

# TOROCOYORI

BY CHOLLA

I have always been fat and for most of my life I have been on a diet. It has been a fact of life for me, like getting up in the morning. I knew that my life was about striving from an early age, because I was not good enough. My mother made that very plain to me in every comment and innuendo. So I lived my life being the ugly daughter of a once beautiful woman, hungering for her love. Her honey colored hair and steely blue gaze were constantly appraising, and found me lacking. I would never be her little cheerleader, or marry the doctor she so desperately wanted me to marry. But most of all, I would never be white.

That is the tragic story of many a fat girl. But I am not just any fat girl. You see, I was a child of Achai Ta'a, Father Sun, and we were the most beautiful people in the world.

My father was Mexican and Yaqui Indian. When I was with my father's side of the family, I felt normal, a blessed feeling for any fat girl. This side of the family was proud of their beauty. I know that when I heard others waxing on about how tall and beautiful the Yaqui were, I too would feel that surge of pride. We were beautiful, with our cinnamon skin and almond eyes. We were tall and strong and fierce. The Yaqui are the only tribe in Mexico to have never signed a treaty, the only tribe to keep their own garrisons in the state of Sonora, to this day. In fact, our size was part of a sacred deal we made with the Talking Tree.

At the time of the Talking Tree (how all time is measured in Yaqui culture), we made a deal to defend the earth and wait for the return of Yo'Mommuli. Before that time, we were little people who only ate flowers, the Suremem. But the talking tree told of a time when the usurpers would come and rape the land and destroy the people. The old ones, the Surem, could not bear the pain of it, and earth's first children went to the north. But some, the Yoeme (what we call ourselves), stayed behind to eat meat and grow larger than all their neighbors, even the usurpers, so that they could defend the land and dance the world anew every spring until the old ones returned. So being big was part of what made us special. And being of the warrior caste, the bigger the better.



Size Queen

In my father's family, I was only one of many beautiful children, all of whom were "blessed." My cousin Leanna was about my age, and her gift was for sports and dance. Mine was art and music. Her brothers were artistic and mechanically inclined. My cousin Tino was brilliant and beautiful, as were all the cousins and cousins and more cousins. My younger brother, although not particularly good at school, was strikingly good looking, musically talented and artistically inclined. It was a sweet break from being on a diet. You see, we were all rather chubby, some of us downright fat. And yet, we ate and laughed and lived a life in a world where we were the blessed of Achai Ta'a. Father Sun had smiled on us.

So what happened? Well, I only got to live in the bubble during the summers. During the other months school and my mother slowly undid what my relatives worked so hard to create. I was lonely, ugly and unwanted. I was a shame to my family. And so I dieted, although it never worked.

You would think that after this many years someone would figure it out. If dieting worked, America wouldn't be getting fatter. After all, we spend 41 billion dollars on weight loss every year in this country. Ironically, that is enough money to end world hunger. But dieting for me was something different. It wasn't a "cure" for my "problem." It was a way of proving to my protestant mother that at least I was working at it. You see, if you are a fat person and you are unrepentant, like those heathens my father came from, you are lost. But if you are at least hoping to conform and are trying, then you might be fat and unwanted, but at least you are morally upstanding. People could pity you, but couldn't really hate you. That would be impolite.

Our bodies are not moral or immoral, but amoral. Ah, that was how Yo'Mommuli created us. When the Sacred Bee sang the world into being, she created it with a wisdom all its own. Then she became part of it, one with it, because she loved it and craved it and lusted after it so much. So inside every tree, every bird, every rock, every jar of peanut butter, every fat person, is beauty and wisdom. There is a little spark of Yo'Mommuli, the sacred word. It's not only in our spirit, it's in our bodies, because bodies and spirits are the same thing. In Yoeme all things are sacred.

Growing up in the middle of this constant struggle was not easy. It gave my life a surreal sense of limbo, where somehow I didn't really belong in either place. So, for many years, I tried very hard to be white. After all, I was half white, right? Somehow being Yaqui was just too weird, one more struggle for a fat, disabled, weird child. So I tried to fit in. I wanted to be beautiful and loved, even if I couldn't be blonde.

Part of fitting in was dieting. So I did. I lost weight and I gained weight. It always seemed as if the promise of being beautiful and loved was just around the corner. What is so sad to me now is that when I look back, I realized that I was beautiful and loved. I had absolutely no idea that I already had what I was fighting so hard to find. I was just too busy hating myself to realize it.

