

Birthday in the Bronx

For Raquel

By Paul Hufker

Characters:

Rocky, 14, Latinx

Kayster: 50's white male radio host

LaBarrera: 50's white male radio host

*Two additional actors, 1M, 1W, will double:

1M =

DOCTOR – a white (ostensibly male)

TEACHER – A white, 50's-60's teacher

COACH – a white (ostensibly male)

1W =

TEETH, LIPS, and HAIR – ROCKY'S roommates, 3 similar white girls, 15 years old, all played by one actress

MI MAMA – ROCKY'S Puerto Rican mother

CITY COUNCIL PERSON – 30's-50's – Latinx

BABY LAMB – a baby lamb ROCKY finds and saves

Author's Note:

This play is based on a true story. It centers around a bright and brimming-with-talent LatinX girl named – Rocky (Raquel) born in a really tough neighborhood in the South Bronx. She gets a scholarship to a fancy prep high school (the kind presidents attend). She's damn good at field hockey, and that's what her scholarship is for, but she's plenty smart too, although no teachers seem much concerned with that. And the girls here – the mostly all-white girls here – sure, they call her spick behind her *back*, but...are things getting worse? They're angrier and more aggressive by the second. Did they pee on Rocky's bed sheets?

Meanwhile, two white, male sports radio hosts (big personality, fast-talking, always over the top) are intently following Rocky's career, as Christmas approaches and they begin to assemble a model train town in their studio called *KayVille* (after one of the hosts names', *KAYSTER*) – you know the kind – picture-perfect, plastic – a model train town which their station makes a big deal out of every year (they're simulcast on radio and TV at the same time so they want the radio booth they broadcast in to be nice and Christmasy) when *KayVille*, their annual tradition, seems to take on a dark new meaning...

Wouldn't it be nice, one of them wonders, if the world were an all-plastic, all-white, all-control-able train town, always at Christmas?

Scene 1:

Lights up on a bloody, brown girl, in a field hockey uniform, holding a field hockey stick and running in place. Fierce.

Elsewhere, lights up on two white, male, 50+ radio hosts in a darkened, small radio booth. They have headphones on and mikes in front of their faces. They are in the middle of calling an exciting game.

KAYSTER: (beside himself) ay yai yai, it's MUD, her little legs are pumping away but she's running in place because of the MUD – no grass, no green, just divots of brown and dead, dead earth – wait now, wait, there she goes in her plaid skirt three inches below the knee and her angry black hair and her Harrow stick and she's in full blur, running like the police are after her – her team is LOSING, way behind -- oh they're catching up! -- It's tied! Because of HER, because out of nowhere, her feet are no longer caked in the mud and it's up! It's up! It's up in the air! Where will it land? Oh god, everything rides on this one moment as the ball goes up...

...UP...

...AAAAAAND...

IN! SHE'S PUT IT IN, SHE'S BURIED IT, DEEP IN THE BACK OF THE NET, GO GET THE PALLBEARERS BECAUSE THIS ONE WAS BURIED, TURN OUT THE LIGHTS, THE PARTY'S OVER, THAT'S ALL SHE WROTE, KISS IT GOODBYE, BURIED IN THE BACK OF THE NET.

...buried...

Pause as KAYSTER pants and catches his breath.

KAYSTER: That's the way this one ends.

The lights change—ROCKY slumps into an exhausted pile, head down, crumpled in a small spot, while the radio hosts go from in-game broadcast to post-show.

LABARRERA: Ya know this team is *stuck* and I don't see a way around it. They're caught in the / Stone Age.

KAYSTER: /well look at the *field*, I mean.

LABARRERA: The conditions of the field, yea, right, exactly, my point is that this team/ is stuck in the *Stone Age*.

KAYSTER: Tell me how you expect me to *get up every day* and root for this high school girl's field hockey team when they

LABARRERA: When the other team's field is as pristine as

KAYSTER: like *my father* rooted for this girl's field hockey team, when

LABARRERA: My father, too.

KAYSTER: When they won't simply

BOTH: *Spend the money.*

KAYSTER: Spend the /money.

LABARRERA: /spend the money.

KAYSTER: The condition of the field! Would Babe Ruth walk ou—would *Tom Brady* walk out there

LABARRERA: Jerry Rice!

KAYSTER: Would *Tom Brady* walk out there if conditions were /

LABARRERA: /God no, *jesus* no!

