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Nickel Ice

GEORGE GIOKAS

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CHAPTER 1

Blue blazer and pants, white shirt and

blue tie; school emblem sewn on the right vest pocket. Underneath, a cloth “fdakto” pinned to a tee shirt to ward off any evd spirits.

My buddy, Alex, was always the first one to dive in to his lunch. It didn't matter what the chef in the back room cooked up that day, Alex would find a way to cram a little less than half a stick of butter in his mouth just before our school cafeteria offering landed on the table.

A Bronx and so I began another day in the South “HmMMM. Good, no?” Alex would say, his

mouth stuffed with yellow, slimy mush. Earlier in the day, on the way to school, Alex would let out a

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moan from the back of the school bus as we crossed the Triborough Bridge and the smell of a nearby bread factory wafted through the windows.

“Hmmm, French toast.” The smell would last as long as it took for the Hell Gate Bridge to vanish from our site, almost to the bridge tolls. There was a rumor that, if you could hit the Hell Gate with a paper wad just right, it would collapse into the East River, but no one ever tried.

Alex grossed us out, but that was not what weighed heavily on our little minds at the Hellenic American School for the Arts. Awkwardly located in one of the worst sections of the Bronx, it took those of us who lived in Queens two hours to get there and two hours to return home.

This was a highly regarded place of learning.

Without it, our proud parents wouldn't have been able to say they carried on the Greek traditions they had brought with them when they crossed the Atlantic. Their search was for a better life after the tyranny of the Germans during the Second World War. This was personal.

“You see when we go to town,” my mother would say, referring to her hometown of Patras, “your cousins will kiss and pinch you because you know the words.” Mom took my brother and me to Greece practically every summer—11 days to get there on the Queen Frederica and another 11 days to come back.

“We are lucky to go,” Mom said, always punctuated with her finger pointed to the heavens. We spoke, read and wrote Greek at a very

early age. Heck, we even spoke, read and wrote

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Ancient Greek. And we learned our faith without reservation. This was education the way education was supposed to be carried out—with a purpose and a necessary strong hand whenever the young charges roaming the hallways got restless.

Every day was a challenge and yet the same, for eight years, from first to eighth grade. Nothing ever changed at the school; not even the teachers.

When it snowed, school was never half a day for us and it took sometimes four hours to get home.

But even when it didn't snow, the ride was so long there hardly was enough time to smack a baseball across the concrete ball field, doodle out my homework, eat the dandelion greens and the salad Mom served up for dinner and squeeze in the latest "Twilight Zone." I hated homework. I saw it as a waste of good time.

The year was 1965, two years after President Kennedy was shot. That was a day that would stay with me forever. The teachers marched us down to the auditorium and we sat in the metal folding chairs, the ones usually used for music appreciation class.

The radio was on and we listened as the events unfolded.

"Three shots were fired at President Kennedy's motorcade today in downtown Dallas, Texas. This is ABC Radio. We repeat... In Dallas, Texas, three shots were fired at President Kennedy's motorcade today... We're going to stand by for more details on the incident in Dallas. Stay tuned to your ABC station for further details. We now return you to our regular programming."

With that, I got my ears boxed by Miss Papastavrou because I whispered something to Alex. I think it was mostly her anger at the tragic news. My head was just there for convenience. It would have been lunchtime and then recess for us, but that was interrupted by the day's news. John F. Kennedy was shot and killed in his car in Dallas, Texas, and 1,500 miles away boys and girls in a Greek American private school in the South Bronx sat terrified on metal chairs not quite understanding it all.

The lunch menu at the Hellenic American School for the Arts was always a surprise.

Depending on which Greek immigrant jumped ship that month, lunch was either pretty damn good or it tasted like raw fish guts.

Our principal, Mr. Paris, was considered a fine, upstanding pillar of the Greek American community. We were required to address him at all times as *Kyrie*, "sir" and nothing else. He was a brilliant scholar, respected and revered for drilling the Greek language and culture into American-born kids who just happened to have Greek parents. But inside the school's walls, *Kyrie* spread fear along with the prerequisite respect. With his half-inch thick wooden ruler always at the ready in his jacket pocket, we knew he would use it if he had to. *Kyrie* was more than tough with us, but we were a tough bunch and it was his way of making what we needed to learn stick.

Friday mornings were always a treat. It was called "assembly," much like a boot camp muster.

The girls sat across from the boys, always separated,

even during recess. From atop a stage, Kyrie would descend the stairs, causing trepidation in every little boy's pants as he took his position in the middle of the freshly waxed wooden floor and on most occasions would call out a boy's name.

"Please come forward..were his usual well-chosen words before the "lesson" of the week, once again, played out on the day before a weekend.

