

CHAPTER 1

KEARNEY

Beacon in the Night

Kearney, Nebraska, where I grew up in the 1930s, was a good-sized town by the standards of the plains. It was large enough for people to want to eat at all hours of the day and night, and the Central Cafe, my father's restaurant, was there for them. It was half a block from the Union Pacific railway station, its neon sign blinking through the night beckoning the train crews rotating off their shifts and the passengers who had arrived, for whatever reason they had come, at the absolute midpoint of the United States. Kearney was halfway between Boston and San Francisco, 1,733 miles from each, as attested by the plaque near the swimming pool at the 1733 Park where I played as a boy.

My father had worked for the railroad. He took a job no one else wanted, washing dishes in the steamy caboose that served as living quarters to a crew of laborers laying track in western Nebraska. From washing dishes he learned to cook, which he much preferred to driving railroad spikes and hauling rails and ties. But the track crews couldn't work through the Nebraska winter, so when the crew crossed paths with a traveling circus looking for someone to feed its collection of roustabouts, aerialists, and animal tamers, my father took off with the circus. This was sometime around 1917, five years after he arrived at America's golden shore from Greece, a boy of seventeen who spoke no English and had a third grade education.

Other cooking jobs followed, and he learned more about the restaurant business. He learned to speak English. His employers often gave him room and board, which allowed him to save much of what he earned. Finally, his experience and his savings reached the point where he was ready to start out on his own. He bought and quickly sold restaurants in Lexington, Nebraska, and in Iowa before settling on Kearney, a town with growth potential and not much competition. It had a college that he envisioned as a source of cheap, smart labor, a handful of Greek families that would make him feel at home, and a vacant lot downtown near the railway station. He bought it and built the Central Cafe, whose sign was a beacon not only to the travelers who passed through Kearney but to its townspeople as well.

“Home of Fine Foods Since 1923,” read that sign in inexhaustible neon. That was the year my father opened the cafe. It stayed open twenty-four hours a day, and for twenty-five years it would literally never close. He married my mother a year later. Two years after that I came into the world, and by 1934, when I was eight, I was counting out change to my father’s customers.

My biggest challenge as a boy was trying to fit in. But fitting in was really tough, because I wanted to be 100 percent American while my parents clung to their Greek customs. They pulled furiously one way, I the other. All children struggle to escape their parents so they can define themselves, but mine had roots deep in another world.

George and Venetia

My father was George Peterson, which was not the name he was born with. That was Georgios Petropoulos, the surname literally translating into “Peter’s son,” and often over the years he told me he deeply regretted changing it. “I wouldn’t want anyone to think I wasn’t proud of our race,” he said. In the scheme of things, however, he kept the more important thing he brought from the Old Country, his bedrock values.

He was from a town called Vahlia, in the mountains of the Peloponnesian Peninsula in southern Greece. It was a poor town, and his

family was among the poorest. His father, Peter, for whom I am named, according to the family lore preferred sleeping under an apple tree to working and would move only to find a new patch of shade when the shifting sunlight hit his eyes and woke him up. His indolence did nothing to diminish the imperial tendencies of his wife, my grandmother Nicoletta, who upon meeting new people would offer her hand to be kissed. They tried to keep a garden, but rainfall was sparse and water had to be carried in buckets from a nearby stream. They kept chickens, which provided eggs, and goats, which provided milk, and when a new baby was born in the family, a goat was slaughtered over the protests of the children, who had made pets of the animals. My father had six brothers and a sister, and they all slept on straw mattresses crowded together on the floor of the family's two-room house or, if the weather was good, outside in the yard. Regardless of the season, none of them wore shoes. The shoes their parents wore were fashioned from discarded tires. They told time by the sun since they could not afford a clock, and on cloudy days relied on guesswork.

School was an afterthought. Girls could expect six years of education. Boys might reach higher, but only if they paid a price. They would have to leave home at the beginning of each week, walk thirty miles to a larger village that had a more advanced school, and live in a hostel with other boys until the weekend when they could walk home again. This was not my father's lot. For his older brothers who went off to school, my grandmother would bake a loaf of bread and score it with a knife five times, to let them know how much—or little—they could eat each day with slices from the block of cheese she gave them from her homemade stores. At some point, they started dreaming of America.

My father's older brother Nick was the first to make the passage. By 1912, he had a job at a meatpacking plant in Milwaukee and could send money for my father's ticket. The *Titanic* sank that year, but my father's trip was uneventful in his fetid quarters deep in the ship's bowels where he longed to breathe fresh air. He entered America through Ellis Island and headed to Milwaukee to meet up with Nick as soon as he cleared the immigration hurdles. His first job, at a fruit stand, fell through because he could not understand the customers; if asked for "a couple of apples," he would heave a sackful on the counter. Soon, however, Nick got him a

job at the meatpacking plant. It was the starting job from hell, feeding cattle hooves and horns into grinding machines to be processed into fertilizer, the kind of job that to this day immigrants are willing to do because their foothold in America is that precious. Choking dust rose from the machines; the men fed them with one hand and clamped damp rags over their noses with the other, which was murder on their arms and shoulders. My father almost gave up and headed home. But he stuck it out and moved up to cutting meat, learning the fine points of reducing cattle and hogs to roasts and chops with very little waste. When he moved on to the railroad job, he changed his name to Peterson, as Nick had done before him. If he was sorry for it later, he could blame the Union Pacific timekeepers who claimed they could never understand him when he said Petropoulos. And as he grew into his twenties and cooked for railroad laborers and circus folk and saved money and set his sights on building the cafe, he waited for someone to marry.

My mother, Venetia Papapavlou, lived in Niata, in southern Greece southeast of Sparta. The Papapavlous had prospered by comparison with the Petropoulos clan. Yanni Papapavlou—or Big John, as her father was known—had land and a big house. Like everyone else in the village, he had no electricity or running water. Rain supplied drinking water that was stored in big clay pots called amphorae, and there was a cistern that provided water for the garden so that no one had to haul water from a stream.

Olive, almond, fig, orange, and lemon groves, wheat fields, and vineyards dotted the landscape beyond the house. Only the olive groves qualified as a commercial operation. Big John had an olive press and used the proceeds from the oil to purchase more olive groves. He paid his workers with the very crops they harvested; the olive pickers were paid one bushel of olives for every four they picked, which he would then press into oil for them. The men who picked grapes and stamped them to make wine kept much of it for themselves and sold the rest.

