

THE
MERCURY
MAN

REMEMBERING
BROOKLYN

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This work is dedicated to my guys
Tony Augugliaro, John Flore and Billy Candotti.

We tried to take care of each other

When you look into the eyes of another,
you look into the eyes of God.

A variation on scripture by Rabbi Alan Berg

Table of Contents

Introduction	13
Food for Thought	15
Down on the Corner	18
Here Comes Kenny	21
Fat Boy	23
Halsey Bops	25
Get a Job	28
How to Buy Real Estate	30
Christmas Eve	33
Make-Believe Sergeant	36
Powder-Blue Pants	38
Not Just the Good Old Boys	40
Lessons from My Father	42
The Library	44
The Poolroom	46
And They're Off	49
First Impressions	52
Say It Isn't So	55
Hamilton, the Original	57
The Mercury Man	60
Craps	62
Poker Face	64
Giuseppe	67
My Friend Billie	69
Ford Fairlane	72
The Clubhouse	74
Unfinished Basement	77

Just a Little R & R	80
Barney's Express	82
Next Stop . . . Red Hook	85
Playland or Land of Play	87
Seventeen	89
Fort Totten	91
Jerry's Funeral	93
He Was the First	95
I Was in a War Once	98
Uncle Carmine	100
Acknowledgments	103
About the Author	105

Introduction

I have put this collection of short stories together to give voice to what I've come to embrace as the defining period of my life. My formative years, a time when friendships filled in for the broken family of my childhood. In these narratives, I have been able to revisit and experience the rich texture of an earlier time and place. These are my recollections of growing up on the streets of Brooklyn in an Italian working-class family in the 1950s and early '60s. Some of these pieces also evoke memories of my time in the army and the year I spent in Vietnam. Here is what transpired as I passed from being a boy to becoming a man.

I hope these words bring about some understanding of my journey.

Food for Thought

We were going sixty, seventy, and then eighty miles an hour. Fast, faster, fastest. My mother's window open, she, looking out and saying to no one in particular, "I love the breeze." The '49 Buick Special flying down the Southern State, chrome glistening as the sun peeked over the horizon. The excitement palpable in the early morning chill. My father always in the lead, followed by my uncles, Charlie and Nick, in their GM cars, as we raced to Alley Pond Park. Leaving home at 6 a.m., to beat the traffic. Man, could Uncle Charlie dance! Great balance. He taught me to ride a bike when I was still struggling at age ten. I remember him doing the Charleston and the jitterbug at football weddings. Those celebrations from the '50s where the men used to throw ready-made sandwiches to one another. They would just yell, "Nino, a capicola sandwich please." And the guy would do his best Johnny Unitas and throw a pass. Uncle Nick was a natty dresser. You could cut your fingers on the crease of his pants. He wore chambray shirts, never linen. He would make these fashion statements like "Linen never looks fresh. No matter how much you press it, it always looks wrinkled." He would know. He stood over a steam iron all day and pressed garments for a living. He also liked to remind us kids that you couldn't wear white after Labor Day. That went for shoes as well as pants. My father was also a clothes horse. Spent as much time in front of the mirror as my mother. He had a collection of rayon shirts the colors of ice cream. My mother spent long afternoons bent over an ironing board, listening to Dean Martin and Sinatra, pressing those pastel-colored shirts, as well as his T-shirts, handkerchiefs, and boxer shorts. Underwear needed to lie flat against the body, not interfere with the pleats of his pants.

At the park, we would commandeer our favorite picnic spot near the lake. Playing catch, throwing a football, maybe a softball game if all the cousins showed up. But it was mostly about the eating. Bagels and cream cheese, with a meatball on the side. Not one on top of the other, but together on the same paper plate. A little something to keep us going while we emptied the cars and set up camp. Our car held the pizzas, white only for my grandfather, topped with bread crumb, anchovies, and olive oil. And the rice balls, *arancini*. White rice, shaped like a baseball and filled with ground veal, peas, and tomato, rolled in bread crumbs and fried. My mother's specialty. Her claim to fame. My uncles would tell her, "Ro, nobody makes them like you," and her face would light up like our new TV screen. But not until my father got home from work and turned it on. We weren't allowed to touch it. The phone either. Those were the rules until I was twelve . . . when my father left us. From Aunt Josie came trays of manicotti and lasagna. She made cheese dance, like my Uncle Charlie could Lindy. Aunt Fay made the parmigiana. Eggplant, not veal, because Uncle Nick knew how to stretch a buck, and even then a pound of veal was beyond a presser's reach. The coolers filled to the top with soda, beer, and enough sausage to open a pork store. Every Italian neighborhood had at least one. A store devoted exclusively to commerce in pig. The traditional bacon, chops, and ribs of course. But also pickled feet, caul fat, and pork skin. The skin my mother used to make braciola. Filled with onions, pine nuts, raisins, salami, and hard-boiled eggs. Floating in tomato sauce and slowly releasing its cholesterol. Should Brooklyn be attacked in our absence, we would survive. We carried large pots and black frying pans that had made the trip from the mother country. Salads, olive oil, and vinegar. Watermelons and peaches bought from the black man with the horse-drawn wagon. In the trunk of our car were cases of Redpack tomatoes. Boxes of Ronzoni pasta. No. 8, because no matter what, on Sunday the men had to have their spaghetti. What do they work all week for anyway? These picnics were celebrations, a way to show how well these men were doing. How hard they worked and how much they cared for their families.

