



**THERE'S ALL SORTS** of bad advice out there about how to deal with bullies. *Ignore them. Stand up to them. Tell a teacher, tell a parent, tell your dentist while he's jamming your teeth back into your face.*

The real way to deal with a bully is to stick a raw chicken in their locker.

I had my showdown with Yasmany Robles just three days after I had started my new life at Culeco Academy of the Arts, a magnet school in the middle of Miami. To get in, you had to have good grades, pass an interview, and either submit a portfolio (for painting or writing) or audition (for theater or music). You'd think all the effort someone has to go through to get into Culeco would've kept out bullies, but I guess not.

I guess there are just too many of them in the world. If your school only allowed in kids who'd never pick on anyone, you'd have an empty school.

Whatever. It's not like I hadn't learned how to handle bullies back in Connecticut.

On Wednesday, between fourth and fifth periods, I went to

the lockers, along with half a million other kids. I stowed my history book and grabbed math so I could do my homework during lunch, then opened my bag of magic tricks and put on my GOTCHA! stamp ring. We would be doing introductions in my eighth-period theater class, and I thought I could use it to demonstrate some sleight of hand. Magic is kind of my thing.

I had a minute before I needed to go, so I took out my diabetes bag and fished out my glucose meter. I thought I'd be all right until lunch, but I'd started to feel spacey and dreamy at the end of my last class. Blood sugar levels might be falling. Best to check now.

As I rummaged, I noticed the tall kid next to me struggling to get his locker open. He was as Cuban as they come: brown, built like a track-and-field champ, with a haircut so short you could see the bumpy skin of his scalp beneath what was left of his tiny curls. He'd wrestled with his combination lock yesterday, too, and never figured it out, so he'd had to carry a full backpack of books to his next class. I'd had trouble with my lock on the first day, until I'd figured out you have to squeeze it as you turn the dial.

And I'm a nice guy. So I said to him, "Hey, man. My lock sucks, too. The trick is to squeeze the top while—"

That's all I got out before he punched his locker. The whole hallway grew a little quieter.

Yasmany—I learned his name later, but why keep you in suspense?—slowly turned to look at me. He scanned me up and down, doing some tough-guy calculations to figure out if he could take me.

Apparently he thought he could, because he stepped up to

me fast, ferocious, chest out, arms wide. He'd been in a lot of fights, judging from his flat-as-a-shamrock nose.

"Just come back from safari, white boy?" he asked. "I mean, if you even *are* a boy."

Let's take a second to break down this insult.

The "safari" crack was because I had on canvas cargo pants and a cargo vest, each with four pockets brimming with gadgets and tricks of the trade. Pretty much all the clothes I own have tons of pockets. I'm ready to perform at any time. You never know when the world is going to need a little magic.

The "white boy" crack was because—I guess?—to him I looked white. Back when I lived in Connecticut, kids were telling me to "go back to brown town" all the time. But I was in Miami now: new place, new rules about skin color.

And the "if you are a boy"? I kept my hair pretty long. It gave me a place to hide stuff in the middle of a trick. And to this caveman's mind, calling someone a girl was an insult.

Whatever. I tried the *My Little Pony* approach to handling bullies. "Sorry. Just trying to help." And I started to walk away.

He body-blocked me. "*You?* Wanted to help *me?* Why would a sandwich like you think I'd need your help?"

Now I looked him in the eye. "Your locker's still locked, isn't it?"

I probably shouldn't have said anything. But he called me a sandwich. Some insults you can't let slide.

In response, he did what bullies do. He slapped my diabetes bag out of my hands.

It hit the ground with a glassy crunch. My stomach crunched right along with it.

That pack contained my insulin, my syringes, my blood-glucose meter, my sharps disposal container (for used needles), my Band-Aids, and a fun-size bag of Skittles. If he broke something important in that pack, I could be in real trouble.