My mother remembered an abundance of food prepared by her mother, Demitroula. Hungry neighbors always knew they would be fed, and her father's generosity extended to the local schoolhouse, where he would hand out small cloth bags filled with a mixture of sun-dried raisins, fruit, and almonds. On weekends this became the stuff of barter

and a social life, with Big John hitching up his horses, piling his children—known collectively as Little Big Johns—into the wagon, and driving to town to trade the bags of fruits and nuts for other goods. If there were any bags left, he would give them away rather than carry them back home.

John and Demitroula had an easy, bantering relationship. His was the only horse-drawn wagon in Niata, and he always insisted that she ride in the front seat with him as he drove, a rare display of gender equality in that place and time. But he also warned her, laughingly, that if she got too big for her britches he would assign her to “live spotter” duty in front of the horses, a reference to the dangerous job of locating the land mines that littered the countryside after Greece’s past wars. Of course he never did carry out his threat.

His generosity was deep. He had an old neighbor, Stavros, who depended on his donkey, called Kitso, or “helper,” to gather wild berries and tsai, the Greek mountain tea also called shepherd’s tea. Stavros sold some of what he had gathered for a few pennies or traded it. Returning from church one Sunday with three of his children, Big John heard a commotion as they were passing Stavros’s small house. Stopping to inquire, he found Stavros berating his donkey, which had died. “Look what Kitso did to me,” Stavros cried. “How could she do this to me?”

Big John agreed that Kitso was a thoughtless beast but joked that she had never done such a thing before. Stavros, not amused, ordered him off his property forever. John hustled away, bought another donkey, and returned the next day to present it as a gift from all the Papapavlou children. They were there as their father knocked on the old man’s door and they saw how, still furious, he again ordered Big John off his property. Sadly, Big John explained that his children would have to give the donkey to someone else. The old man was moved to take a look at the animal and then received it with gratitude, gushing with prayers that Big John would live a long and healthy life.

“You had better pray for an even longer and healthier life for your new Kitso,” said Big John.

Life in Niata had changed. The young men began to leave for better jobs. Without them Big John could not cultivate his groves, and young women like mother had fewer chances of marrying. So the day

came when Big John accepted that three of his children had little choice but to emigrate and join other members of the family already in America. On a mid-September day in 1920, eight years after my father had arrived in America, my mother, Venetia, her sister Patra and brother Demetrios (James), with his new wife Adamandia, boarded a ship called the *Megali Hellas* in Piraeus bound for New York. They had nineteen days of hell, with passengers falling sick all the way before they steamed past the Statue of Liberty and docked at Ellis Island on October 4, 1920. My mother, like my father, was seventeen when she first set foot in America.

And like him, she traveled halfway across the continent. With the small group of immigrant Greeks, she boarded a train for Fremont, Nebraska, west of Omaha. It was all mapped out. She was to work as a housekeeper for her Uncle John and Aunt Vasso Petrow and nanny to their three children. John was an entrepreneur who owned a restaurant and a J. C. Penney store in Fremont. It was he who had sent the money for her passage.

Venetia quickly learned that she would pay a price for her journey to America. She cleaned house and cared for John and Vasso's children and toiled in his restaurant, too. There was no letup and she, like my father, dreamed of what now seemed like a golden past in Greece. But to return home would have been disloyal, and she forced herself to look ahead. After three and a half years, when she turned twenty-one, Uncle John decided it was time for his ward to marry. This could not have come as bad news to my mother.

The Nebraska Greek community was small and highly interwoven, and John knew where to find likely candidates for marriage to a beautiful and highly eligible young woman. One was my father, whose reputation for making a success of the Central Cafe had spread the 160 miles that separated Kearney from Fremont.

Three bachelors called simultaneously at John Petrow's house that day in late May 1924. One, to hear my mother tell it, was a version of Washington Irving's Ichabod Crane, gawky and tall, all limbs and knees and elbows. The second apparently was not memorable enough to recall. The third was my father, smelling of Aqua Velva aftershave, his jet-black hair combed straight back from his forehead and shining with a dose of

Lucky Tiger hair tonic. As the bachelors sat in the Petrow living room, no doubt appraising one another, my mother served them water and fruit drinks and thus had a chance to imagine what might lie ahead.

“Which one do you want?” her uncle asked when she returned to the kitchen with the empty tray.

She and my father were married forty days later.

The Peterson Family Begins

They were married twice, as it turned out. The first time, on July 6, they exchanged vows in the Fremont chambers of a Dodge County judge named Wintersteen. This was legal and official, but it lacked the overarching authority of the Greek church. The church ceremony came a few days later, when the one Greek Orthodox priest for Nebraska and parts of Iowa had a break in his schedule and came out from Omaha. Uncle John Petrow had assembled his Greek friends and relatives in a roped-off section of the J. C. Penney store before it opened. Uncle John gave Venetia away, and a cousin of my father’s stood up as his best man. My parents dressed for this one, my father in a rented tuxedo, my mother in a white dress and a fantastic hat made from layers of chiffon. She carried an equally fantastic spray of flowers. By all accounts the occasion was a joyous one, but the formality of the official wedding portraits seems to have overwhelmed them. Neither looks happy. They stare at the camera with grave, almost grim expressions, in my mother’s case perhaps because the Greek Orthodox ceremony places the wife secondary to the husband, who is “head of his wife” in a marriage. Afterward, everyone rode out to the Petrow farm for the wedding lunch.

I imagine those early days were hard. They were two people whose only certain points of common interest were that they were Greek and had to struggle to survive. My father, the child of poverty, ascetic and hardworking; my mother, warmer and spontaneous—in a perfect world each would have complemented the other and compensated for what the other lacked. But the depth of their divisions came to light at once.

They honeymooned in Colorado. This was not a romantic choice,

but a family obligation. My father's closest maternal relative in the United States, his mother's sister, lived in Colorado Springs and he wanted to show his new bride to his aunt. My mother had the idea that her honeymoon was worth recording, so she got her hands on a Brownie camera and took some photographs. Somehow this escaped my father's notice.

Back in Kearney, they set up housekeeping. My mother had the film developed and one day, when they were walking the seven blocks from the Central Cafe to their house—the family budget did not permit a car—she brought out the photographs to show my father. She must have been shocked at his reaction.

He erupted in fury, raging at her “gall” and “disrespect” for taking and developing photographs without his knowledge and consent. It was an act of disobedience, and furthermore, an unapproved expense. No bride of his could walk with her husband after committing such an act. He ordered her across the street to walk on the opposite sidewalk the rest of the way home.