Joy was everywhere. My dad looking at my mom with his flirty grin. My mom returning his affection with a demure look. My aunts, happily setting the wooden tables. My uncles whistling as they cleaned the grills to cook their sausages. We kids running down to the beach to catch frogs. Go for a swim. The anticipation and the laughter infecting the early morning air. Then I heard my father say, "Of course they're coming, Tony and Betty. They should be here soon." And my mother, knowing how my father looked at my aunt, tried to smile. Her voice no longer bubbly, sounding like the air had been let out of a balloon. She tried to speak but couldn't find the words. She caught her breath, but again, no words came out. I felt the hair stand up on my arms. "Don't cry, ma. Please don't cry."

Down on the Corner

We were playing two on two in the playground when they came through the gates. There were three of them. We hadn't seen them before, though they would've been hard to miss. One wore garrison boots and had a bandana wrapped around his head. The other two carried umbrellas and were wearing stingy-brim hats on a bright, sunny day. They were about sixteen. We were probably thirteen, the summer before high school. Asked if they could play.

They said their names were Benny, Bobby, and Whitey. That they hung out in Halsey Park, where my grandfather and his *paisans* met every morning. To talk about the Old Country, remember those gone by. They wanted to know how tough we were. Could each of us kick the shit out of two guys? Had we heard of the Halsey Bops? What about the Saints, those punks from Queens, or those Italian boys from Fulton and Rockaway? Whitey wanted to know, "Had we been with girls . . . or were we pulling it?" He laughed. Took out his switchblade and jumped around a little like Zorro. "Were we maybe a bit crazy like him?"

Me and some of the guys met up with them in the park that night. Sat together on the wooden benches, transistors blasting, and passed around bottles of cold beer and warm Thunderbird. Groups singing doo-wop. Couples making out. Benny and Whitey talked about the bazaar at 14 Holy Martyrs that weekend. Wanted to know if we could get ten guys together. They had heard the Corsair Lords were trying to push past Broadway, move into our neighborhood. Bushwick was our turf. They said we needed to send them a message. Protect our block from the black guys and the Puerto Ricans. At around eleven, some of the older guys started to get into cars. There was going to be drag racing down

by the church. I was supposed to be home by ten, but there was no way I was going to miss this. Bobby, who looked young to be driving, got behind the wheel of a '55 Ford convertible, decked out with fender skirts and Hollywood mufflers. Then these two girls from school, JoJo and Ann Marie, dressed in pedal pushers and tight sweaters and wearing makeup to look older, got in beside him. They were really cool, and when I mentioned my graduation party, they said they'd be there with bells on. Maybe even bring some booze. I ran into them again a few years later, and they were running a business in the park. It looked like business was very, very good.

Down on Central, it was like a party. The noise from at least a dozen cars revving up, sometimes backfiring. Guys were high-fiving each other, the girls leaning in the open windows and kissing their boyfriends. The race was about a block long, in front of the school, down the corner from my house. The streets had been closed off for a couple of blocks in each direction. Whitey stood at the starting line and held a white flag he had picked up from a construction site. Benny was at the finish line and would call the winner. I remember looking at Bobby and thinking how good looking he was. I had heard him say he wanted to become a model. It surprised me because I thought only girls became models.

On Saturday night a group of us hooked up with the Bops again at the bazaar. Stood around watching Joe Z, a local grifter, late-bet the roulette wheel, stuff his pocket with twenties. Then we noticed the black guys in small groups of two and three. Before anyone knew what was happening, this tall, skinny cat knocked over one of the roulette tables. Tried to steal some quarters, but me and Tony were on him before he could make his move. I was still on the ground, enjoying the moment, when the Lords reacted and quickly got the upper hand. How did I get here, I thought? My heart racing, afraid I might get stomped. But in no time, Johnny Boy and his crew from Fulton and Rockaway—this is years before Johnny became a Mafia boss—jumped in and saved my ass. Chased the motherfuckers down Central and back toward Broadway. Later, me and some of the guys walked over to Halsey Park. Whitey took

out his switchblade, and we all cut ourselves. Then we took turns swapping blood. We were in. Halsey Bops for life.