I knelt down to pick it up, my hands shaking as they reached for the bag. I tried to relax. I closed my eyes, breathed slowly, and remembered what Papi had said to me after Mami died: *Fear is your body trying to tell your brain what to do. But the brain is the king of the body. It calls the shots.*

I opened my eyes slowly, the way the good guys in movies do when they've just figured out how to beat the villain. I noticed that the bright young scholars of Culeco Academy of the Arts had formed a ring around Yasmany and me. This crowd didn't seem as bloodthirsty as the ones in my last school had been. In Connecticut, kids hooted like in *Planet of the Apes* whenever a fight was about to start, jumping up and down and beating on each other in anticipation of someone getting wedged back to the Stone Age. But these kids looked kind of grim and quiet, like this was some boring school assembly they had to attend.

Well, from my perspective, it didn't really matter whether they were enjoying themselves or not. They had me surrounded just the same. I was trapped.

Wait. No. That's an excuse, and I don't lie to myself. I could have pushed my way out of there if I'd wanted to. But now all eyes were on me. I had an audience. And I am a showman.

Yasmany stretched his fingers wide before he made two fists. "Time to die, little man. Stand up."

I stood all right. Got right in his face. "Time to die?" I asked. "Time. To. Die," he repeated.

“Like the dead chicken in your locker?” I asked.

“What?”

See, that’s the real secret of dealing with bullies: Change the game. You thought we were going to fistfight, Mr. Tough Guy, but—surprise!—suddenly we’re talking about murdered poultry.

“The dead chicken in your locker,” I said, explaining it to the crowd. “That’s the real reason you didn’t want to open it. You didn’t want anybody to see your dead chicken so they wouldn’t know you keep dead chickens in your locker. Because,” I said, turning to face Yasmany again, “what kind of weirdo keeps dead chickens in his locker?”

“Stop saying ‘dead chicken!’”

Everybody laughed. That probably would have sent Yasmany into a berserker rage if some girl hadn’t shrieked, “Blood!” She was pointing at Yasmany’s locker.

“What?” Yasmany asked again. He and everybody else looked at his locker, and yeah, there was watery pink blood leaking from it, the kind you find at the bottom of Styrofoam meat packages. Not a lot, but enough to drip from the bottom of the locker door and pool on the floor. And it only takes a tiny bit of blood to freak people all the way out.

Not me, though. I mean, I didn’t know SANGRE DE POLLO was going to come dripping out of his locker, but it wasn’t exactly a surprise, either. I could work with it.

“Open it,” I said to Yasmany. “Unless you’re too . . . *chicken.*”

If he hadn’t been completely bewildered by what was happening, he would have gorilla-rushed me for sure. Instead, he walked over to his locker and tried to undo the lock. Two,

four, seven yanks on it, each angrier than the last. Then he punched his locker door again and said, “I can’t open the stupid thing! I keep trying, but I can’t.”

“Here. Let me.”

He took a step back to let me through. But not without asking, “What? How you know my combo?”

His “combo” was still taped to the back of the lock. About as sharp as a bowling ball, this Yasmany.

I looked at him over my shoulder with spooky eyes and replied, “Fool! I am a magician. I can read your mind.” Then I spun the dial with fast fingers, clock-, then counter-, then clockwise again. I tugged the lock open dramatically and, with a flourish, removed it.

“You want the honors?” I asked him, stepping aside with a gracious magician’s bow.

Yasmany—bro had gone full autopilot by now—stepped forward and opened the locker door, every kid behind him on tiptoe, watching, waiting.

A whole raw chicken, like you get at the grocery store, with bumpy yellow skin and no head, flipped out of his locker, landed on its chicken butt, and went *splat*.

Kids scattered, screaming. Adults would be here any second. Yasmany did a 180 and looked around wildly. He didn’t have eyes anymore: just fear. “I didn’t put no dead chicken in my locker!” he yelled. “You gotta believe me!”

“I believe you,” I said.

Of course I did. It was I who had put it in there, after all.

Abracadabra, chicken plucker.