

## Independence Day

*by John Califano*

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MY BROTHER FRANK, was ten years older than me. Shortly after he turned nineteen he had become friendly with Gordon and Emily Peterson, a young couple who lived on the third floor of our apartment building. Gordon, a bearded, pipe-smoking Brooklyn College professor, wore tan desert boots and tweed jackets with elbow patches. His wife, Emily, was a social worker, a strikingly beautiful blonde who would sometimes go to work dressed in a colorful African gown or Indian saris.

One time I stopped by their apartment to call Frank for dinner. Their place was like a museum. An entire wall of their living room was filled with hundreds of books and record albums. Other walls featured original abstract paintings and a tiger skin that hung next to an authentic African shield crisscrossed with two spears. Scattered among the paintings were framed black-and-white photographs. Several were of Gordon in an African village. Smiling in his safari outfit, he stood in front of a straw hut along with a group of half-naked Bushmen wearing face paint and feather headdresses. Some photos showed Emily in India. One had her posing with a group of Indian women near the entrance of the Taj Mahal. In another, she was sitting atop an elephant.

The few times I was around the Petersons in Frank's presence, I got the feeling he was embarrassed by me, as if he was fearful I would say or do something that might reflect poorly on him. I remember the first time he introduced me to them. "This is my kid brother," he announced. "They just let him out on pass," he joked. I wasn't quite sure what "out on pass" meant, but I laughed along, pretending not to be offended. I wanted to look good in the eyes of people that I instinctively knew my brother held in high regard because they were way more educated and cultured than our parents or any of our relatives. My older sister, Connie, once commented on how "erudite" she thought the Petersons were compared to rest of the neighborhood's working-class families. "Are you *kidding*?" Frank replied defensively, sounding as if my sister had grossly understated the Petersons' stature. "These people *invented* hip."

Frank worked in Manhattan as an office assistant for a big advertising agency and attended Hunter College a few nights a week. Whenever he wasn't working or in school, he was usually down in the Petersons' apartment. My father was envious of the time Frank spent with them. "What are you doing hanging out with those oddballs?" he asked.

“You don’t even know them,” said Frank.

“I don’t have to know them. I can tell just by looking at them. The guy needs a shave and a haircut, and half the time his wife is dressed like a circus clown.”

“Right.” Frank forced a chuckle. “They’re *oddballs*. Meanwhile, Gordon is a college professor with a doctorate in anthropology, and his wife has a master’s degree in sociology. They’ve been all over the world.”

“So, he has a doctorate,” said my father with a cavalier shrug.

“What the hell does that *mean*?”

“It means he’s pretty damn smart,” Frank retorted. “Where’s *your* doctorate?”

“It’s up your ass!” said my father, jutting forward and shouting in my brother’s face.

Gordon was always turning Frank on to new books and authors: Henry Miller, Harold Brodkey, William Burroughs, J. D. Salinger, and Franz Kafka. He would lend Frank a book; Frank would read it and then return it and get another. Because Gordon was a college professor, I thought the books were important. I had no idea what they

were about, but I thought the titles were cool. What was *Gulliver's Travels* or *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* compared to *Naked Lunch* or *Tropic of Cancer*? Sometimes I would skim through pages and read a paragraph here and there. I wanted to understand what I was reading, but most of the time I felt like the stuff was over my head.

My father was constantly on my back about reading. "You're always watching television. How come I never see you pick up a book?" he'd chide me while I was in the middle of a movie or a show. For someone who was always cramming the importance of education down my throat, I rarely saw my old man with a book in his hands. The extent of his "library" was the small bookcase next to his bed containing a few technical and religious books among yellowed and dog-eared back issues of *Reader's Digest*.

I liked the *idea* of reading books only because Frank and Connie were into them, but reading was something I didn't enjoy. Every so often my father would treat me to one his "reading lessons." He would have me stand in front of his old reel-to-reel tape machine and record my voice as I read out loud from a schoolbook or one of Connie's old Classic Comics, *Black Beauty* or some other bullshit. It didn't matter

what I was reading; it felt like torture. I was self-conscious and labored over every sentence. The more I struggled, the more heated he got. “Stand up straight and speak up!” he’d bark. “When you read, you want to be comfortable. It’s a *story* . . . You’re just reading a *story*! That’s all it is.”

