

Excerpt from *Pavarotti and Pancakes*

A week after Mom turns fifty years old, Pop goes to Costa Rica. Thanks to the big concrete job we have down in Wildwood, my father has been able to catch up on some bills. Because of the extra money in the bank, and the weather being too cold to work, he decides to go away.

He and Uncle Charlie are going to meet up with a few other guys who are already in Costa Rica for a fifteen-day fishing trip. The thing is—Pop doesn't tell anyone he is going on vacation until Mom finds him packing his suitcase. I'm in my bedroom when I hear Mom say, "Frank, where do you think you're going?" She says it with such an indignant tone that I wait for his response—but he says nothing.

"Frank," she says again. "I mean it. Where do you think you're going?"

I wander down the hallway to see what's going on. When I reach the doorway to their bedroom, I see Pop folding clothes, and placing them in a black suitcase lying open on the bed. Mom senses me behind her and half turns around. Our eyes meet only briefly—she quickly turns back to Pop.

"Frank, answer me goddammit!"

He looks up only long enough from his folding to say, "Ann, leave me alone. Alright? Charlie will be here soon to pick me up."

"Leave you alone? What are you talking about? I'm your wife, and I have a right to know where you're going."

"Ann, I'm going to Costa Rica with a few of the guys. We'll be back in two weeks."

"Two weeks?"

She glares at him as Pop continues to calmly place clothes in the suitcase. I stand in the doorway shaking my head. *Is he really going to leave us alone with Mom for two weeks?*

There is tension in the air.

While Pop moves to the bureau, Mom approaches the black suitcase lying open on the bed. She reaches in and starts yanking clothes out. Mom is shouting, "You're not going anywhere!"

"Ann!" Pop says, turning from the bureau. "Will you knock it off, fChrissake?"

He rushes to the bed—ignoring the clothes Mom just threw on the floor. He butts in front of her, and quickly zips the suitcase closed. Mom is still hovering behind him. My father uses his left hand to take the suitcase by the handle; he picks it up off the bed. Pop moves towards me in the doorway. He throws a satchel over his right shoulder. Mom moves in front of him to block the way.

"You're not leaving!"

Pop stops only briefly, and lowers his eyes. "Ann, get out of the way."

"No, this isn't fair! I'm not moving!"

"Ann, get the fuck out of the way!"

"No, you're not going to Costa Rica!"

"I am too! Now, move!"

Mom tries to pin him against the doorjamb. I back out of their way, onto the landing. I am more confused than ever. *What do I do?* Should I help Mom make him stay? Or help Pop get out of here? I don't know. I don't like this. I don't like him leaving like this. It's too bizarre. He had to have known this was going to set her off. *What was he thinking?*

As I struggle to find an answer, Pop starts slowly edging his way past her. When they reach the staircase, Mom wraps her hand around the handle of his suitcase; she won't let go. She is

trying to yank it from his hand—or at the very least—stop my father from descending the stairs. But she’s no match for him. Pop is determined, and methodical, in the way he starts dragging the suitcase and my mother down the steps with him. They move slowly. Mom is grunting, and pulling—while Pop is stone-faced, and silent. I feel stupid just watching them. I’m still not sure what to do until I blurt out the words in my head. “Hey Pop,” I say. “Maybe you don’t go this time? I mean, it’s not the end of the world, right? There’ll be other trips.”

When I say that, Pop looks up at me. I’m his oldest son, but standing there atop the landing, looking down on my parents, fighting on the stairs, I’m a delay he won’t have. He speaks nothing—but his eyes say, *Cheech, stay out of this*. Despite his glare, I can’t help but feel like he is doing the wrong thing. He’s leaving without any notice—without even telling me and my brothers ahead of time. *What does he expect us to do with Mom for two weeks?*

Outside I can see the headlights of Uncle Charlie’s car in the driveway, as Pop lowers his gaze and says, “Ann, Charlie is waiting. Now, let me go before we miss our flight. This is ridiculous!” Mom acts like he didn’t say a thing. She still has her hand wrapped around the handle of Pop’s suitcase—trying to yank it from him. But step-by-step, Pop drags her all the way down the stairs. When they reach the foyer, he pulls her over to the front door and with his satchel hand, he is able to get it open. He starts backing out the storm door, with Mom screaming, “*You’re not going! You’re not going!*”

Pop is hunched over, and stone-faced. Using his rear-end to prop the door open—he continues to struggle with my mother for control of the suitcase. Then Mom wraps *both* her hands around the handle and tries to pull Pop, and his suitcase, back inside one last time.

When she realizes she can’t, Mom lets go of the handle and starts kicking Pop in the shins. She screams and kicks, “*You bastard! You bastard!*” Pop doesn’t try to stop her. He doesn’t even cover up. He has control of the suitcase, and that’s all he cares about now. Just as he’s about to straighten up and back out the door once and for all Mom reaches up and slaps him across his left cheek.

