

HEROES

By Pedro Ramos

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*I wish you could swim
Like the dolphins, like dolphins can swim
Though nothing, nothing will keep us together
We can beat them, for ever and ever
Oh, we can be heroes just for one day*
David Bowie, Heroes

1. THESEUS

It was a sunny, blue-sky day. The road parallel to the sea was flanked by a row of tall conifers pointing straight at the sky. There wasn't much traffic, just a white SUV. The waves broke against the rocks separating the road from the water, and the sea breeze cut in through the SUV's open window. Theseus always found the smell of the sea calming. And he needed his heartbeat to slow down. Leaving school that day, they'd been lying in wait for him, again. A gang, pushing him, slapping his head, taunting him. They'd called him 'tadpole', 'midget', 'elf', 'turtle', or any other tiny critter they could come up with. Theseus was fifteen and he was the smallest in his class. And it didn't help that he always got the best marks. 'Outstanding squared, again', 'swat', 'nerd', 'teacher's pet', the stream of insults they threw at him was endless. He was so looking forward to the end of term when his parents would send him to coding camp like the summer before. He could talk to the kids he met there, talk about the games he liked playing.

However, there was something that got on his nerves even more than the bullies at school: Minerva, his thirteen-year-old sister. She was almost as tall as he was. And sometimes that really made him hate her. Inside the SUV, driving along next to the sea, Theseus watched her silently. Minerva was singing, if you could call it singing, that idiotic song their dad always played on the SUV sound system, over and over. Always the same thing. Because his sister demanded it. And again. It was the song for the dance routine they were going to do at the end-of-year show. Or something like that. Theseus didn't really care. He never did. And even less so when it came to his sisters. Because, apart from Minerva there was another one, Helena, who was three. She was with them, in her special baby car-seat, hypnotised by some kind of plastic mobile that rotated and rattled, suspended above her head, and however hard she tried to get hold of it, it was always just out of her reach. Once, talking with some friends, Theseus had heard his dad refer to her as 'the accident.' And since then, whenever he thought about her, that's what he called her. But only in his head. In the conversations Theseus had with himself, and where reality was more the way he would've wanted it to be.

The sun shone, making the sea glitter with silver flecks. Some guy skysurfing almost reached the shoreline only to turn back out to sea. Theseus was still absorbed in his thoughts. At last, he could breathe properly again. His heart had stopped thumping against his ribcage. He leaned his head out of the open window even though his dad had switched on the air-conditioning, and he had to shut his eyes against the breeze. He had waited so long for this day, and he wasn't going to let anything spoil it. Today was the launch date for the new version of Heroes. He'd taken twenty hours to complete the previous version in story mode and, while he enjoyed open-world games, in the end, he had to admit the free-gameplay

mode was a bit boring. In the promotional videos he'd seen, it said the latest version would have new scenarios and even better Artificial Intelligence—AI.

"Dad, you do remember what day it is, don't you?"

"What day is that then?"

"Today they're launching the new version of Heroes. You promised me."

"The new version of what?"

His dad, Esteban, knew perfectly well what Theseus was talking about, but he enjoyed playing the idiot. He thought it made him cool. He even used words he'd heard Theseus using. And sometimes, way too often for Theseus, he asked to play on the console with him. He was so rubbish. He never learned which buttons did what. If they were playing a football game and they were both on the same team, he'd always make them lose, or in a shoot-em-up, then he'd just get in the way.

But the worst thing about his dad, was him being a writer.

