

It's Sunday morning. We went to morning Mass at the mission in San Juan Bautista, like always. My ma and Sylvie are visiting my nana next door, like always. Pa is at the Big Red Barn Flea Market, like always. I'm home alone in my bunk, lying on my stomach, eating Fritos, and reading, like always. *Encyclopedia Brown Saves the Day* is so cool. I would definitely be friends with Encyclopedia Brown if I went to his school. I hear the station wagon park in the spot right next to my window. Pa is home from the flea market. I hear him open the front door, call my name, and stomp across the kitchen right into me and Sylvie's little bedroom. Right away, I can smell beer, but not too much.

"Surprise!" he says. He's a little drunk, but he's not mad, so even though my ma's not home, I think I'll be okay. Maybe. He puts a big box down on the floor right next to my bed. It's wrapped up with rope tied in a messed-up bow on top. My nickname, "Gordo," is written on it in my pa's big, ugly letters.

start punching with theeese," he says. He rips open a blue paper bag and pulls out two puffy red gloves that make me think of clown shoes. I laugh at them.

"What's so funny?" asks Pa.

"Nothing. They look kind of funny. Puffy."

"They're not funny. They're boxing gloves. You can use them to hit the punching bag and maybe hit somebody in the ring one day." He punches the air and says, "Poom!"

"Oh," I say.

So far, this is a bad present.

"Where'd you get all this boxing stuff?" I ask Pa.

"At the pulga, of course. The árabes, they having new things for the boys today. Boxing and lucha libre wrestling things. People were buying it like pan caliente. Look in the box, hijo, there's more," he says. Inside the big box, there is a smaller box. I open it up. Shiny white boxer boots with silver stripes and shoelaces and little dangly pom-poms on the side!

"Thank you," I say. "These are soooo pretty!" Pa gets real quiet. He opens his mouth like he's gonna say something, but he don't say nothing. He shakes his head like something bad just happened. I'm holding my boots like little twin babies, telling him they're so pretty, and then he breathes like he's really tired and says, "Keep going, hijo."

I reach into the box, grab a folded-up bag, and open it up. Yeeeessss! A lucha libre mask of my favorite wrestler, El Santo! The mask covers your whole head and face in sparkly silver. Even the mouth hole and eyeholes are sparkly.

"It's all for you, hijo! Keep going," he says. There is a bag in the box, and I open it up.

"A jump rope! Wow, Pa! This is the best thing!" I feel like maybe I'm going to cry. I look up at Pa. I almost can't say it, but finally I say, "Gracias, Papi. I've been wanting my own jump rope forever. Sylvie never wants to loan me hers. But now, anytime I want to, I can play jump rope."

"It's not for playing," says Pa. "It's for ejercicio. Understand? You start training and training, so your heart and your legs can get fuerte, and you can burn off the fat, get strong to do boxing. Lucha libre. Entiendes?"

"I understand, Pa."

"Hijo, you know how Muhammad Ali is the black Superman?"

"Yeah, he's the best."

"Well, Gordo, you can be the brown Superman. 'Float like a butterfly, sting like a bee!' Un gran campeón!"

"Okay."

"All you need to do is train hard. You want to put on your Santo mask?"

"Yes, Pa!"

I grab it and try to put it on, but I can't. Pa takes it from me and unties the laces on the back of the mask and opens it up. Then he puts it on my head and pulls it down hard. I can feel him tying the laces in the back. When he finishes, it's really tight, and it's pulling my hair, and my ear is kind of bent, and it hurts, but I don't care. I love it.

"Turn around, Gordo," says Pa. "Look at yourself." I walk over to the mirror. Wow. I'm pretty sure I look cool. My pa stands behind me. I hold up my arms and make a muscle, and he reaches down and tries to pull off my shirt. I don't want to take off my shirt in front of him or nobody, and I grab it and yank it back down.

"Gordo," he says. "Take it off."

"I don't want—"

"Take it off. Now."

With my shirt off, I feel naked, and I don't like it. He tells me to look in the mirror again, so I do. I look even more like El Santo now! He is smiling. I feel like El Santo. This is boss.

"You wanna try on your boots?" he asks.

