

*The Time My Father Stood Up To The Mafia* by Carol Roper

“Your father has a death wish.” My mother wagged the *New York Daily News* in one hand, and held a cigarette in the other. “He’s crazy.”

I was getting used to her saying bad things about him now that they were divorced. She wore the silver dressing gown he had given her in the last year of their marriage.

“What is it?” I asked.

“It’s such big news that it pushed Julius and Ethel Rosenberg off the front page.” The Rosenberg’s were accused spies. They had pleaded innocent, but they were Jewish and communists and no one believed communists.

My mother dropped the paper on the dining room table where I waited for breakfast. I pushed my new eyeglasses up on my nose and saw a photo of my father flanked by hulking Federal Bureau of Investigation agents. He wore his business suit, and the horn-rimmed glasses that made him look like Superman’s alter ego, Clark Kent.

“Why is Dad in the paper?”

“You can read.”

I quickly scanned the report. The year was 1952 and organized crime had been jamming my father’s trucking company’s phone lines, and terrorizing his truck drivers.’

“It’s New York. You pay or you don’t play,” my mother said. “Your father thinks if he testifies for the Crime Commission, he won’t have to pay. He has another think coming.”

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“But he shouldn’t pay. They’re crooks.”

“Don’t be ridiculous.” She mother poured cornflakes into a bowl. “It’s America everybody starts out a crook. When you get rich, you get legal. This whole Senate flap is just prejudice against the Italians. And don’t you ever forget, you’re half-Italian. Never forget your roots. Mr. Lucky Luciano helped your grandfather, God rest his soul, open a bowling alley, when no one else would.”

My mother considered the Mafia and the Catholic church equals.

“The newspaper says Dad’s a hero.”

She placed the cereal in front of me. “He’s cheap. He has the money. Pay.” She glanced at the newspaper. “Not a bad picture, for a dead man,” she said. To get back into the dating after the divorce she had recently dyed her hair Rita Hayworth-red. Her flaming hair and knee-skimming dresses brought suitors, but she complained that men just wanted “one thing” from a divorcee. My young mind was somewhat cloudy on the meaning, but I understood that what the men wanted wasn’t what she wanted, which was to have my father love her again.

“Hurry up and eat, you’ll be late for school,” she said.

“Daddy’s doing the right thing,” I said, shoveling a spoonful of cornflakes into my mouth. She glanced at the newspaper. “It’ll only cost more in the long run. Get it over with, already.”

“Lois Ann,” she always used by first and middle name when she was making a formal point, “did he do the right thing when he left us for that tramp?” Who could argue with this cold

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logic? “If he thinks he’s going to reform the system, he’s got another think coming,” she fumed.

I chomped louder on the cornflakes.

“Though if something happened,” she reflected as if forgetting she was talking to her eleven- year-old daughter, “You and Michael would inherit everything.”

“What could happen?” I asked, fear gripping my stomach.

“He could get shot,” she said with remorseless satisfaction. “Then he’d get what he deserved.” She lit another cigarette, though the last one was still burning in the ashtray. “Are you going to eat or what?”

My lips trembled. My father’s triumph over crime would mean nothing to me if he was killed. I pushed the cereal away. “I’m not hungry.” I started to leave my chair.

“Sit down,” she ordered, belatedly recognizing my distress. “What did I say? Nothing. Only the good die young. He’ll be alive a long time, your father,” she clucked. “Mr Luciano was a very generous man,” she added with a pensive smile, “He once gave me a silver dollar.”

“Well, he’s dead,” I said, grabbing the newspaper and dashing from the room.

“You get back in here. I’m not finished with that newspaper,” she shouted, but I was already in the foyer and on my way through the front door, taking the *Daily News* with me.

During our weekly visitation dinners, sitting across from our father in a Chinese restaurant, my brother and I saw him as David against the Goliath of crime. He stood up to the mob! He was almost famous. We were thrilled. The F.B.I assigned to guard him sat at a nearby

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table pretending not to watch us. In the glove compartment of his Cadillac, we snuck a look at his revolver, while he lifted the car hood and checked for bombs before sliding behind the wheel and turning the ignition. When he hugged us, sometimes we felt his shoulder holster under his suit jacket.