Girls were never publicly disciplined like the boys, though they were at times sent home with the telltale sign that they had been caught in some transgression—red palms.

Eight times out of 10, it was the same kid—you guessed it, Alex—who was summoned front and center. Heck, he even prepped for it beforehand, entrusting me with his Coke-bottle glasses.

Alex took his punishment like a wussy, always interrupting Kyrie with tearful pleadings. In the end, after several light whacks across the palms of his hands, Alex would turn on the drama and end up on the floor crying, crumpled like a pile of laundry.

But I'm getting ahead of myself.

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CHAPTER 2

*Boiled dandelions drizzled with olive oil
and lemon. Bread dipping mightily encouraged.*

M

y name is Petros. Literally translated, it means “rock” in Greek. Friends call me Pete. I grew up in a few places. My older brother, Jack, took care of me in Harlem when I was just in diapers and watched my back in the projects in Astoria, where gangs would chase us to the barrel park and back. We would hide, especially from the guys in the sneaker gang led by tough guy Paco, who showed their manhood by pulling the sneakers off your feet and throwing them into the East River. Jack’s Greek name was Ioannis, or John, but everyone called him Jack. Jack saved my life once when a bunch of toughs broke a bottle and almost cut my throat during

a game of hardball in front of our apartment building. He grabbed one of them, told me to run and we both got away.

Every year, in the spring, Jack and I had to walk past the guys in the gangs and our friends wearing a dress. It took my mom a long time to get us into the outfits and every year I tried being sick so I wouldn't have to walk through my neighborhood dressed like a girl. It wasn't really a dress, but it sure looked like one. It was the evzon outfit worn by Greek soldiers and we had to wear it because we marched in the parade in Manhattan with our school. Greek Independence Day was March 25 and every year around that time Jack and I took a deep breath and marched to the bus that would pick us up for the event that marked Greece's independence from the Turks.

Jack and I shared a room overlooking the Triborough Bridge, played punch ball in our narrow hallway and cowboys and Indians in our room. When Mom wasn't watching us outside, we played hardball on a concrete ball field and watched the fight of the week near the skelly court. The fight ended when someone broke the other guy's nose or jaw.

We also spent lots of time chasing our Spaldings before they rolled into the East River. Our building was the one closest to the riverbank and though it was nice because we could see the Empire State Building and Roosevelt Island, many Spaldings were lost in the pursuit of punch ball perfection.

Marbles were always a big hit, but our greatest passion was catching bumblebees in a jar.

We got so good at it, we would collect a half dozen

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or so bees in that same jar, without any of them escaping. Sometimes we would fill the jar with ants and watch them take the bees apart, legs first, then the wings. I liked playing with Jack. Even though he was a few years older, he always included me in things.

Our apartment was small. As you walked in, to the left of the giant metal front door was our living room. The kitchen was next, then the hallway with the bathroom to the left. I still remember my cousin giggling in the hallway when she sneaked a peek at me. A ways down from our tiny but always busy bathroom was our room and then my parents' bedroom, where I used to look out the window, waiting for *baba*, my dad, Mihali Economou, to come home.

We were on the fifth floor, so I could see pretty far. I would spot him a good couple of minutes away, his fedora and impeccable suit swaying back and forth.

It was a whopping five-minute walk from where the buses let off people in the projects to our apartment building. It was the last stop for the buses. The East River was the next stop, if anyone wanted to try. Whenever we took a cab back home from a family outing, my dad had the same line for the driver: "Can't go no more," always followed by his own laugh. Jack and I heard it so many times, we always looked at each other and mouthed the words as they came out of dad's mouth.

"*Vre, Petro*, hey, *Petro*," Mom would yell from the kitchen, "you see *baba* yet?"

“*Nai*, yes,” I yelled back. “He’s almost here.”

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Dad would stroll in with the swagger of one of those gangsters on “The Untouchables,” hat perfectly squared and shoes shiny enough to blind you at the right angle.

Dad wasted no time in idle chatter with any of us. He went straight to the dinner table in the cramped kitchen, which, in our case, was the same as the breakfast, lunch and ironing table.

The kitchen was Yiayia the cat’s favorite place, since all sorts of goodies eventually ended up on the floor and the well-used oven always kept her nice and warm. We weren’t supposed to have cats in the apartment, but Yiayia was quiet, so we got away with it.

The kitchen was also where my mom, Anna, made all our clothes. She was a seamstress, though I never saw Mom work outside the house. Greek men wouldn’t stand for their women spending much time away from the house and kids or, more important, the kitchen.

Mom would sometimes cook for days for those weekend bashes with the family and good friends. For those occasions, no expense was spared at the Greek specialty store on Ninth Avenue in Manhattan where my father worked. Leftovers lasted well over a week.

