

ROOSEVELT HIGH SCHOOL SERIES

Tommy Stands Tall



Gloria L. Velásquez

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Summary: A senior now at Roosevelt High School, Tommy learns that a new student is beaten badly amid rumors that he is gay, so Tommy helps form a Gay Straight Alliance Club to raise awareness and seek equality for gay students.

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For Aunt Dora, Uncle Archie and Bernie
Remembering Steve Joseph Quintana (1959-1996)

ONE

Tommy

Driving into the Laguna Heights neighborhood where Maya lives, I have to smile at her words yesterday. “Kick-ass seniors,” that’s what she called us. It seems like not too long ago I wondered if I’d ever get this far. And now, here I am, a kick-ass senior with my own car, anxiously waiting to hear if I’ve been accepted into San Francisco State. I guess I have changed. Maya once mentioned in my World Cultures class that in some Native American cultures, they believe people shed their skin like snakes, transforming themselves. Snake medicine. Maybe that’s what I’ve done, shed my skin like Maya’s snakes.

As soon as I ring the doorbell, the door is opened by Maya’s mother. In her faded jeans and T-shirt, Professor Gonzales looks more like a student than a university professor. “Hello, Tommy,” she says, inviting me inside as Maya instantly appears at her side. Although Maya insists she looks like her dad’s side of the family, the resemblance to her mother is striking. The same olive skin and shiny black hair.

“Hey, Tomás,” Maya says. “What movie are we seeing?”

This year Maya won't stop calling me by my Spanish name, even though I keep telling her it makes her sound as old as my mom. Maya claims it sounds more sophisticated now that we're almost college students.

"It's the new comedy with Manny Rodríguez."

"I've heard it's hilarious," Professor Gonzales comments. "How's your Mom, Tommy?"

I barely have time to utter a few words before Maya pushes me toward the doorway. "We have to run or we'll be late," she apologizes as I wave goodbye to Professor Gonzales. That's the thing about Maya that's always bothered me—she's always rushing to get things done. She could use some snake medicine herself.

"Nice wheels," Maya says, climbing into the front seat of my black Honda.

"Not as hot as yours," I reply, turning on the engine as we head toward downtown.

"Tomás, if it hadn't been for Mom and Dad's help, you know I couldn't have afforded my car."

"True," I agree, thinking about how Dad's always griping about every penny we spend. I don't know how Mom can take it. She clips coupons like crazy and is always shopping for bargains, but Dad still complains. When I get my college degree, I'm going to give Mom money so she can buy anything she wants, like that new bedroom set she's always talking about.

Maya's next remark pulls me back from my thoughts. "Tyrone had to go to some sort of indigenous drumming with the kids at the Teen Center."

"That's cool," I say, smiling to myself at Maya's attitude of superiority. This year she refers to anyone who is

not a senior as a “kid.” It really doesn’t bother me. I know I’m damn lucky to have a friend like Maya who accepts me for who I am. It’s hard to believe two years have gone by since that day when I tried to kill myself. Maya has stood by me through it all. She never once rejected me.

Arriving downtown, I find a parking space a few blocks from Main Street. We hurry over to the Rialto, but instead of going to the ticket booth, we go to the side entrance where my friend, Mark, is collecting the tickets. The moment he sees me, Mark waves us inside. “Awesome service,” Maya teases, as we get in line at the snack bar.

After that, we find two empty seats in the middle row. While we munch on popcorn, the theater begins to fill. “Isn’t that the new Chicano at Roosevelt?” Maya whispers, pointing to the curly-haired student walking down the aisle with another guy who doesn’t look familiar.

“Yeah, his name’s Albert. He’s from some place called Tracy, wherever that is.”

My mind drifts to the first time I saw Albert. It was at the school library and he was telling the librarian, the Amazon Queen, that he had just moved to Laguna with his parents, that he had an older sister who was studying back East. Later that same day, I’d run into Albert in the hallway. Although we never spoke, we stared at each other for the longest time and I felt an odd connection with him.

When the lights are suddenly dimmed, my attention focuses back on the screen. After almost ten minutes of commercials and previews, the movie finally begins. Manny Rodríguez, the most popular Latino comedian today, is playing the role of Billy, the Barrio Funeral Planner who hauls coffins around in the back of his SUV. Billy

goes from house to house with his shiny Virgen de Guadalupe bumper stickers, giving huge discounts to all his *compadres* and homeboys in East LA. By the time the movie ends, Maya and I have laughed our guts out.

As we file out of the crowded theater, I catch a glimpse of Albert and his friend moving toward one of the exits. Once we are standing outside in the street, Maya asks, “Want to go to Yo Yo’s for some yogurt?”

Shaking my head, I explain, “Sorry, I can’t. I’ve got loads of homework for tomorrow.”

“You need to lighten up, Tomás—it’s our senior year!”

“I know, but I want to make sure I’m well-prepared for San Francisco State.”

“Don’t be a *tonto*—you’ll be more than ready,” Maya says, as we turn and start walking back to the car.

Sometimes I wish I had Maya’s confidence, but the reality is that I don’t have college-educated parents like she does. Dad works nights as a custodian at Laguna Hospital, while Mom cleans houses all day. Things have never come easy in *my* family.

After I drop Maya off at her house, I drive back to the apartment. Dad is in the living room watching the evening news with Mom. I know he isn’t working tonight since he is wearing one of his lame plaid shirts. “How was the movie?” Mom asks, glancing up from the couch.

“Funny—Manny Rodríguez is the new Cantinflas. You’d like him.”

Dad’s unexpected question takes me by surprise. Without taking his eyes off the TV, he asks, “Tomás, can I borrow your car tomorrow? My battery’s dead.”

Hesitating, I answer, “I guess so. I can catch a ride to school with Tyrone.”

I wait for a thank you that never comes. Frustrated, I head upstairs to my room, thinking about how my relationship with Dad sucks, but at least he isn’t ignoring me anymore. At least now he asks me for help, even though he still pretends I’m not gay. We never talk about it; never mention it. Like Maya once said when she was talking about how people still stare at her and Tyrone, we can’t change the world overnight.

I’m almost finished with my Math homework, when the door opens and María, the older of my two sisters, suddenly appears in my room. María turned eleven year this year and we get along fairly well, but she still gets on my nerves sometimes, especially when she tries to boss nine-year-old Amanda around. Mom once told me she thinks María’s jealous because Amanda has green eyes and is *güerita* like me, while María looks more like Mom’s side of the family. “You’re supposed to be asleep!” I gently scold her, as Amanda’s little head pops through the cracked door.

“You too, *gordita!*” I add, ordering them to bed. “You both have school tomorrow and if Dad finds out you’re still awake, you’re in for trouble.”

Pushing Amanda out of the room, a disappointed María says, “Okay, but can I borrow your Lonely Boys CD?”

“Maybe tomorrow,” I answer, wishing María weren’t acting so damn pre-teeny. “Now go to bed.”

The last thing I hear as the door shuts behind them is Amanda’s sweet little voice whispering good night.