Every Friday night our apartment would be filled with my mother's sisters and brothers, along with their fiancés, who came to keep her company after work. Sitting on the edge of a chair, I became almost invisible, listening to their knowing laughter about marriage, smelling the hot coffee and pastries from the corner bakery and hearing the gossip about my father's chances of being knocked off before he got to testify before the crime commission.

My less ambitious uncles, who were employed at my father's messenger and trucking company, had known him since childhood and resented that he had become rich while they were away at war. They also felt superior, because for all of my father's wealth, his heart was not healthy and there was always the chance he would die soon while they remained young and strong.

I noticed a friend of my mother's youngest brother, ten years her junior, often brought my brother and me gifts and stayed late after the others had gone home to the Bronx, talking quietly with my mother in the living room. He had the good looks of a Latin matinee idol, even though he was half-Jewish and Italian. A shy man, he had grown up just a few blocks from her; it was

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rumored among the family that he had always had a crush on my mother, even when she had been married to my father. We liked him, not the least because he frequently checked his pant's pockets and gave us his spare change, over our mother's protests that money was not a proper gift for children. To be honest, I hoped she would marry him so we could be a family again.

Never in the best of moods when seeing us off for our weekend visitations with our father, mother escorted us to the bus stop on Madison Avenue. She feared my father's stand against crime would cause Michael or me to be kidnaped to force our father to withdraw as a witness. She wanted us to have bodyguards. The F.B.I. disagreed and assured her our father was the likely target, not any of us.

We waited for a bus in front of the pharmacy and soda fountain, where I spent my weekly allowance on ice cream.

"You be careful on the bus," she warned. "If anyone sits next to you, move away."

"Nothing's going to happen," my brother said.

"Mr. Big shot," she murmured.

She tugged at my short hair. "I hate short hair on girls. What's he trying to do, make you look like a boy?"

"It was my idea," I lied, pulling away from her. My father had convinced me that short hair was the latest style, during the week he'd taken me to Miami. Wanting my father's approval

more than my hair, I'd let him chop off my pigtails in the hotel bathroom. A dreadful choice that left me resembling a near-sighted poodle.

"I'll take you to a hairdresser when it grows," she said, but I knew she wouldn't. Each time my hair reached an unruly length, she took me instead to a barbershop, or cut it herself. Turning to Michael, my mother said, "You have beautiful hair, wavy, thick." Michael beamed like a dog having its belly rubbed. She softened her voice. "You know I met your father in the hallway of DeWitt Clinton High School," she started. I'd heard the story a half-dozen times and didn't want to hear it again.

"Dad doesn't like it when we're late," I said looking up the avenue for the bus.

"Yes, well, his highness can wait." She jerked at my dress collar. "Just stay neat and clean till you get there, all right?"

"Yes," I said, pulling away from her. She dressed us for visits as if we were going to a formal party. Michael in a short-pants suit, and me in a puffy dress that choked and gave me no waist at all.

"I know you love him," my mother said in a hurt voice. "And don't forget I want a full report." She had a plan. "Jealousy," she explained, "is stronger than love. She would make my father jealous, then he would come back begging on his hands and knees. "I need you to be my eyes and ears. Remember everything you see and hear."

"I can do that," Michael piped up.

"You're too young to understand, but I love you." She squeezed him to her, and over his

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head she said to me, “If you see her, you call me immediately.” She let go of my brother, and her expression narrowed. “It’s getting late and I don’t want you riding the bus.”

“But it’s coming,” I said, seeing the Madison Avenue bus a block away. I liked the adventure of bus rides. The interesting looking people that got on and off at bus stops, the rumble of the bus motor and the diesel fumes.

“I don’t care. I’m sending you in a cab. Your father can afford it.” She stepped off the sidewalk to hail a passing taxi. A boxy yellow-checked cab stopped for us. My mother opened the door then hauled me into her arms as if I were going on a year’s journey instead of overnight. Her perfume enveloped me as she flattened my face against her breasts.

