

Cesar Torres

Copyright 2003

<http://cesartorres.net>

"Huge"

My mother threw a party for Mickey the day he came back from his first year at college, and as was her trademark, she made more food than all of us could eat in one sitting. That afternoon Mickey had burst through the front door, slammed his bags down, placed his hands on his hips and puffed his chest like Superman. "He llegado!" Mickey bellowed. After my mother showered hugs and kisses on Mickey, my mother flitted from stove to countertop to fridge, stirring, draining and blending. My father still wouldn't be home for another hour.

I attended Mickey's homecoming unwillingly, unsure whether I should be happy he was home, or resentful that I had to give up my own room for the rest of the summer. The room had an air conditioning unit, so we would be forced to share in order to survive the heat and humidity, but I would rather Mickey sleep in the sweltering living room.

The party was a fragrant affair, full of the scents of picadillo, vegetables and roasted peppers. If my father dragged his chair to the kitchen window he could smoke, and my mother could serve the food without having to make long trips to the dining room. She made a feast that night, but despite her admirable efforts, the picadillo

was undeniably undercooked, nuanced by some unexplainable briny aftertaste. It made my eyes water, but I chewed the raw ground meat anyway and tried to ignore its toxic flavor. My father washed down mouthfuls of my mother's rice with cold beer, and soon he was laughing in huge bellyfuls, red-faced and sweaty at the temples.

Mickey ate with gusto, helping himself to seconds while recounting his last few days at school before exams, where, according to him, he had just spent 24 hours writing a history paper, delivered it to his professor (whom he made a point of calling "prof"), and started his trip back to Chicago on the Greyhound bus. And all of that on three hours of sleep over three nights. Big deal, I thought. What was important here was that I was choking on my mother's vile salsa, which according to my taste buds, was infused with some sort of cleaning solvent.

From just looking at him as he bent over and unpacked, Mickey looked as unchanged as the sun, even though he had been gone for a whole year and had only visited once for Christmas. He remained short and bronzed, athletic and wiry, as if he were filled with pliable steel, swinging his narrow and trim torso with confidence. His usual football talk was now replaced with anecdotes of fraternity events, lecture halls, beer and office hours, My mother and father leaned forward as Mickey told them of about his finals in 1 biology, but I stared out the window (just like my own convalescing Grandma), looping snatches of songs in my head while concentrating on the nicks and scratches on the toaster's underside at the windowsill.

After dinner I excused myself from the table, feigning sleepiness, and I went to my bedroom, which although technically not mine anymore, was where my headphones were waiting for me and where I could retreat into music just like a

hibernating bear returns to the cave in winter. Mickey came in soon after I started reading, undressing quickly and moving my tapes and books around on the night stand. I didn't complain, because in the morning I would move all my possessions back to their rightful place.

"Missed a party tonight, cause of you," I said.

"Oh yeah? Why didn't you go?"

"Mom said I couldn't. You were coming home, remember? We were *celebrating*."

"Hmmm. They'll come back and play. For sure the breakup rumors start going around every time they tour, but they always come back."

"I said I missed a party, not a concert."

"I'm exhausted. Sorry. I can't even think straight from lack of sleep. Go to bed, ok? And don't move my stuff," he said.

"Okay."

"And don't wake me up early tomorrow. I haven't slept in ages."

"Okay."

Mickey continued to rearrange his books and alarm clock. He pushed my comics aside and set them on the floor, clearing a space on the nightstand for a framed picture of a girl with tan skin and almond-shaped eyes. In the photo she was at a birthday party, holding cake in one hand and a beer in the other. Her mouth was full of chewed cake. A drop of icing dotted her nose.

"That's Elena, you know. Ed? Are you listening?" Mickey said.

“I know it’s her. You told Mom, Dad, and myself two months ago. You told us in a letter, and you told us on the phone. You sent us pictures too. You sent a clipping of her article in the school paper. You had Grandma call us and remind us, and you also sent us her history paper, as well as her report card, blood type and baby pictures.”

“Yeah, but I didn't send you this one. It's her sorority formal.”

“And?”

“And what? That’s all you can say?”

“Uh huh. They let you drink at those parties?”

