



QUICKREADS

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I start walking toward the bus stop, tagging along behind some other kids, trying to blend in. They're laughing and talking—nobody notices me. If I'm lucky I'll stay invisible.

Then I hear footsteps behind me. "*Sánte! Sánnn-te!*" The voice calling my name is sing-song, taunting. It's Rubio! My stomach twists with an awful combination of fear and helpless anger.

More footsteps. "*Sánte! Sánte!*" Now I can hear that Rubio's whole gang is with him. I know I'm doomed.

I start running as fast as I can, which isn't very fast. I head toward the woods

next to school. In 10 seconds, they've got me, Rubio grabbing one arm and Quinto the other. I squirm and thrash around, trying to get loose. But I know it's hopeless. There are just too many of them.

They push me to the ground. Dirt smears my face and goes up my nose. "Get his shoe off!" someone yells.

I go crazy, kicking and punching wildly, desperately. "No!" I yell. "*Don't!*"

Their hands are all over me, rough and hard. But their punches don't hurt much. What really hurts is my soul.

Then all seven of them grab me and I can't move. I feel my shoe being pulled off. I squeeze my eyes shut.

"Freak show!" hollers Rubio.

"Grrrrross!" Quinto yells.

From all sides, their voices hit me like bombs. "*Yuck!*" "*Disgust-o!*"

One boy makes retching noises. Another screams in mock terror. "Auuugh! It's gonna get me! The curse of the clubfoot!"

Then one boy yells, "Bus!" and they all run

off, laughing and yelling.

I sit up, wiping the dirt off my face with my shirt. And since no one can see me, I cry for a minute.



The next day, I'd do anything to stay home from school, but Mom insists. "You have to get an education," she always says. I don't tell her what I'm really learning, which is to hate.

We're in the middle of math class when the principal, Mr. McNulty, comes in. He brings in a new boy. The kid is kind of tall, but he's fat, too. A new victim for Rubio and his gang.

"This is Tino Morales," says Mr. McNulty. "I want all of you to please make Tino feel welcome here."

Somebody makes a fart sound, which Mr. McNulty ignores.

Tino looks around the room at everyone, checking them out. It doesn't seem to bother him that all the kids are staring at him.

He's staring right back at them. In fact, he looks bored.

At lunch, I see Tino again. Now he's carrying a lunch bag and heading for the stairs.

Usually, I don't talk to anybody unless I have to. But today I surprise myself. "Wait!" I say, hurrying after him. "Don't go on the stairs."

He looks at me for a few seconds, one eyebrow raised high.

"This guy, Rubio, and his gang—that's their territory," I explain.

"They don't let anybody else use the stairs?" Tino asks.

"Sometimes if you're cool with them, it's okay—" I say.

"You think it's possible I could ever be cool with those guys?" he says. That eyebrow comes up again.

Suddenly, I feel like I could tell this guy anything. "Not in a million years," I say with a grin.

He laughs, and keeps on walking toward

the stairs. Following him, I wonder if he's brave or crazy. Quinto and another guy, Bobby, see where Tino is headed. Of course they go right after him. I peek over the stairs just as Quinto and Bobby catch up to Tino.

"Hey, Fat Boy," Quinto snarls like the rat he is. "What are you doing here?"

"Going down the stairs, one step at a time," says Tino. "Is that a problem?"

Bobby says, "Yeah, the stairs are *our* territory—the Blades!"

"So I'm supposed to bow down and promise to never use the stairs again, is that it?" Tino says. His voice is sarcastic. He looks them up and down, and I know they're getting steamed.

Bobby turns to Quinto. "Guess the fat boy needs to be taught a lesson," he says. "Right?"

Quinto never gets a chance to answer. Tino lunges forward, slamming his big foot down on Quinto's instep. At the same time, he rams his fist into Bobby's stomach. Quinto yelps with pain and Bobby doubles up, groaning. He looks like he's going to puke.

I hurry away before someone sees me.

I'm walking to my last class when Tino catches up to me.

"Hey," he says. "Thanks for the warning."

"Uh—that's okay," I say lamely. I'm not used to talking to people.

"I needed to look out for those guys," Tino says.

"They'll get back at you," I say.

"Yeah, I can imagine," he says.

"Aren't you scared?" I say.

"I've been beat up a lot," he says with a shrug. "Hey, which bus do you take to get home?"

"The 31," I say.

"Me, too," he says. "I'll meet you at the bus stop after school."

"Okay," I say.

"I know where your locker is," he says. "See you later."

I watch him walk off and I notice something amazing—Tino walks proud. Fat kids at Carmichael High don't usually walk like that. I wonder how long he'll last here.



After school, I get my books out of my locker. I wonder if he's going to show up. But Tino is one surprise after another. He comes around the corner.

We walk to the bus, and it's okay today: None of the Blades are around. "What's wrong with your right foot?" Tino asks.

I stare at him. I swear, nobody's asked me that since I was eight years old. They usually ask *someone else* what's wrong with me.

"It's a clubfoot," I say. "My foot's twisted. It's been that way ever since I was born."

"Huh. Anything you can do about it?" Tino says.

"If they'd done something right away, they could have fixed it, but I think it's too late now," I say.

"It's all your fault," Tino says. "You should've been born rich. Then they would have taken care of it right away."

I grin. Another surprise. It actually feels *good* to talk about my foot.

“It’s my fault, too—that I’m fat,” he says.
“I eat too much.”

I start laughing. “Did you ever go on a diet?” I ask.

“Only about 17 times,” he says. Now we’re both laughing.



Tino gets off the bus and waves. I get off at the next stop and head to the day care center. I have to pick up my baby sister, Yoli.

When she sees my face she lights up like a candle. She comes running for a hug, calling “Sánte! Sánte!”

Everybody loves Yoli ’cause she’s sweet and really pretty. People think I’m good-looking, too—until they see me walk. When Yoli’s 16, like I am now, she won’t want to be seen on the street with me. But right now, it’s cool. I’m the sun, the moon, and the stars to her.

We walk home and watch TV for a while. Then I fix something to eat and Mom comes home. As usual, she looks exhausted. She

works in a factory, making men's wallets. Her hands hurt all the time. That's because she does the same movements over and over. Sometimes I hear her crying when she's trying to fold laundry. Or maybe she's crying about something else.

After everyone goes to bed, I sit down at my drums. But I just play on the practice pad so I won't wake anybody up. My drums are the coolest thing I ever had. My uncle left them for me when he died three years ago. Even when there's no school, playing drums is the best part of the day—always.



When I see Tino at lunch the next day, he's got Runt with him. They look odd together. That's because Tino's tall and Runt's about as big as your average fifth-grader. After me, he's Rubio's favorite victim.

"Hey, man, we're starting a club," Tino announces. "*The Outcasts*."

"Sounds good," I say. Everything Tino says