

Robert Ready

AUTOCEPHALOUS

Andreas, my driver, stood on East Third Street inside the open driver's door. Philly saw me coming down the steps in front of Lillian's house, heading for the car. He got it into his nine-year-old head that I had time, wasn't in a rush for him not to see me, there one block over from our own. What did Philly think, I was getting a recipe from Lillian up there, that I needed to have him see me? His mother was away, and I'd failed as a parent again already. The right side of his face, you could see it even at that distance, had a beet red stamp from whatever had happened to him earlier that I was trying to find out about.

Andreas knew not to let a line pass his eyes from me to Philly or back. Seeing nothing is part of seeing everything, which is part of what Andreas is good at.

"Hey, Pop, catch!"

Philly threw the ball and he meant it. It was a softball a couple years old, some of the threading loose like the ends of the four stitches in his cheek his mother is going to be totally irrational about when she gets back from Florida tomorrow. The ball came at me in a hard, high arc because Philly's going to be as big as I am, bigger. I stepped forward and aside to catch it up over my head, away from the coat I'd just gotten out of the cleaners for my daughter Nika's birthday, which is tomorrow.

"Good catch, Pop!"

He started running towards me, then back across Third, almost falling into garbage as I feinted throws back, sideways, over there, nowhere.

Andreas shook his head, which annoyed me, like he was such a good father himself, at the faro table two or more times a month? It was Philly seeing the Lillian part that stuck in my craw and made me want to throw his ball away and out of his reach.

I threw the ball, put a lot on it, high and straight down the avenue, twenty thirty yards into the next charge of traffic off the light. Philly dropped his arms to his side, didn't understand the game yet. If he was my kid, he had to learn eventually. Nobody, not even your old man. Especially. Then I felt about as high as under the sidewalk in front of Lillian's house.

Andreas gave me a smirk, but he hadn't seen a thing.

In the car, we were driving downtown, toward the Cypriot. I was looking at two photos of the kid who'd hit Philly – one Andreas took of the him on the street, another from some kind of high school yearbook.

"You found out what?"

"Kid's name is Mahmut. Five, six years older."

"Philly told you?"

"You think?"

"Huddled masses. They unhuddle, come here. Everybody comes here, everybody gets in, my mother used to say." Andreas pulled out the accent as if from one of his mother's drawers. "I vromia vyeni sti mesi." Except that even his mother couldn't have sand like that in her throat. Or maybe it was busted glass beads, something bass toned, serrated, and ground. Or I just didn't have much Greek left.

He helped me out. "Dirt comes up. Sort of, like, shit floats," he said.

"That's definitely true," I said.

"Is that not America?" he said she also used to say.

"Was it over anything?" I asked him. "Kid stuff?" The meeting at the Cypriot needed my attention, but my kid's face was my face, too.

"Lillian's rent," he said. "Mahmut started up on Philly about Philly dropping Lillian's rent off to her that time."

"How'd he know that? What's it to him?"

"Good question. Maybe Lillian thought Philly was cute, said something to somebody. You think you're in a city, it's a village."

"Heh-heh. As if I'd pay rent for it. That was just, you know, money she needed. What'd Philly tell him?"

"Some shit about Arabs. Enough to make this Mahmut kid come back later while Philly was sitting on the hood, come up beside him and swing the metal drawer."

"Metal drawer. Sitting on the hood of what car, this one? My car?"

Andreas grunted. "Still had a couple files in it. From that Turk lawyer in the storefront around the corner? He must have seen it out front waiting for Sanitation. That's the thing. The kid's not an Arab. Turk, as you can see. Certain violent streak. Philly'll learn to predict it."

His mother will be ripshit when she gets back tomorrow. Wants to send him to a private school before he ends up just like me. She'll stand with her right foot as if inside me, calling hell down on my head. Last time that started, I left as she whipped all the

way into it, went to Lillian's. She's right. Just like. But in the meanwhile I have to go on being just like.

"Your father," I asked Andreas. "Back in Famagusta or wherever. Was he tough on you?"

Andreas's eyes slid past me in the rear view mirror, to some place out and back, straight down Second. The glass and sand flowed together into old hatred.

"Nicosia," he said.

"I thought it was Famagusta."

"Nicosia."