“Technically we’re not supposed to, but you know...” Smiling, Mickey jumped into bed like a limber ape, legs tucked in as he cannonballed into the covers.

“Got a girlfriend yet, Ed?” he asked.

Put your pencils down, the exam is over, I thought, as I froze in place. The question always made me nervous, although I was not sure at all why it should. I didn't answer, and each second that passed in silence felt tense and knotted, just like my stomach, and I was sure it was not because of my Mom's cooking, because the explosive post-dinner cramps had subsided fairly early after we all finished dinner. I could easily just say I did have a girlfriend. That was the answer I was looking for; It was what I *should* say. But instead I kept my mouth shut.

“Ah, forget it,” Mickey said and turned over in his bed.

Earlier in the school year, my mother had come home from the supermarket one afternoon and explained to me that Mickey now had a girlfriend.

“Elena Marquez,” My mother said. “From Wisconsin, actually. Pre-med. “

"Is she Mexican?" I asked.

"She's *Filipino*," she had said, enunciating and stressing the word in long syllables, as if I were still learning phonics in first grade.

"Fi-li-*pi*-no." she repeated.

At home, we called my mother Mom, occasionally Mama. My father had never called her anything other than Mi Amor. But to everyone else she was La Doña. My mother spent endless hours on the phone with her girlfriends, and she introduced new stories about us kids to her friends in each phone call, relishing in all the details about my trip to the doctor for my urinary infection. Or Mickey's great report card. Explaining the high cost of my braces. Mickey's broken ankle. My confirmation. It seemed to me my mother and her girlfriends traded these stories of family triumph and tragedy just like little boys trade baseball cards in the schoolyard. *You got a graduation? Ah, yeah, girl, I got doubles. You can have my extra graduation if you give me your son's first school dance. Nah? I'll take your husband's mistress and Maria's twins instead. Deal. Next time don't try to hold back on the blood tests, I know you got anemia in your family, you little liar. And yeah, the mother-in-law is looking really pained lately. I think it's hemorrhoids. If it is, I'll trade you for Linda's cancer.*

Sometimes, my mother told me such stories as if I also were one of her girlfriends on the telephone. Most of the time they were nothing more than chronicles of Mickey's life at the University of Illinois. In most cases I heard the same anecdotes more than once.

" Mickey and Elena went to the symphony on campus, Ed," she would say.

"I know." I replied.

"They went biking together. And they went to the symphony."

"I know."

"Did I mention the bike ride?"

"Yes, Ma."

"Really?. They had their three- month anniversary, and isn't it cute they share majors? If it weren't for her eyes, Elena could pass for Latina, you know? Elena has an older sister in med school, yeah a family of doctors. They also eat chicharrón, even though they are, you know, *o-ri-en-tal*. And yeah, they went to the symphony together!"

I left my mother on repeat in the kitchen. I was bored. In the bedroom, Mickey was napping. I looked at the picture on Mickey's desk and noticed the softness of Elena's skin, and how bright the whites of her eyes were. She was pretty, in a schoolteacher sort of way. Mickey was still awake. He caught me staring at the photo.

"That's Elena" he said, moving his lips but making no sound. He smiled at me softly, just like he had when we were both kids, baring his teeth and squinting his eyes a bit.

"I know." I said.

On Mickey's side of the room, on the wall above his bed, my mother had placed a brand new crucifix recently been brought over by Grandma after her yearly trip to Michoacán to visit relatives, visit churches, and then go visit said churches with the relatives. It had hung in our hallway for a few weeks, blessed and ready to offer its

protective powers to all. However, my Mother had thought Mickey's arrival for the summer called for relocation to my bedroom. "You know, for extra protection," she had said, leaning in close to me as she hammered a nail into the wall one Saturday afternoon. I held the extra nails in my hand as my mother pounded the hammer like a professional carpenter. She shuffled down from the mini-ladder and sat next to me on Mickey's bed. She took the nails from my hand and started sucking on one like a lollipop.

"After Mickey sprained his ankle last week – it was after he went to the symphony with Elena – and because of your father's layoff, it's time for us to get closer to God and not *ever* forget him," she said.

