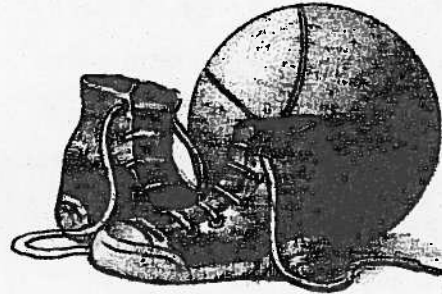


What makes something funny, funny?

## The Coach



*If you find yourself on the Mountain,  
either you've always lived here,  
or you've wandered badly. . . .*

*— L.A. Times, February 2, 1999*

**M**y hair wakes up stupid. Finally I tame it with some product like axle grease, throw down *chilaquiles*, and head for school, dreading first period, basketball, when I'm grogged with sleep.

analogy

Another day in L.A., a long time after our name-reclaimment. Three years, to be exact. With Alicia and Raúl and Jaime, I walk through the morning built from haze. Late summer heat's still got a choke hold on the city, so, although it's early, everywhere you look you see things in semi-wilt.

People, trees, lawns. Even the streets stretch out like parched grey tongues. (Snap fingers for next analogy)

I feel listless as a sunstroked <sup>snap</sup> lettuce. Probably my friends do, too. To avoid any excess outlay of energy, we don't talk much. Don't even kick the beer cans that crud up the sidewalk.

Suddenly, these older guys ram us from behind, elbows swinging like steel chicken wings. Tattooed-up *mentos* in leather jackets, emblemized with Death.

They snarl, "*¡Muévete, buey!*" And they don't mean a barnyard animal.

They swagger us out of their way, so close I'm nearly blown down by beer breath. At 8 A.M.!

*Who's the buey?* I think. I want to break and run but know better. Never show fear. *Stay cool*, I tell

Why use Spanish?

myself. *Just walk*. With cholos like these, you can be assured there are cuetes, guns, somewhere here.

When they're past, they laugh and flip us off and, luckily, keep careening down the street. We're mute the rest of the way.

☆

My day's started sour. First my hair, then punks, now what?

inference

Man, what a *menso*-head I am, signing up for sports. And at this torturous hour.

Why did I go for this crack-of-dawn pain? Inside myself where hope sits, I guess I thought maybe I'd flower immediately into a basketball star. So far this hasn't happened. Not immediately or otherwise. I'm not exactly *Señor Coordinación*. My ability's sub-*excelente*, but I don't trip myself, either.

Ours is a barrio of basketball maniacs. Our fans don't wear cheese hunks on their heads like some of those *idiotas* on TV. But they get pretty into the game. When the season approaches, like now, too-worn shoes stop and start, with no

squeak. Too-soft balls loft through the air. The whole neighborhood starts dribbling and jumping around. Like a great big popcorn machine. Guess that's another reason I signed up. Like the ad says, "I love this game!"

☆

Now we're in the gym, waiting for Coach. He comes late a lot because he owns a Timex as primitive as a sundial and a car that's easily Jurassic.

"I count on every one of you players," Coach pounds into us again and again. "I can't count on my watch; I can't count on my car; I've got to count on something."

Everyone's about as hazed-out as me. So there's a spurt of talk now and then, but mostly pretty senseless mumblings. Some kids stretch out on the bleachers for extra z's.

Our school colors are orange and green. Our mascot's the tiger. What *menso*-heads thought these things up? Tigers don't exist in that color combination. Tigers don't exist in L.A.

analogy comedy

ANYWAY, dressed like peas and carrots, our basketball class's waiting for Coach, *again*.

Unbelievable! Coach strolls into the gym — in a suit! With a tie! (Off to one side, like a skinny, wind-flopped flag.) He usually wears grey oversized sweats that make him look like a melting elephant. Today he's dressed sharp.

predict

The reason's standing beside him. Seven-foot plus, with the build of a post, and bald as a lightbulb. An NBA basketball player once so famous he made Santa Claus seem like a total unknown. He's been out of the game a while, but any true fan knows him. *¡Caray!* The day's shaping up!

What I notice most about this guy is his eyes. Like owls'. It seems there are deep things in them. Deep and mysterious.

What's he doing lost among the Tigers? He must have really veered off the road from Beverly Hills!

"Listen up, everybody," Coach says. As if he needs to grab our attention. We're all gaping like apes.

"You all know who this is, right?" His face

Comedy  
through  
analogy

looks completely satisfied. Like a cat who's swallowed an entire turkey. Man, do we know this guy.