"Yes." I sit down on my bed, and Pa takes off my shoes, opens up the laces of the boots, and puts them on my feet. Then he tightens them up and ties them. I stand up. I bounce up and down, and they don't weigh nothing. I feel like an astronaut, like I can jump up to the top of the house like Lee Majors, the Bionic Man. And they're so pretty. I've never had such a beautiful thing before. I jump up and down some more because it feels so good, and my pa grabs me and hugs me and lifts me up like I was a little boy or something.

"Let's go outside so I can teach you jumping the rope," says Pa.

"I already know how to jump rope, Pa," I say. "When I play with Sylvie and the girls, I can beat them sometimes." I grab my rope and follow him. I don't ever go outside with

my shirt off, even at the beach. It's embarrassing to be fat. I don't like the way people look at me. But today, I don't care. I'm El Santo, and I'm the best. I pick a spot in front of the house, and I begin jumping rope.

My pa looks pretty excited when he sees me jump. My dog, Lobo, comes running to see what's going on.

"Caramba, Gordo! You got good reflexes, mijo, good feet!" he says. I never seen my father so happy before. And I start to jump faster and faster, and when the rope hits the ground, little rocks and dust pop right up. My papi is watching me, and he's laughing and so excited. He even jumps up and down a few times. Lobo is excited too. His tail is wagging and he starts barking. I start to sing my favorite jump rope song that I learned from Sylvie.

I'm a little princess

Dressed in blue.

Here are the things

I like to do:

Salute to the captain,

Bow to the queen,

Turn my back

On the submarine.

I can do the tap dance,

I can do the splits—

"DON'T!" he yells. I stop.

"Don't what?" I ask.

"Don't sing that song." I'm breathing hard from the jumping, but I'm also thinking hard. I look at his face. If the next thing I say is the wrong thing, I'm gonna get hit.

"Should I sing a different song?" I ask.

"No, hijo. No singing. All you do is jump and count, jump and count, okay? Every day you training, you trying to jump a little more."

"Okay," I say. "I'll count." I jump faster and count like he told me to. Now I'm starting to get nervous, and I start to miss. Every time I miss, I start again and try harder and harder. My face feels hot in the Santo mask, and I want to take it off, but I don't stop jumping. My legs are burning, and I am in a cloud of dust, but Pa looks happier now, and I think he's not gonna hit me, and he's not gonna shout. That's not bad.

"Caramba," he says. "That's good. You're big, but you're fast, hijo. Practice, practice. If you jump fifty times today, jump sixty tomorrow, then one hundred, then one day one thousand. I think you can be a good boxer. You want to box?"

"I don't know. Maybe."

"Try. You can do it."

"Okay, I'll try."

"I gotta take a shower now, hijo. You keep training, okay?"

"Yes."

I start jumping rope and counting. It's not as fun as singing, but it's okay. Lobo lies down in the dirt. I think he's bored with the counting, like me. After Pa walks away, I start singing instead. I whisper at first. I can't tell you the name of the song. It's only for me.

It's getting hotter and hotter in the mask. I stop jumping, and I'm starting to untie the laces in the back. It's hard because they're so tight. I'm getting frustrated, and I want to get a knife and cut it off. I wish someone could help me. Then I hear somebody behind me say, "Hey, you!"

I stop untying the mask and look behind me. It's Miguelito from across the camp. He has a Santo mask too and kneepads and a blue cape! He is not wearing no shirt and you can see all his bones in his chest. But the cape is really shiny and pretty, and he looks good, standing there with his bony legs open like a superhero's.

"You think you're the best," says Miguelito. "But you're not, Gordo."

"I didn't say I was the best," I tell him.

"But you think you're the best. Training with your rope.

You think you're the boss. But you're not."

"I didn't say I was the best."

"But you're wearing the Santo mask, *ese*," says Miguelito.

"And Santo is the best, so you think you're the best."

"You're wearing the same mask, *pendejo*," I tell Miguelito.

"Where did you get your mask?"

"My dad got it for me at the flea today," he says.

"My pa did too. Did he get you boots and a jump rope and a punching bag?" I ask.

"No. I got the mask, cape, kneepads, so I'm ready to fight. Man, we have to have a battle. You know that old mattress someone threw out behind the tractor barn?" asks Miguelito.

"Yeah, the one we jump on?"

"Yup. We can have a championship fight on that mattress. I challenge you. You're El Gordo."

