

not
my
fault

A NOVEL

S B FRASCA

not
my
fault

A NOVEL

S B FRASCA

Copyright © 2023 by S B Frasca

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means, including photocopying, recording, or other electronic or mechanical methods, without the prior written permission of the publisher, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical reviews and certain other noncommercial uses permitted by copyright law. For permission requests, contact info@sbfrasca.com.

This is a work of fiction. Any resemblance to actual events or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental. Any questionable grammar, however, is entirely intentional.

Print ISBN: 978-1-66789-677-9

eBook ISBN: 978-1-66789-678-6

Printed in the United States of America on SFI Certified paper.

First Edition

CONTENTS

1

2

3

4

5

6

7

8

9

10

11

12

13

14

15

16

17

18

19

20

21

22

23

24

25

26

27

28

29

30

31

32

33

34

35

36

37

38

39

40

41

1

NOT MY FAULT. *Non mea culpa.* Funny how it sounds more official in Latin. I guess the two weeks I spent trying to teach myself a dead language wasn't a complete waste of time after all. I really want to stand on the desk and shout it like Julius Caesar but that would be dumb because I'm in the library. The words will have to speak for me.

It's not my fault I'm invisible. I take a quick look around to see if anyone notices me but as usual *I am furniture if not for the breathing.* I read that somewhere and right now I'm grateful. Other times I'm not so grateful.

Before I know it my right hand starts to carve. It slashes at the straight lines of the N with confidence. *Oh yeah* I'm stealth. N is for ninja. Then slowly it drags the knife around the curve of the O. And I'm good too. I have eyes and they don't lie to me. Except maybe when I look in the mirror.

Shhh. I freeze. But there's only silence. To be safe I retract the silver blade and slide it into the secret pocket under the flap of my jacket. I'm not finished but I'll have to move away quick if somebody is coming. But nobody's coming. *Let's be real* nobody is ever coming. My only friends here are books. Big books with big faces of presidents and gods and emperors. They surround me like a fan club and look over my shoulder as I get back to work. They're watching in awe and anticipation. I have to finish *non mea culpa* for them.

"Hy?" I almost fall off my chair at the sound of my name. I know it's

my name because it's said like a question.

Yes I call myself Hy. It's shortened from the stupid name my mom gave me and I don't have to change my initials or student ID or anything. And I figured people were gonna make fun of the name she gave me anyway because *I* would if I were them so why not make them say *Hi Hy* or *Hey Hy*? It's funny to watch people try out different combinations because they're the ones who end up sounding awkward no matter what.

Turns out nobody really says much to me anyway except to bother me or call on me in class so at least it sounds like people are saying my name all the time to each other and I can imagine I have lots of friends. When I hear a kid say *let's go get high* I hear *let's go get Hy* and I'm part of the conversation. So maybe I did that on purpose. I don't know.

The only drag is I always have to wait and make sure someone is talking right *to* me and not just saying *Hi* to someone else behind me so I don't look stupid for answering. I also kinda wish my last name was Jinx or Perbole. That would make everyone laugh at roll call and that kind of laughing is okay because I'd be in on the joke. And if I'm in on the joke I'm not *the* joke.

But right now I'm smiling because I know this person is not going to make fun of me. Come to think of it she was probably where the *shhh* came from. This person is the librarian Mrs. Nardo. She's nice enough but she kind of smells like old people. I'm not sure why old people smell like old people. Like it's a perfume they make you buy when you're over seventy or something. I'll have to ask Gram later. I don't think she'll mind me asking because she's pretty cool for old people.

"Hey Mrs. Nardo DaVinci." We have this joke. She doesn't mind

because we both have funny names.

“We will be closing in fifteen minutes, Hy.” She smiles her old people smile at me and I can tell those aren’t her own teeth. It looks like she’s wearing one of those mouthguards with teeth drawn on it. But I would never tell her that. My mom taught me to be polite.

“Okay thank you.” I feel bad but I want her to leave so she doesn’t see what I’m doing.

I can’t believe it’s almost six. I finished my homework pretty fast so I must’ve spent buttloads of time on *non mea culpa*. I watch Mrs. Nardo stoop over Ryan Malloy at one of the front tables to tell him she is closing up soon. I think he has earbuds in and didn’t hear her the first time. At least I hope so because I don’t want to think of Ryan Malloy as being rude. He stacks all his books and shoves them into his badass backpack with surf stickers all over it.

