The Pool Party

by Gary Soto

It was Saturday, summer vacation, but a workday for the Herrera family. The sun, a yellow bonnet of summer hear, hung above the trees. Rudy’s entire family – father, mother, sister, and grandfather, who was known throughout Fresno as “El Shorty” – were working in the yard. Father was gardener, but his yard was brimming with tall, scraggly weeds.

Rudy was in the kitchen slapping together a sandwich for his older sister, Estela. He owed her a favor. She had promised to do more yard work if he sneaked into the house to make a sandwich.

“Make it thick,” Estela had told Rudy. “Three slices of bologna and some cheese.”

Rudy layered the sandwich with only one slice of bologna, tomato, and potato chips. When he pressed his palm against the sandwich, the chips crunched. He liked that sound and liked how the sliced tomato would bleed a faint pinkish juice. He peeked into the sandwich. The bologna looked like a tongue wagging at him.

He picked up the sandwich and looked out the kitchen window. His mother, hair tied with a bandanna, was vacuuming the trunk of their battered Oldsmobile. Rudy imagined the vacuum sucking up marbles, bottle caps, candy wrappers, and leaves. He saw one of his gym socks gag the hose. Mother made a face and wrestled the sock.

When his mother turned around, Rudy ducked down, his back to the wall. His heart pounded, not from fear but from the giddiness of sneaking around behind his mother’s back.

As Rudy stood up, he saw a letter on the kitchen table. The letter was addressed to him. He put the sandwich down and licked his salty fingers before opening up the letter. When he tore it open, glitter rained onto the kitchen table. It was like magic, or a rainbow that had collapsed in his own house. He read: “You are invited to Tiffany Perez’s Pool Party, Saturday from 12Noon – 4 PM. 1334 The Bluffs”

“What’s a ‘pool party’?” he wondered aloud. He sniffed the envelope, nostrils quivering. It smelled like the stuff his mother would dab on her wrists on those evenings she went dancing with his father.

Rudy ran out the back door with the sandwich and the invitation, which trailed a sweet scent of perfume. His grandfather, El Shorty, was sitting in the yard, taping a splintered shovel.

“Abuelo, mira!” Rudy shouted, waving the invitation. The sandwich flopped in his hand, a slice of tomato falling out.

Not even thinking about it, Grandfather took the sandwich from Rudy and chomped a big corner from it. He chewed and cleared his throat.

“Mira, it’s as good as new,” he said of the shovel. “It dug up and buried a lot of things, mi’jo.”

Grandfather took another bite of the sandwich and began a long story about how once when he was a young man hitchhiking to California his shoes were stolen and he had to use cardboard to jump from place to place.

“Like this,” Grandfather explained. He demonstrated how he would pitch the cardboard in front of him, step on it, let his feet cool for a few seconds before he would step off the cardboard and pitch it again in front of him.

That’s how he jumped from place to place and ended up in Fresno, working as a gardener. That’s how years later he would be sitting in the backyard taping a splintered shovel back to life.

Rudy was familiar with this story. He had heard it a hundred times, maybe more, and other stories about the usefulness of electrical tape, another topic that made Rudy wonder if his grandfather was all right in the head. His grandfather was always telling stories about the poor days in California, just after he arrived from Mexico with the dream of a home and an orange tree in the backyard.

Rudy stopped his grandfather’s monologue by shoving the invitation in his face. “Grandpa, what’s a pool party?” he asked.

His grandfather studied the invitation, and then, scratching his stubbled face, said, “That’s when a bunch of guys get together and shoot pool. Like me and my compa Pete Salinas when we –“

“Shoot pool?” Rudy interrupted. It didn’t seem right. Tiffany was the richest girl at his school. Rudy couldn’t picture her leaning over a pool table, muttering, “Eight ball in the side pocket.”

“Yeah, like when me and Pete Salinas,” his grandfather started, “were down to our last quarter and we found ourselves without shirts –“

Rudy rolled his eyes, because the story sounded familiar. Pretending to be startle, Rudy shouted, “It’s the phone,” and ran away. He ran to the side of the house where his mother was vacuuming the car. “Mom!” he screamed over the wall of the vacuum.

“Mom, I got invited to Tiffany’s pool party! What’s a ‘pool party’?”

His mother turned and, by accident, the invitation was sucked into the hose, which gagged and moaned before the card descended into the belly of the vacuum.

“The invitation!” Rudy screamed. He hastily turned off the vacuum and opened it up. He plucked out the invitation, which was crinkled but still sweet-smelling. He also plucked out and pocketed a marble he had been looking for.

“Look,” Rudy said, flapping the invitation at his mother.

Mother took the invitation and read it slowly. She smelled it, a wrinkle cutting across her brow. “Quien es Tiffany Perez?”

“A girl at school.”

“A girl?” Rudy’s mother looked curiously at him. She smelled the invitation a second time and handed it back.

“No se. I don’t know what a ‘pool party’ is,” Mother finally said. “Ask Estela.”

Rudy trotted away, his untied laces slapping around his ankles, and passed his father, who was carrying a plastic trash bag over his shoulders. “Hey, Dad! I’m invited to a pool party,” Rudy boasted.

“That’s good,” Father said. “Give me five, hombre. No, ten! No, fifteen and twenty.”

They slapped palms and spun away. But Rudy’s father stopped in his tracks. He looked back at his son, his head tilted in wonder. “What’s a ‘pool party’?” he asked. He shrugged and lifted the trash bag onto his shoulders.