Every once in a while, he’d pull the reading material from my hands and read what I had just read, only he would read with this overblown theatrical voice as if he were auditioning for *King Lear*. Then he’d rewind the tape and play back both our renditions. “You hear the difference? Now, *that’s* reading!”

Sometimes the lessons got to a point where I didn’t trust my judgment. The words on the page would blur, and in an effort to avoid my father’s overwhelming frustration, I’d try to memorize the sentences that I had previously struggled with so I could recite them again and make them sound fluid. But no matter how it came out, it was never good enough.

Once my father sat me down on the couch and gave me a copy of George Orwell’s *Animal Farm*, Frank’s latest borrowed book. “I want you to read this and tell me what you think it means,” my father demanded, making it sound like some kind of IQ test. I felt like I had

a gun to my head. I distinctly remember the front cover of the book; it had a picture of some pissed-off-looking horses, cows, sheep, and chickens. They were all huddled together in the entrance of a barn—definitely not Old MacDonald’s spread. I read maybe four or five pages and my eyelids turned into lead anchors. About an hour later, my father woke me up and asked what the book was about. “I don’t know,” I mumbled. “Something about some angry animals?”

“What can I do?” he muttered despairingly, as he walked away. “I guess somebody’s gotta be the shoemaker.”



It was the Fourth of July and my father found a paperback copy of Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World* sitting on top of Frank’s dresser. It had been a present from Gordon and was one of my brother’s favorite books. I remembered him telling Connie that Huxley was “a visionary way head of his time” and that he had a “crystal ball.” I thumbed through the pages and noticed that Gordon had written some words for my brother on the inside cover: *For my buddy Francisco. Good luck*

*on your journey!* It was signed *Gordy*. I felt jealous, wishing I had someone outside the family who cared enough to write a few kind words for me.

Frank knew what he wanted and seemed to have a sense of direction and purpose, something I admired. What was my purpose and my journey? I didn't even have one. My parents never discussed my future, let alone any goals or plans for getting anywhere. When teachers and other kids asked me what I wanted to be when I grew up, I'd make stuff up depending on whom I was talking to. Most of the time I would tell them I wanted to be a "scientist," the same bullshit story that my father, who worked as a draftsman, sometimes fed strangers when they asked him what he did for a living. I would answer with the same confident tone and manner as he did, which always stopped people in their tracks. ("Wow—impressive! Any particular area of science?" "I'm not sure at the moment, but I'm thinkin' about goin' in for jet propulsion.") Meanwhile, I didn't know dick about science. My grades were miserable, I could barely do long division, and the closest I came to comprehending jet propulsion was farting in a bathtub.

My father didn't mention it, but I knew that the Huxley book and

Gordon's inscription infuriated him. That morning, he asked me to help him hang an American flag outside our living room window, something he did every Independence Day. He was in a pissy mood and particularly testy. When I yanked on the cord and pulled up the window blinds a little too fast, he wiggled out.

"Easy with that!" he snapped. "You'll fray the goddamn cord!"

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to—"

"What the hell's the matter with you?" he chided. "Can't you see it's a delicate instrument? You don't just pull down hard on something like that. You take your time." He glowered, sounding as if I had desecrated a statue of the Madonna. He lowered the blinds, then carefully raised them again, gripping the cord with his pinky extended. "Eeeeeeasy . . . eeeeeeasy," he said in a more soothing tone, his eyes following the blinds all the way up to the top of the window casing. "I swear, I gotta tell you people everything."

Our flag was fit for an aircraft carrier, the biggest in the neighborhood. After we hung it out our window he sent me to the deli for two six-packs of beer and a mountain of cold cuts. I knew he was getting ready to dig in for the day and tie on a load. When Frank came

home later that afternoon, the old man was half-looped.

“Where the hell you been?” he grumbled.

“I was hanging out with Gordon,” Frank said, cheerfully. “He and his wife bought a new stereo.”

“Gordon, *huh?* Let me ask you a question,” said my father. “Is this your book?” He held the book up to my brother’s face as if it were a stash of drugs.

“Yeah, why?”

“Where did you get it?”

“Gordon gave it to me.”

“I know where you got it,” my father shot back. “Why are you reading this filth?”

Frank looked both bewildered and amused. “*Filth?*” He chuckled.