"I'm not El Gordo," I tell Miguelito. "I'm El Santo. Can't you see my mask?"

"No you're not," says Miguelito. "We both got the same mask, but we can't both be El Santo. If we have a championship fight of the world on the mattress, we can see who gets to be El Santo of . . . the Gyrich Farms Worker Camp. If you lose, you're El Gordo forever."

"Okay, but if I'm El Gordo then you're El Flaco, cuz you're so skinny."

"Okay, I'll be El Flaco. I don't care what you call me, man, because I'm calling you out right now. I'm going to beat you," says Miguelito. "Then I'll rip off your mask so everyone will see who you really are: big, fat, greasy Gordo." Now I'm mad.

"I'm going to break your nose and your femur." I tell him.

"What the fuck is a femur?" says Miguelito.

"It's your leg bone, idiot," I tell him. "Don't you know nothing? I'm gonna tear off your femur and hit you with it like a caveman." Miguelito is getting mad too, and he starts to shout.

"You ain't no big deal, man, just because you're always lying on your butt reading books. Nobody thinks you're a big deal with your books."

We walk out together to the mattress. My dog, Lobo, follows us. The mattress is leaning on the back wall of the tractor barn. We drag it to a place where the ground is flat. Then we

begin jumping around on the mattress. The mattress is big, so we have room to move around. My boots feel great. I feel great.

"You ready, Flaco?" I ask him.

"I'm ready for round one," he says. "Ding ding ding!" He begins making animal noises at me, like a bear or something. Lobo looks up at our faces, and he begins growling. Miguelito says, "WOOF!" at Lobo, real loud. Lobo jumps back a little bit like he's scared, then he starts barking, and he starts going around the mattress in circles, barking at us. Me and Miguelito walk around each other and then he backs up into a corner and points to the middle of the mattress.

"You see that big stain in the middle of the mattress?" he says to me. "Someone peed there, probably some drunk old hobo, and when I beat you, I'm gonna mash your face in his pee."

"You wish," I say. "I'm going to make you lick it up like a dog!"

He puts his hands out in front of him. He bends his fingers so they look like claws. He charges at me and pushes his head into my stomach. I go "oof!" and then I fall back on the mattress. He jumps on me and grabs me by the neck and starts strangling me. Dang. Miguelito is fast! I roll and he rolls with me and now I'm on top! I grab him by the hands and start pushing them down till I have him crucified on the mattress. His blue cape is all twisted up around his neck, but he never stops fighting. Miguelito is super strong for a skinny little dude. He jams his knee against my stomach, then his feet, and he pushes me back. I fall back and suddenly he's

on top of me and trying to crucify me. Lobo is barking and barking, and I roll myself over and start to get up, and he jumps on my back and wraps his arms around my neck like a monkey. I fall on my knees and try to get his arms off of me, but I can't. He's really got me now. I stand up, and he's still holding on with his arms and knees. Then I fall backward and land on top of him, and he rips a big fart.

Everything stops.

I scream. He screams. And we both start laughing. While he's still laughing, I flip around and grab him by the neck like I'm going to strangle him, and I say, "You're not El Flaco, you're the Stinkbug! Lobo runs onto the mattress and starts licking Miguelito's mask.

"NO! Stop it, Lobo. Go away. Bad boy!" Lobo stops licking his face and backs off. Miguelito gets up. His mask is crooked now, and his eyeholes are all wrong. He fixes his mask.

"Hey," says Miguelito. "You know how to do the airplane?"

"Yeah, I know," I say.

"Let's do the airplane then!"

"I grab him by one arm and one leg, and I lift him off the ground and begin to spin in circles. He is shouting: "You'll never beat me!" I spin him around faster and faster, and he's laughing and screaming, and Lobo is going crazy, barking and barking. I feel strong, like a big giant superhero, like we're both flying! Then it's too fast and my hands aren't strong enough, and I lose my grip. Miguelito goes flying past the mattress and he skids into the dirt on his face and chest. Poor Miguelito says, "UGH!" And then

worst of all, Lobo runs up behind him and bites him on the shoulder. Miguelito screams. I jump in and grab Lobo by the neck and try to pull him off, but it's hard because Lobo is big and angry and when he looks at me, it's like he doesn't know me anymore. When I get Lobo off of Miguelito, Lobo's mouth is bleeding. Oh no. Maybe that's Miguelito's blood. Maybe Lobo bit himself on the tongue. I don't know. This is bad. "Bad boy!" I say to Lobo, and slap him on the head. He escapes out of my hands and runs away. I go to Miguelito. His mask is all crooked, but I can see part of his mouth. It is wide open. He is crying.