She screams, “*I hate you!*” Then she spits in his face.

Mom may have spat on him, but Pop doesn’t reach up to wipe it away. He just stands there calmly glaring at her. Then, without a word from either of them Pop calmly backs out the door. My father has that satchel slung across his right shoulder, the suitcase in his left hand, and Mom’s saliva splattered across his nose and mouth.



With Pop in Costa Rica, and Tony staying over a friend’s house, Michael goes over Aunt Teresa’s like he always does. Mom and I are the only ones home. She is on the phone in the kitchen talking to Michael. It’s seven o’clock, and she’s saying that she doesn’t want him to spend the night at Aunt Teresa’s.

Mom wants him home.

She says she’ll be over soon to pick him up. I can tell from her tone that my brother is giving her a hard time. He probably doesn’t understand why he has to come home. But Mom barks

into the phone, “I am your mother, and I want you home. I’m coming over to pick you up, so be ready!”

No sooner does she slam down the phone—then she’s marching out the front door to retrieve Michael.

A half an hour later the phone rings. When I pick up the receiver, and place it next to my ear, I hear a shaken Aunt Teresa.

“Frankie, hey sweetie, it’s Aunt Teri. Listen, I’m sorry to bother you, but your mother is really acting strange. I can’t get her to calm down. She’s downstairs trying to get Michael to leave with her, but I’m worried about him getting in the car with her. I’m gonna try and stall them. But I was wondering how quick could you make it here? Maybe you could take him home?”

“I could be there in a few minutes.”

“Alright, don’t get into an accident, but hurry over. I don’t know how much longer I can stall her before she just flips-out. She doesn’t look right tonight.”

I hang up the phone—and race across town in the Camaro. I get halfway to Aunt Teresa’s house when I see what looks like Mom and Michael in the Cadillac.

They’re slowing down at a stop sign—coming in the opposite direction. All of a sudden, Michael jumps out of the Cadillac as it rolls to a stop. He must have recognized the Ghetto Bomber. Michael scrambles through the intersection without looking to see if any other cars are coming. He reaches my passenger door, opens it, and gets in. He is crying.

“Michael, what’s the matter?”

Sobbing, he slams the door.

“Michael, what’s wrong?”

“I hate her Frankie. *I hate her!*”

“What happened?”

Before he has the chance to answer, I’m startled by the sound of Mom shouting at us while laying on her horn. She has pulled beside us. Her window is down. She is shouting to me that she wants to talk to Michael. Mom looks possessed; her eyes are big and angry. I don’t know what to do except lower my own window and holler back, “Mom, let’s go home and talk.”

“No! I want to talk to Michael right now!”

“Mom, we’re in the middle of the intersection.”

“No, Frankie!”

“Mom, just follow us.”

She lays on the horn again as I start to pull away. Through my rearview mirror, I watch her make an illegal U-turn, and follow behind us. The whole ride home Michael is quiet, and Mom is tailgating me. When we get to our street, something tells me not to pull into the driveway. I don’t want Mom to box us in, so I park at the curb.

Mom pulls into the driveway and gets out of the Cadillac right away. She is marching towards us. I get out of the Camaro and tell Michel to stay put. Standing on the sidewalk near the top of the driveway, I say: “Mom, what’s goin’ on?”

“Where’s Michael?”

“He’s in the car.”

“Tell him to get out!”

“Why, what’s the matter?”

“I want my son out of the car!”

As she marches towards me, the anger in her eyes makes it clear to me that Michael can't go inside. Mom can't be allowed near him like this. I turn around and get back into the Camaro, locking the door behind me. A split second later, Mom is pulling on the handle of my door. She is screaming, "Let me in goddammit! Let me in!"

Michael is in the passenger seat saying, "Frankie, she's crazy!"

Mom begins pounding on my window. "Let me in! Frankie! Let me in! Michael, open the door!"

I shout through the glass, "Mom, take it easy! He'll get out, but you gotta calm down."

"Don't tell me what to do!"

"Okay, but you gotta tell me what's goin' on."

"I'll tell you what's goin' on. You and your fuckin' father always against me, that's what's goin' on! If I want my son home, I want my son home, *period!* He's not Teresa's son He's mine, and he'll do what I say!"

"But Mom, he always goes over there. What's the big deal?"

"He is my son, and I say where he can stay. I say what he can do! Now, open the door because no one is taking my family away!"

"Mom, we are your family. We're sitting right here. Jesus, calm the fuck down!"

"Open the doors! I want my family!"