What to make of this? It was not in my mother's nature or her cultural background to complain about her marriage, but it was she and not my father who told me this story many years after it had occurred. In fact, she waited until he died to tell me, although I had long since concluded that she had much more to complain about. After my father's death, her manner was completely different from the one I had known much of my life. As a widow, she found a joy I hadn't seen. She spoke with a voice that was happy and light. Cousins who had known her as a girl in Greece said she was that girl again. She was finally free of the yoke of the imperious patriarch, my father.

She always was a loving mother. That was clear to me from my earliest moments. She could anticipate my needs, which spoiled me and caused problems later in my life when others—business colleagues as well as romantic partners—could not do the same. Her doting gave me a punch line when Jewish colleagues told me stories about the fussy attentions of their mothers and their maternal pride. I'd listen to them all and say, when they were finished, “Greek mothers make Jewish mothers look criminally negligent.”

The world began to open up to me when I was about three. By

then I had already been to Greece with my parents on a visit to their home villages, but I was only two and don't remember the trip. One of my first memories is of attending a movie with my mother. It was Al Jolson's *The Singing Fool*, the tale of a singer who broke the hearts of those early talking-picture audiences as he sang "Sonny Boy" to his dying son. I remember jumping up in the dark theater and shouting, "I am the Sonny Boy!" My mother shrugged off the stares and laughed and hugged me.

Soon after that, in 1929, my sister, Elaine, was born. I think this fulfilled my mother in some way that I or any son could not. My mother felt born again. Elaine would achieve the life my mother had imagined for herself. The year after Elaine was born, we were happy.

The following summer, my parents drove away—we were now the owners of a Model T Ford—to spend a weekend with the Petrows in Fremont. They had two things to celebrate—the Fourth of July and their sixth wedding anniversary two days later. They left Elaine and me in the care of one of Kearney's eight Greek families, but before the weekend was over Elaine developed a frightening, barking cough. A phone call brought my parents rushing home, but it was too late. She died at age one on their anniversary, July 6, of croup. Croup is a child's disease, a normally mild viral infection that restricts the upper airways. The worst cases occur not in the summer but in the winter and the early spring, and even in those cases it is rarely life-threatening. But this time the stars were cruelly misaligned. That Elaine died was bad enough. That her death occurred on the anniversary of a marriage that was tense at best can only have added to the pain. My father was a stoic. Of my two parents, my mother seemed to suffer far more.

A deep gloom descended over my mother and she could not escape it. Pregnant at the time of Elaine's death, two months later she went into early labor, two months premature. She called my father at the cafe to say she was having rapid contractions and needed to go to the hospital. He told her he was baking pies and couldn't leave, and sent someone else to take her. My brother, John, was born into her sadness.

And pretty baby though he was, he could not lift her spirits. Nor could I, as eager as I was to see her smile and feel her warmth again. But her life was as barren as the Nebraska winter that followed the

summer of Elaine's death. "Just push me into the grave with my beloved Elaine," I heard her say once to my father. She couldn't even bear to hold my brother when he was a baby, something my brother never got over.

I had felt special, doted on, warm, secure, and all of that vanished. After Elaine's death, my mother was a different woman, cold, detached, and strange. I tried to be perfect and loving in order to please her: There we are, the two of us, in the kitchen of our house. I am standing over the register in the corner trying to catch the heat rising from the coal furnace in the basement, but my father keeps the heat low to save money and I am never warm enough, so I shiver, hug myself, hop from foot to foot. It's a little dance I do for her, hoping she will notice. She sits across the room at the table, with a heavy shawl around her shoulders, her fingers twisting the fringes at the ends, staring at nothing. Sometimes she hums, over and over, a sad tune that must have been a Greek lament. But more often she sits in utter silence. That is the worst. The silence is a clammy hand, and I try to drive it away with Mommy this, Mommy that, Mommy, Mommy, Mommy. And she responds with more silence. That is why, today, I fill a pause with words, too many, some would say. In my experience, silence is a pall.

Freudian psychologists tell us that a child's separation from the mother, when the child suddenly realizes he or she is no longer the center of the solar system, is nearly always painful. When the separation takes place at a very young age, suddenly and in the midst of tragedy or trauma, it is especially painful. As indeed I learned.

Thus, the year went by. My father, deprived of his helpmate at the restaurant, decided to try anything to get her back. This led him to bring her to the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minnesota, which by the early 1930s was already a major medical institution serving a wide range of conditions both physical and mental. My mother stayed there for two or three weeks, and returned with a diagnosis of "nervousness." How language changes. What was once called "melancholia" evolved into "neurasthenia," then "nervousness," and then the dire-sounding "nervous breakdown." Today she would have "clinical depression," the debilitating state memorably described by novelist William Styron as "darkness visible." The cure prescribed, in those days before effective

and tolerable psychotropic drugs, was rest and counseling. She got the rest, but not the counseling.

Enter Mrs. Boulos. That Kearney, Nebraska, could be so filled with immigrants strikes me as remarkable only in retrospect. Our little neighborhood seven blocks from downtown included not only Greeks but a poor Lebanese Catholic woman. Her kitchen was always fragrant with the smell of fresh-baked pita bread. She offered a lifeline of escape from the lonely quiet imposed by our mother's need to rest and withdraw. As soon as my brother, John, was big enough to toddle, I would take him by the hand first thing on weekday mornings and lead him through backyards to Mrs. Boulos's kitchen door. Barreling into her warm kitchen, we left behind our distracted mother and received instead the indulgence of an older woman whose own children were grown. She must have liked having children around, because she fussed and served us piping hot rounds of pita bread and tousled our hair as we sat at her kitchen table with our toys.

If my own mother ever resented this turn to a substitute, I never knew it. She was probably relieved that we left her to her rest, and neither she nor my father ever worried, because the Bouloses were friends as well as neighbors. As John got older and more athletic, he tried to outrun me to Mrs. Boulos's door, but it didn't matter who got there first since she was equally warm and giving to us both.

"Economia!"

My father played a small part in this equation. As my awareness grew, he was a distracted and elusive figure who appeared mainly late at night. Sometimes, if I was up early on a weekday, around six or so, I could see him leave for work. He would rush into the kitchen fresh from shaving, his cheeks aglow, combed-back hair still neat and glistening, wearing the uniform in which he presided over the Central Cafe—dark pants and a white shirt, a tie that he stuck between the buttons of the shirt to protect from stains, black shoes, and white socks, the socks white on the theory that white was better for the feet because it retained less heat and

moisture. Then he was gone. There were no hugs, kisses, or conversation, only the kitchen door banging in his wake.