One of the popular girls appears from nowhere with her flock of sheep and puts her hand on his shoulder and he turns around and even from here I can tell she’s making those eyes at him. I can’t really see her eyes from here but I know. And I can’t see his eyes either but I know he’s probably making those same eyes at her. Or *eye* actually because there’s a hunk of blond hair covering one of them. It gives me a weird feeling. I’m not really sure if it gives me a good weird feeling or a bad weird feeling. I think it’s just a feeling I both want and don’t want at the same time. If that makes sense.

Anyway how come Mrs. Nardo didn’t see *non mea culpa*? I must’ve been trying to surprise my fan club when she came over and had my arm over it or something. I don’t think her eyes are that good anyway. I push my chemistry book away and trace the grooves with my finger because I

don't really remember doing it and half of me is hoping it was a dream. My fans are starting to cheer and this time I *shhh* them. Nobody can know it's me. Now I'm sweating bullets so I stand up and head to the door wearing my jacket by the hood like the cool kids do.

Good they're gone. I bet they went to make those eyes at each other somewhere else. Like maybe the dark hallway by the janitor's closet. I know because sometimes I watch. Sometimes I watch from the inside of the janitor's closet and even touch myself the way they touch each other. I lick my lips and hug myself and sometimes I push up against the mop handle if Mr. Mayfield hasn't taken it out yet.

I want to feel what they're feeling. I mean I can *feel* it but I can't feel it the way *they* must be feeling it because there's two of them and only one of me. They do a lot of *yeahing* and *mmming* and then all I really feel is frustrated because now I'm stuck in the janitor's closet till they're done.

It's suppertime and I'm hungry even though I forgot what hungry is supposed to feel like. I usually just put food in my mouth and keep going until there's nothing left in front of me. I never feel full but sometimes I feel sick and then I know I've gone past full. Mom says I'm *emotionally* feeding myself. She says I'm overweight but she loves me. So does she love me the way I am *even though* I'm overweight? Or does she love me and really want me *not to be* overweight?

I know she's not happy to take me clothes shopping. And not just because of my size but because of what I pick out. It's not what she would pick out for me but she tries. She tries to let me choose. Except when I pick something that looks like a costume in a dystopian fairytale. We can laugh together about stuff like that but I think deep down we

both want to cry.

I start walking the six blocks to my house. On the way I pop into F Mart for a snack. I've asked Mr. Fadikar why he named his store that and he says F is the first letter of his last name and Mart is for market. But I told him it's kinda weird because F *anything* is funny to kids. It's like cursing without saying the F word. He looked confused but he's old people and English isn't his first language. The kids in the neighborhood call his store the F bomb and F You. Also last year someone took a can of spray paint and blacked out the M on the sign so it just said Fart until I helped him clean it off with paint thinner. I have all that paint stuff in my garage and he gave me some free snacks so that was good.

I'm in a chocolate mood today so I grab a bag of the mini peanut butter cups and my mouth starts watering like a dog. At the counter I dig in the right front pocket of my jeans for the five bucks I know is in there from yesterday. Gram gave it to me for helping her with some chores like changing lightbulbs and emptying her cat's litter box.

"Why are your pants so tall Hy?" Mr. Fadikar's eyes crinkle up.

I could call him F Man or Fart Man like the other kids to be funny but I like Mr. Fadikar and don't want to make him feel bad. To me he's not a joke. To me he's a man who worked hard and started a business and that's cool. It's not his fault his English isn't perfect. The other kids don't get it. They make fun of his accent and mixed up words. It's a shame their parents didn't teach them respect or anything.

I know he meant *long* and I shrug because I like my pants long and draggy and I don't know why. But I know they must look weird and dirty at the bottom to Mr. Fadikar because he's always dressed nice and his pants end right above his polished shoes.

“Ah you kids with your fashions!”

He gives me back my change and comes around the counter to put a hand on my shoulder like a friend. Or maybe a dad. I smile at him because Mr. Fadikar never makes me feel bad for buying snacks with my chore money. I feel like he gets me.

“See you Mr. Fadikar.”

I stuff the bag of peanut butter cups in my backpack because I know my mom won't want to see it. On the way home I think about showing Mr. Fadikar some of my artwork and then I have a better idea. I go right to the garage and start throwing some sprays into my old canvas tote.

“Hy? Is that you?” Mom's coming into the garage now so I shove the tote under the bench. She hugs me and I smell flowers but also a meaty smell in her hair because she's probably been cooking supper. She does that thing moms do pushing my hair behind my ears because it's hanging in my face. “You need a haircut honey.”