He's here, says Coach, to hang out with us. Watch our moves. Instruct us. To be our *assistant coach*. Jeez! At this news, it's amazing all the Tigers don't swoon to the floor. But we don't. We're too stupefied.

"One thing," Coach adds, "nobody breathes his name, understood? Our new assistant wants to remain anonymous — to keep cameras from snooping around."

Right now nobody can breathe anything. But somehow guys pipe up with "*Yo juro*," "Scout's honor" — even though there are no scouts here — and "I swear on the grave of my hamster."

Then Coach Tree (my name for the wandering all-star) steps forward and says, "*Buenos días*." That snaps the spell. The Tigers can no longer control themselves. They totally swarm the guy. He hugs everyone and they hug him. And he laughs and laughs.

☆

At home we're discussing this coach thing over supper. *Chiles relleños*, which Mami and Abuelita prepared together. For this dish you need *poblano* chilies, the black-green glossy kind. Abuelita says you count the veins to pick the hottest ones. Some people prefer bland, but we want those strong enough to blow your head off. Once the skins are roasted and steamed off, you stuff the rest with meat or cheese and dunk them in flour. Then, with stiff coats of egg whites, they fry in oil, floating like hot islands. Last touch, a drizzle of tomato sauce.

To help out, I usually chop the onions, wearing ski goggles that Abuelita and I got at a yard sale. So my tears don't dilute the sauce. One thing I know, if on my own, *por lo menos*, I could always fix *chiles relleños*.

☆

Our whole family loves basketball. Even Abuelita. Probably even our cat, who sits in

Comedy  
through  
silly  
omission

Abue's skimpy lap to watch all games. Especially we love the Lakers. We know the names of all the players, their numbers, their stats. We are wild for their announcers, Chick and Stu, and given the chance, we would vote Chick in for president.

My brother's both excited and skeptical about Coach Tree, the barrio interloper. Luis is three years older than me. Maybe that's why he's untrusting.

"His motive must be money," Luis says, studying his mangled fork, a garbage-disposal victim. But his eyes say no way can that be. The school district's wish list has a focus on *books*, not on NBA coaches.

"Yeah," I say, "like we've got a gushing oil well at school to turn into dollars at will."

Luis burns me a look, so I say, "So cut my heart out and fry it for dinner."

Everyone, including him, laughs at this Aztec humor.

Papi finishes his stuffed chili pepper. "*Ay, qué delicia.*" He almost sings about how delicious it is.

Instead, he exclaims, "You are such a good cook, *mi vida!* It's that *mole* runs in your veins."

All happy, Mami laughs and goes a little red. Then she grows serious and says, "I believe this basketball man has all he will ever need. I believe he is doing this coaching for love only."

That sends Luis' eyes spinning in his skull. I can nearly hear his brain grinding: *Love! Man, don't you know? The world goes on verde — the green of dollars.* But he says nothing disrespectful. Neither do I. I plan to just dribble my brains loose while this guy's here. To gain every possible tip. Maybe, with buckets of sweat, I'll become *excelente* at this game.

☆

Coach Tree arrives every morning just about before anyone. He slips into the parking lot in some anonymous car and slowly unfolds himself out. Like a giant and rusted pocketknife. I say he's there *before* most everyone. Actually, at first just about the whole school's waiting for a glimpse of him.

He takes that easily. Just strides along, talking to crowding kids and smiling. Like he's found himself a good home. From a distance, where I'm watching, this reception looks like a tall, calm ship riding a choppy sea.

☆

The new basketball program affects everyone. Not just the big kids. From kinder on up, anyone can play. (Our school is so old, kinder to eighth, all grades are there.)

And they do play — if the ball doesn't bog them down. And even if it does. They just keep trying and trying. That's Coach Tree's real aim.

Though everyone gets a shot at basketball, against other schools it's the older kids who suit up. I'm not world-class, but somehow I make the team. For Coach Tree, the Tigers work like crazy. We don't have much height. But speed, we've got *muchísimo*. And we're okay shooters, too.

To say Coach Tree helps us a lot is the under-

statement of the millennium. No whistles. No yells. No heaving of chairs. From steady practice and from his calm voice, the fundamentals sink in.

Once, between classes, he stops me in the hall. My nerves get tangled as a fistful of paper clips.

"You're working hard, Arturo," he says, quiet as ever. "Doing good."

*¡Caray!* Like a warm look from a girl (rare for me), I can live on these words forever.

Before long we're actually winning some games. That's partly due to one guy. José. A natural, you could say. He can steam past all defenders. Fake one way, stutter-step, elevate, shoot, and *swish!* All day, all night, if he has to. Like breathing. José, he can flat *play*.

