

Name: _____ Class: _____

The Challenge

By Gary Soto
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Gary Soto is an American poet, novelist, and memoirist. In this short story, a boy tries to impress the new girl at his school. As you read, take notes on how José feels about Estela.

- [1] For three weeks José tried to get the attention of Estela, the new girl at his middle school. She's cute, he said to himself when he first saw her in the cafeteria, unloading her lunch of two sandwiches, potato chips, a piece of cake wrapped in waxed paper, and boxed juice from a brown paper bag. "Man, can she grub!"



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On the way home from school he walked through the alleys of his town, Fresno, kicking cans. He was lost in a dream, trying to figure out a way to make Estela notice him. He thought of tripping in front of her while she was leaving her math class, but he had already tried that with a girl in sixth grade. All he did was rip his pants and bruise his knee, which kept him from playing in the championship soccer game. And that girl had just stepped over him as he lay on the ground, the shame of rejection reddening his face.

He thought of going up to Estela and saying, in his best James Bond voice, "Camacho. José Camacho, at your service." He imagined she would say, "Right-o," and together they would go off and talk in code.

He even tried doing his homework. Estela was in his history class, and so he knew she was as bright as a cop's flashlight shining in your face. While they were studying Egypt, José amazed the teacher, Mrs. Flores, when he scored twenty out of twenty on a quiz — and then eighteen out of twenty when she retested him the same day because she thought that he had cheated.

- [5] "Mrs. Flores, I studied hard — *¡de veras!*¹ You can call my mom," he argued, his feelings hurt. And he had studied, so much that his mother had asked, "*¿Qué pasó?* What's wrong?"

"I'm going to start studying," he'd answered.

His mother bought him a lamp because she didn't want him to strain his eyes. She even fixed him hot chocolate and watched her son learn about the Egyptian god Osiris, about papyrus and mummification. The mummies had scared her so much that she had heated up a second cup of chocolate to soothe herself.

1. Spanish for "really!"

But when the quizzes had been returned and José bragged, “Another A-plus,” Estela didn’t turn her head and ask, “Who’s that brilliant boy?” She just stuffed her quiz into her backpack and left the classroom, leaving José behind to retake the test.

One weekend he had wiped out while riding his bike, popping up over curbs with his eyes closed. He somersaulted over his handlebars and saw a flash of shooting stars as he felt the slap of his skin against the asphalt. Blood rushed from his nostrils like twin rivers. He bicycled home, his blood-darkened shirt pressed to his nose. When he examined his face in the mirror, he saw that he had a scrape on his chin, and he liked that. He thought Estela might pity him. In history class she would cry, “Oh, what happened?” and then he would talk nonsense about a fight with three *vatos*.²

- [10] But Estela had been absent the Monday and Tuesday after his mishap.³ By the time she returned on Wednesday his chin had nearly healed.

José figured out another way to get to know her. He had noticed the grimy, sweat-blackened handle of a racket poking out of her backpack. He snapped his fingers and said to himself, “Racquetball. I’ll challenge her to a game.” He approached her during lunch. She was reading from her science book and biting into her second sandwich, which was thick with slabs of meat, cheese, and a blood-red tomato. “Hi,” José said, sitting across the table from her. “How do you like our school?”

Estela swallowed, cleared her throat, drank from her milk carton until it collapsed, and said, “It’s OK. But the hot water doesn’t work in the girls’ showers.”

“It doesn’t work in ours either,” he remarked. Trying to push the conversation along, he continued, “Where are you from?”

“San Diego,” she said. She took another monstrous bite of her sandwich, which amazed José and made him think of his father, a carpenter, who could eat more than anyone José knew.

- [15] José, eager to connect, took a deep breath and said, “I see that you play racquetball. You wanna play a game?”

“Are you good?” Estela asked flatly. She picked up a slice of tomato that had slid out of her sandwich.

“Pretty good,” he said without thinking as he slipped into a lie. “I won a couple of tournaments.”

He watched as the tomato slice slithered down Estela’s throat. She wiped her mouth and said, “Sure. How about after school on Friday.”

“That’s tomorrow,” José said. “That’s right. Today’s Thursday and tomorrow’s Friday.” She flattened the empty milk carton with her fist, slapped her science book closed, and hurled the carton and her balled-up lunch bag at the plastic-lined garbage can. “What’s your name?”

- [20] “Camacho. José Camacho.”

“I’m Estela. My friends call me Stinger.”

2. Spanish for “dudes” or “men”
3. an unlucky accident

"Stinger?"

"Yeah, Stinger. I'll meet you at the courts at 3:45." She got up and headed toward the library.

After school José pedaled his bike over to his uncle Freddie's house. His uncle was sixteen, only three years older than José. It made José feel awkward when someone, usually a girl, asked, "Who's that hunk?" and he would have to answer, "My uncle."

