

AMERICAN BREAD

By Kenneth J. Uva

It was one of those stores that you find only in Manhattan. Not everywhere in Manhattan. Just in places where people had little shops to sell things they love. There are a few in the Village and in Chelsea and here and there on the Upper West Side. If they can be classified at all, they would be nostalgia shops. Brian walked into one on his lunch hour one work day.

The store was run by two middle- aged gay men who seemed to be selling the contents of Brian's mother's basement. There were quality items like delicately etched crystal glasses popular in the 40's. More mundane stuff included ash trays and candy dishes in the boomerang shapes and the ever popular turquoise of the 50's. What really caught Brian's eye, however, were objects that he had never seen before even in the most *kitschy* of these emporiums of our former popular culture. In a locked cabinet, along with the white frosted glass tumblers with gold abstract dancing figures sat a set of Welch's Jelly glasses.

Fuck Proust and his madeleines, Brian thought, these bring me back.

Everyone in his old neighborhood drank from glasses that were formerly jars of jelly. The company thoughtfully packaged their grape jelly (seedless, if you please) in jars with a pry-off lid that could be used as drinking glasses. The painted-on pictures were from Disney movies and

various cartoons and stories. Mickey and Donald came to mind immediately for Brian. And Howdy Doody. These glasses brought Brian back to his boyhood home and his beloved lunches of peanut butter and jelly on American bread.

“They didn’t call it hide and seek. They called it ‘hanglo,’ ‘hanglo seek.’”

Brian was engaging in one of his favorite diatribes, regaling Sophie and Joni about how dumb everyone was in his old neighborhood. Even though he moved away from the old neighborhood, on the cusp of Brownsville, East New York and Bedford Stuyvesant, almost forty years before, there is something of the old terrain that still sticks in his craw.

“Everybody there was stupid. I never heard anything intelligent outside my house or the school. That strip of concrete between the sidewalk and the street was the *curve*. They said ‘*lever mind*.’ Did you know there was a song called ‘The *Aller* Rose of Texas?’ “

“How could anyone...?” Sophie didn’t even bother finishing the sentence. To her, the subject was not worthy of further discussion. How could someone of her taste, refinement, and cool, have descended from someone who came from a place like that?

“It’s true,” Brian said, warming to the subject. “I’m not making this up. This wasn’t one of those Jewish neighborhoods where education was everything and people struggled to send their kids to college. These were Italians. No one went to college. No one talked about college. Except your grandmother. I was the smartest kid in the school and she knew I was going to

college. Like people did in the movies.”

Brian’s mother was one of the exceptions in the neighborhood. While firmly rooted in the Italian traditions of family, religion, and macaroni on Sundays, she peeked outward to the larger world. A high school graduate during World War II, when few in the neighborhood were, she was considered a bit stuck up. More than one person said, “She thinks who she is.” But there was enough of the Italian in her to see non-Italian things as the “other.” So sliced white bread, like Wonder Bread, or local brands like Silvercup, was, to her, *American* bread. A person whose parents, unlike her own, were not born in an old country, was an *American*.

Brian was like that in some ways. As a boy, in his head, he was as American as the Beaver, or Davy Crockett. Yet, in his guts, that deep place where you find your true self, there was much of the Italian-Catholic tradition. His wife, Sarah, always said that Jews had the reputation for being morbid and fatalistic. Until she married Brian, she had never known the dark side of Italians. Southern Italians, at least. Maybe it was the long history of poverty and occupation by foreigners, but all that singing and dancing was a crock. These people are dark. Life is sad so don’t expect too much. No wonder so many of them named their daughters Lucy, after the saint depicted holding a plate with her eyes on it.

When Brian is telling his daughters about his early youth, before the move to the suburbs when he became a normal American, his outward thrust is the humor about a place that was like no other in America. “Every girl was named Antoinette or Josephine. Their mothers taught them to

cook at an early age to be sure they were marriage material. And cooking was a sacred ritual, especially the gravy.”

Here is where Sophie stepped into her great lady mode and intoned, “Fortunately, I will have servants and don’t have to worry about *that* sort of thing.”

Brian continued, on a roll. “I’m not kidding, they called pasta sauce gravy. And everyone had a strong philosophy about how to do it right. Aunt Rose’s was no good because she burned the onions. They argued about whether to strain the tomatoes or to leave in the seeds and the pulp.”

Joni chimed in. “I can’t believe that was so important to people then.”

“Joni,” Vin replied, “you are a long way from your roots. What do you kids know, anyway, you, who wanted to leave the San Gennaro Feast because you hated the crowds and the smells? The smell of the sausages and onions make my mouth water. I don’t eat them, of course, bad for you.”

That is Brian. Loves the idea of the old ethnic food but doesn’t eat it. Watches his fats, cholesterol, sodium, and general intake. Eats soy products, takes loads of vitamins and herbs, jogs, and doesn’t look a bit like the other men who came from the same place and the same time. Comfortable in the Italian part of the Village and the “Bohemian” part, but somehow uneasy in each. Maybe that is because he avoids extremes. Intellectual, but grounded in reality. Forward thinking, but tied to his roots. Traditional, but not when the tradition weighs you down, or keeps

you from marrying a Jew.

