



No More Heroes

fiction

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I came of age in a time of no heroes. My dad was a doctor and my mom was a teacher and everyone considered them heroes, except me. They told me your dad's out saving lives, your mom's out molding the future. All of that was true. But it was also true that Dad always swore I was younger than I really was to get the kid price at the buffet. Mom always told the water company we were being scammed by them.

"We don't believe in bathing in this house," she'd say to them. "And you say we used 200 gallons of water last month? If we had, we'd smell a lot better."

Then one day in September 1980, Dad came home earlier than Mom and packed up. He said he was going to the warehouse to put some junk away.

"Why are you taking all of your clothes?" I asked him.

"Because I can," he said as he walked out to the garage. "I'll see you later." I went to the front window of the house and watched him drive away.

After Dad left, I didn't see or hear from him at all. He was still legally married to Mom, though part of me wished he wasn't. We ended up losing our house because Mom couldn't afford it on her own and Dad wasn't paying her child support so we moved from Corona to an apartment in Jackson Heights. It was next to a meat market, but since we were vegetarians, just walking past it made us sick.

"Okay Frankie," Mom told me one morning while I was eating breakfast.

"Today after school, I want you to go to Mount Sinai and see if you can find Dad there."

"What if I can't?" I asked. Dad was the head cardiologist at Mount Sinai, but he always said he hated it there. He claimed he could have his own hospital in Ecuador, so for years, he talked about going back, but Mom didn't want to. Now that Dad wasn't with her, I wondered if he had gone to Ecuador after all.

"If he's not there," Mom said. "I want you to turn on your waterworks. Cry so much that everyone can see. That son of a bitch won't get away with this."

So after school was out, I caught a bus to Mount Sinai. I never liked hospitals. They were always cold and too bright. When I was younger, before Mom was a teacher, she'd take me to Mount Sinai to have lunch with Dad. We never had a full lunch with him. We'd sit down with our bags of veggie burgers and French fries and then Dad's pager would go off. He claimed it was the operating room. It was really just one of his many, many mistresses.

"How can I help you, young man?" a guard asked me.

"I'm looking for my dad," I said. "Doctor Alejandro Carrillo."

"Doc Alex," the guard said. "Yeah, I haven't seen Doc Alex in a while. I didn't

even know he had a son.”

“Do you know where he went?” I asked, but he didn’t. So I asked the receptionist and she told me Dad quit Mount Sinai three weeks ago.

“He said he found a better deal somewhere else,” she said. Dad earned about a quarter million dollars a year, drove a Lexus, and wore clothes from stores in Manhattan. Three or four times a year, we would take a family vacation across the world, going to Europe, Asia, Australia, and South America. There wasn’t any better deal. Dad was already rich, but I guess he wanted more.

“If he ever stops by here,” I said to the receptionist. “Tell him he needs to pay child support for me.”

Summer was about to come for me and Mom and we still had no trace of Dad. I hadn’t been in touch with him since the start of the school year and it worried me a little. But I wasn’t too worried about him. Dad always made it out alive, no matter what he went through. Before he became a doctor, he was in a gang and he had been shot, stabbed, and thrown off a twelve-story building. I was worried about what could happen to me and Mom. Even without child support, Mom’s teaching job paid decently, but it wasn’t stable. She taught ninth-grade English in what the city called a “dropout factory.” Every day during class, she had a few students pick a fight either with each other or her. There were times when she would come home hurt. Once she got stabbed with a switchblade, but not too badly. Another time she was hit in the face with a 900-page textbook. She always said she wanted to quit and go to a school where the students actually did their homework, but the principal said she couldn’t move to another campus until her own students made better grades, like she was a miracle worker.

“Mom, why don’t we go back to Ecuador?” I asked her one night as we walked to the grocery store. I was born in Guayaquil, but left for good when I was six months old. Over the years, I visited Guayaquil with my parents and it was different than New York City. In Guayaquil, people treated Dad like a god. In New York City, people treated Dad like a doctor. Mom was also told by her family

to stop working, so she could stay home and raise me to be like Dad. And up until I was eight, she was a stay-at-home mom, but she hated it. She said it reminded her too much of Ecuador.

“Because, Frankie,” Mom said. “That means we’d have to live with my family.”

“Don’t you like them?” I asked.

“If I did, would I be living in New York City?” she said.

“Maybe Dad’s over there. He always wanted to go back.”

“He’s not in Ecuador,” she said. “Somebody would’ve already seen him by now and given me a call.”