"Lobo bit me. Your fucking dog bit me. Did you see all that blood on Lobo's mouth?"

"I think maybe the blood was Lobo's blood. He bit his own tongue."

I stand on the mattress, breathing hard. Miguelito is still lying down and crying, but he's hardly making any sounds. His brand-new mask has blood around the mouth and nose holes, and he has a big raspberry on his chest from skidding in the dirt and two little bloody marks that look like vampire bites on his shoulder, where Lobo bit him.

Miguelito fixes his mask. I can see his eyes are red.

"Why'd you drop me, Gordo?"

"I'm sorry, man," I say. My voice is tiny. "It was an accident. I couldn't hold on. I'm sorry."

"You shouldn't of dropped me. I think I broke my shoulder."

"You can't break your shoulder. Shoulders don't break."

"I'm bleeding."

"I tried to hold on to you," I say. "But I couldn't."

"I'm going to tell my dad on you, Gordo."

"Don't Miguelito. I'll fix you up, okay? Don't tell him, man. Your dad is the meanest of all the dads. If you tell him what happened, he'll probably hit you instead of me." Miguelito thinks for a moment, and we're both quiet, then someone shouts at us.

"Hey! What the hell happened?" It's my pa. He's walking to us. His hair is still wet from the shower. When he gets close, I can see Pa has a little bloody tissue on his chin from shaving.

"Get up, Miguelito," says my pa. Miguelito stands up. Pa takes the laces off Miguelito's mask and pulls it off. Pa holds Miguelito's face and looks at it, like a doctor. Miguelito has a little blood under his nose and his lip has a cut. Pa looks at me and asks, "What happened?" I'm about to tell him what happened, but Miguelito goes first.

"I told Gordo we had to have a fight to see who is the champion of Gyrich Farms. We started fighting, then we were doing the airplane, and Gordo let go of me and I crashed into the dirt and broke my shoulder and cut my face. And stupid Lobo bit me."

"So you asked for a fight, Flaco?" asks my pa.

"Gordo dropped me and—"

"Did you ask for a fight?"

"I guess so," says Miguelito.

"Yes he did," I say. "I wasn't doing nothing and Miguelito called me out and I had to fight him, and we had an accident."

"Miguelito," says my pa. "Gordo's about twenty pounds more heavier than you. He's taller too. If a little guy like you tells a big guy he wants to fight, what do you think happens?"

Miguelito is quiet, then he says, "I don't know."

"Usually, you get beat up," says Pa.

"But my shoulder's broken," he says.

"Let me see your shoulder," says Pa. "Can you lift your arm?" Miguelito raises his arm. Dad gets Miguelito by the elbow and moves the arm up and down, bends it back, then moves it in circles.

"Don't worry, Flaco," my pa says. "Only scratches, nothing broken. Tu estas perfectamente bien. Do you want me to clean your cuts and put mercurio on it?" asks Pa.

"No," says Miguelito. "Mercurio hurts, and it looks like blood."

"Then go home to your mami, stop crying, and start training so you can win the next fight."

"I didn't lose the fight," says Miguelito. "It only looks like I lost. He dropped me."

"Look at your face with blood. Look at Gordo's face. Who won?"

"Your dog bit me," says Miguelito. Dad looks at the bite marks.

"Pff. No es nada. Lobo was just playing. Baby bites. Go home, wash it, and get some mercurio on it, like I told you."

Miguelito looks at my pa like he wants to say something back, but he don't say nothin'. Miguelito gets up and fixes his cape and then walks past me. As he passes, Miguelito mad dogs me. I say I'm sorry one more time. Miguelito looks at me and he talks, but he doesn't make a sound. I can see his mouth moving slowly, and he is saying: "Fuck you." I look down at my pretty silver boots.

"Gordo," says my pa.

"What?" I ask.

"You won."