My mother's heavy thighs sunk into the mattress, pinning my own left thigh a little. She was a small woman, but she seemed to fill physical space with a colossal might like the Sphinx in Egypt. Her body owned the very rooms she walked into, whether it was church, the butcher shop or a doctor's office.

"Mickey's ankle, and all our other problems will heal just fine and good," she said, her nose just inches from mine. Many of my teachers had often physically recoiled at parent-teacher conferences as my mother reduced the distance between them like a lioness hunting a zebra, while discussing my grades. She smiled and remained courteous as ever, but if you gave her enough minutes, she could come close enough to share her Listerine-soaked breath with yours.

There were other religious items my mother brought into the apartment. Sometimes there were rosaries she had pried from our dead relatives' hands in their coffins at their funerals, and sometimes they were religious paintings filled with dark, demonic scenes filled with heavenly lights and grotesque beasts from Revelations that

she would hang in the front hallway to welcome guests in. From where I slept I had a perfect view of the new crucifix. In the taut folds of Jesus' white, pearly skin, the wounds inflicted upon him stood out like bright flares of blood red against a backdrop of snow. Gash after gash ran down the figurine's legs, and across his arms and chest, rivulets of blood seeping out in fanning branches and deltas. The wounds at his side wouldn't have been out of place at a crime scene or in the pages of *Fangoria*. The crown of thorns, coal-black and shiny like barbed wire, wound tightly around Christ's head. He looked skyward and was wretched. I felt sick.

In all other depictions of Christ, whether in church, my catechism books, or in the walls of relative's homes, his face had always displayed a mixture of sober pain with a bit of sympathy and kindness, and that was truly the kind of Jesus one could grow to love. A little tired from the bleeding and nails in the palm, but ready to say, "Pull a chair, little buddy, let's chat. How are those trig equations coming? Did you get that new Ministry album? A bit derivative. Don't mind the nails in my hands and go wash up before dinner, ok?"

In this case, though, the features on the face were wet with pain as blood streamed down the smooth porcelain face. If I squinted, I could almost see his tears mixed in with the streaks of red. It was simply terrifying and I hated seeing it hanging there at night, when the room got quiet. From time to time my mother would still tuck me into bed, and she always made it a point to take the crucifix down and, while grasping it in both hands, kiss it. Her lips always touched down on Jesus' scrawny chest and lingered there for a few seconds, her eyes shut as if in prayer.

I tried not to think about Christ. The room was dark, but the Christ's smooth white skin glowed from the center of the wall like a beacon. I hesitated for a moment, but soon I began to grind my hips into the crisp sheets underneath me for sexual release, just like I did night after night, but that's when I realized I was in the sightline of the crucifix. There was no hiding from where I lay – Jesus could keep an eye on me at all times from his high spot on the wall, marking me for Hell for touching myself this way. Mickey turned over on his side, pulling the duvet over his own head. I turned away from the crucifix and continued to nervously knead my erection in the bed, knowing I could still be seen. I continued anyway; I was on a mission, and even Jesus could not stop my journey to release. When at last I came into my own hand, I leaned over to the nightstand for a tissue, making sure I did not once look up to the bloody cross. It was best not to look him in the eye, I thought. I made sure to tuck the tissue carefully in the trash before I turned away from the crucifix and went to sleep.

The next week, Mickey came in to the house carrying two large plastic buckets, which he planted firmly on our kitchen table.

“Gro-fast. Heard of it, hermanito?”

I shook my head. On the side of the containers a massive body flexed its muscles, rippling and bulging, the skin the color of a ripe cherry. The picture cut off right where the head was connected to the neck, so there was no face for this headless muscle man. The muscles and their grotesque bulges kind of grossed me out, but I was strangely drawn to the model's body-hugging posing strap in the photo.

“I found this totally on sale at the GNC,” Mickey announced. Up until now, I had never imagined why he would want to be any more muscular than he already was. But judging from the picture, I guess there was plenty more for him to “Gro.”

“What’s in it?”

“Protein, protein and more protein. I’ll get that muscle mass going in no time with this. I’m going to make a shake right now, actually. Want one?”

“No thanks. What’s it taste like?”