José's a smooth player, but a real troublemaker. His family's a mess, so he bears a chip on his shoulder the size of a sequoia stump. He's been kicked out of school more times than there are numbers. He'd as soon spit on you as talk. Has *pleitos*, fights, for fun. José's a strong reason why

we win. Still, for survival, after practice, wherever he is, our team pretty much vacates the area.

☆

There's a sign on my door: NO SE ACEPTAN CHISMES. But, actually, in my room I allow carloads of gossip. *Chismes* bloom at school, too. Soon everyone knows that Coach Tree's losing things. A pen. A handkerchief. A key chain. Once even a tennis shoe! Next thing I hear, the culprit's José. Word is, he's vending Coach Tree-abilia to guys. Jeez! Stealing from Coach Tree's like stealing from God. My opinion? José's the undisputed king of the *menso*-heads.

If it's true, we all expect that this is the last of him. He ought to depart the team fast. But, after all, it must be a story invented for excitement, because José keeps playing. Weird thing, though. *Mucho muy* strange. Sometimes he asks to shoot hoops with us. Sometimes he says hello.

☆

One night Alicia comes over. To do home-

work. And snack on Mexican cooking. Crunchy *chicharrón*, with lime juice squeezed on. We gouge it into guacamole, while we're sort of studying. "Sort of" because immediately concentration slips away. The air feels as crackly as the pork rinds. Like Alicia's got something to say.

I mark my book with a tomato, the only thing around.

From nowhere she plunges in. "Coach Tree caught José stealing his stuff."

"Yeah?" I say, low-key, to see where this's going.

"Yeah. And he's letting it slide."

"¡Mentirosa!" She's gotta be lying. Amazement must fill my face like the look of a stuffed deer.

"Well, not exactly letting it slide," she says. "Coach Tree sees promise in José. He's spending free time with him. Making him practice ball. Making him study. Coach Tree says he won't let him toss his life into the Dumpster."

So Coach Tree works with José, one-on-one. I let that sink in. "Think it'll work?" I ask.

text-  
world-  
connection

"Yeah, I do."

"Why?"

"Because for the first time in forever, José trusts someone."

After Alicia goes, I'm in my room thinking. About Coach Tree and José. Coach doesn't have to do this. He's lost by choice in our nothing barrio, helping a kid with not many chances.

Even though he's a hardcase, I have hope if Alicia does. And she ought to know. José's her brother.

☆

My grandmother takes a decision. "I prepare *chiles rellenos* for this Coach man."

That said, there's no stopping her. I'm ordered to tell him (*tell* the ex-NBA champ!) that the peppers will arrive today after school — along with my whole family. And they do. In a see-through Tupperware tub. (Not my family, the chilies.)

Coach Tree's waiting in the lunch court with a mob of curious kids when Abuelita gets there.

Like a little broom, she sweeps right up and says, "I am happy to meet. You play basket real good. *Chiles muy excelentes. Eat.*"

"Yes, ma'am."

He samples a *chile relleno* with Abuelita cheerfully breathing down his neck and prodding, "¿*Excelente?* ¿*Excelente?*"

Suddenly, Coach Tree's like some cartoon character, steam puffing from his ears, strangling out words in speech balloons: "Agh! Agh!" I say, "Agh!" too, casting an arrowy stare at Abuelita. She's brought the hottest chilies in the universe! Man. My basketball days are over. Probably my life's over.

"CPR!" some kid shouts. What a *menso*-head! There's no CPR for peppers.

Abuelita turns away, totally mortified. I take that back. She's giggling.

We all hold our breath. Then — "*Graa-ci-us, Sonora. Ex-ell-en-tees,*" Coach Tree gasps.

Everyone loses it, *muriendo de la risa*. Then



Coach Tree wipes tears from his face and bows and shakes Abuelita's hand. He shakes hands with everybody in my family. He laughs and laughs. And over the haze of the hot blacktop, carrying the leftover chili peppers, he walks to his car. Slowly, a tall ship of (smoking) calm.

☆

Luis's right. I find out from Alicia, Coach Tree *is* coaching for money. His relative's a teacher here, so he said he'd help out our school — for the salary-shattering price of one dollar.

I know my limits. In pickup games I hold my own, but I'm not NBA-bound. Still, maybe I could do something like Coach Tree. Something for love. Something that's mine. Though right now, I've got zero idea what. To use one of Papi's favorite words, Coach Tree's a person to emulate.

Author's purpose? Why?  
Novel title help us?