"Whatever. I thought it was, whatever," I said. "Was he hardass with you in the refugee camp?"

"Sure," he said. "Till he had to stop, the prick."

One hand on top of the wheel was probably still on his old man's throat forty years ago, somewhere in the wreckage of the fighting for Cyprus. Till he had to stop.

"Salamis," he said to change the subject.

"On rye," I said, to keep it changed. We both grunted.

"No Coke. Pepsi," he said.

"Just right, perfect lemon juice in soup," I said. Old lines.

I looked at the pictures again. It comes to the surface, then up into your face. I asked, "Mahmut got a father you know of?"

"Find one, you want. With them, anyone will do to make the point."

We pulled up at Cypriot Social, tight against the yellow curb. Short George Spartacus was waiting out front, wearing his doeskin blue blazer. He came right up to

my tinted window, and I caught a little gleam off the gold blazer buttons that showed a guy sitting on a wooden fence out in the country wearing a big tweed cap and his pants tucked into knee socks. The guy on the three buttons looked away, down some leafy lane in the fall, probably waiting for sure snatch coming the other way in a world he didn't ever have to look out of.

Andreas got out, shut his door, went around the front of the car, him and Spartacus looking around, the whole Mutt and Jeff drill. Like beginning a song after the third, unheard beat, my door opened and I was up on the sidewalk, between the two of them. If it came to it, I'd usually choose Spartacus at my back. He was like a good pair of glasses for the eyes in the back of my head that could go nearsighted when I got stupid. As in throwing the ball to Philly that way.

Missing person flyers still hung on the wall to the right of the front south window of Cypriot Social on Avenue A, some ripped or curled, or graffitied over by morons. Never forget. These colors don't run. Heavenly towers. It had to be a Turk, a Mahmut who hit my kid – I needed that, too. The smell of burn still pocked the sidewalk air: sheetrock, computers, elevator doors, picture frames, rubber boots, football fields of glass, fingernails, whatever. And that dust, incinerated grey, still blew around. Near the bottom of metal fenceposts, it collected enough to take a finger print. Just in time, I heard Spartacus start to hawk up something that might land and stay in some of it.

“Don't,” I told him without having to turn around.

Sure, he said in a slow gargle. Everything he said and did was slow, though the opposite of stupid slow. He went into his breast pocket for a handkerchief, one of his

perfectly ironed handkerchiefs, the kind the guy on the fence would always have, too.
We were inside the vestibule.

I put my arm around his shoulder. “You iron, yourself?” I asked him, full of fun for him. The shoulder was like a desktop, the doeskin real deep blue smooth. People who work for me dress.

He held the used handkerchief like a rolled diploma. “Nah. Send to the French cleaners. With everything else.”

“Once a month,” Andreas put in.

“Twice. Twice. Twice,” he said, once for each blazer button he touched.

“So, two times,” Andreas said.

On a table by the doors into Kipriaki Hall, under the Doric silver-frames of Dighenis and Makarios III, there was a pile of copies of the memorial sheet for Nika. Andreas picked one up to give to me, but I didn’t want to see it again. It was nicely done. It had been in the portraits section of the *Times*. The reporter – I remembered her, all sympathy and sentences fresh out of reporter school – did a good job hitting the right tone with some of the funny stories I told her about Veronika and me. The reporter, Helen something, knew more Greek than I because it’s been so long. I remember the portrait she wrote, though, as if I’d memorized it in a school.

Though Veronika grew up apart from him, Veronika’s dad remembers her pique at his teasing her about not really knowing where Short Hills was when she and Stefan bought the house her dad had given her the down payment for. Nika’s dad called it Hot Hills. Her dad hadn’t understood when she first landed the job out of Columbia and two years in the Army as his warrior daughter just what it meant to work for a cantor named

Fitzgerald. What does he do, sing “Danny Boy” in the temple? Her dad teased her that way, the way a man who escaped as a young boy from war-torn Cyprus might kid his beautiful, beloved daughter for whom he’d made the American dream possible.

Andreas handed the flyer to Spartacus, who put it back on the pile. The kind of guy you want at your back, especially for the small things like that. It’s tact.

