

Frank Sinatra on the 4th of July

Tim Tomlinson

Frank Sinatra sat in a lawn chair in our backyard, snapping his fingers to a tune only he heard. The narrow brim of a straw trilby threw a shadow on his eyes. He blew smoke rings from a Chesterfield cigarette.

On the lawn's far side, near the arborvitae hedge, Dad took Brillo pads to the underside of the redwood picnic table. He'd been scrubbing at the table and its companion benches for half an hour. The soap foamed up pink, then gray, then clear. Clear meant it was close to clean. He always cleaned this way when we had family coming.

"Yo, Dads," Sinatra said, "You know what you're doing? You're scraping the stain right off that table."

I stood alongside Dad, garden hose at the ready in my hands. Sinatra shot me a wink.

Dad looked up from his scrubbing. He watched Sinatra take a long pull on his cigarette.

"It's just gonna get dirty again, no?" Sinatra said, smoke pouring from his nostrils. "I mean, come on, sit down, take a load off, crack a Schlitz. That's enough with the table. It's clean enough for jazz." His cigarette ash fell to the patio.

Dad said, "I just cleaned that patio."

"You see?" Sinatra said, peering over the arm of the lawn chair. "That's exactly what I'm talking about." He twisted the ash into the patio with the sole of a Huarache.

Mom said, "He's right, you know. We could just use a tablecloth."

"Hey, kid," Sinatra said. "You heard your Moms. Go get us a tablecloth, give your old man a break."

Dad said, "How about the two of youse stick to lounging around doing nothing, and I'll stick to cleaning up my yard?"

Sinatra shrugged. "Works for me," he said. He shook the ice in his tumbler. "Hey kid, good hosts don't let a guest go thirsty."

Mom said, "I'll get it. Cliffy, you stay out here and help your father."

She took Sinatra's glass and hesitated at the kitchen door. "Maybe you want to see inside?"

"What, and look at the silverware?" He shot her a wink. "Maybe later, doll."

Lighting another Chesterfield, he said, "Kid, you're lucky, you know that? Beautiful mom, nice set of sticks..."

I said, "Sticks?"

Dad snapped his fingers and pointed to the suds-upped area of the table. I opened the hose nozzle and started spraying.

"She used to be a fan of yours," Dad told Sinatra.

"No kidding," Sinatra said. "Used to be, huh?"

Dad said, "She grew up."

He wiped the dirty suds off his hands onto a wet towel.

"That when she met you?" Sinatra said.

Dad tossed the towel into a bucket. I helped him flip the table over to dry in the sun.

"Let's go get ready," he told me.

I followed behind.

"Yo, kid," Sinatra said. "Come here, I need to tell you something."

I leaned in close. He whispered, "It don't mean a thing if it ain't got that swing. You understand me?"

"Um," I said, "Kind of."

The family arrived from Brooklyn. Uncle Vic, Aunt Betty, her sister Estrella and her boyfriend Rafe. Nanny and Poppa. Uncle Vic's friend Carlo. They went straight to the fence in the backyard where large evergreens threw shade on black soil. They dug a deep, wide hole in the shade and set the watermelon at the bottom.

"Like a refrigerator, this dirt," Carlo said. "A-bip-adda-bap-adda-boop, done. OK, Two-tone, cover it up."

Two-tone was Uncle Vic's nickname because he drove a taxi in the city with his left arm sticking out the window in the sun. It got chocolate brown, while his right arm remained white.

"You gotta keep it cool, Cliffy," Uncle Vic said, throwing the black soil over the melon.

"Can't be hot if it ain't cool," Sinatra said from the patio.

Carlo back-handed Uncle Vic's chest. "*Minga*," he said, "Is that Sinatra?"

"Ho," Uncle Vic said, dropping his shovel.

They charged Sinatra with their hands extended.

Sinatra held out his palms and leaned back in the chair. "Sorry, fellas, fresh manicure."

Carlo said, "Of course, Mr. Sinatra. But...wow, *Madon*, are you for real?"

"Real as a bimbo in the back of a limo," Sinatra said.

"I can't believe you got him here," Nanny whispered to Mom.

Mom said, "Now how do I get rid of him?"

"Rid of him?" Nanny said.

Mom said, "Guess who can't stand him?"