Pa squeezes my shoulder and smiles at me. Then he walks away. I sit down on the mattress. I reach back and open up the laces on the back of my mask. I pull it off. Aah. My hair is wet. My face is hot. The air feels good, but I don't feel good. Lobo walks back to me and lays down next to me on the mattress. He still has a little blood on his mouth.

"Hey, Lobo," I say. He looks at me. He looks kind of sad.

"I won," I tell him. "I won."

Chorizo

The dogs are melting. Lobo is lying on the porch with his pink tongue hanging out. Chiquita is hiding under the car with her ears down. Everybody is hiding from the sun except for me. I'm riding my bicycle so I can feel some wind when I pedal. It's not working too good. Past the tomato fields, I can see this family walking along San Juan Highway. Right away I know they ain't doing so good. We're not rich or nothing, but they look super poor, even from far away. They're walking, so obviously they don't have no car or even a bike. I see two adults and two kids. The mom and dad have big Santa Claus sacks on their backs. The two kids have smaller sacks. They turn off of the highway and start walking up the dirt road to the Gyrich Farms Worker Camp.

"Somebody's coming!" I tell my nana. "Who are they?" Nana looks out the kitchen window. "Only God knows, miijo."

"Are they in our family?" I ask.

"I don't think so, Gordo."

"Do you think they're lost?"

"Maybe. We'll see," she says.

They get closer and I can see them clearly. They're indios. They're darker than Hershey Bar Pancho, and he's the blackest in the family. Their faces are sweaty. The little girl wears huaraches, and her feet are dirty from the road. They get to my nana's house and stand in a row. I say hi. They look embarrassed.

"Hola," I say.

Nana comes out. The mom and dad smile at her.

"Buenos dias, señora," the father says. His voice sounds like a joke voice. Like he's trying to sound like a girl. I look at him more carefully. His boots are tiny, smaller than mine. I never seen such a tiny man. He holds out his tiny brown hand and Nana cleans the soap off her hands, and they shake.

They introduce themselves. The father's name is Xaman. The mother is Yuritzi. I never heard names like those before. Those are *Star Trek* alien names.

"Señora," says the father. "We're sorry to bother you, but we have a great favor to ask."

"Tell me."

"If you could, señora. Would you make us a gift of a glass of water?" I never heard of nobody giving a gift of water. That would suck, to get a gift that was just a glass of water.

"Yes. Of course. Please sit here on the porch, out of the sun."

"Gracias. The children, they're very thirsty."

"It's so hot today. Poor kids look tired," says Nana. She pats the girl's dusty head. "I'll get a nice pitcher of cold water."

Nana goes into the kitchen. The family sits down in the shade of the porch. Lobo is too hot to bark. The two kids sit down on their sacks. The little girl stares at my bike like she'd never seen a bike before. The boy could be my grade or maybe just a third grader. You can't really say, because even though his head is really big, his body is tiny. His hair shoots up like Woody Woodpecker's. I can hear Nana cracking the ice and then she comes out with a pitcher of water and four stacked glasses. She gives everyone a full glass, and they drink it to the bottom. Nana fills them up again and they finish it all real fast.

"Nana, they're super thirsty," I say. "Maybe we should let 'em drink from the hose."

"Niño. Be quiet." She says to me and says to the father: "I'm sorry, señor. He talks too much. Please excuse him."

"No, he's right," says Xaman. "We could probably drink a gallon each." Yuritzi smiles and nods her head.

"We've been walking since the little store in town," she says. She also has the voice of a little kid.

"Ave Maria," says Nana. "You've been walking from Sanchez Superette? The red store with the wooden bear in the front?"

"Yes. We walked from there. We're looking for work. Do you have work, señora? We'll do anything."

"This isn't our rancho. We're only workers here, señor."

"Do you think your jefe would hire us? We'll do anything."

"You might be in luck. It's August. The tomato harvest started this week. Yesterday the migrera came with two vans and grabbed a bunch of workers off the tomato harvester to send them back to Mexico, so the jefe might need extra hands." The little man leans forward and grabs Nana's hand.

"Do you think maybe you could possibly help us meet your jefe to ask for work?"

"Yes," says Nana. "It's heavy work, though, especially on the tomato harvester. They only hire women. Their hands are smaller and faster." Nana looks at the mom. "Señora, I've worked the harvester many times," warns Nana. "With the heat and the dust and the noise, lots of women faint."