The KAYSTER takes a breath to really lean in and tell us something.

KAYSTER: I understand it's a public high school. I understand funding is tight. I'm not so naïve that I -- but when I am expected to put my hard-earned integrity, carry my hope around in a basket, and just *dump* it at the feet of the teams I love,

LABARRERA: and they won't even put a proper *playing surface* down

KAYSTER: It's embarrassing. While the *other team's* field is /immaculate.

LABARRERA: No, no, it's worse. It's *subversive*.

LABARRERA loves his word, KAYSTER contemplates.

KAYSTER: Well, one thing is for sure, number ten is going places.

LABARRERA: Rack-l.

KAYSTER: The turf quality couldn't even *slow her down!*

LABARRERA: She's playing for a losing school, but that number 10 -- what's her last name?

KAYSTER: Even the bigs of field hockey aren't very big, admittedly, but it's players like -- that can't be her name -- Rack-l? --

LABARRERA: Rhymes with tackle.

KAYSTER: ...but she, *she* can make them come, if only they'll build it.

LABARRERA: Did we get a *last* name?

KAYSTER: *(suddenly holding a piece of paper and reading copy)* Meyer's lamb chops – when a night out hunting turns into a night in foraging, make sure to buy the freshest, juiciest lamb chops – *(he goes off script)* you can tell by the marbling, the way the fat looks – do you know about marbling? -- *Like lambs to the slaughter, Meyer's.*

LABARRERA: *(gimmie a break!)* Do I know about marbling?
The red light goes off, and we know they're off the air for just a moment. KAYSTER puts down the ad, takes a breath.

KAYSTER: Ya know, I've seen a lotta bodies come through this school. I've seen a lotta good teams, a lotta bad teams, and more teams I've forgotten than I can remember. I've seen seventy-one players wear number ten, I've seen fifty-two players wear number twelve. But I've never seen anything like her. Today is her birthday. Fourteen. Her present? Four solo goals, two assists and one defeat.

LABARRERA: She even gets back on defense.

KAYSTER: She *even gets back on defense*. But one thing's for sure and certain: wherever she's going, she can't go there with this team. The – what – isn't there anymore. The heart?

LABARRERA: The funding.

KAYSTER: The *funding*. Compare it to – I mean, the team she played this afternoon looked like *goddesses* in their uniforms. And she. She looked. Half blood, half dirt.

They both take a deep breath and marvel at her. Then, the red light returns -- they're back on air and KAYSTER is reading more copy.

KAYSTER: (*reading*) Coming up on AM 820 our sister station, *deportes*

LABARRERA: No se vayan! Quedesen ayi!

KAYSTER: (*looking at him, amazed*) *Not bad*, buddy! Is that a nod to your—

LABARRERA: I *think* I said it right.

KAYSTER: Is that a nod to your

LABARRERA: Nah, I'm American. I was just trying to - I mean, my great, *great* grandparents, maybe, but not me. I -- (*laughs*) I'm not sure what I was trying to do.

KAYSTER: We'll be right back, and we're gonna take calls from the Meyer Lamb Chops listener hotline. I'm the Kayster with LaBarrera, and you're listening to one oh two point nine FM.

And they're off air.

Lights shift, and ROCKY enters the locker room. She's in her uniform, after the game, putting small bandages on her many cuts.

LABARRERA picks up the copy KAYSTER was reading.

LABARRERA: (*mmmmm*) Grass fed.

KAYSTER: You tried?

LABARRERA: Juicy. Bloody.

KAYSTER: (*distant*) Yea? Yea? Good.

LABARRERA: Summin wrong? You look more palefaced than usual.

KAYSTER: ...yea... I, uh I went to the market. The uh, meat market. I figured with the new ad and all, Jodie and I could pop over to Meyer's new location

BOTH: in the Bronx

KAYSTER: I drive by it every day so I figured I'd – and she nudges me while the guy is chopping, and I follow her eyes and we both watch a worker, some young Mexican kid, drop a live baby lamb Into the trash.

LABARRERA: (*laughing*) Oh jesus, nancy woulda got the kid FIRED

KAYSTER: We don't say anything. He hands us the chops, we walk out. But that live baby lamb. Crying in the trash can...

The lights go down and out on them, and up on ROCKY who is standing in her field uniform in her kitchen. Her mother, MI MAMA, circles her.