The issue at the Social meeting was about jobs in the area since then, maybe forty people at the meeting. During the course of it, I said a lot. Partly, I’m supposed to, and people look to me to organize the community. Partly, I was talking out of being irritated with myself, which meant I was upset about a lot of things. The City could give two rat shits about guys like those doing the liquor or fruit juice deliveries, another guy a masseur lucky enough to just be going in to start at 11:00 A.M. that morning and now the street-level health club he worked at is literally below the street, about seventeen guys in the scaffold window cleaning end of it, on and on, first, second, and third generation guys, good Orthodox guys some of them, sons of mountain and city guerrilla fighters, on and on, their job lives flatter than lite Wonder bread. Workmen’s comp, what was that to what they needed just to make it, get the deadly dust off their shoes?

I said all that at the meeting. I got worked up. Men there nodded, but I knew I was getting worked up especially about Nika’s mother and her new lawyer-husband’s greed for the victim’s compensation fund. They were consumed by it, and that meant people asking questions about family finances, sources of income, my business totally.

The retsina priest, his name the one Philly once and forever turned into Crapapoulos, was there in his black beard and his black cassock and his black cross on a silver chain around his fat neck.

“The community in the city,” I said, “is just as much in post-traumatic stress as the fathers and mothers I knew in the war.”

The priest had a shaky hand to bless out his shaky point about us not bringing back the old hate. “Not the old hate,” he said, “let us not bring back that.”

But I swear, the smell came into the hall and tomorrow was coincidentally Nika’s birthday. We used to have it pounded into us when we were kids on Cyprus that the church was autocephalic, and when we were teenagers in this country, we talked about the priests as autosyphilitic, and we’d say someday we’d drive an auto that’d have cylinder heads that were really cephalic. Like we knew what we were talking about, dickheads, thinking with our dicks, yet I swore looking at Crapapoulos, representative of the autocephalic church, telling us not to hate in the old ways, that it’d be okay for Philly to think with his dick for as long as he needed if it helped him stay clear of thinking like the priest. The Mahmutts weren’t thinking like the priest. You could smell it coming to the surface.

I heard private professions in the back seminar room for awhile. There was discussion about how we were moving into a few more maintenance understandings in even bigger co-op apartment buildings in the Upper West Side, getting along with the new Ukrainians while we were doing it. We could deal with those people now that the world had turned to unite against Arab terrorism. Or that was what a lot of our people wanted to think.

There was debate about an incident the previous night in Cypriot Children’s Park, the little playground over by the East River I never really thought would work. Seemed

some Spanish – the minutes would have to correct that to Latino, brotha, dreads and drugs and dumb – almost hanged himself from the swing set’s top cross bar. Now a precinct detective wanted to know if the Spanish kid intruder had wings to get up that high in the first place. We will issue a statement to anyone concerned that we abhor violence, especially in this time of crisis in the city and the nation. It is against our religion and our association’s very code of honor, though we make no bones about the rat poison we have put down around the perimeter of that playground.

There was extensive discussion about the all-out effort many of our best young and older men put into the months of cleanup at Ground Zero. It was felt that many representatives of many groups associated in the world like our own have increased their mutual understanding by working together in the tragedy. One profession was simply put. Hard hats, firm hearts, standing united, respecting divisions, as in any victorious army. Kipriaki Hall sounded like Carnegie after that son spoke.

The priest started up again. I asked him just to give us a concluding prayer for world peace. Surprised, he went for it, in his Crapapoulic way.

Spartacus choked on a laugh half way through it. “Skata,” he said to me. “Skata floats,” I said back, annoyed that I couldn’t remember the word for floats. He said to me, “One word at a time. The piece of the sky the bastards ripped out, that was world peace.”

Old women, all widows, osteoporotic angels in mourning, brought in tea and pastries. I worked the hall, saw good people checking my face, wishing for a way to touch a line of grief away from how I must still look about Nika.

“It’s not a cross anymore,” I told one of the men. “It’s a shield now – you understand me?” And he said he did. He asked about Stefan and the baby. I told him the

truth: I hadn't seen either of them. He nodded, thinking, I bet, he hadn't needed to hear anything like that. But there's no world peace. Stefan's going to be a big real estate guy out in Hot Hills, where what I do the way I do, they don't. The baby's middle-named after me: Nikos. Stefan can't change the boy's heart, not the one he's born with. Just wait. We all sat around the hall with the elaborate pastries with tea and drinks and espresso and talked about everything all over again for a good two hours.