I want to ask why because nobody cares anyway and I'm okay with it. Instead I tell her I don't want it super short because it hides my face when I want it to and she said I could grow it long and tie it back with a rubber band. But I don't want it super long either. I tell her this and she rolls her eyes like she's done a million times before but not in a mean way. I wish I could look the way she wants me to look so she'd be happier.

“How's roasted chicken and potatoes and...green beans? My mouth waters a little but not like a dog this time.

“Good thanks.” I grab my backpack off the floor and head up to my room.

“We'll eat in half an hour!” She yells up the stairs.

Speaking of dogs Rufus jingle jangles into my room with his tail all waggy. I keep telling Mom he's got too many tags on his collar for such a little guy but she says she likes hearing where he is at all times. She says the day she doesn't hear the jingle jangle will be a sad day. I think that's dramatic but whatever. I fall onto my beanbag and he tries to lick my face but I push him away. I don't want to push Rufus away because he digs me and he wants me to pet him but today I don't want his bad breath stinking up my face. It's not his fault because a couple of his teeth stick out and his tongue never really goes back into his mouth all the way. He keeps trying to lick me so I get up and sit on my bed. Then I get an idea.

I grab a sketchbook from the pile on the nightstand and open to a new page. I grab my colored pencils and I draw and draw. I color and shade and forget all about the peanut butter cups in my backpack. When Mom calls me for supper I drop my pencils and shoot both hands in the air like it was some big timed art competition. My fans hold their breath from their positions above me as the judges circle like sharks. They suddenly stop in front of me and their faces screw up into big joker grins.

"THE WINNER!" One judge shouts and holds up my sketch and everyone goes crazy. In the crowd I see Leonardo DaVinci *the real one not the librarian* and Zeus and my favorite band Punk Immortal. They all cheer and give me the thumbs up. Now I just have to figure out how to reduce it to the size of a nickel for Rufus's collar. I hop off my bed and give a little bow and I think I may actually be hungry for real.

2

I LIKE SATURDAYS because I don't have to talk to anyone if I don't want to. I can spend pretty much the whole day watching movies or working on some new idea. Today I want to work on the idea for Mr. Fadikar. I looked up *not my fault* in Hindi and it's this really cool pattern of lines and curves. I know exactly where I'm gonna do it too.

There's an old cement bandshell at the edge of the park. I'd never go there at night because it's where all the shady kids hang out and I've heard crazy stuff about drugs and some kind of fight club. But in the day nobody's there because the blacktop's all cracked and messed up and no good for skate boarding or anything. Plus it's kind of raining today but it won't matter to me because the bandshell is a curved shape so it's sheltered from the rain.

"I'm going out!" I yell to my mom but then I see a note on the fridge saying she had to cover for someone at work.

She's a nurse so sometimes they need her in a hurry on her day off. She works so hard and I try not to think about my dad too much at times like this because it makes me mad. It makes me mad that he left us. It makes me mad that she has to do everything for me because my dad is such an A-hole. That's what she calls him when she's had too much beer and I don't blame her. That's what I call him too when my birthday goes by without hearing from him. But usually she doesn't complain and even says we're better off without someone like that hanging around to make us feel *not good enough*.

Apparently he found someone *good enough* in another state and they have two *good enough* kids that aren't fat and a *good enough* golden retriever whose breath doesn't stink because he can close his mouth all the way. I don't blame Mom for my dad leaving us even though we have to pretend he doesn't exist because *he* pretends *we* don't exist. I don't blame her because she's a good person and I know it's not her fault. And just like that I have an idea for a badass birthday present for her. And I know one thing for sure. I know that if I ever have a kid I won't pretend my kid doesn't exist. Ever.

The bandshell is gray and ugly because nobody cares. I'm trying to imagine when there were real musicians playing here back in the old days and it makes me feel blues and reds and purples so I just grab my sprays and start. I brought a picture of *not my fault* in Hindi and now I'm following the lines and loops and curves. I hope it's accurate because it's for Mr. Fadikar and I care what he thinks.

After a while I'm sweating so I stop to take off my hoodie and I see someone sitting there in the far corner. I freeze because I know what I'm doing isn't really legal even though nobody should care if all I'm doing is making it look better.

"Hi." She speaks first. I say *she* because of her voice. But I shouldn't jump to conclusions.

"That's my name don't wear it out." It's my best line.

"*What's* your name?" She's confused naturally.

"No *Hy*. That's my name." This part cracks me up because it's like an old black and white comedy skit my mom showed me a long time ago. They're at a baseball game talking about players named *who what* and *I don't know*. It's so funny.