[25] "Freddie," José yelled, skidding to a stop in the drive-way. Freddie was in the garage lifting weights. He was dressed in sweats and a Raiders⁴ sweatshirt, the hem of his T-shirt sticking out in a fringe. He bench-pressed 180 pounds,⁵ then put the weights down and said, "Hey, dude."

"Freddie, I need to borrow your racquetball racket," José said. Freddie rubbed his sweaty face on the sleeve of his sweatshirt. "I didn't know you played."

"I don't. I got a game tomorrow."

"But you don't know how to play." José had been worrying about this on his bike ride over. He had told Estela that he had won tournaments. "I'll learn," José said. "In one day? Get serious." "It's against a girl."

"So. She'll probably whip you twenty-one to *nada*."

[30] "No way."

But José's mind twisted with worry. What if she did, he asked himself. What if she whipped him through and through. He recalled her crushing the milk carton with one blow of her fist. He recalled the sandwiches she downed at lunch. Still, he had never encountered a girl who was better than he was at sports, except for Dolores Ramirez, who could hit homers with the best of them. Uncle Freddie pulled his racket from the garage wall. Then he explained to José how to grip the racket. He told him that the game was like handball, that the play was off the front, the ceiling, and the side walls. "Whatever you do, don't look behind you. The ball comes back — fast. You can get your *ojos*⁶ knocked out."

"Yeah, I got it," José said vaguely, feeling the weight of the racket in his hand. He liked how it felt when he pounded the sweet spot of the strings against his palm.

Freddie resumed lifting weights, and José biked home, swinging the racket as he rode. That night after dinner José went outside and asked his father, "Dad, has a girl ever beaten you at anything?"

His father was watering the grass, his shirt off and a stub of cigarette dangling from his mouth. His pale belly hung over his belt, just slightly, like a deflated ball.

[35] "Only talking," he said. "They can outtalk a man any day of the week."

4. a professional American football team

5. He lifted 180 pounds in weights over his body while lying on a bench.

6. Spanish for "eyes"

"No, in sports." His father thought for a while and then said, "No, I don't think so." His father's tone of voice didn't encourage José. So he took the racket and a tennis ball and began to practice against the side of the garage. The ball raced away like a rat. He retrieved it and tried again. Every time, he hit it either too softly or too hard, and he couldn't get the rhythm of a rally⁷ going.

"It's hard," he said to himself. But then he remembered that he was playing with a tennis ball, not a racquetball. He assumed that he would play better with a real ball.

The next day school was as dull as usual. He took a test in history and returned to his regular score of twelve out of twenty. Mrs. Flores was satisfied.

"I'll see you later," Estela said, hoisting her backpack onto one shoulder, the history quiz crumpled in her fist. "OK, Estela," he said.

[40] "Stinger," she corrected.

"Yeah, Stinger. 3:45."

José was beginning to wonder whether he really liked her. Now she seemed abrupt,⁸ not cute. She was starting to look like Dolores "Hit 'n' Spit" Ramirez — tough.

After school José walked slowly to the outdoor three-walled courts. They were empty, except for a gang of sparrows pecking at an old hamburger wrapper.

José practiced hitting the tennis ball against the wall. It was too confusing. The ball would hit the front wall, then ricochet⁹ off the side wall. He spent most of his time running after the ball or cursing himself for bragging that he had won tournaments.

[45] Estela arrived, greeting José with a jerk of her chin and a "Hey, dude." She was dressed in white sweats. A pair of protective goggles dangled around her neck like a necklace, and she wore sweatbands on both wrists. She opened a can of balls and rolled one out into her palm, squeezing it so tightly that her forearm rippled with muscle. When she smacked the ball against the wall so hard that the echo hurt his ears, José realized that he was in trouble. He felt limp as a dead fish.

Estela hit the ball repeatedly. When she noticed that José was just standing there, his racket in one hand and a dog-slobbered tennis ball in the other, she asked, "Aren't you going to practice?"

"I forgot my balls at home," he said.

"Help yourself." She pointed with the racket toward the can. José took a ball, squeezed it, and bounced it once. He was determined to give Estela a show. He bounced it again, swung with all his might, and hit it out of the court. "Oops," he said. "I'll go get it, Stinger."

7. A rally in sports is an exchange of strokes before a point is won.

8. **Abrupt** (*adjective*): brief to the point of rudeness

9. **Ricochet** (*verb*): to rebound or bounce off of a surface

He found the ball in the gutter, splotted with mud that he wiped off on his pants. When he returned to the court Estela had peeled off her sweats and was working a pair of knee pads up her legs. José noticed that her legs were bigger than his, and they quivered like the flanks¹⁰ of a thoroughbred horse.

