

The Time That Uncle Tom Died

"Vasili?" A crackly voice shouted at me through the telephone.

"Yes?"

"Thees is Taki, from Hal'street." I recognized the Greek contraction of "Halsted Street." "It's about you Uncle Tom. I sorry to say, he die today. Is at County Hospital."

The reason Taki, Uncle Tom's friend and roommate, called me was that he found my name and phone number on a note in Uncle Tom's wallet, put there in the event of a crisis or, in this case, the final emergency. When my uncle visited County Hospital, he took only that note and his Social Security card, which served as identification enough to get him admitted. Uncle Tom might have learned very little English in his fifty years in America, but he was well aware of American medical costs, high even then. Because no record existed of his savings, he was readily admitted to County Hospital for care, free of charge. He assigned me, therefore, to keep his two and a half thousand dollars in my apartment because "you couldn't trust banks since the Depression." I, of course, kept his money in the Pioneer Bank at five percent interest, adding to the nest egg that would pay for the inevitable funeral.

I first met Taki on a trip to Greektown with my father, ostensibly to stock up on feta, Greek olives, olive oil and pastries, but also to visit his uncle and his past. Driving south on Halsted, my father's Pontiac Silver Streak crept around the corner of Polk Street across from the Hull House complex and painfully bumped its way into a parking space. My dad's parking was worse than his driving, the Braille method. There stood the sooty tenement, my father's first home in Chicago and still occupied by my Uncle Tom and his old friend. A round-faced, portly man in his fifties, my father had traveled a long way from Halsted Street in the twenty years since taking leave of Greektown. He was proud

of his newly purchased bungalow on the West Side, his three Hart, Schaffner and Marx suits, his forty-nine percent interest in the Delphi restaurant, and, more than any thing, his beautiful dark-haired wife. He smiled a lot then.

Dad and I found our way through a dark gangway up three flights of stairs and rapped on Uncle Tom's door. The place was gloomy, a three-room apartment, heated by a round wood stove in its kitchen and lit by naked bulbs which hung in each room. Uncle Tom, a generation older than my father, was a handsome old man, tall for a Greek, with a narrow face, a thin nose and rather sad eyes. Working on the railroad had made him trim and fit, and somehow he had escaped the family baldness. In contrast to Tom, Taki was somewhat stooped. The man's face was dominated by a witchlike proboscis that pointed to his almost toothless mouth. When we arrived, the two puttered, together providing coffee from the top of the wood stove and sweets from the icebox. They steeped the coffee grounds in a shiny copper pot and poured the mixture into demitasses seated in tiny saucers. It was necessary to wait for the grounds to settle. If we had been at home, my Aunt Penny would have told all of our fortunes from the configuration of our own particular coffee grounds. Most of Chicago called this drink Turkish coffee, but we had been corrected by my father. It was Greek coffee. We sat at a small, square wooden table, the kind you see in the photographs of old Greek men in travel brochures. In the center of the table sat a plate holding a string of figs surrounded by candied fruits.

As we sipped our coffee and tasted the sweets, the men discussed politics, the Greek national obsession. For my fifth grade project on Greece, I once asked my father how many political parties there were in Greece. He answered "Five million." Using what little Greek I had learned in Greek school -- I had been *taught* a great deal there -- I knew that the subject at hand was the bitter and vicious civil war which followed World War II, a matter which is still spoken of carefully because it set Greeks against one

another: nationalist and communist, inhabitants of a village and its neighbor, even members of the same family. A delicious drink of seven-star Metaxa, an anomaly in that setting, soothed feelings and softened memories. Hospitality was paramount.

Though much of what was said in Greek escaped me, I knew the gist of the matter from previous conversations with my father. Though he had left Greece at seventeen, almost twenty years before the war broke out, he knew its history well. He had also described the apartment in which we were sitting, his first American home, as a kind of prison. "For my first week I sat there staring out the window," he said sadly, "scared to go outside and look like a fool. You know, Vasili, how people think you're stupid when you can't speak their language, even if they can't speak it themselves? It must have been five or six days. I just watched people from the window, rushing back and forth. It amazed me then how fast Americans rush around like crazy people, no time to live. Now I race around too." He paused to consider what he had said. I relished moments when my father editorialized about America, as though we were not of it. I felt that I was learning inside information.

"Your uncle Tom told me that it didn't matter, not speaking a word of English, that everyone on Halsted spoke Greek, but I didn't believe him. I thought he was just trying to get me to jump into the water and swim. But he wasn't kidding. You know, he knows about as much English now as he did then. I can't believe that man! Anyway, I took a dime he gave me and went out for coffee. I ordered in what I thought was English, but the waiter answered in Greek. I took my coffee and ran back upstairs. I'm here twenty-five years later, and sometimes I feel the same as then." But then his bright dark eyes smiled over his aquiline nose and little moustache as his mood changed. "Vasili, you're lucky I didn't miss the boat. You know why?"

I knew the answer, but I said, "Why?"

“Because you would be sitting all day on the side of the mountain talking to the sheep and the goats.” Because of my youth and innocence, he always edited out unseemly comments about shepherds and their charges.