“Like Mom's rice pudding, but that’s not the point. It could taste like all of Mom's cooking but I'd drink it anyway. I’ll be huge in weeks. Huge!” Mickey flexed his arms and his eyes bulged in his sockets like a sprung jack-in-the-box.

Mickey scooped the chalky powder into the blender while he explained what he would need to do to bulk up.

"Some of the guys at Urbana are taking it and they look like monsters now."

I pictured Mickey taking a hit from a bong at a fraternity party and passing it to a monster friend, who would look a lot like the one on the bucket: bulging, headless, reddened skin and massive veins. And headless. Big muscles and no heads. Where would the headless monsters put the pipe if they had no mouth or nose? The monster would utter “thanks, dude” from the top of its torso, speaking from the hole on top where its head should be. Would Mickey’s own head shrink and disappear like an Amazon headshrinker trophy if he drank this stuff? I hoped it would.

The bucket remained there in the center of the kitchen table like some strange centerpiece. It promised results in “as little as three weeks.” I was still lingering

on thoughts of the model's shiny posing brief, which made a small bulge of penis and testicle that was dwarfed by the nest of muscles surrounding it. Mickey had started going to the gym down the street, where construction workers, high school kids in team sports, and the occasional handful of Latin Kings frequented the room with the dumbbells and weight machines. Somehow I couldn't imagine Mickey, short and goofy, walking around the sweaty equipment, asking *can you spot me, man?* It would be almost as ridiculous as me trying to do the same. Then again, I could only speculate. I didn't even go to the weight room at my school, and I had persuaded my Mom to write me a note to get me out of gym class for the rest of the semester. In fact, I would only feel weird and self-conscious, my whole body tingly like when a foot falls asleep, all pins and needles looking around at the other boy's bodies, bigger and more developed than my own as I changed into my gym shorts.

My mother took great delight in Mickey's new hobby, and she decided she would help him become her 'little Atlas.' Special meals began to arrive alongside the regular dishes that my mother, my father and I ate. Mickey's place at the table was now cleared to make room for special plates, tall glasses and new bowls for Mickey. She had begun to concoct "Samson dinners," as she called them, in order to maximize his muscular development. I couldn't really tell how these meals were different than those of my father or mine, except that they certainly looked to be triple or quadruple the size of ours. Breakfasts, which for my father consisted of a steak with an egg on top, for Mickey were three large steaks with five fried eggs and a layer of bacon covering the meat like a crunchy blanket. Mickey drank his shakes at the table, and eventually he got his own bread basket in front of his plate at dinnertime, while my mother, father and I

shared one basket of rolls between all of us. Two Cokes were not enough, so my mother also placed a carton of orange juice next to Mickey's three cola cans. This is what being huge was all about.

The handy bags of potato chips and peanuts with chili pepper that were to be found at anytime in our house soon dwindled in quantity, making way for snacks chosen with Mickey's weightlifting efforts in mind. Beef jerky started to appear in the snack jar, and the chocolate chip cookies I so loved became less frequent, while tubes of raw cookie dough suddenly materialized in Mickey's hand most afternoons. "My calorie expenditure is up. Gotta have it," he said.

The word sazón translates to seasoning in English, but in Spanish-speaking countries, that two-syllable word carries with it the same importance as of family honor, integrity, even nobility. Sazón is a hidden talent: a special touch, a secret art that exists only in the hands of the cook. My grandfather tells me my great-grandmother's sazón was legendary, prompting her to open her successful chain of restaurants. She's dead now. Her sazón was golden and pure, the best kind of sazón one could have. Legendary.

My mother on the other hand, had been born with a sazón fit for public school cafeteria workers, prison chefs and airline food meal planners. Her cuisine could not be reduced down to a question of blandness, saltiness or undercooking. She just simply was trying to slowly kill all those around her with the worst-tasting food in La Villita. We had lost the right to host several family Christmas parties because of so many bad dishes that my mother created. Her beef stews tended to taste like fish, beans resembled porridge, and even her lasagna tasted bitter and somehow like cabbage, despite

the fact that she had not once cooked with cabbage. However, my mother and my father thought it was quite hilarious to joke about the terrible state of my mother's sazón, and it was customary of my father to call out for pizza halfway through the meal.