“I can’t breathe.”

She released me to give Michael another turn. I climbed into the cab pulling him in beside me on the leather seat. Our mother gave the driver the address and instructed him, “You wait, she’ll go inside and get the money. Call me when you get there,” she commanded, shutting the door for our thirty-block journey. Holding my brother’s hand, I settled into the seat watching the sunlight between the buildings as we traveled through the manmade canyons of New York to our father’s downtown office.

“What happened?” My mother sat on the horsehair couch covered in grey velvet for my de-briefing. I sat next to her wearing play clothes, a short-sleeved shirt and denim pants. Sturdy Buster Brown shoes kept my arches intact.

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“We went to the zoo.” I dutifully began my weekly report.

She made a sound like blowing a bug off her arm. “The zoo. Big spender.”

Michael lay on the living room floor, pretending to watch Howdy Doody on television, but I could tell he was listening to our every word.

“He bought us hotdogs. We saw the seals.” I hated betraying my father to my mother.

“He doesn’t want anyone he knows seeing him sneaking around. She was with you, I presume.” Her voice lifted like a prosecutor who already knows the answer.

I remembered my father standing on the cafeteria terrace waiting for the woman who had ruined my mother’s life. “She met us there.”

Her face turned dark. “Pretending it was a surprise, I suppose.”

“No, he was looking for her.”

“He’ll be looking for his head when I’m finished with him.”

“She’s not that bad, she’s young and kind of...,” Before I could finish, my mother’s fingers dug into my flesh and she jerked my arm.

“That’s an act. She wants you to like her and when she gets what she wants, she’ll cut you and Michael out of his heart.”

“You’re hurting me.”

My mother had a dazed expression as if she’d snapped out of a trance. She dropped my arm and rubbed the spot where her fingers had left a red imprint.

“Never forget she’s the one who took him away from us.”

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“But you’re divorced now.” I took my arm back.

“A divorce is a piece of paper. Your father and I were married in the church before God, and what God has put together, no man can put asunder. We are married forever. Do you understand?”

“You don’t even believe in God,” I mumbled.

“I heard that,” she yelled in my face. “I damn well do believe in God, who says I don’t? Did your father say that? He’s a liar.”

“He didn’t say anything about you.” It was true. He rarely spoke of my mother.

“Thinks he can forget about me. Well, he’s got another think coming. Where did she sleep? Did she spend the night there?”

“No, she went home after dinner. It was just dad and me and Michael.”

“Smart. He got her out of there before you woke up. If that tramp spent the night, he’d lose custody.”

A knot of dread tightened in my stomach. “What’s that mean?”

“We couldn’t see him,” my brother said from the floor.

“Someone has big ears,” my mother teased.

I began to sob.

“Why are you crying?”

“I want to see him.”

“Don’t be useless,” she said impatiently. “I never said I’d stop you from seeing your

father.”

“You said he’d lose custody,” I wailed.

“*Could* lose it. I didn’t say would.”

“You said, ‘would’.”

“All right, so sue me. I said it. I didn’t mean it,” her voice rose in exasperation.

My brother started to cry, and crawled into her lap.

“Will you look at you two? A couple of sob sisters.”

“Why are you mad at me,” I wailed.

“I’m not mad at you, honey. I love you.” She put her arm around me, while balancing Michael. She smelled of sweat and cigarettes. “You’re my little girl.” I squirmed away.

Michael pleaded, “Don’t be sad, mommy.”

“Mommy wants a cigarette,” she said, pushing him away. His tears increased.

“Look what you did,” I accused, as I kneeled and comforted my brother.

She put the palms of her hands to her forehead. “I can’t hear myself think.” She opened her hands and looked at us, splayed in misery at her feet. “Why are you crying? Stop it.”

Michael turned his attention to Clara Belle the Clown on television.