And the two worst things about his dad were, him being a writer and that he worked from home so he could do the school run. Which was sick. Another word Esteban was always using because he'd heard the kids use it and thought it was massively cool. And because his father was so cool, he enjoyed talking to all the moms—most of Theseus's school friends came to school with their moms—and the moms laughed at Esteban's jokes and asked him if he was writing anything new and even brought copies of his books to get them signed. And he—his dad—thrilled, would scrawl his illegible signature: Esteban Rey. Then he would draw a little cat. Or something he said was a cat. And his school friends' moms would tell him how much they loved the book. Although Theseus was convinced none of them had read a word of it. Certainly not all of it. Most of his books were horror or about some kind of violence, like a murder, or a Martian invasion, or the return of living dead. That was why he'd been told he couldn't read them. And he couldn't understand why, because at fifteen, nearly sixteen, he'd already seen stuff like that on TV.

"Did you get me my gift card?" he asked.

"What card? Seriously, I don't know what you're on about."

The song ended and before the next one could begin, Minerva started to yell.

"Daaaad! Daaaaaaaad, play it again! Agaaaaaiiin, pleeeeeeease."

Minerva was thirteen and had an i-Pad with an enormous pink cover that had even more enormous rabbit ears sticking out of it. She'd spent the whole trip watching a video that her gym teacher had recorded for the kids to learn the dance routine for the end-of-year show.

"Use your headphones and stop tormenting us!" Theseus shouted.

"Daaaad! Theseus yelled at me!"

And Theseus grabbed hold of the rabbit ears on the i-Pad cover and pulled with all his strength. Helena, in her baby seat, started crying and Esteban had to twist right round in the driver's seat.

"Guys! Can we all get along, OK?"

"He shouted at me! And he's trying to steal my tablet!"

Helena carried on crying.

"It's a dumb i-Pad." Theseus said. He let go the ears and the i-Pad smacked into Minerva's chest. She bawled.

"Aaahhhhhhhh."

"Theseus! I saw that, I saw all of that!" said Esteban looking at him in the rear-view mirror. "And you know very well I don't like it when you wind up your sister."

Now the pair of them, Minerva and Helena, were crying in the back of the white SUV. Theseus looked through the window and out to sea. It was immense, blue, many shades of blue. He wanted to swim out to the horizon and touch the point where the sea meets the sky, also blue, but much paler. 'Why?' he thought, 'Why did I have to be born into this family?'... He just wanted to get home, download the new version of Heroes and press play. What would they surprise him with this time?

"Whatever. Sorry," he said to Minerva. "I didn't mean to hurt you. I'm sorry."

"Dad, Theseus isn't really sorry, he's just saying it, so you don't punish him 'cause he wants to play that new game."

Esteban calculated the time it would take to get home. And how much energy he had left.

"Look after your little sister," he said. "Please."

Helena, defenceless, strapped in her car seat, was crying as if something inside her was broken.

Theseus took the dummy out of her mouth and then popped it back in. Amazingly, Helena paused, stopped crying, and looked as if she were about to laugh. Theseus did it again. And now, yes, the crying turned into laughter.

"See... you can be nice if you want." Esteban spoke to him via the rear-view mirror.

Theseus ignored him. He carried on looking through the window as if nothing else existed.

"Here," Esteban spoke again, and handed Theseus a gift card. "I hadn't forgotten."

Without saying anything, Theseus stashed the card into one of the pockets in his backpack. The game's logo glittered brilliantly. Heroes. Finally, he had it. 'One life, a million possibilities,' was the slogan that came up at the end of the trailer he'd watched—over and over—on YouTube.

"That's not fair! What do I get?" Minerva protested.

The SUV drove along the road, parallel to the coast, towards a little fishing village.

2. Andrea

The SUV travelled on leaving the little fishing village behind. The place was so small it was literally just one street next to the sea. A street of two-storey white buildings and one bell tower. There was an old, disused train station, a church, one shop, a pharmacy, a hostel with a bar and a pool, and a supermarket. The rest of the village was a randomly built assortment of houses and chalets. The people living there were a mix of locals and foreigners, and for whatever unknown reason, this fishing village was one of the few that had retained something of its original charm. None of the buildings were taller than the palm trees that lined the rustic, make-shift seafront promenade. At dawn, it was still possible to hear the birds singing.