Saturday night was the occasion for a family meal at the cafe, but even then my father was continually jumping up to attend to customers. On Sundays we had lunch together at home, but this was a hurried affair at around eleven-thirty in the morning so he could get back to the cafe by noon. When he came home at night, usually at nine or later, he looked exhausted, his combed-back hair unkempt, the cheeks that had been glowing in the morning now dark with stubble, the promise of his white socks replaced by the reality of fifteen painful hours on his feet and varicose veins that he wrapped in damp cloths and soaked in a tub of water laced with Epsom salts while he sat at the kitchen table with his trouser legs rolled up. He didn't talk to us, or to Mother, very much. (I never once in my lifetime saw him hug her.) There was no joshing, no sitting down with us to read, not much curiosity about how we spent our days or what we were studying in school. He never worked around the home, never mowed the grass. Yet it wasn't that he didn't care for us. It was just that he seemed able to express his love only by his utter and exhausting devotion to our livelihood and our future through his work at the cafe. He was what would later come to be called a workaholic, and this tendency to focus on work at the expense of family and personal relationships was, unfortunately, one of the legacies he passed on to me.

Elaine had died approximately eight months after the stock market crash of October 1929. I was too young to notice how things changed as a result of the widespread loss of jobs and income that came to be called the Great Depression. Farmers had been locked in a depression of their own caused by crop surpluses, drought, and mortgage debt for most of the 1920s, so maybe things didn't change that much in Kearney. Cattle and hogs continued to ride through daily on the Union Pacific, one-way passengers bound for the Omaha stockyards. I do remember that encouragements to thrift were everywhere, at the cafe and at home. Visiting the cafe's sole bathroom brought one face-to-face with the sign my father had taped to the paper towel dispenser: "Why Use Two When One Wipes Dry." It was not a question. To my father, "big spender" was a big-time insult.

But at least the customer had a choice. At home things were different. There we lived according to a set of rigid guidelines calculated to squeeze every last measure of wastefulness out of our behavior. The worst of these governed the weekly Saturday night bath. Never was a ritual designed that said more about a child's place in the pecking order. It began with a steaming tub in our one small—and in the winter frigidly cold—bathroom. My father was first into the tub, and I expect he sank into the hot water with a sigh of relief from the pain of his labors. Once he was soaped and rinsed and out, it was my mother's turn. Next, it was time for John and me. We bathed together in the twice-used, now lukewarm water, and it was never clear to me whether I was cleaner after the bath, or before.

The living room was kept cold and was sealed off during the entire winter, as was the small guest bedroom that my father had made by erecting a wall that cut the living room in half. The bedroom was opened for guests, who came frequently and often unannounced. This was a habit among Nebraska's Greek immigrants; they treated one another's houses and restaurants like wayside inns where they expected to find overnight lodgings and good food, all for free. In our house they had to endure the plastic coverings my father kept on all the furniture to protect the upholstery, another of his economizing measures. But my mother loved the company and saw these visits as great social occasions.

Other visitors stayed longer. I would arrive home from school to find that a new crop of my father's relatives from Greece had shown up, wearing odd clothes and carrying old suitcases tied up with twine, and had taken over the guest bedroom where they would stay for months while they worked at the cafe. This, I later learned, was by prearrangement: their labor in exchange for room and board and small wages that would give them footholds in America and allow them to move on, the same path my father had taken. But in contrast to the vacationers, these visitors were a burden on my mother, who had to clean up after them, do their laundry, and cook for them when they weren't eating at the cafe. My father argued that it saved money on wages.

He also saved money on the party line telephone, an antique term

that piqued interest in my grandchildren until they learned that it meant a line shared by three neighbors, on which a nosy neighbor could listen to your conversations. And I remember my mother's shouted call to "Close the lights!" when someone left a room, knowing that lights left burning would bring my father's wrath. "Economia!" he hurled at her. "Economia!" Even today, when I leave a room, I need to "close the lights."

My father's economies at the cafe extended well beyond the paper towels. To keep his costs low, he would go to the markets and pick up day-old vegetables and fruit, and whatever else he could purchase at a discount. He produced some of the better restaurant meals in Kearney with this provender, and some of his most popular dishes, like meatloaf, were made from the previous day's leftovers. He did his own butchering in the restaurant kitchen. From his experience at the meatpacking plant in Milwaukee, he could look at a loin of pork and know exactly how many pork chop tenderloins he could cut from it. He could attack a quarter of beef with a meat saw and a butcher knife and reduce it to steaks, short ribs, fat and lean cuts for stew and hamburger, and bones for soup stock, with hardly any waste.

The Central Cafe's menu brimmed with this hearty fare, offered for what today seems like a song. The most popular item was probably the "Hot Beef Special," an open-face sandwich featuring a mound of roast beef on white bread slathered with mashed potatoes and gravy, a slice of pie, and coffee, all for thirty cents. The coffee, over which a customer could linger through unlimited refills, was five cents by itself. Beef stew, stewed chicken with noodles, liver and onions, ham hocks and beans, hamburgers, and the aforementioned meatloaf accounted for most of the rest of the lunchtime orders. For the evening meal, beginning at five-thirty, which in our part of Nebraska was supper (lunch was called dinner), diners favored steaks and chops, prime rib of beef, and roast pork loin. Potatoes and gravy, macaroni and cheese, green beans, presliced white bread, and simple salads were the staples on the side, followed by fruit pies, or ice cream for dessert, and the drinks of choice were coffee, milk, iced tea, and water, in that order. There were no Greek dishes on the menu. Stuffed grape leaves would have puzzled

Kearneyites; they liked their rice straight, and ground beef, too. Even my mother's glorious baklava, her butter-rich wonder of honey, nuts, and wafer-thin stacks of phyllo dough, was too exotic for the cafe's dessert case. Later, when Nebraskans followed the nation's lead and repealed Prohibition in the state in 1934, my father put beer on the menu but not wine or hard liquor. (My mother was one of Prohibition's many scofflaws, making wine from grapes she grew in our backyard and crushed in the time-honored way, by foot in a tub in our basement. Kearney's police chief was one of her prime patrons and she loved those customer relationships. No one was sure if my father knew about her cottage industry.)

For all of my father's cost cutting, the Central Cafe was the town's only white tablecloth restaurant. Its fifteen tables were "four-tops," meaning they sat four people each, and the counter that ran along one wall could accommodate another eighteen. Each of the tables was laid with a tablecloth, white cloth napkins, and heavy stainless cutlery designed to take a beating in the large sinks in the kitchen at the back. The counter, of course, had no tablecloths, but counter customers got cloth napkins like everybody else. This apparent contradiction to my father's "economia" gave the restaurant a feel of quality that set it apart in Kearney.

