**Waste**

Iván Brave

Luis tears out the page, crumples it up, and tosses the wad into the cafeteria waste basket. He is trying to write his crush’s name perfectly. But Pablo shoves him.

“Lunch is over, tonto.”

Another wasted sheet. At least no one saw what he was writing. . . Luis ninja sprints his way to the brick amphitheater, on the far side of the playground—his quiet place.

Crisscross on the first row, he mouths her name, “Cindy,” tracing the letters of her name, over and over. Half of recess goes by, among plenty of pencil shavings and crushed spiral notebook shreds. Yet not one iteration of her name seems to come out just right.

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“What are you up to, Luis?”

Like a bug plucked off a branch, Luis rolls into his stomach. He won’t lift his head to see her face.

“Hi, Sonia . . .” he says, noticing her nails are like seashells today. As he compliments her, Luis stealthily thumbs forward to the next page.

“You’re funny,” she says. “I already saw what you were writing.”

The sound of the playground swirls all around them. Children playing tag, swings creaking, Luis sighing. He watches as she reaches into his canvas bag, to help herself to one of his writing utensils, asking Luis to hand her a clean sheet, too, so she can draw.

“You should tell her you like her,” says Sonia, tracing the outer edges of her left and right palm. “Girls like it when you tell them.” The way she said it, Luis isn’t sure if Sonia is proud of herself for knowing what to say, or of her own hands. She doesn’t stop staring at her finished art. “Yeah, just tell her.”

“No way,” says Luis. He explains his bad luck in the past. “Once they know, it’s over!”

Sonia clicks her tongue. Then she goes to shade in her hands with the pencil, but the pencil tip snaps.

“What’re you doing?” Luis asks.

“Shading in the edges, like . . .” Sonia says, grabbing his notebook and flipping to the section from two or three weeks before, the day Luis drew a slew of leaves from the playground. “Like you did here. How did you do it?”

“It’s not *how*,” Luis says. “It’s *what*.” He snatches his pencil back from Sonia, puts it in his sharpener, and twists. “You took a number 1 pencil,” he says. “It makes the lines dark, but only because the tip is weak.” Luis picks out a #4 pencil.

“Number 4?” Sonia asks, holding the cedar in her hands.

“Lighter than 2s and 3s, but also harder.” Luis goes back to the last iteration of Cindy’s name, probably his best, with her name in the shape of a heart. “It’s better for shading.”

“Right,” says Sonia, her face flashing crooked, milk-white teeth. (When he isn’t looking, thinks Sonia, I’ll take this pencil home.) She goes back to shading her hands, admiring her work along the way. When she is finished, she holds up her own two hands to the light of the early winter sun, nodding. “Yeah,” she says, “you definitely have to tell her.”

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“Shouldn’t I wait until after her birthday?”, asks Luis, carefully tearing out his gift for Cindy.

“I thought that’s why you were making her something?” Sonia asks. “Look, there she is, go give it to her.”

Even with his bad eyes, Luis sees the young girl followed by a parade of friends, each stapling their lunch money dollar to a long chain of bills starting at her chest—a local custom at the school. The more popular you were, the more classmates stapled dollar bills to your chain of dollar bills. And Cindy’s was so long she had it wrapped around her waist, twice, and the end tucked into her khaki skirt pocket.

Sonia nudges her still crisscrossed friend to go wait where their class will eventually line up to return from recess. He does.

“Hi, Luis,” Cindy says, trying to line up at the door in front of him, with her two friends.

But Luis doesn’t move. His heart pounding. His hand trembling, holding out to her that innocent sheet of paper.

But Cindy doesn’t grab it. Her face is so red you can’t even see the pimples on her cheeks anymore.

Just then, Pablo jumps from behind and snatches the gift from Luis’s hand.

He bursts out laughing, gathering friends to come look at what tonto wrote, before balling it to a crunch. “Luis likes Cindy!” The collective “Ew” and ensuing laughter hurt more than looking directly at the sun. Luis holds his breath, like swimming under water, and lunges for his “Cindy” back. Yet the other boys are too fast. First, they pass it around, but soon are kicking the sheet like a soccer ball, staining it with their muddy shoes, and making Luis chase it, trip, fall, get knocked over, until the wad goes back to Pablo, who finally stomps on it hard, before softly lobbing it into a nearby trash can.

His hands cut up by the gravel by the door, Luis is suddenly lifted into the air: Pablo and his friends have grabbed Luis by his limbs, and they dump him into the very same trash can.

Cindy giggles and leaves. Pablo and his friends dash from the scene.

The world is over. The teacher hasn’t even reached poor Luis yet. When from the sky there comes a pair of outstretched hands, with seashell fingers.

“That was awesome,” Sonia says, pulling Luis out. “I knew you should tell her!”

“Right,” says Luis, a little dizzy. But strangely happy too. “Why is that?”

“Because now you know,” says Sonia, blushing. “She doesn’t like you.”

The teacher walks Luis to the restroom, then to the principal’s office. Meanwhile, Sonia smiles. She has decided to keep Luis’s pencil after all. The one she stole. Until he realizes who *actually* likes him.