When school was finally out, we got a call. Dad was in Ecuador. Aunt Monica had seen him with a young, foxy lady and apparently they were engaged. All he needed to do was divorce Mom and he’d be set.

“Frankie,” Mom said. “I guess we’re going to Ecuador for vacation.”

The last time I went to Guayaquil, I was ten or so. I remember thieves lurking at the airport, so for a fee, you could get a guard to walk with you. As soon as we got off the plane, thieves came to Mom and me. It must have been our clothes. We were dressed too nicely compared to the rest of the crowd.

“Excuse me, miss, can I—” one of the thieves said to Mom. She swung her bag around and hit his head, knocking him down.

“Whenever someone’s too close to you, move in the other direction,” she said, in Spanish. If you didn’t want thieves around you in Ecuador, you spoke only Spanish. Just one English word would make you look “American” and if you were American, that meant you were rich and your stuff was up for grabs. At this point, we were losing our “wealth.” Mom used a credit card to buy our airline tickets and we were on food stamps. I didn’t even know what a food stamp was until then.

When we got outside of the airport, Uncle Antonio was waiting for us in his 1951 BMW. In New York, it would be a “classic” car. In Guayaquil, it was a piece of “mierda.”

"If I don't stop at red lights, don't worry about it," he said when we were in the car. "People get mugged for doing that."

"So Frankie, do you still want to live here?" Mom asked me and I really didn't care anymore. I wanted Dad home with us. It didn't matter where we lived.

When we got to Uncle Antonio's apartment in downtown Guayaquil, he grabbed all of our luggage with both hands and ran up the stairs, yelling for us to follow him as fast as we could.

"Assholes like to sneak in here," he said. "Last week they took my wallet, but it was my fake one. Frankie, when you know you're in a bad neighborhood, carry a fake wallet in your pocket and your real one in your shoe. That way if you get pickpocketed, all you lose is an empty wallet."

"Stop that, Tonio, you're scaring him," Mom said. "He doesn't need a fake wallet, he's as broke as you are." We finally reached the apartment on the seventh floor and Aunt Monica was in the kitchen, cooking soup for us.

"Frankie!" Aunt Monica said. "You've grown so much. You look just like your father. I bet he's glad to have a son who looks like him."

"Monica," Mom said. "Shut up."

Mom found out Dad was working at Hospital Maldonado as a primary care physician. So she tried to make an appointment, but the receptionist said there weren't any open.

"Listen lady," Mom said. "I'm Margarita Canoli and I live in Rome and I'm only here for a few days. I've heard Dr. Carrillo is the best doctor there is and I demand to see him. There's a small reward for you if you let me in."

So after lunch, Mom and me headed out to Hospital Maldonado. Thanks to all the red-light muggings, busses didn't even stop anymore. When they were close to a bus stop, they'd slow down just enough for a passenger to jump in without rolling underneath.

"Okay Frankie, hold on to my arm," Mom said and we both leapt onto the bus, paid the 25 cents, and sat down close to the driver.

"The hospital's not too far from here," Mom told me. "I don't care if your dad wants to marry someone else, but I'm going to put him through hell first."

"Mom," I said. "If we have time, do you think we could visit your old neighborhood? I've always wanted to see it."

"Sure," she said. "It probably doesn't look any better now. You know what, Frankie? You're almost thirteen, so I think I should be honest with you. I left Ecuador for a lot of reasons, but the main one was you were born before I married Dad."

"So?" I said. "Lots of people have kids before they get married."

"Yes they do," she nodded. "But that's an American thought. I got banned from my own church for having you. And the pastor wouldn't baptize you either. So I told Dad I'm going to the US and if you don't want to come, screw you."

"How come nobody treated Dad the way they treated you?" I asked.

"Because he's a man and he's a doctor," she said. "But he was also taught. Nobody remembers their teacher."

Hospital Maldonado was nothing like Mount Sinai. It was really hot and the lights were flickering. Mom checked in as Margarita Canoli and we sat on a couch with rips all over it, waiting for Dad to come out. When he finally did, he saw Mom and started running in the other direction.

"Dad!" I yelled to him. "Dad! Wait!" I went after him, even though Mom was telling me not to. He slipped into the restroom and I followed. Then he shut himself into a stall, thinking I wouldn't recognize the same shoes he had for the last ten years.

"Dad, what's going on?" I asked. "You weren't like this before."

"Frankie, things are different now," he said. "No they're not," I said. "You're different."