We go on like this for five minutes, then ten minutes, then fifteen minutes before I decide Michael and I have to leave. Nothing I say to her makes any difference, and nothing she says to me makes any sense. She lets Michael go over Aunt Teresa's as much as he wants—whenever he wants. But suddenly he has to come home? No matter how much I try to explain to her that she needs to calm down, the more frantic she becomes.

When I start the engine—prepared to leave—Mom shoots me a look that says, *where do you think you're going?* She leaps onto the hood of the Camaro. Her face is glaring at us through the windshield. Her hands are wrapped around the top of the hood; her legs are dangling off of the front grill. I shout at her through the windshield. "Mom, get off the hood!"

"No!"

"Mom, get off the hood! We're only gonna take a ride!"

"No, get out of the car! I want my son home!"

"Goddammit! Get off the fuckin' hood!"

When I say that, Mom looks up at me through the windshield and raises the middle finger of her right hand as if to say, *fuck you!* That's when something inside me snaps. "You wanna act like this?" I shout. "You wanna throw a tantrum over nothing?"

"I want my son!"

"Well, get off the fuckin' hood!"

"No!"

"Get off the fuckin' hood!"

"No!"

I don't know what to do. My fifty year old mother is clinging to the hood of my 1986 metallic blue Chevy Camaro. She refuses to get off. I'm screaming myself hoarse; Michael's crying himself crazy. I can't believe this is happening.

"Mom, get off the fuckin' hood!"

"No!"

"Get off!"

“No!”

I’ve had it. I don’t know what else to do except put the car in gear and shout, “You don’t wanna get off? Fine! Don’t get off!”

I start rocking the car back and forth. I put the Camaro in reverse—step on the gas—then slam on the brakes. Then I put it in drive—step on the gas—then slam on the brakes.

“How do you like it now, Mom? You sure you wanna stay on the hood?”

My mother has panic on her face. She is fighting not to lose her grip, but after a few sets of back and forth, Mom slips off the hood, and rolls into the gutter. I edge up slowly, so as not to run her over—then quickly speed away. The problem is—Michael and I are facing the wrong direction. We’re heading towards the cul-de-sac, which is a dead end. In order for us to leave, we first have to drive down and turn around.

We race down the avenue. As we start speeding back in the other direction, I see a figure standing in the middle of the street—it’s Mom.

We’re one hundred and fifty yards from her, but I can tell what she’s thinking. *If you wanna leave, you’re gonna have to run me over.* I take my foot off the gas and hesitate for a split second. *Am I really willing to do this? Am I really going to run her over?*

As quickly as that question comes to mind—so does the answer—the weight of my foot against the accelerator. I step on the gas, and Michael and I start racing towards our mother. With my foot to the floor, her image becomes larger with each passing nanosecond. As we bear down on her, I scream, “Michael, hold on!”

It looks like she’s not going to move. I try to trick her by yanking the wheel to the right, then to the left, but Mom just mirrors me. Whatever direction I swerve in, she goes the same way. That’s when a voice inside my head screams, *this is it!*

I don’t hear the engine anymore. I don’t feel Michael to my right. I am staring at my mother through the windshield as we race towards her with my foot to the floor. She’s fifty yards in front of us squatting down with her arms open like a football player ready to make a tackle. She is stubborn. She is crazy. She is ready to die.

Move! I think to myself.

She’s at thirty yards....

Don’t make me kill you!

She’s at fifteen yards....

I’m not stopping!

Ten yards....

She’s in my headlights....

Five yards....

This is it! This is the end! She’s not moving. You’re gonna kill your mother! You’re gonna kill your mother! At the last possible second—Mom dives out of the way. Michael and I crane our necks to the right; we watch her tumble past us into the gutter. I don’t stop. We race to the corner. I look to my left—no traffic coming. I make a right. We are gone. We are free.



Something happens to you when you come within feet of murdering your mother, in a 1986 metallic blue Chevy Camaro. You start to feel a rush of adrenaline fill every cavity of your soul. It's the sort of rush you feel when you realize—you didn't let up on the gas—you made your peace. I was willing to run her over right there on the street where I grew-up. It's that adrenaline that makes it hard for me to think about where Michael and I should go.

Do we go to the police?—No.

Do we go back to Aunt Teresa's?—No.

Do we go to Grandmom's?—No.

Do we go to Uncle Bruno's?—No.

If I know Mom, she has already gotten herself out of the gutter and into the Cadillac. I bet she is casing the streets right now, looking for a fight. I have to clear my head. I can't think straight. Where do we hide? What do we do? Why is this happening? As I search for an answer, Michael and I approach a small church complex off to our left when the thought comes to me that Mom will never think to look for us there. I don't know the name of the church. It's not Catholic, so we've never paid any attention to it before. But tonight, I race into the parking lot, and pull behind the church to hide. There are other buildings around. They look like part of a school. All of the lights are off. I feel safe here—far out of view from the road.

