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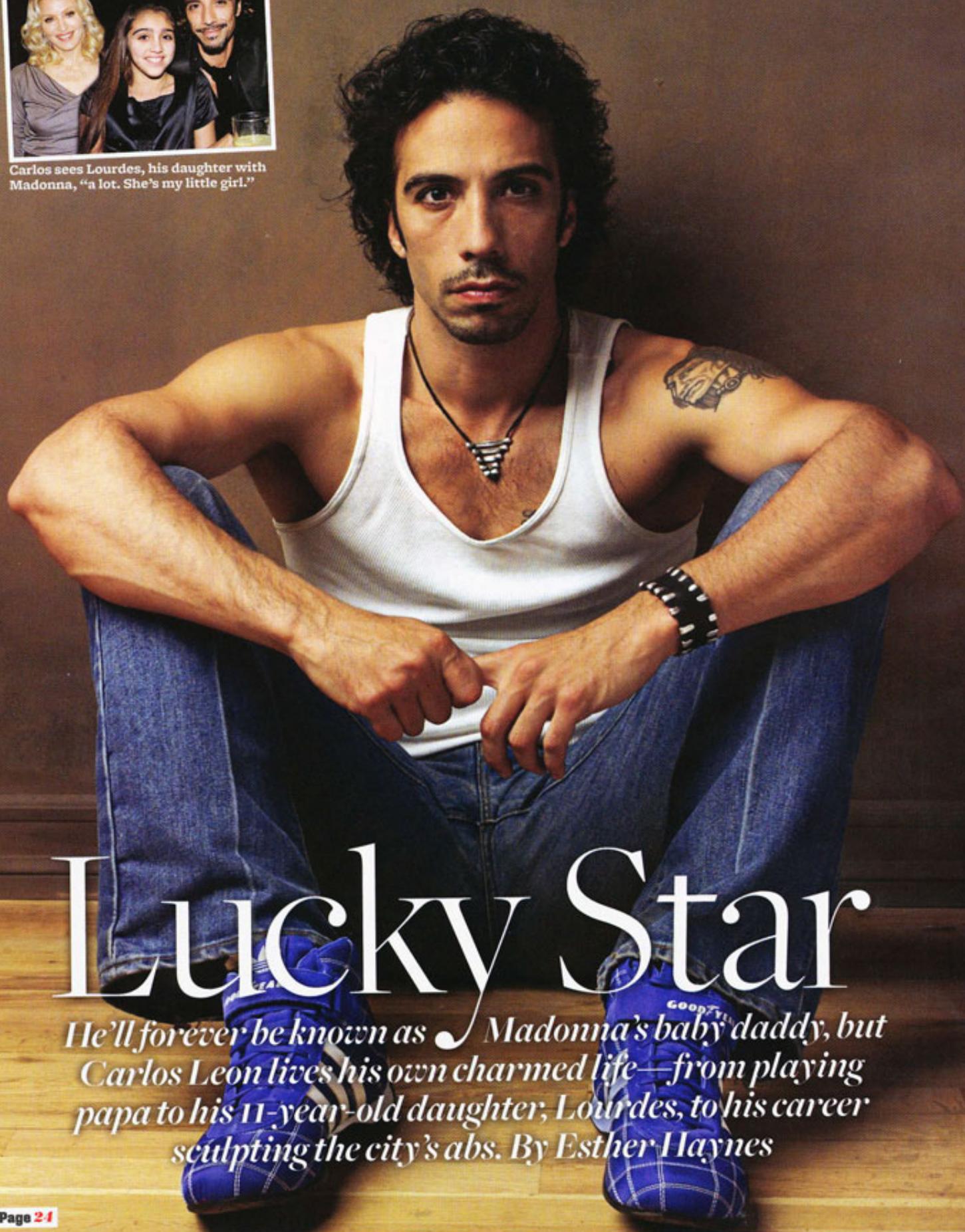
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Carlos sees Lourdes, his daughter with Madonna, "a lot. She's my little girl."



Lucky Star

He'll forever be known as Madonna's baby daddy, but Carlos Leon lives his own charmed life—from playing papa to his 11-year-old daughter, Lourdes, to his career sculpting the city's abs. By Esther Haynes

“Don’t believe the hype,” Carlos Leon warns, when asked about an oft-repeated Internet rumor about him. The actor/former trainer is not referring to the stories about how he was ballsy enough to approach Madonna in 1994 as she jogged past him in Central Park. Nor is he talking about the rumors that she started talking about having babies with him shortly afterward (she gave birth to their daughter, Lourdes “Lola” Maria Ciccone Leon, in 1996). He’s not even responding to the articles saying he was arrested a few years ago for smoking pot in Washington Square Park (who knew it was illegal *there?*). No, that’s all true.