In the later afternoon, Spartacus did the driving, heading toward the tunnel, to Jersey and the Liberty Science Center. The sunset was going to be good, and that would help. The front radio speakers were on, one of those AM talk shows yelling about liberals and the destruction of America. We'd left Andreas to straighten out with the community representative from the precinct about that gymnastic Spanish kid, so that it wouldn't happen again, but the signal would be clear. We were driving slow, Spartacus-style that gave me time to register what I didn't believe I was seeing out the polarized window in the brown gold of the grey city in the bright evening light.

"Georgios," I cried. "Look who's there." I grabbed for the pictures I'd left on the seat. It was Mahmut, or his twin brother.

"What's that, anyway?" I asked.

It was like a flying saucer filled with dirt, grass, rocks and a stone house without a roof, somehow elevated off the street. And on the top of it, the Turk kid Mahmut, no less, with a clipboard, writing and looking around.

"It's that monument. Just opened, or re-opened. Once they got some sensible cement involved."

“Look at that. Look who’s up there. Monument to what?” I really didn’t know.
“Looks like the old country,” I said. “Shit, have some swamp fever, poverty, rock fights.”

“It is. The old country. Just another one, is all.”

Spartacus ate newspapers, news magazines. He was an MSNBC junkie, a receptacle for information. “Ireland,” he said. “It’s a monument. To the Irish famine. See the sign there? Says *Irish Hunger Memorial*. That’s when the British gave the food to their soldiers. And blamed it on a fungus. Couple million Irish died. The rest came over here. Became Kennedys.”

“That was a hundred years ago. Those people ever get over anything?”

“About a hundred and fifty.”

“Stop the car.”

We glided up curbside. It was where Vesey Street runs into the esplanade by the Hudson, two blocks over from Ground Zero. Spartacus moved around and opened my door. It was maybe seven in the evening, the financial district its usual ghost of the money day gone by. Just a few black Lincolns waited like pacified dogs outside #4 World Financial Center, where Merrill Lynch headquartered. There didn’t seem to be anyone else around, which suddenly became good. I got out, and Spartacus advised me not to do it.

I walked around, got the idea of the place, kept Mahmut in sight as he bent over to peep around at the botanical growth, then look up at the buildings ringing this artistic graveyard of old misery. A pamphlet I took out of a rack said it was a sculpture. It took up maybe an acre of a city block. Part of it was a covered passageway where a tape loop went through the facts. The tunnel and the black limestone perimeter walls of the thing

had sentences engraved deep into long bands of white glass, from politicians and thinkers over the past hundred years. Hundred and fifty years. Senseless, manipulated death. Couple million. First modern genocide of white people.

You came out of the passageway and walked through a reconstructed stone cottage without a roof. You could see the oven where people cooked, cooked what? You walked up a path, and there were all sorts of Irish grasses and plants: indigenous heather, gorse, foxglove and iris, the pamphlet said. The iris flowers were yellow on slender, high stems. There were stones, little boulders with names of all thirty-two Irish counties, north and south, carved into them, some as if they'd been rolled there by glaciers, some buried flat in the earth. If you were Irish, you could find your home county and know it was part of the famine that reminded you that the whole country then was one bath of misery, Protestant or Catholic. If you were Irish, you could feel rooted, like a potato, in your old country's history. Then you could look up at the broken roof line where grass tufts sprouted out of the stone in front of #4 World Financial Center, look east down Vesey Street to the crater the Mahmut's had dug all the way down from the sky. Except for the foundation slurry walls, built on bedrock, that had held back the river. They brought the fire down, but they couldn't get the river in.

Mahmut's face didn't have the rectangles of a Turk, more the slopes and niches of an Egyptian, with the blackish irises of maybe an Iranian, as in Persians, the ones who wrecked the Aegean before Alexander chased Darius all the way to the Caspian. Then Darius was murdered and the body left for Alexander. If you don't want history repeating itself, you have to chase them down.

"You Irish?" Mahmut had the balls to ask me.