Mi MAMA: Tu crees que eres mejor que mi porque eres blanca? You a white ghost. You want to come back to a home you no longer welcome in. Quieres regresar a un hogar que no te quiere.

She slaps ROCKY hard, across the face. ROCKY shows no emotion.

MI MAMA: Tu crees te blanca? I will hit you hasta que tu piel es blanco brillante.

She beats and beats and beats ROCKY, and the lights condense, until ROCKY is a bloody pile on the ground, in her own spot. MI MAMA stands over ROCKY, runs her fingers gently through ROCKY'S hair a moment, and leaves. ROCKY stands and pulls herself together. She brings out a bucket of white paint and a brush.

She dips the brush in the paint. Then paints a few thick streaks across the floor, the walls, the kitchen table, the chair. She sits in the chair. Rubs her bottom against the fresh paint. She stands, and presses her bottom against the wall, squishing and swirling with her backside. She steps back to admire her art.

She paints while she talks.

ROCKY: The field *is* in bad shape. Which is why – and again, I’m super sorry I am not delivering this in Spanish, but my Spanish isn’t very good – which is why I think it would *behoove* you all to maybe, put some of the city funding towards replacing the field.

She starts calmly painting her skin white.

ROCKY: There’s more brown than green, now. There’s more dead than alive. And cheap paint. Lines that wash away with the rain. So, I guess what I’m saying is ... lo que estoy diciendo es... it needs to be replaced. Or we’ll never win. Ever.

She’s done painting herself. She looks at the board members.

ROCKY: Wanna go over my broken bones?

CITY COUNCIL PERSON: (*the decision said without interruption*)
Lo sentimos, pero en este momento el ayuntamiento del Bronx ha decidido mantener la financiación donde está. Apreciamos sus esfuerzos por utilizar el proceso democrático para --

ROCKY points to herself.

ROCKY: Clavacle: twice, fibia: twice, tibia: once--

CITY COUNCIL PERSON: *Apreciamos sus esfuerzos --*

ROCKY: All fingers, *both hands*, just to--

CITY COUNCIL PERSON: (fed up) Gracias por tu tiempo.

ROCKY: Just because I don't speak Spanish doesn't mean I wasn't born here!

CITY COUNCIL PERSON: *Gracias por tu tiempo.*

A beat of silence.

ROCKY: I stole a baby lamb from a trash can and now it's in my room.

ROCKY turns around, the lights turn with her, and she's back in her kitchen. MI MAMA appears.

MI MAMA: (*broken english*) Happy Birthday.

ROCKY: Two more lame ones until I can drive.

MI MAMA: I hear your father coming up the steps. He will have your present.

ROCKY: I've never met my father.

MI MAMA: He got you a new field stick. A new white field stick.

ROCKY: All I want is a new field. And a little extra food.

MI MAMA: Your father will have dinner.

ROCKY: A little extra I can take to my room.

MI MAMA's eyes go dark.

MI MAMA: Porque eres ingrata?

Stunned.

ROCKY: I'm *grateful*.

MI MAMA: You want to leave when your new stick comes? I'll beat you with your new white stick.

MI MAMA stands off with her daughter.

ROCKY: It will. Help me score.

MI MAMA slaps her daughter in the face, hard. ROCKY loves her mom and makes familiar excuses.

ROCKY: You're confused. That's all. You're a confused immigrant, doing the best that you

MI MAMA slaps her daughter in the face, hard.

ROCKY: A single mother, speaks no English, trying to put foo

MI MAMA slaps her daughter in the face, hard.

MI MAMA: Maybe your brother will raise you.

ROCKY: He hits harder.

MI MAMA: Is that why you want to go to a white school?

ROCKY: Their field is much better.

MI MAMA: Your white skin makes me sick.

ROCKY: This is. Just paint. From our field. It was muddy. We lost.

MI MAMA turns away.

ROCKY: Presidents went to this school. CEO's.

MI MAMA: So. Why you?

ROCKY: Because I'm good at field hockey, mami. Really good. And they want to win. At everything.

Silence.

ROCKY: I went to the city council. They won't give our school any more money. A lady from the white school came and offered me a place there. I'm going.

In a sharp movement, MI MAMA draws her hand back to slap her daughter. ROCKY flinches hard. But the hand lingers, does not strike. MI MAMA lowers the hand, makes a prediction.