“What are you talking about? Huxley’s considered one of the greatest—”

“It’s *filth!*” my father shouted, hurling the book against the wall, its pages fluttering. “And I don’t want it in my house!”

“Have you read it?” Frank asked soberly.

“It’s *filth!*”

“Okay—but have you *read it?*” Frank repeated, enunciating his words.

“I don’t have to read it,” said my father. “I already know what it’s about!”

Frank smiled and I recognized the sadistic glint in his eye. His demeanor was patient, but I knew that inside he was licking his chops, ready to rake the old man over the coals and make him look like a royal jackass.

“Oh, really?” said Frank, stroking the sides of his chin with his fingers and nodding with mock earnestness. “Then please, tell me. What’s it about?”

“It’s about drugs, test-tube babies, and whatnot,” my father blustered. “That’s why the church banned that crap years ago.”

Frank laughed.

“What’s so funny?”

“Here you are commenting on a book that you haven’t even read!” Frank continued to laugh. “You’re taking your cues from the church and you don’t know what you don’t even know. I mean, *listen to*

yourself!”

As Frank was talking, I could see my father working up a good head of steam. “Listen, buddy boy,” he said, jabbing a finger in Frank’s face. “I know you’re a big-shot advertising man up there in Manhattan with the rest of the phony bastards, but when you’re in my house, you can take all that Madison Avenue bullshit and shove it. I don’t want you bringing this crap into my house. Do you hear what I’m telling you?”

“Well, hey,” said Frank in a calm, educated twang, extending an open hand toward my father, “now, *there’s* an intelligent response. At least it’s good to know that you’re an open-minded, critical thinker with your own thoughts and opinions.”

“And tell your friend *Gordy* that if he wants to poison somebody’s mind, he and his fruitcake wife should get their own goddamn kids.”

“Why don’t you tell him?” said Frank. “I’m sure he’d relish the exchange of ideas.”

“I will!” said my father, yelling into Frank’s face. “And don’t think I won’t!”

Frank picked up his book and noticed that the front cover was

torn. He was about to point this out to my father, but instead he snorted and shook his head hopelessly. As he headed toward the bathroom my father blocked his path.

“Gimme that!” my father demanded, holding out his hand.

“Whaddaya mean?” said Frank. “It’s my book.”

“I’m gonna burn that shit!”

“You’re not burning anything,” said Frank, looking and sounding outraged.

“I said give me that!”

Frank hid the book behind his back and my father lunged forward, trying to snatch it from his hand. They tussled with each other and Frank pushed my father away, causing him to stumble backward and fall on his ass. My father’s eyes were wild with rage. I thought for sure that he was going to get up and finish my brother off for good.

“You sonofabitch!” He shouted, struggling to lift himself from the floor. Before he could get to his feet, Frank darted out of the apartment, slamming the door behind him. The old man’s face was beet red; I don’t think I’d ever seen him that angry. He charged for the front door and fumbled with the lock and doorknob for a good fifteen

seconds, a simple maneuver that he'd done a million times before.

Realizing that he'd never catch Frank, he ran back into the living room and made a beeline for the window, his eyes in a menacing dead-stare focus. I was directly in his path and he was chugging at me like an angry bison. I jumped out of his way and barely avoided getting mowed down.

At the window, my father raced to open the blinds. He yanked down on the cord with all his might, this time no "delicate instrument," no carefully extended pinky. The blinds shot up to the top of the window with a loud clatter. The force of his uneven grip frayed and snapped the cord causing the blinds to dangle lopsided. He then slammed open the window with a loud thud, rattling the casing.

"You fucking bastard, I'll kill ya!" he hollered down to Frank.

I dashed into my parents' bedroom, and from the window I watched Frank in the courtyard. He was standing on the narrow cement walkway, looking up at my father, smiling and waving the book. I could see my father's image reflected in the windows of the building across the courtyard. There he was with his strap T-shirt and hairy chest. His head and torso were leaning out the window, his hands braced far apart on the outer sill just above the huge red, white,

and blue flag. He looked like some crazed war veteran barking at the world.