This wasn't a kid – this was a condition, fifteen years old or fifty, or fifteen hundred. I didn't think he knew who I was yet. He certainly didn't know who he was, standing there on top of some bad history, his pockety pants sliding off his thin gangsta hips, a do-rag skulling his head black, being all charming and American to me, the old guy. I figured he hadn't seen the car. A car's the first thing you look for. I'd been that young, with an accent that made me sound like a mouthful of stuffed grape leaves. But I always knew to look for the car.

He told me he was doing a school project. He had to do something historical about a culture not his own family's. He said he liked a rock band from the place. So he picked this. He had to compare it to his own family heritage. It was linked to his Advanced Placement History.

“Interesting. What are you comparing to what?”

“Ireland. This.”

He pointed down with both first fingers to the turf, grasses, flowers, plants, and rocks of the monument. Then he used both thumbs as if to hitch all that up to his own chest. A smile flew from faraway onto his face.

“To Cyprus. My teacher has us doing personal ethnography in our diversity elective.”

“What's yours?”

“Excuse?”

“Your personal ethnography. Where exactly are you people from?”

The question made him for the first time wary, as if I weren't just some random tourist. He didn't answer me, didn't say Cyprus again, but he didn't seem afraid, either.

That made the switch in me go off too soon, and I had to breathe before saying it slow, the way Spartacus would.

“You’re comparing the Irish to Cyprus. So you can advance your place in history?”

He walked on stones like Antrim and Galway and down and around into the enclosed passageway. Now there were a couple of other people walking over the hill of famine. You could hear the Hoboken ferry churning on the river, and you could hear the traffic over on West Street driving heavy noise in both directions. Little winds shook the ragged turf at the top of the empty walls of the old house reassembled stone by stone. Atoms of Nika had maybe ended up part of the mortar in this phony thing, this FamineLand the Mahmut who’d hit Philly like that was using to get to college. Rising to the top. Is that not America?

I went in at one end of the passageway. Spartacus appeared at the other. The tape loop was on the numbers of the dead. 1845. Then 1848. 1849, 1852. I didn’t move fast enough. I’d underestimated. Mahmut went mid-air, getting Spartacus with both feet in the chest and coming back down into a crouch like a reptile on a rock. He was still holding the clipboard in one hand.

It was the look on his face more than common sense about noise in the tunnel with people up on the mound. The look of possession, of owning me, of making me do exactly what the world thought would happen again here. To a kid. It went on for a couple of seconds.

Like a thing in a horror movie, he sprang up full height and started shrieking anguish for the police that he was being robbed. The passageway made him sound like a

bunch of screaming people, and that turned the switch in me back on. I got up over the top of his stupid kicking and used the flat of the clipboard so hard just where he'd hit Philly that his head smashed into one of the glass inscriptions from a British general disgusted by the beggars in Londonderry fighting each other for blighted potatoes.

I got Spartacus up. His hard chest filled with air again over his bruised ribs. Mahmut must not have wanted to hurt him bad, or didn't really know how yet.

"My buttons," Spartacus gasped. One gone, one hanging by a thread. He went murder-fast after the dazed kid, but I shouldered him back out into the air. I went into a loud drunk act, holding my retsina buddy and singing the opening bars of the Greek anthem as we stumbled out of the famine area into the street and the car. The two tourists stayed out of it, separately, as if they didn't want even each other to know they'd heard a thing. They probably weren't tourists. No police were around yet.

Two buses rolled up fast because the light was starting to go down. The white plates said Alabama and the white sides said *Adventure* and *Exploring God's Creation*. The explorers got off, adults first, thickened blond women in Capri pants and clogs, then high school kids who couldn't be shown anything worth seeing. The women herded the kids onto the hunger memorial as if they'd already explained it to them and this was just the virtual outcome of everything they'd been telling them. Two boys, both alike in white version of dreads but with silver crucifix necklaces, stood still and glared at us as if we were on a plasma screen for them. I poured Spartacus into the back seat of the car while he ripped off the second button of the guy on the fence and held it tightly in his hand against his gut. I could hear the screaming of lady teachers at what they found in the passageway.

I drove, mostly with my left hand, up to Canal Street and inconspicuous into the line for the Holland Tunnel. Spartacus said he was all right. He laughed at not seeing the Ninja shit coming from an Arab. Not to hurt his feelings more, I didn't tell him the kid was a Turk.