“Never mind,” she said, apologetic. “Forget what I said, it’s just talk. Words don’t mean anything they’re just so much hot air.” She glanced around. “Where the hell did I put those smokes?” And reached for her red and white pack of Pall Malls on the end table. Putting a cigarette in her mouth but not lighting it, she said, “Go get your brother a cookie from the pantry,

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and one for yourself. Not two,” she admonished “your father doesn’t like fat women. Just one each.”

We’d won a reprieve and a reward. I scrambled to my feet.

“Then go downstairs and play. Take your brother with you before he goes blind watching that television.”

I hurried him from the room before she could ask any more questions about my visit with my father.

Soon my mother was ready for her coup. A marriage proposal had come from her brother’s friend, a man she didn’t love, but who was smitten with her. Now she had my father just where she wanted him, she told us. When she let him know another man wanted to marry her, my father would be outraged and humbled, realize what he was losing and beg her to take him back.

A good plan, and one that might have worked in nineteenth century Italy.

Mother arranged a meeting with my father under the guise of wanting to discuss family business, had her hair retouched, put on her make-up and changed her dress three times before she was ready for her triumph.

“Here comes your mother,” my Aunt Louise said in a voice like a television announcer. “Doesn’t she look wonderful?”

My mother danced into the living room for our inspection wearing her best silks, furs and perfume looking as glamorous as any movie star.

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“You’re beautiful, Mommy,” Michael said, and I agreed.

I knew I wasn’t supposed to pray for anything but my own redemption from sin, but that night I prayed my mother’s scheme would succeed and she would bring my father home.

Two hours later she returned in defeat, her make up smeared by her tears. She refused to speak to us, went to her bedroom where she locked the door.

Listening from the hallway as she told my Aunt Louise everything, I heard the story.

When my mother had arrived at the restaurant, my father had treated her as if she’d come to a business meeting between former partners. He had not paid her any compliments, but rushed to the point of her wanting to see him, not even offering her drinks or dinner first. His coolness had tossed her through a loop; too soon she revealed her ace in the hole, the pending marriage proposal. He had congratulated her! The cad had confided how guilty he’d felt about the divorce and how he never would’ve considered marrying again until he knew my mother was secure, and now that she had unburdened him, he was free to marry her rival. In the face of his genuine happiness for her, my mother could hardly admit her fraud. Feigning cheerfulness she came home and threw up.

Weeks passed. My mother let the dark roots of her hair grow out, she spoke of her betrayal in whispered hushes on the telephone with her sisters. She stayed in her bedroom and shouted at us to go away if we tried to enter. She forgot to feed us and when reminded it was time to eat, gave me money and sent me out to bring home Chinese food in paper cartons. She wore her eyeglasses and did not take them off even when her fiancé came to call. She cried and swore

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that my father had outwitted her to save on alimony, which would be terminated when she remarried, leaving her only with child-support. And when her fiancé, who had a clerical job in the garment district, tried to assure her he could support her, she called him an idiot and laughed till he withdrew in defeat.

I knocked on her door and entered carrying a tray. My mother lay across her bed with her arm over her face.

“I brought you a bowl of chicken noodle soup.”

She raised her head slightly and glanced at me. Her eyes looked washed out, her skin yellowish from tobacco. “That’s nice of you, honey, but I’m not very hungry.” Her head dropped back like a puppet’s. “Just put it on the night stand, will you?”

I maneuvered the tray onto the mahogany table. The hot soup sloshed over the side and singed my fingers. I drew back, spilling more soup. Not wanting to upset her, I controlled myself and didn’t cry. Wiping my hand on the back of my blue school skirt, I sat in my mother’s pink boudoir chair.

“So how was school?” She asked.

“Fine,” I said. It wasn’t. I was just developing breasts, and some of the older boys carried squirt guns to school and to soak the front of any girl who, like myself, was a budding pubescent.

I looked out the window, and saw a remarkable spectacle on the next door rooftop that caused me to forget my scorched fingers and the daily humiliation of school. A dozen nuns were

trooping across the asphalt carrying boxes of food.