MI MAMA: At Christmas. You will crawl home. And not go back. Because they will take a razor and shave off all that white. And see what's underneath.

Lights down on them and up on KAYSTER and LABARRERA in the studio, after hours, sitting on the floor, setting up an intricate model train town.

The studio is decorated for Christmas. It's late, most employees have gone home.

LABARRERA: Bar. Think like you're going to a *bar*. Then think get some *air*, then go *uh*. Bar. Air. Uh. Barrera.

KAYSTER: And the guy *still* couldn't say it.

LABARRERA: *Bear?* No, not *bear-era*...

They laugh.

KAYSTER: Every window-breather in the city calls up and wants to call you a fraud, or *me* a fraud, but—

LABARRERA: (*tired of that word, of defending himself, even if it is only sports radio*) I'm a fraud, you're a fraud, we're all frauds!

KAYSTER: But I can't help *anyone* who thinks your name is *bear-era*.

KAYSTER looks at the train and track pieces scattered in front of him.

LABARRERA: (*the train town, the decorations*) Not even Halloween and I've got to choke down Christmas. I have no agency. I have no agency in my life.

KAYSTER: Alright, how are we settin up *Kayville*?

LABARRERA: You're the kayster. You tell me.

They assemble the train and tracks to KayVille. It ought to look nice, as it's featured everyday on local cable TV along with the two host during their 4-hour afternoon sports show. Their show is simulcast on radio and TV.

Lights stay on the studio as they simultaneously come up on a running, bloody ROCKY in a muddy field hockey uniform, broken old brown stick in hand.

ROCKY: (*running in place, dark and fierce*) They gave a brown, broken stick to my father and said "here, provide for your family with this."

She bumps an unseen defender's body off her own, and keeps running.

ROCKY: They gave my mother a brown, broken stick and said, "here, cook with this."

She grunts hard as she knocks an unseen defender from each side of her to the ground. She keeps running. And panting.

ROCKY: They gave me a brown, broken stick and said, "here, learn with this."

She winds up big and takes a hard shot.

ROCKY: I couldn't.

She scored. She stops running. She smiles. In the auditory background, a crowd cheers her goal.

A white girl with a pretty white smile comes out and hands her a shiny white field hockey stick, taking her broken, brown one.

ROCKY smiles. The crowd is still cheering. ROCKY holds up her white stick in victory. The PRETTY WHITE GIRL claps and smiles and comes close to ROCKY. Closer. Does she want to hug ROCKY? Closer. PRETTY WHITE GIRL is awkwardly close to ROCKY.

ROCKY wants to play nice, opens her arms like “are we gonna hug?” PRETTY WHITE GIRL leans in and spits in ROCKY’s face.

The crowd keeps cheering. PRETTY WHITE GIRL goes to leave, stops, and turns to an utterly heartbroken ROCKY.

The crowd music lowers so we can hear...

PRETTY WHITE GIRL: Audits. Audits and yachts. Inheritance offshore? Offshore? Tennis camp kale au pair escrow. Aspen. Aspen and audits.

She exits. ROCKY is as confused and broken as she can be – but by god she’s got that shiny new white stick.

Lights out on her.

KAYSTER: (some progress made on Kayville) Was that our guy? Did he unlock the bathroom door?

LABARRERA returns from the bathroom and sits, helping KAYSTER assemble.

LABARRERA: Like talkin to a wall.

KAYSTER: I feel horrible. What’s his name?

LABARRERA: Like talkin to a wall that – when it finally does talk back – doesn’t talk in ENGLISH. Jesus.

KAYSTER: He was a doctor in his country.

Silence. They assemble.

KAYSTER: He was telling me about his daughter's student loans.

LABARRERA: His daughter is in ... Mexico...?

KAYSTER: (*nope*) They're not *Mexican!* She's at UC Berkley. And she

LABARRERA: He *just* said Mexico!

KAYSTER: He's *eastern European – nothing like Mexican*, and he tells me they're gonna make her leave school. Something with her forms and he's screaming *she's legal, she's American* but

LABARRERA: (*shaking his head*) See, restrictions aren't meant to *impede*. Restrictions have a place, but when they *impede*, they

KAYSTER: So now she's thinkin she'll learn her father's trade and take over. When he retires. And I said Berkley has a lot of good

LABARRERA: Heyheyhey, lotttttttttta people skipping college these days. (*the model train town*) Do you want the post office over here? Or

KAYSTER: She's gonna what? Grow up and be her dad?