Being at Halsted and Polk placed Uncle Tom in space and history for me. Before my first visit there, all that I associated with him was amassing money and eating with my hands. Almost every Sunday found Uncle Tom in the living room of our home on Lorel Avenue, one of the many family members whom my parents welcomed each week in what amounted to an open house. The moment he saw me he reached into his pocket for a shiny half dollar for me, which he first flipped in the air, caught, and put in my hand, closing it with his. I quickly came to think of his weekly gift as my due. I soon became a tubby little miser and thought of very little else when I saw him at our door. At a tender age, I developed a tendency to hoard money that I attribute to Uncle Tom. As a fifth grader, I was lending money to my sister Elaine and my cousin Barbara at Mafia rates.

When we sat down to dinner, he studied me as I cut chicken or lamb off the bones and forked the pieces into my mouth. This behavior he thought to be effeminate for a Greek male, so he took my fork from me, set it alongside my plate and demonstrated proper meat eating, raising his meaty lamb bone and biting at it. “Etsi, Vasili.” Like this, Vasili. This behavior didn’t catch on. As long as he was watching me, I gnawed at the bones, but I went back to my knife and fork as soon as he lost interest in the subject. I still wait until the very last of the meat to pick at the bones, and then I do it behind my napkin. A bit prissy, perhaps.

Getting into the bathroom – bungalows had only one – was an adventure on Uncle Tom Sundays. After a fifteen-minute wait, I knocked at the door for the third time.

“Who is it?” Aunt Penny choked. Coughed.

"It's Billy." My name, Vasili, had been anglicized into Billy. "I gotta go."

"Can you hold it a few minutes, honey?"

"No, I gotta go bad, now."

"Fer Christ sake," she muttered. "Okay." The door opened as Aunt Penny returned to the desperate flailing near the open window that she believed would clear the air of smoke. "Sorry, Billy." She flushed her butt down the toilet and hustled out into the hall. When my business was done, I opened the door only to meet my impatient mother, Pall Malls in hand.

"Women, especially Greek women, should not smoke," Uncle Tom regularly proclaimed. "They look like *poutanas* (prostitutes), and they smell." The point made, he returned to his cigar.

The notice of Uncle Tom's death was no big surprise. We all knew that. A "How are you?" directed at Uncle Tom, however casual, elicited a litany of complaints and ailments. He couldn't see; his ears were going; arthritis was acting up; and nothing he ate stayed down. There was no hard evidence of the latter. An experimental change in greeting -- "What's new?" -- produced an identical response even though the answer had to be false. I was told later that this pattern had started in his thirties. Well, his death was incontrovertible proof that he was not altogether a hypochondriac. So there! Because Uncle Tom was somewhere in his sixties -- he didn't know his age -- I felt no great sense of sorrow in what was, after all, the natural course of things.

There was no immediate family available to inform of Tom's passing; Uncle Tom's wife and four children were somewhere in Greece and had probably given up on him, considering his absence of half a century. Because he had been a guerilla fighter in one of the Balkan Wars, Uncle Tom claimed that it was not safe for him to return to Greece. My father contended that the almost weekly change in the Greek government

over that period had made Tom a forgotten man in the old country. But restaurant meals, poker games, an occasional visit to the track, and late-night talks in the Parthenon coffee house -- bachelor life on Halsted Street -- apparently had more appeal than the joys of fatherhood in the remote village of Aghia Sofia. Uncle Tom, it seemed, had little desire to spend time with the sheep and the goats. Additionally, he and his *patrotis*, his countrymen, had surely found their way east down Harrison Street to the corner of State where they might admire the voluptuous ladies at the Follies Theater. Thus inspired, I guessed that they frequented some of the many houses that were not homes that operated between the Loop and Halsted Street.

Not many years after our visit to Greektown, my father died and I inherited the responsibility of watching out for Uncle Tom. By the time I was making my bi-weekly stops on Halsted Street, his bachelor activities were a thing of the past. Uncle Tom's life had settled into a less strenuous routine. The old men began each day by putting some wood in the stove, filling and heating the copper pot and sharing coffee. I usually arrived as that ritual was in progress. My uncle pulled the door open for me, letting the light into the room and the cigar aroma out. While he pulled his long, black overcoat over his brown, tweedy suit jacket, he asked if I was ready to go. "*Eese etimos, Vasili?*"

"*Ne, Theo.*" I used the informal Greek yes that sounds like it should mean no. Uncle Tom had abandoned his practice of criticizing me for speaking Greek so poorly and was making an effort to speak slowly enough for me to understand. We settled into a strange bilingualism that got us through each visit. He placed his gray kepi on his head, looking dapper, and we found our way down the stairs to Polk Street and then around the corner to Halsted.

In five minutes we stood at the counter in the Trianon Pharmacy where Andreas Poulos took care of two of Uncle Tom's necessities -- his money and his medicines.