“There are nuns on the roof,” I said.

“What?” She raised her head sounding irritated.

“Nuns.” I noticed a fire pit and watched fascinated as the nuns brought out hamburgers, and hotdogs and potato salad, covering a whole picnic table. I had the astonishing revelation that nuns ate the same food as everyone else. Until that second, I must’ve thought they existed on holy wafers and consecrated wine.

“Of course, there are nuns, it’s a convent. They married Jesus, I married your father. Only he didn’t marry me.”

“Yes, he did.”

“You wouldn’t understand.”

“I’m almost twelve.” I kept an eye on the nuns watching them cook hotdogs and hamburgers on the open grill.

“Are you going to get up and make dinner?” I asked my mother.

“Is it dinner time?”

“No.”

“Ask me at dinner time.”

“Because, if not, I should go get something. Hamburgers would be nice.”

“Well, we don’t have any money.”

“We could charge it.” The aroma of the sizzling meat had begun to rise over the rooftop.

I breathed in, my mouth watered.

She moved her arm and turned her gaze on me. “We can’t charge anymore,” she said.

“We’ll just have to wait till your Aunt comes over. I’ll tell her to get you Chinese.”

“We had Chinese last night.”

“And we’ll have it tonight,” she said firmly. “Where’s Michael?”

“Playing downstairs.”

“On his bike? I want him to be careful.”

“Yes,” I agreed, wishing I were a nun enjoying hotdogs and hamburgers for dinner.

“Maybe I’ll be a nun when I grow up.”

“Over my dead body,” she said. “Go make sure Michael’s okay in the street.”

“I just did.” The nun’s habits swirled around them as they filled their plates. Sounds of laughter drifted up to my window. I’d never heard a nun laugh before, it made me want to cry.

“I need to find someone to help clean and cook and take care of you and your brother. It’s too much for me by myself.”

“I can do it.”

“I don’t want you turned into a servant. You’re not going to be like me. Don’t make my mistake. Don’t ruin your life. Never get married and have children. Don’t be like me,” she warned.

Pulling my gaze away from the nuns, I glanced at my mother prone in her bed. She smelled unwashed. “Are you going to take a shower?”

“When I feel like it,” she said with a mean smile.

“Don’t worry, I won’t be like you,” I said in disgust. From the corner of my eye, I caught a quick movement, and dashed for the door as the slipper she flung hit it.

“I’m your mother and don’t you ever forget to respect that,” she shouted.

And then one day my mother got of bed and made an appointment at the beauty parlor. She had decided she would seek revenge. She would make my father’s life as miserable as he had made hers. How exactly she would proceed was unclear, but one thing she swore, “I’ll make that son-of-a-bitch sorry he was ever born.”

Her plan of retaliation turned out to be simple: she would marry her youngest brother’s friend. My grandmother and aunts cooked for two days. The aroma of sausages and meatballs and manicotti and fresh pastry filled the apartment. The marriage took place in front of a Justice of the Peace in our living room just as revelers rang in the New Year of 1952.

“What the hell is this country coming to?” My mother asked. It was Spring time and we were standing on the curb waiting for the traffic signal to change. She pointed up at a round air raid siren that had magically appeared at the top of all the city’s lampposts.

“What is it?” I asked. I hoped it wasn’t anything bad. She was in a rare good humor and had bought me an ice cream cone.

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“It’s a siren to warn us in case the Russians attack us.”

“Why would they do that?” I asked worried.

“Because they’re poor and we’re rich, and Joseph Stalin is a fruitcake who wants to take over the world.” We waited for the light to change before crossing the busy east-west street.

“Isn’t Russia far away?”

“What a question. I don’t know. Not far enough.”

“In school we learned about the atomic bomb and how it was a long dangerous trip and the bomb could’ve blown up the plane before they got there.”

“But it didn’t.” The traffic signal changed to green and we started across the street.

“Yes, but if it’s a long way for the United States to drop a bomb on Japan, and Russia is far away. How can they bomb us?”

“Stop thinking about things that don’t concern you and eat your ice cream.”