Frank stood his ground undeterred. He was baiting old man with a big shit-eating grin. A short distance away, a cluster of women sat on the community benches and beach chairs, knitting sweaters and enjoying the late afternoon sun. They were all gawking at my father, their mouths open in disbelief. When Frank noticed the onlookers he got their attention and pointed up at the old man as if to ask: *Can you people believe this lunatic?*

“*Scumbag! Scumbag!*” my father hollered, his voice ratcheting up to an even higher level of rage. “*Wait till I get my fuckin’ hands on you!*”

Frank tucked his book under his arm and wagged his head sadly with a gloating smirk. He then rubbed his index fingers together, one over the other, in a *shame on you* gesture. My father went ballistic. He leaned so far out the window that I thought he was going to fly down to the courtyard and choke my brother with his bare hands. “*G’ahead, ya little sissy!*” he screamed at the top of his lungs. “*You come back here, and I swear, I’ll put you in a fuckin’ hospital!*”

Frank turned around and walked out of the courtyard continuing to shake his head. As I watched him disappear from view, my stomach sank. I thought that I would never see him again.

My father slammed the window shut and I could hear him cursing to himself and knocking about in the living room. I was afraid he would turn his rage on me. After a few minutes, he pushed open the door and stomped into the bedroom, nervously running his hand over the top of his head. “What the hell you doing in here?” he snapped. I thought for sure he was going to start swinging.

“Nothing,” I said, my voice trembling. “I was just—”

“Well, if you’re doing nothing, then go do it outside where you belong.”

As I walk out of the room he stepped in front of me and held me against the door. “Let me see you turn out like the big one,” he warned, holding a stern finger up to my face. “I’ll put *both* of you in a hospital.”

As I'd feared, Frank moved out of the apartment. He didn't tell anyone. He packed some clothes in a suitcase and split. When I heard the news, I was crestfallen.

"How can he just leave like that without saying a word?" my mother said to Connie.

"Ma, you sound surprised," said my sister.

"Of course, I'm surprised!" my mother fired back. "Why would you think I wouldn't be surprised?"

"Are you *kidding*?" said Connie. "I'm surprised he didn't move out sooner."

My father walked around the house in a foul mood. "Good—" he commented. "Now he'll get a chance to see how tough it is out there." He acted like he could care less, but I knew that Frank's sudden exit had gotten the best of him.

My parents bickered with each other about who was to blame. My mother called around to all the relatives to see if anyone knew of my brother's whereabouts. Nobody had a clue. In the midst of all the family drama, no one asked me what I thought or what I was feeling. I was happy that Frank had finally gotten out of the house and away

from my father, but I missed him sorely. I was also fearful of not having him available to speak up for me whenever the old man exploded and decided to start whacking me during one of his drunken tirades. How could he leave without saying good-bye to me? Would I ever see him again? Did he still love me?

Connie told me that Frank was living in rooming house about a mile from our apartment complex. She said that she'd known where he was all along and that he had told her to keep it under wraps until he got settled. A few days later Frank had sent for me. His place was in a musty old three-story Victorian-type house with big wooden banisters and a wide, creaky staircase covered with a ratty carpet. Frank's room was on the top floor just opposite a shared bathroom. I knocked on the door and Frank quickly opened it.

"Frankie, are you okay?"

"Yeah . . . yeah," he said, pulling me into the room. "Did you tell anybody that you were coming?"

"No, nobody."

"The old man doesn't know where you are, right?"

"*Nobody*," I said. "He asked me where I was going, and I made up

some bullshit; told him I was going to the park.”

“Good,” said Frank.

My brother looked unsettled. His hair was mussed and his eyes were red and tired looking.

“Frankie, I was worried about you. I didn’t know where you were. I missed you.”

“I’m sorry, but I had to get out of there. I can’t take the old man anymore.”

“Yeah, I know—me too,” I said, wanting to let him know that I was on his side.

“Make yourself at home,” said Frank, pointing to an unmade bed with a faded, pale green bedspread. I sat down and sank into the droopy mattress. The room looked like it hadn’t been decorated since the turn of the century: a plain oval-shaped area rug, a wooden rocking chair, a desk with a lamp and a framed mirror that hung just above a small antique-looking dresser. Frank’s suitcase was flopped open on the floor with clothes dangling off the sides. On top of the dresser was a carton of orange juice, a big loaf Wonder Bread and open jars of peanut butter and jelly with a butter knife sticking out of each.

“I haven’t had breakfast yet,” said Frank, making himself a sandwich. “Are you hungry?” he asked without turning around.

