Seventh Grade

By Gary Soto

1. On the first day of school, Victor stood in line half an hour before he came to a wobbly card table. He was handed a packet of papers and a computer card on which he listed his one elective[1], French. He already spoke Spanish and English, but he thought some day he might travel to France, where it was cool; not like Fresno, where summer days reached 110 degrees in the shade. There were rivers in France, and huge churches, and fair-skinned people everywhere, the way there were brown people all around Victor

2. Besides, Teresa, a girl he had liked since they were in catechism classes at Saint Theresa's, was taking French, too. With any luck they would be in the same class. Teresa is going to be my girl this year, he promised himself as he left the gym full of students in their new fall clothes. She was cute. And good in math, too, Victor thought as he walked down the hall to his homeroom. He ran into his friend, Michael Torres, by the water fountain that never turned off.

3. They shook hands, *raza*-style, and jerked their heads at one another in a *saludo de vato*[2]. "How come you're making a face?" asked Victor.

4. "I ain't making a face, *ese*[3]. This is my face." Michael said his face had changed during the summer. He had read a GQ magazine that his older brother had borrowed from the Book Mobile and noticed that the male models all had the same look on their faces. They would stand, one arm around a beautiful woman, and *scowl*. They would sit at the pool, their rippled stomachs dark with shadow, and *scowl*. They would sit at dinner tables, cool drinks in their hands, and *scowl*.

5. "I think it works," Michael said. He scowled and let his upper lip quiver. His teeth showed along with the ferocity of his soul. "Belinda Reyes walked by a while ago and looked at me," he said.

6. Victor didn't say anything, though he thought his friend looked pretty strange. They talked about recent movies, baseball, their parents, and the horrors of picking grapes in order to buy their fall clothes. Picking grapes was like living in Siberia[4], except hot and more boring.

7. "What classes are you taking?" Michael said, scowling.

8. "French. How 'bout you?"

9. "Spanish. I ain't so good at it, even if I'm Mexican."

10. "I'm not either, but I'm better at it than math, that's for sure."

11. A tinny, three-beat bell propelled students to their homerooms. The two friends socked each other in the arm and went their ways, Victor thinking, man, that's weird. Michael thinks making a face makes him handsome.

12. On the way to his homeroom, Victor tried a scowl. He felt foolish, until out of the corner of his eye he saw a girl looking at him. Umm, he thought, maybe it does work. He scowled with greater conviction[5].

13. In the homeroom, roll was taken, emergency cards were passed out, and they were given a bulletin to take home to their parents. The principal, Mr. Belton, spoke over the crackling loudspeaker, welcoming the students to a new year, new experiences, and new friendships. The students squirmed in their chairs and ignored him, they were anxious to go to first period. Victor sat calmly, thinking of Teresa, who sat two rows away, reading a paperback novel. This would

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[1] **elective** (n.) - optional course or subject
[2] ***raza*-style. . .*saludo de vato*** - Spanish gestures of greeting between friends
[3] ***ese*** - Spanish word for "man"
[4] **Sibera** - region in northern Asia known for its harsh winters
[5] **conviction** (n.) - belief

be his lucky year. She was in his homeroom, and would probably be in his English and math classes. And, of course, French.

14. The bell rang for first period, and the students herded noisily through the door. Only Teresa lingered, talking with the homeroom teacher.

15. "So you think I should talk to Mrs. Gaines?" she asked the teacher. "She would know about ballet?"

16. "She would be a good bet," the teacher said. Then added, "Or the gym teacher, Mrs. Garza."

17. Victor lingered, keeping his head down and staring at his desk. He wanted to leave when she did so he could bump into her and say something clever.

18. He watched her on the sly. As she turned to leave, he stood up and hurried to the door, where he managed to catch her eye. She smiled and said, "Hi, Victor."

19. He smiled back and said, "Yeah, that's me." His brown face blushed. Why hadn't he said, "Hi, Teresa," or "How was your summer?" or something nice.

20. As Teresa walked down the hall, Victor walked the other way, looking back, admiring how gracefully she walked, one foot in front of the other. So much for being in the same class, he thought. As he trudged to English, he practiced scowling.

21. In English they reviewed the parts of speech. Mr. Lucas, a portly man, waddled down the aisle, asking, "What is a noun?"

22. "A person, place, or thing," said the class in unison.

23. "Yes, now somebody give mean example of a person--you, Victor Rodriguez."

24. "Teresa," Victor said automatically. Some of the girls giggled. They knew he had a crush on Teresa. He felt himself blushing again.

25. "Correct," Mr. Lucas said. "Now provide me with a place."

26. Mr. Lucas called on a freckled kid who answered, "Teresa's house with a kitchen full of big brothers."

27. After English, Victor had math, his weakest subject. He sat in the back by the window, hoping that he would not be called on. Victor understood most of the problems, but some of the stuff looked like the teacher made it up as she went along. It was confusing, like the inside of a watch.

28. After math he had a fifteen-minute break, then social studies, and finally lunch. He bought a tuna casserole with buttered rolls, some fruit cocktail, and milk. He sat with Michael, who practiced scowling between bites.

29. Girls walked by and looked at him, "See what I mean, Vic?" Michael scowled. "They love it."

30. "Yeah, I guess so."