That's what Andrea did every morning, but she didn't really listen to the blackbirds' trilling song or the joyful peels of the conceited, gossiping cockatoos. She had enough to deal with getting her brothers dressed so they weren't late for school. Andrea was the oldest, and she'd learned this was the way it had to be. She'd left school at sixteen. What was the point of her carrying on studying? Her future was the two floors and six rooms of her home. The upstairs flat. Downstairs was the village supermarket. Not long ago it had become the only one for miles around. So, it was up to Andrea to help her parents in the family business and look after her brothers—fifteen and eleven years old—whose only thought seemed to be doing the opposite of whatever she'd told them, so everything always took twice as long, and they always arrived late and disorganised wherever they were going.

And when her brothers came back from school and college, while they pretended to do their homework but were, in fact, up to everything except their homework, she would put price labels on all the stock her dad bought from the local farmers. Red tomatoes that tasted of tomatoes, wrinkled, compact cucumbers, lettuces that needed washing twice to clean out all the extra life that came with them. Her mum, Mercedes, was a strong, dark woman, with a piercing gaze, who was in charge of the cash till and supervised everything Andrea did. Andrea helped her select watermelons or pick out the ripe avocados from the ones that still needed a week. Because the most popular produce in the supermarket was their fruit and veg. They sold other stuff too, but according to their customers—and they had a few who came from as far away as the city—what they really loved was the smell of real fruit and vegetables.

"You wouldn't believe it, but the fruit and veg in the new supermarket doesn't even smell like fruit and veg. It doesn't taste of much either," a customer was telling Andrea. The woman who was almost totally round had clearly just had her hair done—a perm—and seemed to be buying food for a whole regiment. "And give me one of the speciality loaves too."

Andrea served her, as she served everyone, with a smile, but also with the indifference of someone who really doesn't care what they're doing.

"Anything else," she feigned interest.

"Well, look, I'm not sure if I've got any oil left. I'll take a bottle just in case."

And Andrea, who even as a child had known from memory where everything was, went to the correct aisle and returned with the oil.

"Now, I think I'm done. How much is that?" asked the lady.

Andrea did the sums in her head, the lady paid, Andrea gave her the change and shut the cash register.

"Thank you!" said Andrea

“Oh Mercedes, I hope you know what a clever daughter you have!” the permed, round woman told her mum.

Mercedes smiled proudly.

“Does she have a boyfriend?” the woman asked.

A dark look crossed Mercedes’s beautiful face.

“That’s not likely. She spends all her time staring at screens. I have to hide her phone just so she gets some work done!”

“And they don’t like the clever ones. Am I right? Men never like clever women, sweetheart.”

Bored, Andrea disconnected from the conversation and looked over the design she’d made for her next tattoo. Her mother and the round customer were still gossiping when she felt her phone vibrating in her pocket.

“I’m going to the bathroom,” she said.

“So well brought up. Why did she leave school? She’s so young...”

Andrea didn’t stay to hear the last part of what the customer was saying. She went into the toilet cubicle and locked the door from the inside. She spent so much time in there her mum thought she’d started smoking. What Mercedes never suspected was that Andrea had discovered where her phone was hidden and kept it in her pocket all morning only to put it back in its hiding place just before her mum went to look for it to give it back to her.

Andrea had a new message. Advertising.

You’ve just won a free pass to the latest version of Heroes. All you have to do is enter the promotional code #Heroes2025gift and you can upgrade to the new version FOR FREE. The most eagerly awaited game of the season, now with new functions and even better AI. Your more real than reality experience is here! One life, a million possibilities. Heroes.