When I went to graduate school, I lost weight. A lot of weight. I was on Nutri-system, and it was awful. But I really did get thin, for a split second. In fact, at thirty pounds from my target weight, my friends asked me to stop losing weight, because I was looking scary. I also lost my gums, my hair and my gall bladder.

Of course, I gained it all back, the weight, that is. That is the way dieting works. I went from a size 22 to a size 32, via a size 12. I remember trying to change my target weight and the woman

said, "But you only have thirty pounds to go! Then you'll be perfect." She insisted that 150 is the perfect weight for a woman who was 5' 10". It said so on The Chart.

I need to say something about The Chart that you might not know. The Metropolitan Insurance Company calculated the ideal weight chart by measuring Norwegian men. That's it. No women were weighed in calculating the chart. No men of other races or nationalities were weighed. They just figured that women should weigh a little less than men. I mean, didn't you ever wonder why the formula was so simple? It's 100 pounds for the first five feet, then five pounds for every inch after that. The human body doesn't calculate in base 10, does it? Now you know. The charts are a lie.

But let's go back to these Norwegian men. We'd all be eating cheese puffs if they had calculated the charts in Samoa, or in Sonora for that matter. And no, we didn't all get fat because of our diets. People are different. That's what makes being Samoan and Yaqui, and even Norwegian, special. If Laplanders and Sri Lankans are different, why would we measure them on the same chart?

Because it's easy, and neither doctors nor insurance companies have time for diversity. There are more insidious reasons, too. Because white doctors are white (and most doctors are), and white is the standard, then everyone would be better off being white. And there you have it. Fat is about racism, and don't you forget it. Every Slimfast you drink goes to support a thin rich white person who has never been fat. Dieting was the perfect outlet for my internalized racism.

I don't think I realized it until my ancestors called me home. It began fairly benignly, with a book that fell on my head. I began reading about my own people, learning our history and realizing that the Yaqui world was bigger than my own family. Then I met several other Yaqui women who were beautiful and outrageous and made me feel like I was at home. Finally, I woke up one night, to hear a band playing outside my window. I leaned over to look out the window and there they were, old men playing accordions and violins and drums, old women singing in their strange off-tone way. When I rubbed my eyes, they were gone. There was nothing left but the drunks at the bus stop and the quieter sounds of night.

If I hadn't grown up Yaqui, I would have thought I was going crazy. But since I had, I could tell when something-big-was-happening. The old ones were calling me back to the desert; they had something for me to learn. When that happens, there will be no peace until you go. I would celebrate Wa'haema, the Yaqui Lenten season, and I made plans for my pilgrimage. I decided to go to Old Pascua, as that was the plaza in Tucson I had once been to as a young girl. I packed up the car and drove. Alone. After all, how could anyone else understand who wasn't Yaqui?

The desert in springtime is something everyone should see at least once in their lives. People always ask me why I go to the desert. They don't see any life or beauty there at all. But my people come from the Sonora, and it is so alive you can't take a step without encountering life. Everything whispers constantly, except at night when it screams. And in the Sonora, spirits do not have trees to hide behind. They come out in broad daylight and dance on your head. It makes driving alone on I-10 very interesting.

I stopped the first night at my friend Rene's trailer. He was an old college friend, a Morongo Mojave Indian. We walked up to the little hut he built facing the Santa Clara mountains. We

sat there and drank coffee in the still cold spring evening. "So, they called you, eh?"

I looked at him questioningly. Then it hit me. They had called him, too, back to his home and to his people. When we were in college, he had left his senior year. None of his friends, including me, had ever understood. I understood now. I held my cup to keep my hands warm and said "Yep." I looked over and he smiled, like he understood it was an apology.

He laughed, "It's not easy standing in the middle. You get all chewed up."

"No shit!" I laughed, "So what am I doing here in the middle of the desert?"

"Maybe learning to stand in both places one at a time, eh?" He got up and walked away.

I really didn't understand then, but I did have a sense that I had been living a life that was a betrayal of myself, my ancestors, even my friends. The feeling squirmed like a worm in my belly, reminding me of my dishonesty now that I was alone. I just didn't know what I had been dishonest about. I only knew that I had not been living with good heart and I had to trust that I would find out how to do what I had been called to do. Learning to stand in two places at once is what Yoeme queer folks do, it's their job. So far, I hadn't really been doing such a great job of it. I slept in the little hut facing the mountains, and dreamt that I slept upon the soft plump hand of a huge woman.