He changed the menu every day, depending on what he found at the markets. His first task each morning, while the early breakfast crowd was waking up to coffee, pancakes, waffles, and bacon and eggs, was to type out the dinner and supper offerings on a messy two-ply Ditto form rolled into the big square Underwood typewriter on his small desk. Hunched over the machine, he hunted and pecked with one finger until the menu was composed, then wrapped the form onto a drum on his hand-cranked Ditto machine to turn out copies on cheap paper. They came out smelling of the duplicating fluid, a smell that only people of a certain age will remember, and with purple letters that were unaligned like children's letter blocks pushed together on the floor, one high, one low, one tilted, because the typewriter was old. The flimsy, purple, oddly printed menus contrasted with the feel of the seemingly luxurious white tablecloths.

Depression Baby Businessman

I started working at the cafe when Prohibition ended in 1932. I was eight. It was my job to take cash and make change at the register at the front of the long counter, and I liked it from the start. The numbers fell in line for me. Customers squinted at the bills and coins I counted out into their hands, looking for mistakes I never made.

This success emboldened me. One of my father's pricing innovations, designed to keep the cafe filled, was a 10 percent bonus for customers who paid in advance—diners who bought a \$5 meal ticket up front would get \$5.50 worth of food. Many of the tickets were kept in a little box on the counter and once I took my station at the register, I made it my business to look them over to see whose were on the verge of running out. Woe to the patron who was a ten-cent slice of pie away from spending his \$5.50. I would confront him at the register while he was fumbling for his change. "Would you like to renew your meal ticket? This one's almost out." Most of the time they did, without a fuss. But the Depression had reduced the number of people who could advance \$5 against their future meals, even with a 10 percent return, and sometimes I ran into resistance. I responded with aggressive salesmanship, a trait I would refine and depend upon as time went on; learning early on not to take no for an answer was a valuable lesson. I sometimes hovered near tables while customers were eating. Once I chased the local haberdasher down the street (when he forgot to pay a nickel for a cup of coffee). I never questioned whether my targets thought I was pushy or obnoxious; my goal was to improve my numbers for the recognition I would gain, and, maybe, win my distant father's approval.

For many, of course, the Depression was far more serious than mustering \$5 in order to save fifty cents. Millions had nothing at all. In Kearney, we saw enough to know the country was struggling, and that people had to try to take care of one another. Dozens of jobless and underfed men found their way to the Central Cafe's back door begging for food, and my father never turned a single one away. He didn't just hand out meals for free, however; sensing that their pride depended on it, he always found some chore that they could do in

exchange for a heaping plate of stew. It was his version of a welfare-for-work program.

Many people never made it to the cafe's doorstep, but my parents managed to help them in other ways. The hardships that hit the Great Plains farmers in the 1920s continued into the 1930s, worsening the effects of the failed economy. There was drought and more drought. As a child in the mid-1930s, I recall dust storms that blackened the skies at noon and choked people and animals with swirling grit. Business at the cafe dropped down to nothing because nobody went out. At school, teachers turned the lights on and tried to teach, but nobody could concentrate in the black-brown darkness because you could hear the dirt peppering the window glass and the windows and doors rattling in the wind. It was scary. The sound was alive, like a rasping intruder clawing at the walls. Thick grit drifted in around the windows and under the doors and nobody could stop it. At home, even when we had some warning of an approaching storm, and Mother got John and me to help her tape cellophane or wax paper over the windows, the dirt still found its way inside. When the storms ended, we swept the dirt up and carried it outside in buckets. Worse still were the storms of grasshoppers. They, too, blackened the sky as they swooped down to devour entire fields of wheat and corn, denude home gardens, and form writhing, hopping clusters on the streets and sidewalks, where they crunched sickeningly under your feet when you walked.

The victims of these plagues—and they seemed biblical in their ferocity—were often immigrant farm families. There were kids in my school who wore the same grimy overalls for days on end and slumped at their desks looking dirty, dusty, and hungry. My parents made food baskets for such families. My mother had emerged from her depression and found busyness the best therapy to keep it from returning. So she made scarves, hats, socks, and mittens for needy children and baked bread for bake sales to benefit the poor of Kearney. Their charity also went back home to Greece in the form of the clothes my mother made and the money my father gave to benefit their villages—half his savings when the times were prosperous. It was to be a lesson I never forgot.

As a young man, I did not fully appreciate the lesson these efforts of my parents conveyed. It was as simple as could be: Give something

back. Nobody gave my parents anything except the most precious gift of all—the opportunities this country offered them when they landed on its shores. For the chance to be who they could be and to be successful, they recognized civilized society's fundamental bargain—it's a two-way street—and they repaid their gift by helping those less fortunate, near and far away.

Although the dust storms and raining grasshoppers frightened me and I felt bad for the hungry men and the poor farmers, the Depression came down to something more self-centered. Two or three of Kearney's barbers ate at the cafe, and they were hard-pressed to pay for meals once their customers started skipping haircuts. My father worked out a reciprocal trade agreement, swapping food for services: Whenever my brother and I needed haircuts, our father sent us to the barber who was next in the rotation. This would have worked just fine, except that they didn't all give good haircuts. If the wrong barber came up in the rotation, I could end up with a bowl haircut that left me looking like the farm boys who (I imagined) got shorn at home by their fathers, using pruning shears or blunt scissors. I hated these haircuts, and argued with my father about getting them. But in the end, I had no choice because, as he explained, they were the only way these men had of satisfying their debts to the cafe, and he was not going to turn them into deadbeats just because his son was too vain to accept a perfectly good haircut. I usually snipped away with scissors afterward, trying to repair the damage, but it never did much good. Only later did I appreciate the thrift that the Depression enforced with a harsh hand, the lesson of never, even in the bad times, spending more than you earned. And in the good times, you saved and saved.

In our family, my father enforced the saving habit rigidly. He brought me a piggy bank from the local home savings and loan bank, but the pennies and nickels I put into it weren't for a rainy day. He wanted me to prepare for a monsoon. I was not allowed to raid the piggy bank for something I might want, like the little snapshot camera that I craved. Savings were meant to be saved. Rather, I stuffed the bank until it weighed a ton. Only then would my father unlock it and let me spill out its treasure of coins onto my bed, where the sight of them made me feel rich, but, alas, I couldn't spend them. I had to count them and

stack them in wrappers to be taken to the bank to put into my passbook savings account, which slowly grew larger. My father carefully supervised this rigorous process for years. This personal savings account helped pay for college.