[50] "You ready?" she asked, adjusting her goggles over her eyes. "I have to leave at five."

"Almost," he said. He took off his shirt, then put it back on when he realized how skinny his chest was. "Yeah, I'm ready. You go first."

Estela, sizing him up, said, "No, you go first."

José decided to accept the offer. He figured he needed all the help he could get. He bounced the ball and served it into the ground twice.

"You're out," she said, scooping the ball up onto her racket and walking briskly¹¹ to the service box.¹² José wanted to ask why, but he kept quiet. After all, he thought, I am the winner of several tournaments.

[55] "Zero-zero," Estela said, then served the ball, which ricocheted off the front and side walls. José swung wildly and missed by at least a foot. Then he ran after the ball, which had rolled out of the court onto the grass. He returned it to Estela and said, "Nice, Estela."

"Stinger."

"Yeah, Stinger."

Estela called out, "One-nothing." She wound up again and sizzled the ball right at José's feet. He swung and hit his kneecap with the racket. The pain jolted him like a shock of electricity as he went down, holding his knee and grimacing.¹³ Estela chased the ball for him.

"Can you play?" she asked. He nodded as he rose to his feet.

[60] "Two-nothing," she said, again bouncing the ball off the front wall, this time slower so that José swung before the ball reached his racket. He swung again, the racket spinning like a whirlwind. The ball sailed slowly past him, and he had to chase it down again.

"I guess that's three to nothing, right?" José said lamely.

"Right." Estela lobbed¹⁴ the ball. As it came down, José swung hard. His racket slipped from his fingers and flew out of the court.

"Oops," he said. The racket was caught on the top of the chain-link fence surrounding the courts. For a moment José thought of pulling the racket down and running home. But he had to stick it out. Anyway, he thought, my backpack is at the court.

10. the side of an animal's body between the ribs and the hip

11. **Brisk (adjective):** active, fast, and energetic

12. the area in which a player stands to serve the ball

13. **Grimace (verb):** to make a facial expression twisted with pain

14. **Lob (verb):** to throw or hit (something) in a high arc

"Four-nothing," Estela called when she saw José running back to the court, his chest heaving. She served again, and José, closing his eyes connected. The ball hit the wall, and for three seconds they had a rally going. But then Estela moved in and killed the ball with a low corner shot.

[65] "Five-nothing," she said. "It's getting cold. Let me get my sweats back on."

She slipped into her sweats and threw off her sweatbands. José thought about asking to borrow the sweatbands because he had worked up a lather of sweat. But his pride kept him quiet. Estela served again and again until the score was seventeen to nothing and José was ragged from running. He wished the game would end. He wished he would score just one point. He took off his shirt and said, "Hey, you're pretty good."

Estela served again, gently this time, and José managed to return the ball to the front wall. Estela didn't go after it, even though she was just a couple of feet from the ball. "Nice corner shot," she lied. "Your serve."

José served the ball and, hunching over with his racket poised, took crab steps to the left, waiting for the ball to bounce off the front wall. Instead he heard a thunderous smack and felt himself leap like a trout. The ball had hit him in the back, and it stung viciously. He ran off the court and threw himself on the grass, grimacing from the pain. It took him two minutes to recover, time enough for Estela to take a healthy swig from the bottle of Gatorade in her sport bag. Finally, through his teeth, he muttered, "Good shot, Stinger."

"Sorry," Estela said. "You moved into my lane. Serve again."

[70] José served and then cowered out of the way, his racket held to his face for protection. She fired the ball back, clean and low, and once again she was standing at the service line calling, "Service."

Uncle Freddie was right. He had lost twenty-one to *nada*. After a bone-jarring¹⁵ handshake and a pat on his aching back from Estela, he hobbled to his uncle's house, feeling miserable. Only three weeks ago he'd been hoping that Estela — Stinger — might like him. Now he hoped she would stay away from him.

Uncle Freddie was in the garage lifting weights. Without greeting him, José hung the racket back on the wall. Uncle Freddie lowered the weights, sat up, and asked, "So how did it go?"

José didn't feel like lying. He lifted his T-shirt and showed his uncle the big red mark the ball had raised on his back. "She's bad."

"It could have been your face," Freddie said as he wiped away sweat and lay back down on his bench. "Too bad." José sat on a pile of bundled newspapers, hands in his lap. When his uncle finished his "reps,"¹⁶ José got up slowly and peeled the weights down to sixty pounds. It was his turn to lift. He needed strength to mend his broken heart and for the slight chance that Stinger might come back, looking for another victory.

15. **Jarring** (*adjective*): causing a physical shock, jolt, or vibration

16. a repetition of a set of exercises

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