

Name: _____

Class: _____

Taco Head

By Viola Canales

1956

Viola Canales is a Mexican American author who grew up in south Texas. She celebrates her Latinx culture through her writing. "Culture" refers to beliefs, values, traditions, and customs shared by a particular group. In "Taco Head," Canales writes about a young girl who struggles with taking tacos, a traditional Mexican dish, to school for lunch. The following text also contains language that some may find hurtful or offensive. As you read, take notes on how Sofia feels about eating tacos for lunch throughout the story.

- [1] Mama used to pack two bean tacos for my school lunch each day. Every morning she'd get up at five to make a fresh batch of flour masa.¹ She'd roll out and cook one tortilla at a time until she had a big stack of them, nice and hot, and then she'd fill each with beans that she'd fried in bacon grease and flavored with chopped onion in her huge cast-iron skillet.

And each morning I would sit at the kitchen table and say, "Mama, can I please have some lunch money too, or a sandwich instead?" But the reply was always the same: "Why, mi'ja?² You already have these delicious bean tacos to eat."



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It wasn't that the tacos weren't good; it was that some kids called all Mexican Americans beaners,³ so the last thing I needed was to stand out like a big stupid sign. All the other kids either bought their lunch at the cafeteria or took nice white sandwiches.

I started going to the very end of the cafeteria, to turn my back and gobble up my tacos.

- [5] Then I started eating each taco by first putting it in a bag.

It would take me all of five minutes to eat, and then I'd go outside to the playground. I was always the first one there, often the only one for quite a while. But I didn't mind, except on really cold days, when I wished I were still inside.

On one cold day, I so dreaded going outside that I started eating my second taco rather slowly. "Hey, you!" someone shouted. I turned and found a big girl standing right 'smack in front of me, her arms crossed over her

1. a dough used to make a variety of Latin American dishes
2. Spanish for "my daughter"
3. a slur or offensive word toward Mexicans and Mexican Americans

chest like bullet belts.⁴

"What's in that paper bag?" She glared and poked at the bag with her fat finger.

I was stunned stupid. She grabbed the bag.

[10] "Taco head! Taco head!" She yelled. In seconds I was surrounded by kids chanting "Taco head! Taco head!"

I wanted the ground to open up and swallow me whole. Not only was I found out, but the girl had caused my taco to fly open and splatter all over my white sweater.

This nightmare went on forever, until Coach Clarke, the girls' PE teacher, blew her whistle and ordered everyone back to their seats.

"Sofia," she said, "don't pay attention to them. They're just being mean and silly." She took me to the teachers' lounge and helped me clean up.

For two days after that, I went directly to the playground and didn't eat my lunch until I got home after school. And then for two days after *that*, I ate inside a stall in the girls' restroom.

[15] The next Monday, Coach Clarke stopped me in the hall. "Sofia, how about we eat lunch together in the cafeteria?"

When the lunch bell rang, I found Coach Clarke sitting in the middle of the cafeteria, with students standing all around her. She looked up and waved me over.

"Here, Sofia," she said as she pulled out the chair beside her. "Everyone else was begging to sit with me, but I said no, that I was saving this chair for you."

I sat down, feeling sick, nervous.

"How about we trade?" Coach said. She opened her lunch bag and pulled out a half-sandwich wrapped in plastic. "I'll trade this for one of your tacos."

[20] All the kids were staring at us.

"Oh, please, I really want to trade."

I hesitated and pulled out my lunch. I unwrapped the foil.

"Those look good," Coach said, reaching for a taco. "Better than any stupid sandwich I've ever had. See for yourself. Take a bite."

4. a strap used for holding bullets

I carefully unwrapped the half-sandwich and took a little bite. It was *awful*, something between sardines and bologna.

[25] “Ha! Told you!” Coach Clarke said, laughing. “Here,” she said, taking the rest of the sandwich, “you don’t have to eat it. Have your taco instead.”

As I ate one and Coach Clarke ate the other, she kept making all these loud *mmmmm* sounds. I knew everyone in the cafeteria could hear.

And the next day we ate lunch together in the middle of the cafeteria. We traded. Again, her half sandwich was truly awful. *Do all sandwiches taste like something between sardines and bologna?* I wondered.

But this time, as she ate one taco and I the other, she told me stories about herself: about how she became a coach because she’d fallen in love with sports at school; how she loved playing soccer most but had also been good at playing field hockey and softball. We laughed when she described the funny skirt she had worn playing field hockey.

I told her I liked to play soccer too, with my father and cousins in the street. Then I remembered Clara and her stories, so I told Coach Clarke about Clara and how she told me that I had inherited⁵ my great-great-grandmother’s gift for kicking like a mule. I hesitated, then said, “I wish I’d kicked the girl who made fun of me.”

[30] “Sofia, learn to kick with your head instead.”

“Like in soccer?”

“No, like with your brain. And you know how you can really kick that girl, and really hard?”

“How?”

“By kicking her butt at school, by beating her in English, math, everything — even sports.”

[35] Coach Clarke and I had lunch together the rest of that week. She asked me for the recipe for the tacos. I had to ask both Papa and Mama for this, since Papa cleaned and cooked the beans before Mama fried them.

After that, I wanted to “kick that girl” so bad that I asked Coach Clarke if I could go to the library to study after lunch instead of wasting time on the playground. She arranged it for me. She also told me, “Part of ‘kicking that girl’ is to eat your tacos proudly, and right in the middle of the cafeteria.”

That year I kicked that girl in all classes and sports, especially soccer.

It wasn’t long after my lunches with Coach Clarke that some of the other Mexican American kids started eating their foods out in the open too. And sometimes when I pulled out my lunch, I got offers to trade for sandwiches. But I always ate both my tacos before heading off to the library.

5. **Inherit** (*verb*) to receive a passed down quality or trait