Eager to Please

Most of what I did as a young boy was designed to please one of my parents or the other. To my father, I wanted to prove that I was up to his taskmaster's standards. As for my mother, I simply wanted to regain her attention and make her happy. I was still young and naive enough to think I could fill the void caused by Elaine's death.

After she returned from the Mayo Clinic, on the better days of her recovery, she regained her magician's touch in the kitchen. She was a great baker, and when I arrived home from school in the afternoons I would find warm buttered toast made from her homemade bread, a big pot of hot chocolate, and Greek pastries. You couldn't stop eating her glorious baklava or her kourambiethes, almond shortbread cookies sprinkled with powdered sugar. Her theeples were equally addictive, thin triangles of dough rolled together and deep-fried and then lathered with honey, nuts, and cinnamon.

Since I considered it a high priority to please my mother, it was obviously my duty to appreciate her cooking. The way I figured it, the more I ate, the happier she would be and the more attention she would pay to me. Like a dog chasing its tail, I could never eat enough to bring back Elaine and erase her depression, but I kept trying anyway. Physically, given the butter-drenched goodies that emerged from her oven, my eager eating made me a chubby little boy. I've since conquered the worst of such temptations, but pastries obsess me to this day. My wife jokes that if I were standing by a pastry shop when a nude supermodel sashayed down the street, I'd be more interested in the shop window. (This addiction to food foiled one of my father's plans to economize. He wanted John to wear my clothes when I outgrew them, but John was slender and my clothes swallowed him, so he got new ones of his own.)

One could argue that pigging out on my mother's confections was not the hardest duty. But that was not all I did to curry favor. One year, with Mother's Day approaching, our elementary school teacher organized a craft project in which we would make papier-mâché boxes for our mothers to store their jewelry and knickknacks. That was not nearly good enough for me. Somehow I got hold of some alabaster. That was proper jewelry box material, and I set about carving it into what I was sure would be the best present ever. I worked obsessively, spending recesses and after-school hours carving while the other kids were playing. (Not being particularly athletic, I preferred this to roughhouse playground games in any case.) When I presented her the box, she smiled and hugged me and told me how sweet it was of me to think of her. Then she put the box away and I never saw her use it.

The depth of her loss was just too great for me to understand. Once I asked her why she never displayed a photograph of Elaine downstairs in the living room where she had photos of John and me in small silver frames on a side table. "Because I cannot bear to look at it," she said. "You see where it's hanging?" She kept the photo, the only one taken of Elaine before she died, on a wall in the staircase leading to the attic. "When I miss her and want to look at her, I come up here, turn on the light, talk to her, and cry."

I entered first grade at the Emerson Grade School, one of Kearney's several public elementary schools, when I was five. Private schools were unheard of; Kearney would have been offended by anyone who thought its tax-supported schools couldn't prepare its young people for whatever they decided to take on, be it farming, shopkeeping, or college. From Emerson through junior high and Longfellow High School, I felt I had to be the best-behaved and best-performing student in the school. And I was. Hard as it may be to believe, I don't ever recall any notable naughty behavior on my part. I accumulated gold stars and As with a vengeance. My only B was in biology, and that was because I couldn't draw the frogs we were studying. I started playing the clarinet in the ninth grade and I practiced obsessively. I even persuaded my father to buy a machine made by Philco that made recordings on a plastic disc so I could listen to myself and work on my mistakes. In a little over a year I had mastered—I use the term loosely—the third and fourth

movements of Mendelssohn's violin concerto, held first chair in both the high school band and orchestra, and was selected as first clarinetist in the Nebraska clinic orchestra, composed of high school musicians from throughout the state.

It Wasn't That Easy Being Greek

My dedication to pleasing my parents sometimes found its limits. This was partly due to the conflict they felt at being American but nonetheless determined to remain loyal to Greece, its religion, and its customs. Kearney's Greek community was an isolated island in the American sea of Nebraska, and this insularity affected me in ways that I stopped counting. The worst of it was the clothes Mother sent me off to school in. She made, at home, bouffant, blouselike shirts with ruffles on the front. These frilly white numbers, worn with knickers and high-topped black patent leather shoes, set me worlds apart from my schoolmates. On my first day in the first grade, all the other boys in their bib overalls, denim shirts, and work boots stared at me in my Little Lord Fauntleroy outfit, first with curiosity and then giggling behind their hands while I flushed with embarrassment. I protested when I got home that afternoon, but she persisted in making me wear those clothes to school, and she did the same to John when he started the first grade. This went on only for a few years but, at the time, it seemed like forever.

Special occasions such as Easter were even worse. For these, she dolled us up in foustanelas, outfits worn for Greek folk dancing and by the king's guardians known as Evzones. These consisted of a white shirt with bloused sleeves and a skirtlike flared bottom, worn with a vest, a decorative sash at the waist, and leggings with garters at the calves. So much for fitting in.

In both cases, I later wondered if Mother was trying to reclaim Elaine by dressing us in these effeminate costumes. If so, even understanding her motive could not offset the embarrassment we felt at having to wear these ethnic red flags that looked girlish to boot. None of the other Greek boys in town had to wear such outfits. My good friends

throughout my childhood, Gus Poulos and John Mitchell—John’s family name was condensed from Mitchellooulos—at least understood my discomfort, but the non-Greek majority gave my brother and me looks and snickers every time we had to go out wearing them.

Even my name seemed to conspire against me. Mother called me Petie, an innocent diminutive but one that caused confusion. I learned this my first day in junior high school, when the teacher started calling the roll and then stopped to ask, “Petie Peterson. Is that a boy or a girl?” Laughter ran around the room, and after that I insisted that my mother make sure the school system knew my name was Pete. But to her, I would always be Petie. Indeed, after Elaine’s death she had hovered protectively over our every activity, forbidding John and me from playing contact sports. When we went into the water at Kearney’s one public swimming pool, she insisted on being near us at the pool’s edge. Once on the Fourth of July, she read the riot act to my Uncle Bill, my father’s brother, after the fuse of a cherry bomb he lit spurted off and hit me in the eye. She even forbade us to climb the cherry tree in the backyard, though its limbs were not more than six feet off the ground. I was labeled a sissy by the other boys in those circumstances, and, I suppose, I was. (John escaped that dubious designation, in part because he was more into sports and also because he was a little devil with an infectious naughty and, at times, disingenuous personality who charmed everyone he met and, in particular, my mother.)