The next day I drove on to Tucson. I checked into the Motel 6 and unpacked. As I was a rather poor graduate student, I decided to cook in my room to save a little money. I also decided that this would be a great time to drink Slimfast for my breakfast and lunch. My mother bought me cases of the stuff, ever hopeful. I figured it was an easy and cheap solution. I could do my pilgrimage and lose weight, too! I got my suit on and went for a swim, enjoying the first warm sunshine of the year.

As I got out of the pool, one of the maids saw me. She said, "Are you here for the dances?" She was Yaqui, too. She gave me directions and said she'd see me that night. Something nagged at my back as I thought that she was very pretty. I could hear my Aunt Naomi whispering, "Of course she is, she's Yaqui." Their voices were getting louder here; their presence kept me company.

I drank my Slimfast, got dressed and went to the plaza. It's an old little village, and Tucson has kind of grown up around it. A central plaza and church surrounded by a few blocks of adobe houses surrounded by light industrial area make up Old Pascua. It looked like a party was getting started, and the paper flowers and confetti belied the seriousness of what was about to happen. But then that is the Yoeme way. Flowers are the blood of Christ, of the Little Deer that sacrificed himself before the Talking Tree so that the Yoeme could eat meat and grow large to defend the land. Flowers are the map of the underworld, the Sea Aniya, the home of the valiant dead.

Somehow I can remember it all so clearly, one of those moments when time starts running in slow motion and you can taste and see and smell so clearly you think you're waking up for the first time. The tell-tale sign that something-big-is-happening. The taste of wood smoke and dust on the air, the smell of Indian tacos

**SHE WAS WALKING ACROSS THE PLAZA, A SHIP SAILING THE SEA. HER DARK HAIR FELL IN WAVES AND SHE WAS HUGE. SHE STOOD NEARLY SIX FEET TALL, AND A FEW HUNDRED POUNDS. HER EYES WERE LIKE THE NIGHT SKY FULL OF BURNING STARS, AND SHE WALKED AS IF TO SAY, "IF YOU DON'T WANT ME, IT'S YOUR LOSS."**

and pickled lemons, the character of the light as the sun is setting. I stepped onto Yaqui soil like I was coming home. I sat on the bleachers, waiting for the Tenebrae to begin.

Then I saw her.

She was walking across the plaza like a ship sailing the sea. Her dark hair fell in waves and she was huge. She stood nearly six feet tall, and a few hundred pounds. Her eyes were like the night sky full of burning stars, and she walked as if to say, "If you don't want me, it's your loss." She tossed her head like a wild horse, singing at the top of her lungs. I was transfixed.

She looked just like me.

She glanced over her shoulder at my open mouthed gape and smiled. I didn't look away. I smiled back. And as the sun finally set and the Tenebrae began, I wept.

I wept for my sins, against my people, but mostly against myself. I hated myself for being fat, for being Yaqui, when it was my greatest gift and my most sacred obligation. Dieting was not only damaging to my metabolism, but to my soul, because in that act I was stating clearly that I wanted to be white. I wanted to be the same. I wanted to blend in and conform to the plastic version of beauty that the white people in the magazines said was the truth.

And when the black-veiled cavos came through the plaza and the people knelt in the dirt to be purified, I joined them with tears in my eyes. I welcomed the rope whips, the three strokes across my back as I knelt with my face to the ground. I could feel the cool dust in my hands. And when I looked up in the dark firelight, I saw her grinning at me.

Wa'haema is the season when the world is reborn. The Yoeme atone for the sins of the world, to ask Achai Ta'a to make the world anew. And so it was that I prayed for all fat girls, especially those beautiful dark eyed black and caramel and olive-skinned fat girls. I spent the night of weeping pouring Slimfast down the drain at the Motel 6. And on Looria, when the world is reborn, I knew I'd never have to drink another shake again, unless it had ice cream in it.

I never saw that woman again. But then, she'd done her work, and Yo'Mommuli was satisfied. I found out that my betrayal had been deeper than I knew. I betrayed my own power and beauty, my seataka, the gravest sin for a Yaqui.

In Yoeme, we have a word for such a person. Torocoyori. It means "race traitor," a Yoeme possessed by a usurper's soul. I did a lot of staring in the mirror on that trip home. And when I walked up to the trailer, Rene' hugged me and asked, "So did you get your butt kicked?" I just laughed.

That was many years ago, and I am no longer Torocoyori. I try to live with good heart, redeemed by the flowering blood of the Little Deer, like any good Yaqui after Looria. Sometimes it's hard, sometimes I forget, especially when I'm the only fat person around. But even then, I have to admit, I'd rather be half Yaqui than a Norwegian man.

After all, the children of Father Sun are the most beautiful people in the world.

