

JUST ONE THING

Tess Almendarez-Lojacono

Flash
Fiction Online

YOU HAVE TO BE THE BEST IN THE WORLD at something.”
My father couldn’t have made his point any clearer if he’d spoken in all caps. Maybe he had.

I must have been about eleven, which would shuffle my brothers’ and sisters’ ages from thirteen for Maria, twelve for Joaquin, then myself—the bridge between older and younger—and so on to Bell, little Boo, and Miguelito, who was only ten months old. We were in the dining room, choking down one of Mum’s meatless Friday meals. Breakfast, lunch, and dinner—all were eaten in the dining room. The old beige walls were wildly streaked with crayon halfway up. Each time they were painted over, someone else would reach the age of creative abandon and the marks would appear again. In contrast, a grim crucifix glared down upon each meal.

I envied my protestant friends who could eat hamburgers and hot dogs on a Friday. Catholics were forced to eat big egg and onion messes. It felt like vomit in your mouth before you even swallowed. One time I actually burst into tears as I slid into my seat, under the watchful eyes of Jesus and my Dad. He (they?) took pity on me and let me go outside to play instead. This singular display of generosity was not lost upon my siblings.

I gave a furtive glance around the table. Was it too late to squeeze out a few tears now?

“People are going to look down on you because you’re Mexican,” Dad continued. “But if you can beat everyone in the world at just one thing—you have your comeback.” He put down his fork. “Go ahead. Ask me something about the French Revolution. Anything.” He stared hard at my older brother and sister, challenging them to the task.

Joaquin quickly stuffed in a mouthful of the egg thing and pretended he had manners. Maria looked at the ceiling.

“Okay,” Bell piped up. “Is that when they invented French toast?”

“Something *else*.” Dad sighed. Giggles threatened the gravity of the moment.



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because you’re Mexican,”*

Dad continued.

*“But if you can beat
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“No, Bell. You’re thinking of *cake*.” Maria had drawn her eyes back to the table to smile at Bell. “Marie Antoinette said, ‘Let them eat cake.’”

“Oh. Then why did they fight? I mean, I like cake.” Everyone laughed out loud this time. Even Dad.

“Who was the guy that got killed in his bathtub?” Joaquin suddenly looked interested.

“Murat—and that’s too easy.” Dad was mad again.

“Honey, maybe they haven’t studied the French Revolution yet,” Mum began.

“Studied? You mean in school?” Dad’s anger turned to disgust. “You can’t wait for those idiot teachers to give you an education! They don’t know anything about history!” He threw an arm toward the living room, where rows and rows of books lined the walls. The width of that room was four feet narrower because of all the bookshelves. “We have volumes on the French Revolution. More information than the library! They couldn’t just pick up a book instead of watching one of those stupid television shows?” We gasped—we were not allowed to say *stupid*. “That’s it! No TV tonight!”

No television? But *The Wild Wild West* was on!

“Instead, I want you all to think about the subject you will choose, in which to become an expert.” Dad looked from one crestfallen face to another. “Now eat.”

I pushed the eggs around on my plate. “Dad?” I ventured.

“What?”

“Can it be anything?”

He kept frowning. “Yes. As long you become the world’s expert.”

I made a path through the eggs now, with my fork. “Dad?”
“What.”

“Did you always know what you wanted to do? When you were little, I mean.”

His eyes crinkled at the corners, as though he would smile. Instead he handed me a slice of white bread from the fluffy stack that was set out just for him. “Be quiet now and eat.”

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This story was published as
FLASH 2008/09 #2 on Flash Fiction Online
(flashfictiononline.com).

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