I turn the engine off, take a deep breath, and stare out the windshield. I try to swallow my adrenaline and gather myself, but I can't. I can't because I can still see her in my headlights. I can still see her mirroring my every move like she wanted to get hit. The thing is—I was going to do it. I didn't let up on the gas. I was beyond the point of being able to stop. Had she not dove out of the way—I would have killed her.

Sitting here in the dark, hiding behind the church, with the image of Mom in my headlights ready to die, I look over at Michael who is in tears. He is facing away from me, staring out the passenger side window. He is crying and sniffing so heavily that his chest rises and falls with each breath. My brother is a mess. I need to say something. I need to calm him down. I need to make this right.

"Michael." He doesn't answer. "Hey, Migalooch...."

He turns towards me just slightly. There are tears on his cheeks, and his eyes are red. His chest is still rising and falling, but the look on his face is of a sad anger.

"Migalooch, you alright?"

"Why," he stutters out, "doesssss sssshe doooo these thingsssss, Frankie?"

"I don't know."

"Why," he keeps stuttering, "can'tttt she jjjjjjust be nnnnormmmmmal?"

His face cringes when he says the word 'normal.' He starts to cry again. I place my hand on his back to console him, but Michael turns away from me. He turns away because he doesn't need consoling; he needs answers. He wants a normal mother, not one who dives onto the hood of her son's Camaro, or stubbornly stands in the middle of the street ready to die. Tonight, I need to give him answers. Tonight, I need to be a father.

I clear my throat, and take my hand off of Michael's back. I turn towards the windshield, and start talking to him without talking *at* him. My voice is soft; my speech is slow.

"Migalooch," I say, "ever since we were kids, Mom's had problems. You know that. I mean for years she slept on the couch at our old house. When we moved, she started sleeping on the

floor, going days without showering. Now, I know she has embarrassed you at some of your basketball games, and she embarrassed you tonight over Aunt Teresa's, but I think she's acting this way because she's sick, Michael. She's doing all this because she wants to be like Babbo. You're too young to really remember him, but he didn't like Mom very much. You could even say he hated her. So, when I hear you say that you hate her, it worries me, because I know you love her and I know she loves you. It's just she wants us to hate her right now. She wants us to treat her poorly. She wanted me to run her over just now, because that's what she thinks she deserves. You follow me?"

I pause, and look over at Michael to see if he's listening—to see if my words make any sense to him. He is still looking out the window. But his chest isn't rising and falling anymore, so I decide to keep talking.

"Michael, do you remember when Dad used to go away, and Mom would ask one of us to check the closet for her to see if Babbo was hiding inside?"

"No."

"No? You don't remember that?"

"No."

"Well, you were probably too young. But she used to ask me, or Dad to make sure Babbo wasn't hiding in her closet—that's how scared she was of him. Even after he died, she had to make sure he wasn't hiding in her closet ready to jump out and kill her after she fell asleep. Now, that's what I mean Michael; Mom's stuck in the past. It's like she's a prisoner. We can't be mad at her for that. We can't hate her for that. Things happened to her when she was little, bad things, you kn..."

"I don't care, Frankie."

"But Migalooch..."

"I don't care what happened to her when she was a little girl. She's fifty years old now."

"Yeah, but Michael, she's still the same girl who got abused years ago. You have to understand; Mom wouldn't have turned out this way if that stuff didn't happen to her."

He doesn't say or do anything more after that, except fold his arms across his chest. I feel like an idiot for talking to him like this. But he is too upset to see the truth of my words, and I'm too upset to convince him of it. I stop talking, and we both end up sitting in silence for a few minutes—me staring out the windshield, and Michael staring out the passenger's window.

I start to get a chill from the winter air, and decide to turn the car back on, and crank up the heater. Michael is still staring out the window in silence with his arms folded across his chest. I wish I knew what to say, because what I *did* say has only served to shut him down. My adrenaline may have subsided, but I still feel like I did something wrong, like I said something wrong, and made this night that much worse for him.

I'm supposed to be his big brother—his Hero of the House when Pop goes away. All I can think is how much I wish I could take back what I said to him about Mom. *He doesn't care about any of that*, I tell myself. *He's almost five years younger than you, Chichi. He wants Mom to be like Aunt Teresa, normal and healthy. It's not that he could care less about what happened to her all those years ago in that greenhouse; it's that all he knows is he wants a mom who is happy to see him. A mom who makes him snacks when he comes home from school. A mom who doesn't embarrass him by the way she smells. A mom he is proud to call his own—yet all I can do is make excuses for her.*

It's with a mixture of guilt and shame that I look over and say, "Hey, you wanna go home, Migalooch?"

He still doesn't say anything. I know his silence means that he's tired of talking, and that—*yes*—he wants to go home. Still, I wish he would say something—so I could explain myself—so I could explain our mother.