“Who else will cook for you, but me?” La Doña would ask everyone at the table. My father and I discussed my mother's new menus for Mickey, and he and I agreed it was the best thing to have happened since the Thai restaurant opened in our neighborhood.

“She stopped giving me extra portions. Your brother's getting all the extras now,” my father said, sipping his post-dinner coffee.

“Have you seen the size of the sandwiches she makes for Mickey's lunch? They're the biggest triple deckers I've ever seen!” I said.

“I don't want to see them. I try to be careful and not give your mother's cooking too much thought. It might make her think I like it. I'd rather think of dinner like church: I have to sit through it, and as soon as I am done, I want to forget I was there.”

Mickey was going to the gym at least four or five times a week, and he always came home smelling like sour sweat and moist towels. He would step out of the shower wearing only a towel wrapped around his waist without any discernible differences in his musculature. In fact, it only seemed like his face was becoming wider and fuller. Fat. He was still drinking the shakes, and eating triple at the house, even when we ordered take out. Friday nights, had now become gargantuan affairs, as now our order had gone from one to two pizzas: An extra large pepperoni, bacon and sausage pizza for Mickey; a medium pepperoni and onion for the rest of us.

“Elena will love the new, stronger me.” Mickey said between bites. “She’s coming in August to visit, right before school starts. She really likes guys with muscles, Ed.” A thin trail of grease ran down a corner of his mouth. He wiped it with the back of his hand and drank more Gro-fast shake. He had strawberry flavor, and this version of the thick liquid now looked hot pink, but it was still thick as glue. I wondered if Elena and Mickey were having sex often in their dorm rooms. Maybe she slept over at his place all the time. If he was using condoms, maybe he had brought some back with him from school. Part of me wanted to find them and take a look at them up close, but they were probably stashed somewhere in our bedroom, and surely the bleeding Christ would catch me and report me to the authorities.

At about two I would run down to the front door and get the mail, carefully sorting it for my Mom, Dad, Mickey and Myself, leaving the pile of junk mail and magazines in separate stacks. Mickey had started subscriptions to magazines with titles like "Muscles and Muscles," "Ripped and Glistening," "Rock Hard Life" and "Ripped and Ready," and I found myself soon poring over page after page of oiled granite-hard bodies, repelled and attracted by their masculine display. In most photos the men were puffed up like angry cobras as their huge shoulders and arms flexed, their backs massive and gnarled with muscle, carefully tapering down to a narrow waist and then bulging back out their egg-shaped thighs.

Some of the men, particularly the ones in smaller weight divisions, seemed less bizarre than the others, and I they soon became my favorites among the models. I looked at the pages for long periods of time, aroused and flushed in the face. I considered the kitchen table a “safe” place in the house to look at my brother’s

magazines, mostly because after he would come home he would take them to the bedroom and throw them on the bed, directly beneath the gory crucifix my mother smooched every now and then. Once the magazines were inside the room, I couldn't bring myself to look at them, much less relieve my masturbatory impulses. The eyes of the Christ felt cold and alive, ever watchful, and there was no way I was going to get busted by the Son of God. I imagined myself in communion, ratted out like a cheating mobster.

“Bless me father, for I have sinned,” I would say, “It's been three months since my last---“

“Save it, son. The bloody Jesus in your bedroom tells me you've been touching yourself inappropriately. I'll give it to you plain and simple, because I love you, and God cares for all his gentle creatures: Masturbators go straight to hell. The rest of the clergy will make sure you get what's coming to you. Book him, Father!”

I would then be handcuffed, led to the pearly gates, tried, and sent back down to the underworld. The shame would remain with me till the endless loop of my eternal days.

Mickey's own accomplishments in the gym continued, and as he stacked on more weights on the barbells at the gym, the changes in his body became more evident as he widened week after week. His back was definitely bigger, almost like those linebackers in the locker room, but it looked a little disproportionate, considering his short frame, almost as if his heavy upper body would topple the rest if he lost his balance. His calves now bulged out from the leg openings of his Blockbuster uniform, and although he mentioned it to no one, I suspected he had started shaving his legs. They

certainly looked smooth, but their massive size gave them the appearance of a large turkey drumstick. The chest now was always clearly enlarged, and the shirts he had worn now looked small on him, delineating the pectorals and his small nipples.