"No hay problema," says the father, slapping Yuritza's shoulder. "This one, she's like a mule. Strong." That's pretty funny. The mom smiles at her feet. When the little girl smiles, I can see all of her front teeth are gone except for the two pointy ones on the side. Every kid in the Gyrich Farms Worker Camp has to have a nickname. I decide hers will be Vampi.

"Our jefe usually passes by in the mornings to load up the water truck at the pump right over there. We can ask him then."

"Yes, por favor, let's do that. We have to thank the Virgin for putting you in our path, señora, to help us find work. Gracias."

"Let's hope we can get you some work," says Nana.

"It shames me to ask for another favor."

"Go on, señor."

"That building over there. Can we sleep there?"

"That's for the chickens, señor. I couldn't let you sleep there. It's too dirty. There's fleas. Lice."

"How about over there," he asks, pointing to the carport.

"In the carport?" asks Nana.

"We promise we'll take good care of it."

"There's shade, but there are no walls," says Nana.

"That's all we need, señora. We're very tired. We'll only stay a couple of days, until we find work."

"I'm sorry we don't have room in the house, but it's tomato season, and we have cousins staying and the house is really full. We're like sardines, but if you want to sleep in the carport you can."

"Thank you, señora. May God reward you for this."

After resting in the shade and drinking some more water, the family begins taking their stuff out. First, they take out a big blue plastic sheet and lay it out on the dirt. Then they put a big dirt clod on each corner of the sheet. They're going to sleep on that? They unfold another plastic sheet and with a yellow rope they make a little tent, like if they're camping. Vampi's mom gets the hose, turns it on, and—I can't believe it—Vampi and her brother get naked, completely naked, and she hoses them and soaps and then washes their hair. Nana stomps out of the house, walks over to me, and points for me to go inside, so I do. She follows after me.

"Gordo," she says. "Stop staring at that family."

"They're taking a bath outside," I say.

"Let them," she says. "They're trying to get clean. There's nothing wrong with that. I'd be happy if you'd take a bath inside or outside or anywhere." Grandma steps back outside and talks to the mom. I stand near the window and pretend not to watch them all.

"Yuritzi," says Nana. "Do you and your husband want to use the shower room over there by the willow tree?"

"Yes, gracias."

"We don't have indoor toilets here at the camp," says Nana. "The outhouses are over there for you all to use. There's paper there already. There is a flashlight in there if you need to use it at night. Also, we don't have a telephone here. I'm sorry." The lady and her husband begin to giggle. "Ai, señora," she says. "It doesn't matter if you don't have a telephone. In our pueblo, no one in the family has a telephone. There's nobody to call!" Nana laughs with them.

"Do you want to use the kitchen? I have a stove and sink and refrigerator if you want to use them."

"No. That's fine."

"Please don't be shy about asking for anything."

"Gracias," says Yuritzi. Nana goes back inside and I follow her. A few minutes later, we hear my grandpa pulling up in his pickup truck. He is home from work. He drives to his usual parking spot in the carport but stops when he sees the family. Grandpa gets out of the pickup. He don't say hi or nothing to the family. He walks straight into the house.

"Vieja, who are those people?" he asks Nana.

"They just arrived from the other side. They don't have any place to sleep." He don't say nothing. She don't say nothing.

"Gordo, go outside," says Grandpa.

"But Grandpa," I say, "Nana just told me to stay inside."

"And I'm telling you to go outside. And don't bother those people."

I step out and ride my bicycle around the house like a merry-go-round. Past the window, I hear my grandparents talking all mad in the kitchen. Past the carport and the family is stacking up some firewood for a fire. Past the window and Grandpa is saying something about how this is his house. Past the carport and the dad is down on the ground, burning up a little dry grass under the wood. Then it's Nana stacking away the dishes and getting rough with it. Then it's Vampi and her brother stealing a few tomatoes from the field and whoa—Xaman got a nice fire going. I stop the merry-go-round to have a good look. I love fires so much.

From her sack, the mom pulls out a brown grocery bag. She takes out an onion, dried masa for tortillas, eggs, and chorizo. Man, they have everything in those sacks! I'm watching the action when Grandpa comes out. He might still be mad, so I know I'd better get back on the bike to stay out of his way. He takes his hoe and heads out to his garden. I keep on riding around and watching Vampi's family.

