

I Loved a Mario Lanza Lookalike

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When I look back I see myself leaning against the door frame leading to our railroad apartment one flight up. I was a slight child of seven or eight with long, dark stringy hair that hadn't been washed in more than a week and severely short bangs, uneven and unprofessionally cut. I wore a red and white scarf loosely around my neck. The scarf was so long the ends reached below my knees.

Every morning I waited for my mother to navigate the old heavy stroller carrying my two younger sisters down the flight of stairs. The stroller came down slowly, one step at a time. With each step the girls who were strapped in with stained cotton harnesses were jolted. Their heads moved in unison like two bauble dolls with runny noses.

I held the door open for my mother and together we walked to school down Rogers Avenue, always waiting for the lights and checking the traffic both ways. We passed Ikey's candy store where I picked up the Journal American for my father. I liked going into the dark dingy establishment. If the owner and his wife were in the back I sometimes stole penny candy, bubble gum, or two cent lucky packets from the glass displays in the front.

I almost got caught once when the old woman came shuffling from the back. Her hair was grey and wiry. Her face was a mass of wrinkles. Her thick glasses were greasy and smudged. Her feet, in broken down sandals were long neglected, caked with dirt and dry cracked skin. She smelled slightly of fish and her mouth was often dripping the leftovers of her last meal.

At the next corner we passed the ice cream parlor. Sometimes, on the way back from school, when it was hot we stopped for a small coke. I sat on a red leather stool in front of a gleaming white counter enjoying my coke while my mother would go into the small grocery store next door to pick up milk or bread. The prices were higher than at the A and P but Harry the grocer allowed my mother to run a tab until pay day. Often I

ran in there to grab a devil dog or a packet of potato chips from the shelves to share with my best friend Suey who lived at the back of the Chinese Laundry down the street. "Put it on my mother's tab." I shouted. Harry removed the small pencil from behind his ear and a small notebook from his apron pocket to make a notation. After he put the pencil back in its resting place he fluffed the corkscrew curls that decorated his forehead. Even though he always chewed on a toothpick he managed to say, "Okay, sis."

At school I sat on the wooden bench that lined the concrete walls of the school yard until Sister rang the bell to enter. This was my daily routine until I saw him. He was in one of the upper grades and came into the school with his friends. He looked just like Mario Lanza from the movies my grandmother took me to see. He had the same hair cut, the same waves, the same strong square chin. His clothes were immaculate and freshly pressed. He was animated and jovial. His dark brown eyes sparkled. His teeth gleamed when he laughed with his friends. I loved him instantly and I wanted him to love me back.

I stared at him without blinking and smiled faintly if he happened to accidentally and unseeingly look my way. I held my hair up, pretending to make a ponytail thinking this made me look more attractive and older. But he didn't notice. I watched for him every day but he never noticed me. He just bounced his pink Spaulding ball and talked to his friends a few feet away from me.

I tried another tactic to get his attention. While waiting for my mother to make her way downstairs with the stroller I pulled out our mail from the mail slot and tossed it on the tiled floor of our vestibule. "Some big boy from school came in here and did it. I saw him!" I told my mother when she asked how the mail ended up on the floor. I told her the same lie everyday until finally she asked me to point the boy out.

I was delighted. I would get to meet him. He would be forced to notice me. And just like Mario Lanza from the movies he would sing to me when we walked to school.

“Mom, he’s there.” I said. “That’s the boy who pulls the mail from the slot.” My mother walked over to the boy.

“I want to talk to you.” She said. “ why are you throwing my mail on the floor? Stop, or I will tell your mom and report you to your teacher.”

Mario stopped bouncing his ball. He and his friends looked at my mom. They were silent. I looked at Mario’s handsome face. It was red. He was confused and horrified to be yelled at so suddenly and undeservedly. He opened his mouth to protest but instead he started to cry.

My mother softened her approach and said “Don’t do it again.”

Sniffing and wiping his tears, Mario bounced his ball and turned away.

I saw Mario in the school yard almost every day but he never turned his head to look at me.

And the mail was never pulled from the slot again.