Even innocent family customs seemed to conspire against my desire to fit in. We received regular packages of herbal teas from Mother’s family in Greece. This tea, called tsai, was stored in a trunk in the cool basement to keep it fresh. There were two varieties: one my mother enticed me to drink in the mornings by calling it “brain food” and saying it would make me very smart; the other—chamomile—she drank in the evenings because it helped her go to sleep. One day in school our teacher asked what we drank with breakfast. Most of my classmates said they had milk or Ovaltine with their morning meal, but when my turn came I answered, “Tsai.”

“What is tsai?” she asked.

Not knowing to call it tea, I explained that it was tsai, and that I

drank it with meli—honey. I said, “It’s good and it’s sweet and it makes me smart. I drink it every morning so I can be smart all day.”

“Does your mother drink it also?”

“No, she drinks the other kind of tsai, the kind that puts you to sleep at night.”

“And where does your mother get this tsai?” the teacher continued.

“Out of the suitcase. There’s a suitcase downstairs in the dark room and she goes down there and puts the tsai in a jar and keeps it in the cupboard. And then she makes it for me in the morning, and she drinks hers at night so she can go to sleep.”

These mysterious doings apparently set off warning bells of stimulants and opiates and strange foreign customs, because before I knew it the teacher asked, “Why don’t you have your mother visit and explain it to me, and then we can explain it to the rest of the class.” It was another example of our differentness, and I felt embarrassed to be singled out.

Nor did I ever have my own birthday party, though I was permitted to go to a few parties of others. Greek tradition dictated that we celebrate my Name Day—June 29, the day in the church calendar dedicated to Saint Peter—rather than the anniversary of my birth. But Name Days were for adults, not for kids. It was another case of being different and not the American kid I wanted to be.

By the time I reached junior high school, Mother was no longer trying to make me look like a Greek folk dancer. But the Old Country still cast a long and sometimes—I felt—stultifying shadow. Junior high meant it was time to attend Greek School. The classes were held in one of our classrooms at Kearney Junior High after regular school hours. The teachers were Greek Orthodox priests who journeyed the forty or so miles from Grand Island, the closest town with an Orthodox church, to ruin the after-school lives of boys who would much rather have been playing football or basketball or shooting marbles. Their job was to teach us how to speak and write the mother tongue. The process began with subtle indoctrination: The first thing the priest/teacher of the day would do was to set up a small flag with a blue and white Greek flag upon the desk. They wore long beards and black robes, and they taught with unsmiling, rigid discipline. While we struggled to grasp the strange

shapes of the twenty-four-letter Greek alphabet and connect them to words and words to comprehension, our non-Greek classmates passing in the hall would cast glances at us in the classroom with eyes that said, "How strange!"

Here again, I was driven to excel. I mastered Greek to the extent that I could write letters to our Greek relatives in their home villages and read the ones that we received. I also recited long Greek poems to my mother at home, at church, and at Name Day parties.

But as time went on, I tried harder and harder to escape. My parents' Greek habits and culture seemed like a vortex dragging me down while I wanted to break free and become more American. When I could I much preferred attending Kearney's Episcopal church, where I served as an acolyte, rather than going on the long drive in summer heat and winter snows to Grand Island for the interminable Greek Orthodox services. These could go on for three excruciating hours in rapid-fire Greek. It was trying during Lent, when the first day's bite of food, near the end of the service, was the communion bread, one small piece representing the body of Christ (oh, how I prayed for the second coming!).

There was no departing from these practices, however, since my parents believed that the Greek church was superior, indeed the source of Christianity. When they crossed themselves, their hands went from forehead to navel to the *right* chest and then to the left, and they insisted that the Roman Catholics who touched the left side of their chests first were doing it all wrong. As I rebelled against, or at least questioned, these assumptions, my father summoned various visiting Greek priests and bishops to sit down with me and set me straight. They all said the same thing: I should think of the world's religions as a tree in which the roots and the main trunk were all of Greek Orthodox origin. The Catholic and Protestant churches were mere branches.

None of their certainty about the church interfered with equally strong folk beliefs and superstitions. My mother once summoned my godmother to banish a wart from my hand. We assembled at midnight for the exorcism and my godmother, a strange-looking woman whom I barely knew, waved the branch of a particular kind of tree while she muttered incantations, and then applied some kind of homemade ointment to the wart. To my astonishment, it shrank and eventually disappeared.

Life Comes into Focus

This reliance on faith in all its forms made it hard for my parents to accept my nearsighted, color-blind eyes. By the seventh grade, I was practically sitting on the teacher's lap to see the blackboard, and plunging my face deep into books to read. Every time I attended a movie in Kearney's one theater, I headed straight for the front row. When the kids chose sides for softball, I was always picked last because I couldn't see the ball well, and on winter afternoons when I played Monopoly I had to lean over the board to see how many squares my roll of the dice had bought me. "Nonsense," my mother said when I told her there might be a problem. "Your father's and my eyes are fine."

When the school nurse finally insisted that I see an optometrist, he had me look through a succession of lenses at an eye chart that became clearer and clearer as he adjusted them. Understandably, he asked to see my current glasses, to determine the advance of my nearsightedness. He was stunned when I told him I had never had glasses, but surely not as stunned as I was when, at age thirteen, I walked out with my new glasses and saw the world in focus for the first time I could remember. I had no idea I had missed so much. The cars on the street had license plates that actually bore numbers; the signs in the store windows told of shovels for sale and discount trousers, and, even from a distance, I could read the Central Cafe's neon sign: "Home of Fine Foods Since 1923." The movie theater was a block and a half from where I stood, and I could see without running to stand under the marquee that George O'Brien was playing in something called *Painted Desert*. At home, I picked up the afternoon newspaper from the front steps and realized I could read it without holding it inches from my face. In the days to come I learned that I didn't have to squint except when the sun was bright.

But my parents were still convinced that my eyes should have been more like theirs. They were equally suspicious to learn that I was color-blind. In fact, my father insisted on taking the color perception test himself, and when he passed it he looked at me with doubtful disapproval. How could such a smart kid flunk such an easy test? Experiences

like that dramatized the distance that grew between what I knew of the world, and what I saw my parents believed.

Adolescence sharpened still further the differences between the Greek world that my parents inhabited and the American world that I longed to join. Non-Greek girls brought out the worst of their prejudices. With no Greek girls my age in Kearney, I had to look elsewhere. But whenever I seemed interested in one of the American girls, my parents' comments were anything but civil. My mother was especially harsh, making some awful generalizations about *Amerikaniki* girls.