And yet, Mickey didn't really look like those bodybuilders in the magazines that came to our house. And I should know, because I studied them carefully every afternoon, memorizing the page numbers of all my favorite ones for my mid-afternoon sexual enjoyment. I fantasized about those ogre-like physiques, oiled and full of male rage as they winced for the camera while flexing. Mickey had grown thicker all throughout his body, like the way dough rises overnight from baker's yeast. His waist also looked several inches wider, and his hairless belly looked fuller and covered in a soft layer of fat. His wide back encroached his neck, which seemed to have disappeared, as if he were wearing a small pillow for comfort. He looked solid as brick, but soft through the belly and fattened like a duck.

"You really should try some of this stuff, Ed," Mickey said one day while we both lay in bed, reading. "It works like magic."

"I should try it, yeah," I said. I knew I would never dare touch "Gro-Fast." My shoulders always looked thin and sloped, but there was no way I could even imagine myself any different. In this world my chest was skinny and concave, but I hoped that the right girl would see through my narrow exterior and into the inside.

"You can try some of my Gro-fast," Mickey offered.

"Maybe,."

"I've seen how you look at my fitness magazines," Mickey said. My heartbeat froze and my heart raced. I hoped in the dim light of the reading lamp, Mickey

wouldn't see me blush. I hoped the scary Jesus on the wall would not give me away in front of my brother, either. *Just shut up, ok? Don't tell, Jesus. Don't tell on me.* How could Mickey have known I was obsessed over those hard bodies in the magazines?

“Those guys weren't born like that, you know,”

“Really?” I said.

“Yeah, but of course, some have what it takes genetically embedded in them, you know. Building muscle is part of their nature. For some guys, that's just the way they're going to be. Some others can try to change themselves and build a lot more muscle, but in the end, if you're meant to be that way, you're meant to be that way.”

“Girls do notice...But who cares, really? All the guys that look like that at school are grade-A assholes. The jocks. I hate them all.”

“Do you mean to say I was one of those guys in high school?”

I thought about it, and truthfully, I couldn't really be sure. Mickey was my brother, there was no denying that – we shared the same blood. But in that one year he was a senior and I was a freshman, he had walked around the school halls with that strut and swing of the shoulders that reeked of football player, varsity wrestler or sexual predator. It was strange to think of Mickey that way, because at home nothing was different. We still played video games on the weekend and went music shopping after he was done with work. But at school he became the guy in the varsity jacket that knew he would never talk to someone like me, and I was the short guy in black boots and Skinny Puppy t-shirts who would never talk to someone like him.

“Not sure, I guess.” It was the truth. “We didn't hang out together in school. Anyway, that Gro-Fast stuff looks gross. Like cement.”

“But it works, hermanito. I have put on two inches in my biceps. It might do the same for you. Might even get you a girlfriend. Its about time you got going, don’t you think?”

“Yeah of course. I’m just picky, that’s all.”

Mickey would be returning to Champaign in a week, and Mom had selected the last Saturday before to invite Elena over to the house. Dad had quit smoking, and he looked forlorn and lonely sitting by the kitchen window, as if he had lost a good friend forever. He sat facing the center of the room, but his head leaned to the left to look out the window, as if he expected to a box of Lucky Strikes walking up the street, leaning from side to side as if it were looking for the our address among the two flats on our block.

Dad had begun to make it a habit of drinking beer at the dinner table, and he set his down that afternoon while he went to open the door to let Mickey and Elena in. Mom was already in the middle of cooking, making sure there were extra helpings tonight for Elena, and of course, extras for Mickey's Samson dinner. Weeks of careful study of those men in revealing posing briefs in Mickey’s muscle magazines now gave me enough expertise to say he certainly did not look like any of those cut, rippling bodies in “Rock Hard Life”. His face looked positively round, and his arms, smooth and hairless, were certainly beefy, but not muscular and cut of granite like the bodybuilders. When he stepped out of the shower he now looked swollen and brown, turgid, like an old retired boxer. Or put another way, fat. Mom had already started packing his bags, and he would be taking six tubs of Gro-Fast to Champaign the following week.