They water the corn masa mix with water from the hose. Vampi begins rolling out the masa in a little plastic bowl. She looks nice now that she had her bath and fixed her hair and washed her feet.

Grandpa returns from the garden and in his hands, he has little baby zucchinis, which are not my favorite food, but one of my favorite words. The zucchinis have big yellow flowers on them, and it almost looks like he's trying to be some kind of Romeo when he gives them to Yuritzi. She smiles and says gracias. The dad says, "I know we're a bother. We're grateful to you for letting us stay. We'll leave soon."

"We're glad to help," says my grandpa. "But you can't stay long in this carport. It's not good for you with children."

"I know, señor. I know it's not good." They're both quiet for a moment, then Grandpa says, "I'll go and talk to the jefe right now. I think he can help you with some work."

"We hope so, señor. We're ready to work. We'll do anything. Grandpa gets in the truck and closes the door. He rolls down the window and asks me if I want to go with him.

"No, Grandpa, I'll play on my bicycle." He leaves, and I stay. The mom has the frying pan real hot now, and she drops in the onions and the chorizo. The breakfast smell is so good and chorizo is my number-two favorite smell after peanut butter. They're getting excited now, talking and laughing even, except I can't understand what they're saying. Sometimes I hear Spanish—"chorizo" or "trabajo," but then it is not Spanish at all. I have never heard this language. She cracks the eggs and they land in the red chorizo like six suns. She pops

them and the yellow goes everywhere, and she stirs it all up. She looks at me and smiles. I smile too. Finally the chorizo is done and they take it outta the fire. Vampi's been making tortillas like crazy, throwing the masa from one hand to the other until they look nice and round. She's flipping them with her fingers, and they look good. Dang. Vampi's a good cook for a little kid. I tried making tortillas once, and mine came out all lumpy and shaped like shoe bottoms.

When the food is all made, they begin rolling little egg and chorizo taquitos with their hands. They lick their lips and their fingers even. It looks really fun, like camping. I smile at the mom again, and she smiles back. She rolls a taquito and passes it to Vampi. They talk their language, so I can't understand. Vampi stands up and walks over to me. She takes my hand and puts a little chorizo taco in it. I can see her little bat teeth when she smiles.

"Thank you. Gracias," I say. I take a bite and it's so tasty I have to take another before I'm finished with the first one. We all start laughing, cuz it's good and everybody knows it. I'm about to finish it off when Nana calls to me.

"Niño! What are you doing?"

"They gave me it, Nana."

"Get in here. Now!"

"Señora, we are happy to share with him," says the mom.

"We have plenty."

"Gordo, get in here now," says Nana again.

* * *

I go into the house. She looks like she can't decide if she's gonna cry or shout.

"You took food from them?"

"Yes, Nana. They gave it to m—" WHAM!! She slaps me across the face. She has never hit me there. We look at each other's faces. I can't believe it. She looks like she can't believe it either. I feel like I'm gonna cry, but I know everybody gets mad at me when I cry, so I don't.

"Can I go now?" I ask.

"Go," she says. I go to the living room and turn on the TV. It's the stupid news. I don't care. I lay on the sofa with my face in the crack. I hear the family laughing and eating outside. I hear Nana in the kitchen. I try not to move or make any noise, but I can't help it. The wet rolls down my cheek and into my mouth. I taste tears and egg and chorizo.

Cookie

Fat Cookie takes a tiny yellow library pencil out of her pants pocket. She looks from one side of the camp to the other, like a spy. She stares at the white wall in front of her like it's something interesting: a television show or one of those flea market posters of the most beautiful unicorn with a gigantic tail, running in the wind. With the back of her hand, Fat Cookie wipes a dusty spiderweb off the wall and then holds the tip of her pencil against the wall.

"What are you gonna do?" I ask her. She breathes.

"I'm thinking."

"Are you gonna write on the wall?" I ask. "Because if you do, you're gonna get in trouble with—"

"Shut up, idiot," she says to me but not in a mean voice, just tired, like a mom.

"Gordo, what do you even know about trouble?" she adds. "You don't have enough imagination to get into trouble. You're too busy kissing ass and reading your books."