Rather, he’s talking about this snippet: “Carlos Leon was born in Cuba and left during the Mariel boat lift in 1980.”

“I’m a die-hard New Yorker!” Carlos says, laughing. “My childhood was here. I’m a native.” His parents, however, are Cuban. “I was raised Cuban, and I have the culture in me. I speak Spanish fluently. But I’m a New Yorker.” The boat lift blurb apparently stemmed from a well-intentioned wikipedia.com edit made about a year ago by someone who presumably got him confused with a guy named Carlos De Leon, who did come to the U.S. on the boat lift but likely did not get to bump around with Madonna.

“You know, I’m going to have to get out my birth certificate and prove it,” Carlos, 41, says good-naturedly. “And people also say I’m really short. I’m not that short! I’m 5’11”OK, maybe not that tall.”

This is what happens when you’re in the nebulous area between famous and non-famous and linked to one of the biggest celebs in the world, but you don’t give many interviews: People fill in the blanks with whatever scraps of info they can find. They’re drawn to the mystery. Plus, the Cuban refugee story is kind of, well, sexy, like Carlos himself—not handsome, exactly, but sexy in a sort of Che Guevara kind of way. It helps that he’s ripped, after years of working out at Crunch Fitness, where he was employed as a trainer in the ’90s and where he still trains.

“I’ve been into fitness ever since I was a kid,” says Carlos. But when asked if his parents were also into healthy living, he

answers, “Not at all. Are you kidding me? The reason I got into it was because I wanted to avoid doing everything that my family was doing—they were dying off at a very young age. I looked at them, and a lot of them smoked or had diabetes and didn’t take care of it. I asked questions and educated myself. That’s how I started, because I wanted to live longer.” He began doing push-ups when he was 17, “because I was a skinny kid.” And he still runs in Central Park almost every day—“at least six miles. Anything less, what’s the point?”

That upbeat attitude worked for him when it came to wooing Madonna—he became her trainer as well as her lover after they met that day in the park, when he was 28. And suddenly, his life changed. He

“Madonna could train her trainer—that’s how motivated she is.”

A rendering of Carlos’ first Leon Fitness center, opening this fall.



was transformed from a low-key Crunch trainer who loved hip-hop into the Material Girl’s boy toy. And even though the couple broke up in 1997, less than a year after Lola was born, he will likely forever be known as Madonna’s baby daddy.

Carlos takes his parenting very seriously. Ask him what he’s most proud of in life and he’ll answer, “I’m proud that I’m a truthful person. And I’m also proud that I’m a father.” Lola and her mother live in London with Madonna’s husband, Guy Ritchie, but Lola, now 11, can sometimes be glimpsed walking around New York hand-in-hand with Carlos. “I see Lola a lot,” says Carlos. “She’s my little girl.”

Does he give Lola fitness tips? “No, she’s fully aware,” Carlos responds. “She knows what she’s doing.” OK, but is Madonna in as good shape as she used to be? “Better,” he says with conviction. “Madonna is totally motivated. She could train the trainer, that’s how motivated she is.”

Carlos doesn’t pump up other people anymore, but he does offer advice when pushed: “Change your workout every six weeks—a little weight training, a little Pilates or kickboxing. You have to shock the body to change it. This makes it more fun, so it helps on a mental level, too.”

Carlos has now translated his love of exercise into another type of business venture: designing state-of-the-art fitness centers for luxury apartment buildings. Leon Fitness’ first client is the new Crescent Club condo building in Long Island City, Queens; the gym is scheduled to be unveiled this fall. Carlos plans to give it “an industrial look” to reflect the changing LIC neighborhood. “It will have a warehouse kind of feel, hardwood floors—very cool,” says Carlos, who works with EFGH Partners in Manhattan on his designs. He’ll stock the gym with Lift Fitness machines, couches and mirrors etched with images of buff celebs, such as Arnold Schwarzenegger. “[If you’re buying in] Long Island City, it can be a pain in the neck to take the train and go work out in the city,” he says. “I want to bring the gym into people’s homes.”

When he’s not perfecting his workout spaces, he’s concentrating on his acting career. Carlos is starring with Jesse Bradford in an upcoming horror flick, *The Echo*, produced by the same team who made *The Ring* and *The Grudge*. “The part was practically written for me,” Carlos says. “My character’s a New York guy, a mechanic, so the dialogue was easy.”

Back on the topic of his hometown, Carlos gets nostalgic when he talks about his “amazing” childhood, and it’s obvious he wouldn’t trade it for anything. He especially loves the fact that his parents mixed things up for him culturally. “I was very lucky that I had a Cuban dad and mom, surrounding me with Cuban music and dancing.” He certainly has had the best of both worlds—American, Cuban; fame, privacy; father, bachelor. Carlos pauses for a second, then clarifies, “I am lucky.”