I asked him if there was anything I could do for him other than wait until Monday and get him to wherever for buttons.

He said, "Put Savage on."

Through the packed tunnel, we listened to Savage from San Francisco in good form about liberals being insane, red-diaper-doper babies from NYU. When one hostile guy got through his screener long enough to say he was hosting parasites, the tape delay gave Savage time to spit out his glob of insults from Nazis-wearing-Depends to Clinton-sexual-deviant on and on until he took a break and the station pitched a new colon cancer protocol at NYU. Spartacus asked me if I'd ever had a colonoscopy, because he had to have one in two days and now with his bruised ribs he didn't know. I told him they'd mainline Valium into him and it would be okay, which is what they did to me. We made it without seeing a cop through the tunnel.

We went down 95 to Liberty State Park in Jersey City by the harbor. Savage came back on and took calls from people around the country who agree with him. We headed into the Liberty Science Center parking lot. I told Spartacus I knew a good spot to hang out until we could go back, probably by going up the turnpike to the bridge and back into the city the long way. He said he'd put on a different set of plates while we did that. He was hurting but he was thinking, slow and sure.

When Nika was fifteen, Liberty Science Center opened. They do a lot of science education for kids. Right now, they were featuring a T-Rex named Sue. Sixty-seven million years old, forty-five feet long, twelve-inch teeth, made possible by the generosity of McDonald's. Neither Nika nor Philly ever was much for dinosaurs. Just when Nika's mother and I were at endgame, the day before we finalized that, I took Nika to the Center for her birthday. I'll never forget it, her glee in the thing that scared the hell out of me. They have a hundred-foot-long dark passage, called the Touch Tunnel, a sensory-deprivation educational thing. You crawl through it blind, with fingers and toes and ears you didn't know you had. I came out of it sweating and with a wicked headache from squinting for light. Nika came out like Bat Lady, or like Ariadne from the old Greek story, her eyes wide with competence, her olive skin positively gleaming from the dark. Then we ate something on the outdoor dining deck, and she pointed over the river at the towers and said she didn't know whether she wanted to be a scientist or make a lot of money and work there, high up in the air. She came out of college a whiz at statistical modeling on computers. They got her to make money high up in the air.

Sitting in the front of my Crown Victoria in the empty, handicapped parking area of the Center, thinking, *Tomorrow's Nika's birthday*, I saw the bruised Spartacus bobbing up and down in front of the hood as he changed the front license plate. The one button looked pitiful.

Setting sun colors mixed up the clouds over the lower Manhattan skyline. A band of bluish-orange laid itself on the trapezoid top of WFC #1, and the dome top of WFC #2, and the pyramid top of WFC #3 – the three, chunky outposts still guarding the western flank of the gone towers. The World Financial Centers looked stocky and little, like

griefs with bent heads. Savage was yelling about a religion of hate, but then the station cut him off to start the broadcast of the ball game. I tried to shoot the planes out of the sky, but every time I just missed and hit the towers. I heard Nika in the Touch Tunnel saying, “Dad, you there? Isn’t this great?” but again, again I didn’t say a word back because I didn’t want to let on to her how scared I was.

Spartacus finished. He said he knew what I was looking at. He said it never did anyone any good to think this way, but this is what he thought. “There are two numbers that won’t go away,” he said. “The time of the first plane. And the time the second tower came down. Eighty-four and ten-twenty-nine. That’s a hundred and three minutes.”

“And?” Ten-twenty-eight, really. A hundred and two. They don’t go away.

“You just don’t know, ever,” he said. “Where or what, in a hundred and three minutes. And another thing,” he said. He really wanted me to listen. “Over there,” he pointed straight to it with the hand holding the button, “there are these banks of spotlights all around it. Eighteen spotlights per bank. Thirteen banks. Thirteen. Why’d they do thirteen, there of all places?”

A white security car was coming around our way for the second time in a clear hint that the Center was closed for the day. The guard actually had some kind of headdress on rather than his uniform cap. Raghead, I almost said aloud, but it got caught in a sound I choked out into a cough.

“You all right?” Spartacus asked me. Now he was holding his side like Napoleon.