Elena and Mickey came into the kitchen, followed by Dad. Dad kicked me in the shin to stand up and say hello. I put out my hand in front of Elena's perfectly manicured one. Two dazzling eyes set off by dark make-up stared back up at me, inquisitive and firm.

Mom was moving on to the next course, happy to flit from oven to stove to fridge as she prepared the meal. Dad sipped beer in the corner, laughing at the appropriate jokes, and asking Elena about her classes and her affinity for chemistry, but in reality, he was not part of any of the conversations. It was like he was in a different kitchen of a different house altogether. His eyes were bloodshot and watery; I could smell his malty belches from the other side of the table. And though he smiled at me from time to time, he looked at me in a way that made me feel like he, or maybe I, wasn't really there.

Elena winced a bit when my mother announced we would be eating beef stew. Mickey had explained to me a million times that she was a vegetarian. I myself had been thinking about becoming one for months.

"Well, my cooking may not be the best, but the boys and their father eat it." My mother said, casting her eyes down on the spoon she was using, stirring the salsa, slowly, deliberately. Seconds ticked by and no one spoke for a little while, until my dad broke the silence.

"Let's make a toast, he said. Un brindiz. A toast for the next school year, no?" he said.

He shot up from his seat and left in a hurry. Mickey and Elena were still not twenty one, but I certainly was not about to mention it tonight. My father set two

heavy steins on the table, and filled each one to the brim with beer. He winked at me. As he leaned over to pour I could see the bald spot on the crown of his head, and I wondered if I would go bald like him one day. Elena and Mickey were seated side by side, and although she looked quite nervous, Mickey's eyes looked bright and proud, like when first-graders bring their first A home to Mom.

“To the couple.” My father said

Mickey and Elena both blushed like children. After they took a sip, foamy beer stuck to their lips. They both licked it off with their tongues in eerie synchronicity.

Elena's chest was round and small, but looked perfectly proportioned for her slender body. Sitting next to Mickey she seemed miniscule though, especially since he had become so wide. He had gone shopping a few days ago for new clothes, but his new polo shirt and jeans still looked tight on his fleshy frame.

“Ed here is still looking for a good girl to go out with, right?” my father said.

“Yeah, it's that time. Time to put those comic books down. Sometimes a man—”

Mom glanced over her shoulder at the table, frowning over a chipped serving bowl.

Ed began to make himself another protein shake to use as a chaser for his beer.

Elena dipped her pinky into the frothy Gro-Fast and tasted it. It was bound to taste better than dinner would.

“Don’t you love Mickey’s new body? I like to call him my Hulk. Oh how I just love big muscly guys. You know, Arnold Schwarzenegger is just so sexy. Just like you sweetie, just like you,” Elena said.

She walked up to Mickey and sunk her hands and head into his chest, just like in the movies. Her fingers sank into Mickey’s gushy mounds, leaving small indentations in the brand new polo shirt. Her head made an indentation as well, just like on a soft pillow.

My father cracked open another beer and poured it into his glass.

“Ed here seems to be headed right your way at school, I think.” My father said. “Right Ed?”

I nodded.

“Ed’s even been going to the library this summer. Working hard,” said Mickey.

“Yup,” was all I could muster.

That morning I had changed my usual routine and gone to the public library to get a book to read, and I wandered the aisles in the balconies on the second floor, overlooking the main floor. Up here the air was musty but inert, and it became easier to concentrate on the rows of books and they way they seemed to line up row after row into eternity. Back in the stacks I didn’t think about school, about getting a girlfriend, or my mother's parties.

It was in the silence of the aisles, while looking at the novels, that I noticed that another boy from my school was up in the stacks at the other end of the balcony, reading a book while standing in front of the shelves.

Even with my bad eyesight I could see that the stranger's book was a bodybuilding pictorial. I didn't have to look long to recognize the familiar oiled bodies, the painful-looking poses and the revealing briefs. The boy looked familiar, and he was probably a junior as well. His letterman's jacket gave him away as a varsity baseball player. I didn't pay much attention to his face or his colorless hair, because I felt nervous and exposed in front of him. But with his narrow body standing upright, holding that book, I wanted to stand closer to where he was. I wandered slowly over to where he stood, holding my own books open in front of me as I read the introduction.

