

HERE
THE
WHOLE
TIME

VITOR MARTINS

TRANSLATED BY LARISSA HELENA

PUSH

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BEFORE

I AM FAT.

I'm not "chubby" or "husky" or "big boned." I'm heavy, I take up space, and people look at me funny on the street. I know there are plenty of people in this world who have much greater problems than I do here in Brazil, but I can't think about other people's suffering when I have my own issues to deal with at school. High school has been my own personal hell for the last two and a half years.

Sometimes I feel like the list of nicknames for fat people is endless. That isn't to say that this list is especially *creative*, but I'm always impressed with the sheer number of nicknames that guys at school come up with, when it would be so much easier to just call me Felipe.

Ever since I broke a chair in geography class at the beginning of the school year, people have sung "Wrecking Ball" whenever I pass by them in the halls. Two weeks after, another kid in my class broke his chair, but no one sings a Miley Cyrus song at him. You guessed it—he's skinny.

I've always been fat, and living in this body for seventeen years has made me an expert at ignoring comments from others. Which isn't to say that I'm used to it. It's hard to get used to it with daily reminders that you're a piece of demolition equipment. I've just gotten used to pretending that they're not talking about me.

Last year, without telling anyone, I bought one of those teen magazines that come with boy band posters inside. I like boy bands (more than I have the courage to admit), but what made me buy it was a burst on the cover that said, "Insecure about your body? Get over it, girl!"

According to the magazine, an overweight teenager who wants to be cool and have friends has to make up for their weight somehow. Basically, if you're really funny, or super stylish, or very likable, no one will notice that you're fat. I thought for a moment about how I compensated for it. I couldn't come up with anything.

I mean, I consider myself a funny guy. People love me online (543 Twitter followers and counting). But when I try to socialize in real life, I'm a big loser. I totally fail the likability test. And my style? Ha-ha. I'd define it as sneakers, jeans, and a reasonably clean gray T-shirt. It's hard to have cool clothes when you're a size XXL.

I flipped through the rest of the magazine, took the "Which celebrity would be your BFF?" quiz (I got Taylor

Swift), and then threw it out. I didn't want to be reminded that I have nothing to offer.

But today everything will be different. It's the last day of school before winter break—the day I've been looking forward to since the school year started. Winter break lasts twenty-two days. Twenty-two glorious days free of fat jokes, nicknames, and ugly looks.

I jump out of bed early to make sure I'm on time for school, and when I get to the kitchen, my mom is already up, painting a canvas. Three years ago, my mom quit her job at an accounting firm to become an artist. And it's been three years since our kitchen last resembled a normal one, because there are canvases, paint, and clay everywhere.

“Good morning, my angel,” she says with a smile that should be impossible for someone who's been awake since seven a.m.

My mom is gorgeous. For real. She has big, animated eyes; her full hair is always tied up; and she's slim. Which means that before he walked out on us when he found out my mom was pregnant with me, my father made it a point to leave me with the fat gene. Thanks a lot, Dad.

“Good morning. You have paint on your chin. But you look beautiful, anyway,” I say hurriedly as I grab a cheese sandwich and look for my keys.

“Felipe, I'm not sure if I told you, but this afternoon—”

“Sorry, can’t talk—already late! See you later, love you, bye!” I answer, closing the door behind me.

To be honest, I’m never running late, but my anxiety makes me believe that the sooner I get to school, the sooner I can get it over with. Which, unfortunately, makes absolutely no sense.

I press the elevator button three times more than I have to as I finish my sandwich. And when the door opens, there he is. Caio, my neighbor from apartment 57. I swallow the dry piece of bread that’s still in my mouth, rub my hand over my chin to make sure there are no crumbs left on my face, then step inside.

I whisper a “Good morning” so low that even I can’t hear it. He doesn’t respond. He’s wearing earbuds and focusing on a book. I wonder if he’s really listening to music while reading, or if he’s the kind of guy who puts earbuds in so he won’t be bothered. If option two is the right answer, I can’t say I blame Caio from apartment 57. Because I always do that, too.

The elevator takes about forty seconds to go from the third floor, where I live, to the ground floor, but it feels like forty years have passed by the time the doors open again. I just stand there, not knowing what to do, and Caio walks out without even noticing that I was there. I wait three minutes in the hallway before leaving the building.

✧

The last day of classes drags by. I only have to turn in a history paper and take a philosophy exam. And when I finish the test before everyone else, I'm desperate to get out of there.

"Already done, Butterball?" I hear someone say as I get up awkwardly from my tiny desk.

Mrs. Gomes, the teacher, collects my answer sheet and says, "Have a great vacation, Felipe," looking deep into my eyes. It feels like a look of compassion that says, "I know you can't take the other students' picking on you anymore, but stand your ground. You're strong. And there's absolutely nothing wrong with being fat. I know it's inappropriate to say this because I'm your teacher and I'm fifty-six years old, but you're quite the catch."

Or maybe I'm not that good at interpreting sympathetic looks and she really is just wishing me a great vacation after all.

When I get to the hallway, I see some girls saying goodbye to each other and (believe it or not) crying. As if winter break didn't last only twenty-two days. As if we didn't live in a small town where all you have to do is poke your head out a window to see half the school right there on the sidewalk. As if the internet didn't exist.

If my life were a musical, now would be the moment when I'd cross the school gates, singing a song about freedom, and

people in the streets would dance in a tightly synchronized choreography behind me. But my life is not a musical, and when I walk through the gate, I hear someone yell, “Butterbaaaall!” I just lower my head and keep walking.

✧

My apartment building is close to school. It’s only a fifteen-minute walk, and I like to do it every day so I’ll have something to say when my doctor asks if I exercise regularly.

The only problem is all the sweating. After my obvious self-esteem issues and my absolutely lovely classmates, I think sweat is the thing I hate the most in life.

By the time I get home, I’m melting like a wax figure. My mom is in the same spot as when I left her. Except now she has a lot more paint stains on her clothes, and her painting is almost done. Today she painted a lot of blue circles (she’s been in a blue phase for the past few months) that, if you look at them from just the right angle, appear to be two dolphins kissing. I think.

Besides the usual mess, there are pans on the stove, and the apartment smells like lunch. Actual lunch, not yakisoba leftovers from last night’s takeout. The idea of starting the break with a proper lunch excites me.

“Hello, boys. How was school?” she asks, without lifting her eyes from the painting.

“Last time I checked, you only have one son, Mom.”