“You drive now, okay?” I said. “I want to go home, see Philly. Call Lillian, see if she wants to go to Atlantic City for a few days.” I paused. “I shouldn’t have done that.”

“What?”

“Thrown the ball past him that way this morning. You don’t teach nothing that way, you think?”

“Strong kid, Philly,” Spartacus said, not knowing what I was talking about. “Look who’s he got for an old man. Apple doesn’t fall far from the tree.”

“That’s what I’m afraid of. Causes problems in the world, you know? Let’s go. I have to heat up the wife’s meatballs for Philly.”

“*Enosis*,” I told Philly when I saw him sad in bed tonight. “Say that. *Enosis*. Like that.” I nudged him under a rib. It was like a piano key to a sounding board, all of a piece wherever life touched him.

He wanted to giggle but the pain up his face let out just one middle note of fun.

“Halitosis,” he said. Then he said it right for me, like a hundred times before. Could it be now that he’ll start to get it? His mother goes into ice and fear mode when I talk to Philly about Cyprus, about any of it. She’s in Florida visiting her sponge-fisherman family near Clearwater. It’s just about the time of the blessing of the fleet and the diving for the holy necklace the young boys practice years for. She loves all that Aegean-American ceremony and fantasy. When we met and started up, she told me I was like a corsair. Now she’s thirty-five and tells me I’m coarse. The real reason she went to Florida was Lillian, something she was hurt about, and right about, and useless to worry about.

Nika’s mother was different, beautiful and educated and able to put me and everything I came from in what she called global historical and cultural context going back to the Ottoman takeover of Cyprus in the sixteenth century. She said at the end I

was no better than an Arab at heart, but I shut off the switch and let her go. Nika's mom won Nika away, but I am putting up a fight for Philly. Let Nika's mom get the victim money. She deserved it on several counts.

"*Papouka* Theo?" Philly said as a question. No, not yet, I thought. Maybe soon, when it wouldn't be just a question, just a story or a banner in some parade up Fifth Avenue in which people play at Ireland, Israel, Puerto Rico, Greece.

I couldn't keep it – impatience, exhaustion at the old story, at how long it takes to get it – out of my face. I knew that, because Philly rattled it out like catechism.

"EOKA, Ethniki Organosis Kipriakou Agonos, National Organization of Cypriot Fighters. For *enosis*. Union with Greece. *Papouka* Theo fought with Digger, Dig–"

"Dighenis."

"Him. His full name was Colonel Georgios Grivas, and he went up against Heel Marshall . . ."

"Field Marshall."

"Field Marshall Sir John Harding. EOKA killed British soldiers."

"It was a war, Philly. After 400 years of the Turks. *Papouka* Theo was a freedom fighter."

"That's right," Philly said. "EOKA were terrorists, probably."

The word hit me. "Where'd you get that word?"

But the question was stupid, and I didn't wait for his answer. It was in Florida, visiting a better part of life. My father faced a firing squad under order of a heel marshall in 1955. I used to think I remembered being picked up at the funeral by Georgios Grivas himself, but I was three. Philly'd gotten the word from his mother.

“Pop? Where’d you go, Pop?” He’s taken to saying that recently when we talk, asking me where I’ve gone when something he says makes me think.

“Nowhere. Here. What?”

“I just thought of something.”

The half of his face that was whole was alive with it. He is a bright kid and he can get out of all this if he’s tough enough to walk away from it, from me.

“They weren’t terrorists,” he said. “They were something else.” Proud, he was going to make me wait. Or ask.

I asked. “What something else.”

“They were freedomists.”

“Enough,” I said to Philly. I touched his face, and he kissed the inside of my aching right hand. “Enough *enos*,” I told him. It made him laugh, and I heard his voice go down into a lower register. Eventually, the piano will play all keys.

“Pray to Nika,” I told him. “Nika’s high in the sky. She can see us.”

Philly went quiet, as he does about his fancy half-sister dead in the national tragedy of that day. Maybe her doting over him the two or three times a year they were actually together cut out some hollow space in him. Maybe he’ll end up trying to fill it with a series of mistakes later on in life. I went out of his room praying to Nika for him, praying to Nika for him about me, the night before her birthday, which is tomorrow.