I did have one girlfriend, Jean Christman, whose father owned the town's bakery and was a regular customer at the Central Cafe. I put off telling my parents that we were going out, but I had to come clean when I wanted to take her to the high school dance. My sense is that the customer relationship softened the news just a bit, and as a result the prom came and went without too much commotion.

Outside the cafe my parents' social exposure to Americans, and certainly American girls, was at best limited. I do not recall ever being with my parents in a non-Greek home. This lack of interaction resulted far more from fear than any real distaste. Like many immigrants, past and present, my parents worried that popular culture, represented then by things like jazz and swing (they only played Greek music!) and the equivalent today of hip-hop, rap music, and suggestive advertising, would engulf their children and sweep away their values, even their respect for their customs and rules.

My father enforced with his hands the importance of respect for him and his rules. If I came home even five minutes late at night, he slapped me, always after asking if I preferred the blow *anapodi* or *dipli*—backhand or forehand. I always chose *anapodi* because the slaps seemed less hard. I quietly, but deeply, resented this extreme and bullying discipline that none of my friends had to put up with.

This cultural tug-of-war came to a head in my senior year in high school, when I led an effort to win parental support for a lighted, chaperoned dance in the school gymnasium. I had learned ballroom dancing from my Uncle Bill Peterson's American-born Greek wife, Helene, of whom my mother disapproved not just because she danced American style, but because she also favored innovations such as store-bought

clothes over the home-sewn variety. I had visions of a swing band playing all-American wartime hits like Jimmy Dorsey's "Tangerine" or Glenn Miller's "Moonlight Cocktail" and chaste couples dancing on the hardwood floor, and I went all out for this, my first extracurricular crusade. The proposal went out to a vote by parents, and I was shocked and embarrassed to learn that my father, from whom I'd kept the knowledge that the whole thing was my idea, was one of only five parents to oppose it. I'm sure he wanted to reduce the chances of my involvement with a non-Greek girl. The dance happened nonetheless, in a very well lit gymnasium under the watchful eyes of our high school teacher chaperones.

Our high school dance was just a small example of the changes taking place. The day that really changed everything had happened two years earlier. I was fifteen, in the tenth grade, and that Sunday morning I had gone to the home of one of my Greek friends to listen to music on the radio. Suddenly the music stopped and a shocked announcer reported that Japanese planes had attacked the American fleet at Pearl Harbor. We listened in rapt and frightened silence as new details came in—battleships sunk, planes destroyed, soldiers firing pistols at the attacking bombers. I'm not sure either of us knew where Pearl Harbor was.

I raced home to get my mother's reaction. She never listened to the radio and had not heard the news. That night when my father came home he was grim. Though I sometimes heard him singing "God Bless America" softly to himself as he was shaving in the morning, with all his Greek attachments I had never fully realized his devotion to America. His voice shook and tears filled his eyes as he spoke of the sneak attack on "the greatest of all countries."

By the next morning, everybody knew where Pearl Harbor was. The kids at school, from the seniors down through the seventh graders—the high school and junior high shared one building complex—talked of nothing else. The teachers, too, pointing to world maps or spinning globes to show us what was going on in the Pacific. Everyone was numb. At eleven-thirty the whole school assembled in the auditorium to hear President Franklin D. Roosevelt address a joint session of Congress. Speakers were hooked up to a radio. Roosevelt came on and started a short speech with stirring words: "Yesterday, December 7, 1941—a date

which will live in infamy . . .” When he finished, we weren’t numb anymore, we were angry.

In the days that followed, everyone of military age, including myself, volunteered. Sadly, my advanced nearsightedness kept me out of the military. John was too young to be drafted. If not drafted, the rest of us planted Victory Gardens and shared the sacrifice of rationing butter and sugar and meat, gasoline and tires. Women took their places in the factories and we all bought war bonds to keep up the supplies of goods, arms, and ammunition.

Those last years of high school sped by. My work duties at the cafe had expanded from the cash register to the kitchen and all points in between. I washed and dried dishes, waited and bussed tables, mopped the floors, for which my father paid me a dollar a day. On weekends I worked at the Kearney Country Club, tending bar at night in exchange for golf lessons and caddying during the day, for which I collected the grand sum of fifty cents a round and sometimes a ten-cent tip. When I was a senior, the same year I organized the dance, construction crews moved into Kearney to start work on a new Army Air Force base outside town. The crews meant new business and more income for my father. One day when I was working the counter I met the foreman who was overseeing construction of the runways. He became a regular and I served him extra-large slices of pie until I worked up the nerve to ask what kind of jobs might be available.

“Come out Saturday. We’ll see,” he said.

He assigned me to watch a huge pile of builders’ odds and ends, mostly junk, that had accumulated in one corner of the base complex. The work was anything but demanding. All I had to do was sit there and warm my hands on an open fire while I watched the junk pile to make sure there was no pilfering. At the end of that day, he told me I had qualified for weekend overtime pay and handed me a check for the astounding sum of \$18.

That evening I walked into the cafe kitchen where my father was hard at work cutting up a piece of beef, his sleeves rolled up and a blood-stained apron covering his shirt front. When he saw me he pushed his hair off his forehead with his wrist and said, “Well, big shot, how does

it feel to put in a real day's work for a change?" The moment I had been waiting years for had arrived at last.

"Actually, Dad, I enjoyed it a lot. And you might be interested in what they're paying me." I threw the check down on the worktable.

He was speechless. I am confident there were many days at the Central Cafe when he did not earn \$18. The entire twenty-four-hour-a-day, seven-day-a-week operation took in perhaps \$25,000 a year during the long years of the Depression, and that sustained our family, two cooks, four waitresses who were paid a dollar a day plus meals and tips, a dishwasher, and Jack Ryan, who for years held down the overnight shift all on his own—he, all alone, and with an unceasing smile, did it all; he cooked, served, and washed the dishes. The Central Cafe produced regular gifts of cash back to my father's family in Vahlia, and less frequent ones to my mother's village of Niata, as well as wardrobe-sized boxes of used clothing to both places. And it produced my father's promise to me that when I graduated from high school he would provide me "the best education money can buy," a promise that gained momentum when I won the New York State Regents' prize, which provided a scholarship at a New York university, scoring highest on a standardized test given to all the high school students in Buffalo County, where Kearney is situated.

The Regents prize was one clear signal that my future did not lie in Kearney. The \$18 check lying on the table was another. For the first time I realized there were options out there. I didn't know what they were, but I wanted to find out. I also knew, or sensed, that I would have to seek them elsewhere. One day soon I would leave my hometown and my parents and enter a new world that I could explore on my own terms.