

# HERO

By José G. B. Derraik

*Note: I originally wrote this article when I was 18 or so, sometime around 1990. For some reason, I have always had a particular 'affection' for this story, so I have recently translated it from the original in Portuguese.*

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The squalid figure wandered through the night, barefeet and wearing just a pair of ripped old shorts. His dirty body held numerous scars, the marks of a rough life in the streets. The worst scars however, could not be seen. But he could feel them, he re-lived them through every dawn and every dusk.

He could not remember his father. *Have I ever met him?* Occasional recollections of his mother's face would come to his mind, and for a split second a glimpse of a smile could be seen in his eyes. But his mother was long gone. An expression of anger would soon appear, brought back by the memory of her body lying across her bed. He vividly remembered the empty bottles of ale lying beside her rigid and cold body. *I will never forgive her for leaving me*, he whispered almost inaudibly.

As he walked aimlessly through the streets of the large and busy South American city, his inner scars opened up, exposing a heart empty of hope. Through his taunted mind, moments of despair for such an unfortunate life were replaced by a burning hate against the society who continuously despised and rejected him. His sunken eyes bared the traces of restless nights passed on cardboard mats. He never knew whether he would feel the next sunrise bathing his skin. This time however, a pleasant warmth reached his face with the arrival of another morning. *I am still alive* he thought to himself, although he was not sure whether he should rejoice over this. He thought of the day ahead of him, and the absence of pleasant things to look forward to. More battles in search of food, more battles for survival.

As he moved through the bustling streets, his swaggering walk and aggressive manner

displayed to the world a childhood lived in the streets. Well-dressed men and women looked down at him with repugnance. *Scum* they thought as they walked by. The small and scruffy figure watched them with a pleading expression, sometimes replying to their disdain with coarse language and obscene gestures.

He walked by, not really caring about where he was going. The emptiness of his stomach automatically guided him towards potential sources of sustenance. *Did I eat anything yesterday?* He could not remember. Halting in front of a fast-food restaurant, time stood still as he watched a little boy and his parents enjoying a family meal. The sight in front of him was dream-like, as a movie shown in slow motion. The smiles, the laughs, the hugs and expressions of affection were all so alien to him.

As he watched, his mind drifted into blurred memories of his neglectful mother, who made a living as a prostitute. Through his mind, passed also memories of the physical abuse he suffered in the hands of his stepfather. He would run away from home regularly, but would always go back. There was nowhere else to go, and in that house he at least had a mother. Well, for a while anyway. Now they all seemed to be fictitious characters in some distant nightmare. As he stood by the window, he wondered what it would be like to have a loving family. To have someone that would touch him with kindness, that would look after him and hug him tightly. He would imagine how wonderful it must feel to be tucked into bed by a loving parent, who would whisper in his ears words of tenderness.

His thoughts were abruptly interrupted by a hard blow to side of his head, which threw him to the ground. For a while the world around him was spinning, and he did not know where he was. Slowly he recovered his senses, and was eventually able to identify a man standing beside him. The restaurant man in his red and yellow uniform was angrily waving his hands in the air and uttering threats. Most were unintelligible, but he thought he heard *You're scaring the customers away* amongst them.

Still dizzy from the blow to his temple, he stood up and staggered away with an uncontrolled flow of tears streaming down his face. Without knowing why, he started to run. He kept running and crying until he was completely out of breath. He finally stopped at an empty patch of land besides the ruins of a burnt out building. Overgrown weeds and rubbish obscured his crouched and trembling body. As he attempted to stop the flow of tears, he watched a group of rats scattering way. He felt momentarily safe there, as he could see no humans around. For a long time he stayed there, hugging his legs firmly, rocking his body backwards and forwards. He cried for a long time, until exhaustion drove him to lie down on the spot, where he eventually fell asleep.

He woke up late at night, with cramps in his stomach. *How long has it been since I last eaten anything?* Slipping his right hand into his pocket, he pulled out a small can. It was empty. He had been deceiving his body's clamour for nourishment sniffing the glue he stole from a shop downtown. Now that all the glue was gone, the pain was back. He moaned, and cursed his wretched life. Consciousness abandoned him, and he lay down once more on the muddy ground.

He woke up when daylight broke, feeling the return of the unforgiving pain. He was becoming increasingly desperate. He no longer cared, as his misery erased any trace of virtue from his troubled spirit. Faced distorted by a fresh flow of tears and anger, he shuffled around the yard for some kind of weapon. Grabbing a sharp piece of glass, he marched out in search of something to end his despair.

An elderly lady happened to be passing by, and he briskly waved his makeshift weapon at her, demanding her money. Frightened and taken aback, the woman started to scream. As if in a split second, there were numerous people running after him. He dashed away as fast as he could, and through the corners of his eye he could see the angry mob close behind. In panic, he took a wrong turn and ended up in an alley with no exit. Turning to face his pursuers, he did not have time to cry for mercy

as punches and kicks hit him from all directions. When the panting creatures finished fulfilling their primeval impulses, a skinny and battered body lay on the pavement.

The boy was now lifeless. One more street kid, another life abruptly cut short. There was no one to cry for him, nobody to pray for his soul. Around his limp figure, undefined expressions could be seen on the faces of the crowd. They ignored that at their feet lay dead a human being. A hero.

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