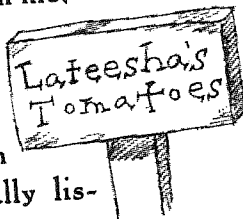


CURTIS



Deltoids—awesome. Pecs—check 'em out. Quads—now playing on a body near you. Can't help being born with this body, or living three doors down from Kapp's Gym. Can't stop people calling me Atlas or Ceps. That's short for Biceps R Us. Actually, I started that name. But that was before Lateesha cut me loose.

We had us a real nice thing going. She was a few years older than me, always talking about having a family, living in a house in the country, like her aunt's place in Michigan. I wasn't really listening too hard. I was twenty-



three. With this body, I had other girls hanging on me at the time. Some of 'em I just couldn't brush off. When Lateesha found out, she slammed the door in my face so hard the paint cracked.

You don't know what you got till it's gone. All that was five years ago. I've caught up with her now. Done fooling around. She was looking for a husband, and now I'm looking for a wife. I moved back from Cincinnati in May and ran into her brother the first day. Said she's still single. Same third-floor apartment. But when I came up to her on the street, she turned her back. Wouldn't let me explain. Twice it happened. No chance for words. So I decided to give her some deeds instead.

She lives straight across the street from the garden. I staked out a spot right by the sidewalk, where she could look down and see it. Then I came home with six little tomato plants in plastic containers. She had a serious thing for tomatoes. She'd put a monster slice on a piece of bread and call it a sandwich. She'd even bite into 'em, just like apples. Always talking about eating 'em out of her aunt's garden when she was

a kid and how she wanted to grow 'em someday. She probably thought I forgot all that. I planted 'em right there in front of her eyes, to show her I hadn't, that I was waiting for her.

I got the biggest—beefsteak tomatoes. I could see 'em in my mind, bright as traffic lights, flashing at her across the street. I'd never grown anything before. I got into it. Every day something new. The first flower bud. Then those first yellow flowers. Then the tomatoes growing right behind 'em. This old man with no teeth and a straw hat showed me how to tie the plants up to stakes. Then someone else told me all their diseases. That got me worrying. What if all my plants started wilting? Or caught blight and died? That wasn't any message I'd want her to see.

I started coming straight from work to check 'em. I noticed every hole in every leaf. I picked off bugs, pulled out weeds, and I gave 'em lots of that fertilizer called Tomato Food, like somebody told me. From little green marbles, those tomatoes started growing. Then they started getting orange. Then they went to red. I kept looking up at

Lateesha's window, wanting her to see it too. The only faces looking back were the drunks that hang out under her place. That liquor store's all boarded up, but they still suck on their bottles there anyway. They liked to call me "field slave" and "share-cropper." Ask how Massa's crops is doing. I could have banged their heads together and shut 'em up, but I didn't. That was part of the point of the tomatoes. I was showing Lateesha that just cause I got muscles don't mean I'm some jungle beast. I stopped working out and stopped going out with no shirt, no matter how hot it was. When some chicks would be walking by and see me there and say "Looking fine," I knew they meant me but I'd point to my biggest tomato and say back "Sure is." My homies all laughed to see me out there. Stopped calling me Ceps. Started in calling me Tomato. I just smiled.

Those tomatoes got big as billiard balls. One day when I checked 'em, my biggest one, the one I'd been watching closest, was gone. The next day, another one gone. It wasn't insects that took 'em. I was mad. They weren't even all the way ripe yet. My

plants were right there by the sidewalk. I put chicken wire around 'em, and even on top, but people could still reach in if they tried. I couldn't guard 'em day and night. Then Royce showed up, just in time.

You drop bread on the ground and birds come out of nowhere. Same with that garden. People just appeared, people you didn't know were there. Royce was like that. Except that he didn't want nobody knowing he was there. One of the gardeners saw that her pile of grass clippings was all spread out. Had a sort of human print in it. He'd been sleeping there nights and leaving early. One morning he s'ept late. I'm the one who found him. He was fifteen, black, built big—looked like I did. His face was banged up. Said his father did it and threw him out. He didn't want to go back. I bought him breakfast and we made us a deal.

I found him a place closer to my tomatoes but hidden by somebody's corn, so the cops wouldn't see him sacked out. I bought him a brand new sleeping bag. I gave him money for food that week. Then I picked up a pitchfork for three dollars at a junk shop.

His part of the deal was that if he saw or heard anyone mess with my tomatoes, he'd come at 'em full speed, holding the pitchfork.

That was my best shot protecting 'em at night. For daytime, when Royce was gone, I painted a sign that said "Lateesha's Tomatoes." It was big. I put it right there in front of the plants, facing the sidewalk. If people know something belongs to a person instead of the city or the U.S. government they're more likely to leave it be.

When I'd pounded it in, I filled up my water can. Walking back, I looked up at her window. As still as a cat, behind that lace curtain, there was her face, staring down at the sign.