Seeing my brother in a strange room in a strange house gave me an uneasy feeling. The place was worlds away from our cramped apartment and the din of constant shouting and fighting. It wasn’t only the space; something had changed in Frank. Weeks before his blowout with the old man, he and Connie tried to talk my mother into the four of us packing up and leaving our father. Now Frank had actually taken the plunge. He was liberated— out of the house and on his own. The dependency and closeness that I’d always had with him suddenly seemed tenuous.

“Do you want a sandwich?” He looked up, glancing at me through the mirror.

I hesitated for a moment and he turned around making direct eye contact. I didn’t answer. I just kept looking at him, searched his face for some sort of reassurance that things were still the same with us.

“*What?* C’mon, tell me,” he said abruptly. “You want a sandwich or not? I got plenty here.” He turned away.

“I’m not hungry.”

He took a quick bite of his sandwich and stepped over to the bed.

“I’m glad you came over,” he said, sitting next to me. “I wanted to talk to you alone.” “There’s a lot of stuff goin’ on. I’m not coming back home.”

“Never?”

“Never.”

“What about what you and Connie were talkin’ about?”

“Talking about what?” he said, speaking with his mouth full.

“You know, about all of us moving out and living together someplace away from Daddy.”

He took two more bites of his sandwich, wolfing it down like a hungry animal. “That’s not gonna happen,” he said with a huge, gulping swallow. “Things are different now. I don’t want to live with Ma either.”

“Well, what about me?” I asked.

“What about you?”

“Can I stay here and live with you?”

Frank shook his head, looking to the ceiling as if my suggestion

was totally out there.

“Why?” I said. “There’s room here. I can sleep on the floor.”

“Sleep on the floor . . .” Frank muttered wearily. “Johnny, you don’t understand. I can’t take care of you,” he said, shaking his hand in front of him, the tips of his fingers pressed tight against his thumb. “I can just about take care of myself. Besides, even if I could take care of you, the old man wouldn’t have it.”

“How?” I said. “First, he’s gotta find us, no?”

Frank snorted derisively. “Are you kidding?” he said. “If he knew you were with me, he’d send bloodhounds looking for us.”

“C’mon, Frankie,” I pleaded. “I won’t be any trouble. I promise.”

“Oh God . . .” said Frank, rubbing his eyes with the heels of his palms. “I knew this wasn’t gonna be easy.” He briefly looked away, collecting his thoughts. “Johnny, listen to me,” he said, gripping my knee. “I asked you to come here so I could talk to you man-to-man.” His eyes were tense, and for a moment I thought he was going to tell me that he had cancer or some other life-threatening disease.

“What? What is it?” I asked.

“I enlisted in the army.”

“Whaddaya mean? You mean like the real army? The army army?”

“No, dummy.” He smirked. “The fake army.”

“When?”

“Last week,” he said. “I just got my papers. I’ll be shipping out from Fort Dix in two weeks.”

“How long you gonna be away?”

“Just a couple of months. I signed up with the Reserves. I have to do eight weeks of basic training and then serve one weekend a month for five years and a few weeks in the summer.”

“Five years!” I blurted. “Holy shit!”

“Tell me about it,” said Frank.

The whole thing sounded daunting. I stared at the floor for a few seconds trying to imagine what it was going to be like not having my brother around.

“What can I say?” said Frank. “It’s a drag, but for now, that’s the way it’s gotta be.”

He got up and stepped over to the dresser where he leaned his back

against the drawers and chugged juice from the carton. I watched him from across the room and felt a great distance between us. He was shipping out in two weeks and I could tell that he had already checked out on me and the family. My chest grew heavy and tears welled up in my eyes. I didn't want him to see me cry. I looked away and noticed his torn copy of *Brave New World* sitting on the nightstand next the bed. The front cover was partially flapped open and through blurred eyes I spotted the tail end of Gordon's inscription: *Good luck on your journey!* All I kept thinking was, what was *my* journey?

I looked over at Frank and his face was near expressionless. He took another swig of juice and shrugged, his detached, unblinking eyes staring right through me.



**John Califano** grew up in Brooklyn, New York and lives in Manhattan. He's worked as a writer, actor, visual artist and musician and has performed in clubs, art galleries, feature films and Off-Broadway productions. He recently completed his debut novel, *JOHNNY BOY*, and is currently working on a second book and a collection of short stories. His work was recently featured in *The Broadkill Review*.