31. They ate slowly, Victor scanning the horizon for a glimpse of Teresa. He didn't see her. She must have brought lunch, he thought, and is eating outside. Victor scraped his plate and left Michael, who was busy scowling at a girl two tables away.

32. The small, triangle-shaped campus bustled with students talking about their new classes. Everyone was in a sunny mood. Victor hurried to the bag lunch area, where he sat down and opened his math book. He moved his lips as if he were reading, but his mind was somewhere else. He raised his eyes slowly and looked around. No Teresa.

33. He lowered his eyes, pretending to study, then looked slowly to the left. No Teresa. He turned a page in the book and stared at some math problems that scared him because he knew he would have to do them eventually. He looked at the right. Still no sign of her. He stretched out lazily in an attempt to disguise his snooping.

34. Then he saw her. She was sitting with a girlfriend under a plum tree. Victor moved to a table near her and daydreamed about taking her to a movie. When the bell sounded, Teresa looked up,

and their eyes met. She smiled sweetly and gathered her books. Her next class was French, same as Victor's.

35. They were among the last students to arrive in class, so all the good desks in the back had already been taken. Victor was forced to sit near the front, a few desks away from Teresa, while Mr. Bueller wrote French words on the chalkboard. The bell rang, and Mr. Bueller wiped his hands, turned to the class, and said, "*Bonjour*."[6]

36. "*Bonjour*," braved a few students.

37. "*Bonjour*," Victor whispered. He wondered if Teresa heard him.

38. Mr. Bueller said that if the students studied hard, at the end of the year they could go to France and be understood by the populace.

39. One kid raised his hand and asked, "What's 'populace'?"

40. "The people, the people of France."

41. Mr. Bueller asked if anyone knew French. Victor raised his hand, wanting to impress Teresa. The teacher beamed and said, "*Très bien. Parlez-vous français*?"[7]

42. Victor didn't know what to say. The teacher wet his lips and asked something else in French. The room grew silent. Victor felt all eyes staring at him. He tried to bluff his way out by making noises that sounded French.

43. "La me vave me con le grandma," he said uncertainly.

44. Mr. Bueller, wrinkling his face in curiosity, asked him to speak up.

45. Great rosebushes of red bloomed on Victor's cheeks. A river of nervous sweat ran down his palms. He felt awful. Teresa sat a few desks away, no doubt thinking he was a fool. Without looking at Mr. Bueller, Victor mumbled, 'Frenchie oh wewe gee in September."

46. Mr. Bueller asked Victor to repeat what he said.

47. "Frenchie oh wewe gee in September," Victor repeated.

48. Mr. Bueller understood that the boy didn't know French and turned away. He walked to the blackboard and pointed to the words on the board with his steel-edged ruler.

49. "*Le bateau*," he sang.

50. "*Le bateau*," the students repeated.

51. "*Le bateau est sur l'eau*,"[8] he sang.

52. "*Le bateau est sur l'eau*."

53. Victor was too weak from failure to join the class. He stared at the board and wished he had taken Spanish, not French. Better yet, he wished he could start his life over. He had never been so embarrassed. He bit his thumb until he tore off a sliver of skin.

54. The bell sounded for fifth period, and Victor shot out of the room, avoiding the stares of the other kids, but had to return for his math book. He looked sheepishly[9] at the teacher, who was erasing the board, then widened his eyes in terror at Teresa who stood in front of him. "I didn't know you knew French,"she said. "That was good."

55. Mr. Bueller looked at Victor, and Victor looked back. Oh please, don't say anything, Victor pleaded with his eyes. I'll wash your car, mow your lawn, walk your dog--anything! I'll be your best student, and I'll clean your erasers after school.

56. Mr. Bueller shuffled through the papers on his desk, He smiled and hummed as he sat down to work. He remembered his college years when he dated a girlfriend in borrowed cars. She

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[6] **Bonjour** – French for "Hello"; "Good day"

[7] ***Très bien. Parlez-vous français?*** – French for "Very well. Do you speak French?"

[8] ***Le bateau est sur l'eau*** – French for "The boat is on the water."

[9] **Sheepishly** (adv.) – in a shy or embarrassed way

thought he was rich because each time he picked her up he had a different car. It was fun until he had spent all his money on her and had to write home to his parents because he was broke.

57. Victor couldn't stand to look at Teresa. He was sweaty with shame. "Yeah, well, I picked up a few things from movies and books and stuff like that." They left the class together. Teresa asked him if he would help her with her French.

58. "Sure, anytime," Victor said.

59. "I won't be bothering you, will I?"

60. "Oh no, I like being bothered."

61. "Bonjour." Teresa said, leaving him outside her next class. She smiled and pushed wisps of hair from her face.

62. "Yeah, right, bonjour," Victor said. He turned and headed to his class. The rosebuds of shame on his face became bouquets of love. Teresa is a great girl, he thought. And Mr. Bueller is a good guy.

63. He raced to metal shop. After metal shop there was biology, and after biology a long sprint to the public library, where he checked out three French textbooks.

64. He was going to like seventh grade.

GARY SOTO
(b. 1952)

Gary Soto has a lot in common with the character Victor Rodriguez. Soto grew up in Fresno and once harvested crops in the fields of California.

Soto began writing while in college. In the fiction and poetry he's written since, he reaches back to the sense of belonging he felt in Fresno. He often writes for young adults, who he knows are also searching for their own community and their own place.