The logistics of how the Russians could deliver bombs, or invade and dominate the United States had apparently eluded everyone in the Pentagon. No doubt some of the great minds of the day knew the truth about Russia and were labeled communist sympathizers. We passed a news stand where the newspapers displayed front page photos of the bespectacled convicted spies, Julius Rosenberg and his matronly wife, Ethel.

“If the Rosenbergs are so crazy about mother Russia, they can go live there for all I care.” She glanced at me. “Watch out, you’re dripping your cone.”

I grabbed my napkin and wiped the front of my blouse.

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A few weeks later, I came home with a necklace issued at school; a delightful trinket with my name and birth date imprinted on it. I proudly showed my new bauble to my mother who screamed, "Take it off."

"Why?" I possessively fingered my treasure. She was always acting bonkers about something.

"That's not a necklace. It's a dog tag."

"A dog tag?" What new strangeness had the adults invented? "We don't have a dog."

"It's what they give soldiers to wear so they can identify their bodies," my mother explained. "Take it off. It's bad luck."

Reluctantly I pulled the chain over my head and handed her my jewelry for the dead. "How will I be identified?" I asked.

"Honey," she said, pocketing the tags, "if they ever drop The Bomb, it won't make any difference, we'll all be boiled away, anyhow." At times, she had a brutal clarity. She didn't throw the tags away though; growing up in an economic depression, she never discarded anything, no matter how useless. The dog tags were consigned to a tin that had been once filled with Valentine sweets from my father, and now sufficed as a sewing box and catch all, and which I thought of as a treasure chest

The trial of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg pushed my father's story off the front pages of the newspaper. As time passed, the Crime Commission witnesses either developed amnesia, or

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turned up, inconveniently, dead. My father was less eager to testify. He wanted to expand his business, and the investigation was hampering him. The smart money was on interstate trucking and air freight and that is where he set his sights. He withdrew his cooperation. The FBI agents no longer shadowed us. There was a snag. All ports were controlled by the Teamster's Union, and my father was persona non grata for running to the Feds. If he wanted a piece of the action, he would have to pay. My father swallowed his pride and opened his wallet. As my mother had predicted, his so-called principles wound up costing him twice as much. If he suffered any pangs of conscience over his decision, I never knew about it. He soon bought a brand new home with his new wife, in tony, Westchester County.

The Rosenberg's execution was scheduled for eight o'clock on a balmy spring night, two days before summer's arrival. Riding the elevator up to our apartment, I overheard two men talking about how the executioner would give the Rosenbergs so much juice the lights would dim in New York City.

Support for leniency had come from civil libertarians and humanitarians all over the world. Albert Einstein, and Pope Pius XII urged clemency, and an estimated five thousand people, including the Aronson twins and their mother, had gathered in Union Square to hold a vigil for a pardon. President Eisenhower twice denied executive clemency for the Rosenbergs saying: "The execution of two human beings is a grave matter. But even graver is the thought of the millions of dead whose deaths may be directly attributable to what these spies have done.... When in their most solemn judgment the tribunals of the United States have adjudged them

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guilty and the sentence just, I will not intervene in this matter."

On June 19, 1953 at exactly 8:00 P.M., I leaned from the window of our eleventh floor apartment and stared down at the glowing street lamps. They didn't flicker and I thought the Rosenbergs might still be alive.

"What are you doing?" my mother asked, coming into the living room and seeing me hanging out the window "Get back in here before you fall out and kill yourself."

"I want to see if it's true," I said.

She was wearing pedal pushers with a blouse over them, and smoking a cigarette. Sitting on the couch, she curled her legs under her.

"If what's true?" She inhaled, and the tip of her cigarette glowed.

"About the lights blowing out when they electrocute Julius and Ethel Rosenberg."

She exhaled blue smoke, and tilting her head at me, squinted her eyes.

"Go to bed," she said.

"Why?" I knew my mother considered them guilty.

"Death isn't a sideshow." She reached over to turn on the table lamp. The bulb exploded.