My parents were officially divorced by the end of the summer. Dad was forced to pay months of owed child support, so he was frustrated he had to postpone his wedding. Mom didn't seem too upset about the divorce. Honestly, my parents were

never affectionate with each other. They were usually fighting, name calling, or not talking at all. There were eight mistresses Mom knew about and I'm sure there must have been more. She wanted an answer to why he was being unfaithful, but he never gave her one.

"I didn't want you to be an only kid," Mom told me one afternoon. We were on our way back from the grocery store.

"Dad just wanted you," she said. "He thought having another kid would make us grow further apart."

"Maybe it would've brought you two a little closer," I said, but I doubted it. If my parents were always on the marriage rocks with only me, another kid would've made them kill each other.

My thirteenth birthday came and I spent it at the arcade with my friend, Alonzo. When we were all out of quarters, we walked across the street to Melbrook's Pharmacy to get a soda. We stood outside of the pharmacy, drinking up our orange cream soda, and then Alonzo asked about my dad. Even when Dad was living with me and mom, he was almost never home, so Alonzo probably only saw him two or three times during our five-year friendship.

"My parents got divorced last month, didn't you know?" I told him.

"No," he said. "Is your mom okay with it?"

"She seems okay," I said. "Being a teacher keeps her mind off it, I guess. Haven't your parents been divorced since you were a baby?"

"They were never married," Alonzo said.

"And I'm glad they weren't or one of them would be dead by now. They hate each other a lot."

I got home from hanging out with Alonzo close to dinnertime and Mom was in the kitchen, grading tests. The principal warned her that if her students didn't make better grades during the new school year, she was done teaching.

"Happy Birthday, Frankie," Mom said. "I left you twenty bucks on your pillow."

"I know," I said. "Most of it is gone now."

"Really? So is my money, like mother, like son," she said, without ever looking up at me.

She kept grading until it was almost

midnight. When she was done, I asked her what the new averages were for her class and she shook her head.

"I need at least eighty percent of my class to go to tenth grade or I'm done."

"It's only October," I said. "You have until June to take care of it."

"You're right, Frankie," she nodded. "I've got a long time."

In the middle of December, I was off for winter break and Mom was too, but she spent most of the holiday making lesson plans for the upcoming semester. Her salary had been reduced because of her "bad performance as a teacher" and she was put on probation since her entire class flunked their final exam.

"Mom," I said to her on New Year's Eve. "Can we go to Times Square?"

"For what? When it's midnight there, it'll be midnight here too. I want to have these lesson plans done by at least tomorrow morning."

"Mom," I said. "You're not a bad teacher."

"My principal says I am, so I must be," she said.

"No you're not," I said. "I was your first student and I'm decent, right? The problem's not you, Mom. You've been doing everything you can, you deserve a break."

"I really don't spend a lot of time with you, do I?" Mom said. She threw her lesson plans on the floor and we were off to Times Square.

During our train ride, Mom told me she had recently been in touch with Dad. He claimed he was going to send us some extra money for the holidays, but it never happened. He was actually behind on child support again and when she called him out on it, he said his wedding ended up costing him more than expected.

"Remember this, Frankie," she said. "If anyone ever promises you something and they don't follow through on it, you have the right to tell them to go to hell."

"I know," I said. "You've been telling me that since I was little."

"Sometimes I wish I could go back in time

and turn down your dad when he asked me out on a date, but then I wouldn't have you as my son," she said. "Don't worry about it, Frankie. I'll teach after school if I need to, but my class is going to pass. I'm going to do whatever I can for my students, even if I have to beat their heads in."

"If you beat their heads in, they might lose some brain power."

"I wonder if they have any in the first place," Mom said. The train stopped at 42nd street and we walked out, huddled in our jackets, going up the steps to Times Square. I looked both ways before we crossed the street and whenever someone was too close to me, I moved over so they would be too far away to pickpocket me.

"That girl over there is giving you the eye," Mom said and pointed to the girl with her nose, because like she'd always say, never point at anyone with your finger, use your nose or head. I shook my head, thinking Mom was kidding.

"She is," Mom told me. "But remember Frankie, when you start dating, take her out for at least three months so you can figure out if she's worth it or not."

"Mom," I said. "What if I can't afford to take her to nice places?"

"Frankie, if someone really loves you, they'll love you if you're rich or broke," Mom said. "And if anyone ever makes you feel lesser for being poor, you reserve the right to smack them in the face with your book of food stamps."

"Wouldn't that hurt a lot, Mom?"

"Yes," she said and patted my shoulder.

"But so do lots of things."



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