Andrea remembered the game. She used to spend hours in front of the TV wandering through its virtual world, where, according to the adds, you could do anything you wanted to. Things she couldn’t do in (her) real life, like skydiving out of an aeroplane. Or piloting the aeroplane. Of course, if you’re piloting the plane and then you skydive out of it, there’s be nobody to pilot the plane and the plane will crash. In the best-case scenario, it crashes into the mountains surrounding the city; a city the game’s programmers had designed from a montage of stereotyped images from films and photos. That’s what Andrea liked least about these types of game. The graphics simulated reality in every detail but, despite being called ‘open world’, the games didn’t actually let you do exactly what you wanted—not by any stretch of the imagination. But that’s what Andrea had found most interesting: testing the limits and shortcomings of this hundred million selling game. For example, Andrea had known the last version like she knew her parent’s supermarket and, playing online, she’d skydived from planes more times than she could count. She’d done it with the plane flying so low over the city it had to crash into one or other of the taller buildings in its path. And Andrea had wanted her actions to have some effect in the game; she’d wanted to change the course of the game for all the players who were online at that moment.

What a let-down.

The only thing Andrea had ever achieved was a spectacular explosion the consequences of which vanished like fireworks. The next second, the city would appear again complete with all

its buildings, streets, and avatars in all their glorious detail. It really annoyed Andrea. They promised a real experience, but you weren't allowed to deviate from the script they'd decided on. Where was the fun in that? It was just more of the same. That's why she preferred the fantasy-style games where the rules were what they were, right from the start.

And anything could happen.

Although, if they gave you a free pass, well, she wasn't going to get over excited.

"Mum," shouted Andrea as she came out of the toilet. "I'm just going up to the flat, OK?"

It was a few minutes to two in the afternoon and she knew her mum would close the shop as soon as the round lady with the new perm had gone on her way. If they ever stopped talking. Her dad still hadn't got back in the truck, and, with a bit of luck, her brothers would be watching videos or surfing the net so they wouldn't bother her. So, taking advantage of the fact her mum hadn't said anything about peeling potatoes or taking steaks out of the freezer, she scurried up the stairs to the first floor and, quiet as she could, she crept across the corridor, left her phone in the kitchen where it was supposed to be hidden, crossed the corridor again and went into her own room. She had the room all to herself—the one consolation for being the oldest, and, importantly, the only sister. She switched on her console and connected to the Store to download the new version of Heroes using her promo code.

She pressed play.

Welcome to Heroes. Please enter your alias.

3. The Never-ending story

The SUV entered the housing estate crowning the hillside at the other end of the fishing village. All the chalets were the same, monotonous, each one with its tiny garden and huge parking bay out front. Esteban lifted Helena in his arms and went into the house with Theseus and Minerva. Penelope, Theseus's mum, was already home. She was dressed ready for a workout.

"Mom," said Minerva as soon as she saw her, "Theseus yelled at me."

"Really?" asked Penelope, half joking, half serious. "Theseus?"

She kissed little Helena and her husband.

"How are you, honey?"

"Nothing to report. Your kids want to kill each other. How was your class?"

Penelope was a Pilates instructor at a sports clinic specialising in injury rehab.

"Very good. They asked me to do a series of videos to put online or something like that.

Then people can do Pilates at home, at their own pace. What do you think?"

"Sounds cool."

"And they pay well. I didn't know you could earn so much doing those sorts of videos. Theseus?"

Penelope and Esteban scanned the whole kitchen. He hadn't even said hi—no kiss, no hug. Penelope missed the little six-year-old boy who'd never wanted to be parted from her. Since the event, Theseus was like a lump of ice—an iceberg broken off a glacier, just floating downstream. Getting further and further away.

"He's probably in the attic playing that game you hate," said Minerva accusingly. "Dad gave him a gift card in the car."

Penelope looked from her daughter to her husband.

"Is that right?" she asked. "I thought we agreed to wait until the weekend?"

"It's already Friday," said Minerva.

Esteban raised his eyebrows unable to stop himself smiling.

"This isn't what we decided," persisted Penelope.

Esteban shrugged and couldn't help laughing.

"What's Dad laughing about, Mom?" asked Minerva.

"Nothing. Just that your father is a complete idiot."