I usually knew what Mom was working up on any particular day because sometimes she would start her magic in the morning. Every month, white cloths, heavy with curdled milk, hung from the ceiling and in a few days yogurt would be produced, which Mom mixed with white rice for a special dinner.

Tonight, because she had taken me and Jack to Astoria Pool at the park that past Saturday, we knew that dandelions were on the menu because she always spent the time waiting for us picking them and stuffing them into two huge grocery bags.

Dandelions, Mom would remind us, were all they had to eat during the Second World War, when the Germans occupied Greece.

The large dandelion pot under the sink was put into play, usually about an hour or so before Dad's black Florsheims jumped off the Q-102 bus and onto the pavement.

Mom never measured anything, so when she salted the water, it was straight from the Morton Salt box. I had a crush on the little girl on the box, but I never told anyone.

The dandelions were carefully washed and rewashed until they looked like wet grass then in the pot they went. Don't get me wrong. I knew these were weeds we were eating and it never occurred to me that dog piss and God knows what else could have been on them, 'cause when they came out fully cooked, they were baptized with olive oil and salt and then dropped into the big bowl we all shared, dipping our bread in the juices in the bottom—weeds, yes, but as comforting as a thick stew in the middle of January.

Honey-glazed doughnuts my father brought home usually followed the main meal. Someone once told me that doughnuts were better than sex, but I had no idea what sex was until Steve Petsas told me about it in the schoolyard one day while I was on second

base waiting for Tom Papanicolaou to score me in.

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When I got home, I asked my mom about it but she dismissed it with a wave of her hand and a laugh.

The bread we ate and dipped into the wonderful oil and lemon-infused dandelions was always fresh 'cause we would buy two loaves from the bread man who made his daily rounds from floor to floor in the projects. "Bread man. Bread man."

That's all he said, but more ladies opened their doors to him than they did anyone else. My dad would sometimes wink at me and comment about the bread man and his basket of goodies, making the rounds with all of those housewives. I would wink back, but had no idea what I was winking about. I guess it was our little secret, whatever it was.

Jack was the squeamish one. He would reject the dandelions and go straight for the feta cheese, smacking down a thick slice between two pieces of the bread man's perfectly baked French crust.

Mom would not take kindly to someone eating just cheese and bread so sometimes she would force Jack to eat the weeds. One morning, when Jack wouldn't eat his eggs, she broke two over his head and made him go to school. Everybody stayed away from Jack that day, even our fearsome principal.

I, on the other hand, ate just about anything

Mom or anyone else put in front of me—a sign, according to Greek mothers, of a healthy boy. At one point, I was so healthy I was 4-foot-5 and 100 pounds. This was pretty big for a 10-year-old. But I looked healthy, so they made sure I kept eating.

I especially liked ice cream, but Mom used to throw out our popsicles when she saw me and Jack

suckin' on one. "No goot," she would say in her broken English.

But Mom wasn't at school, so I made sure I had my fill of ice cream during recess.

That's how I met Mulvaney.

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CHAPTER 3

Vanilla sandwiches were always a safe

bet, but the ice-cobdvelvety sting of a creamsicCe

had no equah

F

rancis Mulvaney pulled into the Good Humor

lot late. Again. It was a little after eight on a

Friday morning but the temperature on the

Coke thermometer outside the garage already read 87

degrees. Hot for mid-March in the South Bronx.

Mulvaney was about to climb into his truck.

“Mulvaney.” Rory McShane, the distribution manager, was always after Mulvaney for something, but this morning he had urgent business.

“Ain’t ya been in yer locker, now?”

“Jus’ got in, Rory. Give us a break, wouldya?”

“Just as I figured.”

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“Finn’s been in a bad way,” Mulvaney said, looking to free himself from the impending interrogation.

“There’s always somethin’ with ya or that drunken father o’ yers, ain’t there, Francis?”

Mulvaney, whose face carried every single bit of every year of the 47 he’d lived, curled his lips at the remark but didn’t waste any time putting on the trademark Good Humor white coat and hat.

“There’s a new schedule, now,” Rory continued.

“For who, then?”

“For you, Francis.” Rory handed him several sheets of paper and a map. Mulvaney looked over the first sheet.

“Yer kiddin’, a school route?”

“That’s right.”

Mulvaney threw the papers into the wind. “I ain’t doin’ it.”

“Ya will and you’ll like it, Francis.”

“I told ya when I first took this miserable job I wasn’t doin’ any school routes.”

“Take it or leave it, Mulvaney. I mean it.”

Mulvaney stared at Rory as he walked away saying “Praise the Lord, Francis, for a beautiful day. Praise the Lord.”

Mulvaney collected the papers from the ground and looked skyward. “I’ll praise ya, but I first need to know, why the hell me?”

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