The boy glanced at me but didn't say hello (not surprising based on my low social standing in the school). We were both aware of each other's presence, although we hadn't even nodded to acknowledge one another. I looked up, and I noticed he had what looked like a hardon inside his jeans, and I blushed, but continued to look. I inched closer, and although I wasn't sure why I was doing it, I let my right hand drop to my side. We glanced at each other and exchanged glimpses of each other's eyes, in a transposed instance of his blue irises against my black ones. My heart should have been racing, but I think it was only his that was doing so. I think his hands were shaking. They were shaking, but with the certainty of some deeper impulse, we felt each other's bodies through our jeans, rubbing our hands on cotton, creating friction in the soft silence of the stacks.

I felt hot and woozy, and I could feel something like a feather tickle the insides of my stomach as I exchanged touch with this stranger whose name I didn't even know. We never found our release, but we were ready to continue looking for it. And we would. Our eyes met again, and he put his forefinger to his lips.

"Don't say anything, Ayala," he said. He knew my name. And I didn't know his. I became afraid, and that's when my own heartbeat skipped and began to race, but before I could reply, the baseball player was walking in the opposite direction and out of the library's double doors. I ran down the stairs and left the library.

I had come home and showered that afternoon, changing into fresh clothes so I could help with the cooking.

"So what book did you get?" my father said. Mickey had sat back down for his first round of food. Elena was finished with her beer.

"Doesn't matter," I said. My father looked the book over and returned it to me with a grunt.

The meal began soon thereafter, and the servings of tomato soup, mashed potatoes, milanesas and beans were tripled for Mickey. The beer had made him sweaty just like my father, and they both took a break from eating every once in a while to wipe their brows. Elena avoided the steak at all costs, pushing it away from the mashed potatoes and beans with her fork so they wouldn't touch. She smiled occasionally and reached under the table to squeeze Mickey's hand. Mickey looked happier than I had seen him in weeks. His upper back eclipsed the backrest of the chair behind him. While he sat there I also made a mental note to sneak some of his bodybuilding magazines and stuff them between the mattress of my bed before he headed back to school. He'd never notice they were gone until he was already driving south with Elena toward Champaign.

Although the shocking appetizers at the beginning of the night had me thinking we were all headed to the emergency room, the main course, for the first time, turned out to be edible (but not delicious), and no one could explain why.

“I simply don’t know what it was. I will certainly give you plenty for you to take home, Elena, except for the beef. I am glad you like Mexican food. Do you eat much Oriental food at home?” My mother said.

"Asian, Ma. Asian." Mickey said softly. He was never rude enough to chide my mother, especially in front of a guest. He left that job up to me.

“No, we don’t eat much of it at home.” Elena said, pausing for a second. “My father really likes Italian food, so he cooks a lot of lasagna and eggplant dishes.”

“How do you stay so thin on such fattening foods?” said my mother, holding a hand to her cheek.

“I don’t know. My family tends to be rather small.” Elena looked a bit tired, and the thick mascara on her lashes seemed caked and smeared in the kitchen light. I couldn’t understand what she saw in Mickey, but the idea of having a girlfriend was still something I wanted to continue working on.

I excused myself from the table, and I was surprised by Elena when she gave me a kiss on the cheek as she said goodnight to all of us. I went to sleep tired and feeling sluggish from all the food, but even as I started to drift off to sleep I could hear Mickey’s and my father’s laughter, and Elena’s giggle as she said goodbye to my parents and Mickey drove her home. The sheets were crisp and cool, just like I liked them. In the darkness of the room, I could still see the white contours of the bloody crucifix, and I fell asleep staring at the white body, the thorns wedged into the Christ’s skin. I felt like I could go on looking at it for quite a long while tonight, while the voices and the soft sounds of the kitchen filled my ears and my sleep. It seemed bigger than usual, and

although chilling, I stared at it for what seemed hours, but I am not really sure when I finally closed my eyes and went to sleep.

Cesar Torres

Copyright 2003

<http://cesartorres.net>