"Theseus is a complete idiot too."

"Hey, only your mother can say that, OK?"

"What? Complete idiot?"

"You definitely don't call your brother that."

"Com-pit id-yit" burred Helena.

"It's Happy Hour!" said Esteban

"Mom! The baby said the thing you said I couldn't say!"

"I heard her. Do me a favour and go get your brother to set the table."

"THESEUS!!!!" yelled Minerva without moving an inch.

"I would prefer it if you went up to the attic and asked him to come down here and help set the table."

"I don't want to go up to the attic..."

“Leave it,” Esteban intervened, “I’ll go.”

“Right, my hero.”

Esteban kissed his wife on the lips and departed with a smile. The same smile that had made her fall in love with him the night they first met. Perhaps she would forgive him about the gift card. They’d agreed that both of them had to keep the same boundaries, but it was so difficult. And anyway, however hard they tried to do things the same way, all the children had come out different. You only had to look at Theseus and Minerva. They were polar opposites so, most of the time they hated each other and ended up fighting. Was it like that with all siblings of the opposite sex? Neither he nor Penelope knew anything about it as they were both only children.

As he climbed the stairs to the attic, Esteban had the feeling that the hardest part was still to come. He and Penelope had achieved everything they’d always dreamed of. A family, jobs they loved, and this little house next to the sea where they lived the whole year as if they were on holiday. Did their kids realise how lucky they were? Esteban asked himself. ‘For them all this is normal,’ he answered his own question. How could he explain to them that when he’d been studying at Uni, he’d had to take two part-time jobs? He didn’t want his own kids to go through that, but sometimes he thought it would be better not to give them everything they asked for. Where was the boundary? He wasn’t as good as Penelope when it came to maintaining order; the kids knew it and took advantage. He had to learn not to spoil them. He knew it. But he also knew what had happened to Theseus didn’t happen to all teenagers and that was why he went easy on him. Of course. It was because he was afraid, but it was also his way of telling Theseus that he was there for him, and always would be—sometimes you won and sometimes you lost, but the important thing was never to let your guard down and to always pick yourself up, fight on and do better in the next round. And life is full of unexpected twists. There’s no script to follow. ‘Perhaps I should write a book about that,’ Esteban Rey thought to himself as he reached the last flight of stairs and took a breath before knocking on the attic-room door.

“Theseus?”

“What?” came the grumpy reply from the other side.

“We’re just setting the table, son. It’s roast chicken.”

Esteban cautiously opened the door. Theseus was lying on a beat-up sofa in front of a fifty-inch TV screen. On the screen was the one-word message: ‘Downloading’, and a promising 85%.

“Is that the new game? Would you like me play it with you?”

Theseus didn’t answer. They both knew the answer. But his dad wasn’t about to give up.

“I’ve been practicing.”

“Daaaad...”

“Don’t worry, I’m joking. Come on, let’s go set the table and eat. Mom is in a good mood and wants to tell you all about how she’s been chosen to present the new online Pilates channel.”

‘Great,’ thought Theseus. ‘So, I don’t just have a dad who’s a writer, now I have a mom who’s going to be famous too.’

“And that book?” asked his dad, surprised. “Are you reading it?”

Before Theseus could answer, Esteban had picked up the book from the floor.

“I flick through it while the games are downloading,” he said indifferently. “Before I used to play on my phone, but it relies on the wi-fi and it’s really slow.”

“*The Never-ending Story*,” Esteban read the title on the cover. “I love this one.”

Theseus shrugged his shoulders.

“Where have you got to?”

“Don’t know. I can’t get into it. The main character is some fat kid who gets beaten up by the others.”

“Well, that’s one way of looking at it. I think Bastian is a bit more than just a kid with a weight problem who gets bullied at school.”

“Whatever you say. Don’t we have to go down and set the table?”

“Yes, of course, let’s go.”

Father and son started down the stairs side by side.