LABARRERA: Imagine her in the outfit.

KAYSTER: Her father's moustache.

LABARRERA: And then her daughter will take over for her.

KAYSTER: And her daughter for her and one day someone comes in out of the blue and asks innocently enough, what can you tell me, about oh, say, the Crimean War? And whatever

she's doing, in that moment, she comes to a complete halt and thinks *oh my god, I only know how to clean a radio station.*

Lights shift.

ROCKY drags a school desk center stage and sits facing the audience.

TEACHER'S VOICE: What can someone tell us about the etymology of the surname *meyer*?

Silence.

TEACHER'S VOICE: You. What's your name? I don't know your name.

ROCKY: My name is

TEACHER'S VOICE: Stand when addressed.

ROCKY stands.

ROCKY: My name is

TEACHER'S VOICE: What can you tell us about the etymology of the surname, Meyer?

ROCKY: It's Germanic. English. Dutch. It means mayor.

TEACHER'S VOICE: Legal matters.

ROCKY: Yes. It also means, a person who is in charge of legal matters.

TEACHER'S VOICE: Anglo-Saxons. A powerful people.

ROCKY goes to sit.

TEACHER'S VOICE: You have young, strong legs, and I am asking you to use them in this class.

ROCKY: My. Bones hurt.

TEACHER'S VOICE: Flying number ten! Antoinette Concello. Shall that be your new name?

ROCKY: My name's not

TEACHER'S VOICE: *Antoinette please tell us more about the surname Meyer.*

ROCKY: The name also has Jewish origins in

TEACHER'S VOICE: (*singing*) Flies through the air with the greatest of ease, the daring young girl on the flying trapeze. (*talking*) Ms. Concello was a pioneer. Sports. Acrobatics. Trapeze.

ROCKY: I play field hockey.

TEACHER'S VOICE: (*sharply*) No. No, young Antoinette. You don't just play field hockey for your new illustrious school. No, no. For us, you play field hockey *very well*.

Silence as ROCKY feels all the eyes of the classroom on her. Her emotions overtake her.

ROCKY: May I be. I need to. My bones. Really hurt.

In tears, she slumps in her desk.

The TEACHER'S VOICE talks on as the stage is transformed to be a girl's dorm room. Four beds: two empty, one with a sleeping girl's back to us, and one with ROCKY lying in it.

TEACHER'S VOICE: (*over the transition*) Cage-free spa, board of directors heirloom tomatoes, commodity strategies. *Downsize?* Ha! Investor relations!

ROCKY is crawling into bed.

TEACHER is full of fire.

TEACHER'S VOICE: Investor. Blood. Relations.

ROCKY slumps into bed, exhausted.

Silence. Lights out on the classroom, and up on the dorm room.

TEETH, a pretty white girl of 14, is asleep in her own bed. She rolls over after ROCKY crawls into her own bed.

She shows her teeth a lot when she talks – and she smiles wide a lot.

TEETH: (*whispering*) Rock?

Silence.

TEETH: *Rock?*

Silence.

TEETH: What do you *want*? Also *which* day is it? Not tomorrow, but—Rock? *ROCK? What day is exactly your birthday and what do you want for it?*

ROCKY: (*mumbles*) Your pretty teeth.

TEETH: *Huh?*

ROCKY: I want my bones to heal.

TEETH: My mom said you could have your birthday at my house if you want.

ROCKY: These sheets *stink*.

TEETH: You know who's gonna be in town? Noam Chomsky! He's old. He's *way* older now, so he. But he used to come over all the time and tell these funny stories at dinner and my mom said maybe he can tell *you* some stories at din-

ROCKY: *Someone peed in my sheets?*

ROCKY jumps out of bed.

ROCKY: SOMEONE PEED ON MY SHEETS!

TEETH: No one would pee on yo—

TEETH gets out of bed and goes to inspect.

TEETH: *(smelling)* Oh, no.

ROCKY: *Why would anyone PEE on my sheets?*

TEETH: Maybe it's like. Someone had a dog in, and it—

ROCKY: *(falling into tears)* I can tell the difference between animal pee and human pee and this is HUMAN. Why????

TEETH tries to hug her, ROCKY pulls away.

TEETH: All the girls like you.

ROCKY: *One of them peed on my bed.*