Andy greeted us with a smile and waited patiently while Uncle Tom opened his coat buttons to get at the inside pocket of his jacket and pull out the brown envelope that held his railroad pension check. The graying pharmacist reached for the check, thanking Uncle Tom, with the affectionate and polite "*Efxaristo, Theo.*" Thank you, Uncle. He turned the check over on the counter so that Uncle Tom could place his "X" on it. He added his own initials and reached into the cash drawer. He handed Uncle Tom a handful of bills and some change as well as a small, white drugstore bag. Uncle Tom pushed the money back so that Andy might take what was due him.

Turning toward the north from the pharmacy exit, we walked through the aroma of fresh-baked bread at Grocery Diana and past the exotic *Kentrikon* shop whose windows were filled with Greek religious supplies of every sort, highlighted by darkly colored, two-dimensional icons. When we reached Adams, we settled into a booth at Sofia's Snack Shop, greeted by Sofia herself. "*Yia sas, levendeas.*" Greetings, warriors, handsome men, or gentleman! Translate however you chose; you couldn't lose. Better yet, the words came from the still beautiful Sofia, who had become a little rounder, her black hair streaked in gray and her arms thicker and stronger with work. Sofia charged Tom a dollar for dinner and fifty cents for breakfast or lunch, regardless of what he ate. The lady had a soft spot for him, developed, perhaps, during Tom's more active period.

After breakfast, we found our way to the *Kafeneon Parthenon* where, of course, political debate was the order of every day. The world of men, the coffee house, was saturated with smoke and noise, and criss-crossed by waiters in white shirts and black trousers bustling about with trays holding syrupy Greek coffee and sweet licorice shots of ouzo. A trace of hashish emanated from a corner occupied by a wasted old man puffing on a hookah, a holdover from four hundred years of Turkish rule. My father considered the coffee to be Greek, but the hashish was a Turkish thing. Another instance of the

victimization of the Greeks! Uncle Tom spent much of the day there much as he would have if he were in Aghia Sofia where the *kafeneon* sat just off the road at the foot of the mountainside that held the village. Those were good days for Uncle Tom in America.

On bad days, Uncle Tom found himself in the men's ward at County Hospital where he always seemed to receive good care, despite its role as a public welfare institution. The giant, six-story edifice was a healthy walk from Greektown down Polk Street. It welcomed all who entered. An imposing, nineteenth-century stone structure, it had passed a hundred-years or more serving Chicagoans who could not pay and some who could but didn't say so. In the over-worked facility, it was necessary to use the corridors to hold beds, and the hospital had what seemed a patient-nurse ratio of fifty-to-one, so you were mostly on your own finding the patient you were interested in.

Uncle Tom usually wound up on the fifth floor, dedicated, it seemed, to aging and aged men. The ward was a study in white, even though most of its occupants were not Caucasian. I often found myself wending my way among the ancient patients who wobbled around on knobby legs that protruded from wrinkled white gowns that concealed very little except their shoulders. Either crew cut or bald, white fur on their cheeks and necks, the old men tended to look alike, a brotherhood of the ailing. There is probably some existential message from nature in the fact that the closer we get to death, the more we resemble each other.

As I put down the phone after receiving Taki's message, I felt hollowed out and sad at the thought of Uncle Tom dying alone at County Hospital in what had the feel of a dormitory. Taki hadn't told me whether he had been present or not. In any case, I knew whom to call to smooth the way through the required steps – newspaper ad, funeral home, church and, finally, cemetery.

The Rentas and Rizzolo Funeral Home ruled Halsted Street and Morgan. Like politics, death was an ethnic matter in Chicago. The Greeks dominated Halsted Street and the Italians controlled Morgan. Rentas covered the Greek trade; Rizzolo brought in the Italians. The partners knew what they were doing and where.

John Rentas was our man. "John, this is Bill Pantellos. I'm calling about my Uncle Tom; he passed away this morning."

"Oh, I'm sorry to hear that, Vasili." A respectful pause. "Where is he?"

"He's at County Hospital. Can you take care of things?"

"Of course. Will you give me his full name?"

"Athanasios Lymperis."

"Middle?"

"Sorry, I don't know."

"That's okay. Lymperis with an "i" or a "y"?"

"Y"

"*Efxaristo*, Vasili. I'll be in touch. Where can I reach you?"

I recited my phone number. "John, what do I do about the church?"

"Don't worry, I'll take care of that. You go to *Panaghia*, right? *Panaghia*, the Virgin Mary, was our shortened name for Church of the Assumption of the Virgin. The man was a professional.

I called my Uncle Pete, who knew everyone and their relatives, to help me compose a list for the *Tribune* obituary which, when compiled, would read "beloved husband of... loving father of..." and so forth. He took a break from his workday of pick-ups and deliveries for Rainbow Laundry to help me develop the family list at our dining room table. Even Pete couldn't help with Uncle Tom's family in Greece. It would be a short obituary.

Our enterprise was interrupted by the ring of the telephone; it was John Rentas.

"Vasili, I'm at County Hospital."

"Yes?"

"Uncle Tom doesn't want to go."

I choked on my coffee. "What do you mean he 'doesn't want to go'?"

"The guy next to him died; Tom's looking fine." John was also cracking up.

"Okay, John, I guess you shouldn't take him then." I had to wait a few seconds.

"Thanks anyway. We'll take a rain check."