"What, Rocky's being fresh?" Nanny said. "Who cares what he thinks?"

Sinatra said, "Hey, Grandma, he's the king of this castle."

Mom said, "So where's the castle?"

Sinatra clicked his tongue, pointed his finger, and winked.

"Can I get you something, Mr. Sinatra?" Nanny asked. "Some bread and sauce maybe?"

Sinatra shook the ice cubes in his empty glass. "You can freshen this, Grandma. Cliffy, show her how, huh? Easy on the water, you hear me?"

I came back out with his drink. He told me sit, but there wasn't another chair. He leaned in confidentially.

"Now don't take this wrong, Cliffy, but your old man, he's in a box, you hear what I'm saying?"

“Sort of.”

“See, a box got four corners. It’s square, it can stack neat. It can hold things inside, keep them from falling. All that bullsh-... All that BS. But you know what it can’t do?”

“What?”

“I want you to think,” he said, rapping his knuckles on my head.

“I don’t know.”

“What I told you before?”

“Swing?”

“Ring-a-ding-ding,” he said, clicking his tongue. “All that scrubbing, the Marine Corps. It’s for squares, for amateurs. It don’t swing.”

He drained his glass, and wiped his lips with the back of his hand.

“Another?”

He shook his head, grabbed the jacket from the back of his seat and slung it over a shoulder. “Enjoy the fireworks,” he said, heading for the gate.

“Wait,” I said, “Where are you going?”

“Rio,” he said. “Vegas... Wherever they’re swinging. I won’t know until I get there.”

“I want to come.”

“Yeah, you and everyone else including you know who,” he said, jutting his chin toward the door.

I said, “Mom? She can’t go anywhere.”

Sinatra said, “Don’t she know it.”

“Clifford,” Mom called, “Come in here and help me with this.”

“You better go,” Sinatra told me. “Tell your old man I said cool it, and tell your Moms I’ll take a rain check. And next time, when you’re a little older, I’ll take you both swinging.”

When we came back out with the lasagna, he was gone.

After lunch, we played some wiffle ball in the backyard. Carlo and Uncle Vic dug up the watermelon. Dad scrubbed off the dirt with a sudsy rag.

“Yo, Rocky,” Uncle Vic said, “you’re gonna clean the green right off the rind.”

I said, “Yeah, Dad, cool it.”

Nanny laughed. “Yeah, Rocky. Cool it.”

I got the hose and sprayed off the suds.

Then Carlo cut pink cold wedges that we ate and spit the seeds onto paper plates. Nanny helped Mom gather the dishes while Dad told stories of the Marines. We watched him do clap-hands push-ups out in the yard. I climbed onto his back and he did more, until his arms gave out and his chest fell into the lawn.

“Your old man, Cliffy, he’s something else.”

“Yeah,” Mom said, “But what?”

“Hey, what did you expect?” Uncle Vic said. “You married a Marine.”

“He’s in a box,” I said.

Mom said, “A box? What are you talking about?”

Carlo and Uncle Vic laughed.

“He *used to* box, Cliff, he’s not *in a* box.”

Dad said, “Watch out I don’t box you.”

When it got dark, Carlo and Uncle Vic set off Roman candles and whistle missiles they brought out from the city. They brought firecrackers and cherry bombs for me, but Mom wouldn’t let me throw them.

“But Mom—”

“Absolutely not,” she said. “Are you crazy?”

Dad said, “Do what your mother tells you.”

I negotiated down to walking around with sparklers and fountains.

“These don’t swing,” I complained.

“What are you talking about?” Dad said. “Swing?”

I said I’d tell him when he was older.

“*Minga*,” Carlo said, “The mouth on this kid.”

Later, in bed, I thought about Frank Sinatra. *Come fly with me*, he sang. He sang, *Fly me to the moon*. He sang, *Love is the tender trap*. I thought about Dad in his box. The pink suds, the Brillo pad scraping the finish off tables, the push-ups. I thought about Mom, her sticks, her fear of cherry bombs, the way she asked Frank Sinatra inside.

When she entered my room to say good night, she asked me the same old question.

“Did you say your prayers?”

I said, “Yeah. Did you say yours?”

She looked at me. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

I said, “You know.”

She said, “You’re not making any sense. You better go to sleep.”

She turned out the light.