The tension between the traditional world and the outside world was a subtext of Brian's life. Much of that came from his mother. Her birth name was Carmela. She was named that because she was born on the feast day of Our Lady of Mount Carmel. She hated that name. It was too old world for her. Her friends called her Millie and she used Mildred as her official name all her life. Yet, she *was* different from most of the girls in the neighborhood. She never used foul language, and somehow, everyone knew that you acted differently around Millie. Maybe she took those 30's and 40's movies seriously. Maybe it was possible to go to college and wear college sweaters and know young men who spoke perfect English and had good teeth. Perhaps there were real people who went to swank nightclubs like Fred and Ginger. Frank Sinatra was no different from the people in her neighborhood and he was a star. He got out. Why shouldn't she? She saw Frankie at the Paramount and screamed and carried on like the others. It was possible for regular guys to have something better. It would be possible for her too.

Brian's old neighborhood was full of regular guys. And, maybe, some of these guys weren't so bad. His father worked for the electric company. Two uncles were automobile mechanics. Two others worked for the Post Office when a job with the Post Office meant something. They took pride in working for the U.S. government. They polished their brass buttons and shined their hat brims. Once, when seeing a black woman mail carrier wearing shorts, Brian commented, only half in jest, "It's a good thing Uncle Frank and Uncle Mike aren't around to see that."

For Brian, the uncle with the best job of all was Uncle Tony. He was a welder at the Brooklyn Navy Yard. They built ships there, large warships. He, and thousands of other regular guys, built battleships and aircraft carriers. Even after the peak years of World War II, the place was still active, building large aircraft carriers. They had visitor days and there was nothing more thrilling for Brian than to visit the place and see the ships docked there and to climb aboard the carriers and submarines. The Russians better not mess with us when we have these ships, thought Brian.

His father was a Navy man in World War II so Brian was partial to the Navy as the best branch of the service. The best Navy in the world, thought Brian. They sank all those Nazi U-Boats to win the war in Europe. Dad's Navy, in the Pacific, kicked the shit out of the Japs, with their sneak attack on Pearl Harbor, *kamikazes*, and *banzai* charges. His father had told Brian all about Okinawa and the Japanese planes crashing into American ships, of being awake for 48 hours straight, staring at this radar screen, and warning the ship of a Japanese bomber heading straight for it, a warning in time for his shipmates to spot the plane and shoot it down. What kind of enemy was this? They committed suicide for their goddamned emperor?

But on our ships and in the air and on the ground there were millions of ordinary American boys, regular guys, from towns and farms and cities. They stood by their guns and their buddies and their flag. Uncle Tony's LST hit a mine and sank at the mouth of the Seine. Uncle Mario was in heavy infantry fighting across France. To this day, he won't talk about it. They fought as free men, no bows to the Emperor or *Heils!* to the Fuhrer. Brooklyn was full of men like these. Brian was proud to be the son of one of them.

When Brian wasn't carrying on about the unique stupidity of so many of the denizens, he would admit that he lived in a special place at a special time. The time was the mid 1950's and as a boy of five, he was not quite aware that he was a witness to history. His father lived and breathed baseball. He was the speedy second baseman of his high school team, taught Brian the game, and loved the Dodgers. Brian liked to play his father's brand of baseball. Neither of them were big, but they were fast and agile. Brian was never the player his father was, but he also played second base, and liked to bunt and steal bases in Little League. That was real baseball, the way God wanted it played. When provoked, Brian would do his act about juiced up balls and bats and bulked up players who were useless except when hitting home runs.

"Ebbets Field was right on the street," Brian explained to Sophie and Joni. "Driving by, I could see the dents that the baseballs made in the chain link fence in right field."

"Brian's first sports memory, and maybe the first memory outside his personal experiences, involved the Brooklyn Dodgers. People argued about which of the New York teams was the best—the Dodgers, the Giants, or the Yankees.

"The Yankee fans would always rub it in about how the Dodgers never won a World Series and how the Yankees won every year," he told Joni, who always seemed interested in what he had to say. To the Brooklyn fans, "Wait 'till next year" was the slogan of futility. But, in 1955, it was next year. The Dodgers, finally, beat the Yankees.

“There were parties in the streets,” Brian remembered. “People cried and hugged each other.” When his father told him that the Dodger center fielder Duke Snider hit four home runs to tie the Series record, he became Brian’s idol for the rest of his life. Brian, the cynical intellectual, the man whose language and demeanor never betrayed his roots, made the pilgrimage to Cooperstown 25 years later when the Duke was inducted into the Baseball Hall of Fame.

Brooklyn’s glory was short lived. Two year later, in an act of infamy comparable to Pearl Harbor, the Dodger owner, Walter O’Malley, moved the team to Los Angeles.

“Looking back,” Brian reflected, “I was really mad that the Dodgers left Brooklyn. It was only later that I realized what else was leaving. The world of the regular guys was going away. The guys who read *The Daily News* and argued about baseball and worked in the Navy Yard and Con Edison and in the breweries and factories were also leaving. Everyone moved to the suburbs. Brooklyn was changing. Our people were moving out, the ‘coloreds’ were moving in.”

Brian’s father was a bit reluctant to move at first. Brooklyn was his world. His job was 20 minutes away by subway or car. You could pick up the evening edition of *The Daily News* at the candy store across the street and run into the guys and shoot the bull for awhile before going home. But he knew it was better for the kids. Brian’s mom, however, had been looking outside Brooklyn for some time.

“Everybody worked during World War II, except Francie.”

At dinner one night, Brian, was telling Sarah and the girls one of the family legends. In a time when war industries reached deep into the local neighborhoods where, for example, the costume factory worked three shifts making uniforms, everyone worked. Everyone, that is except his father’s sister Francie. A healthy young woman in her mid-twenties at the time, she stayed home, cashed the allotment checks three brothers sent to their mother, and leaned out the window resting her elbows on a pillow. The story was told often, as are many family stories. Brian, however, particularly liked that one. He wondered, two generations later, what his daughters might be doing if the country was fully mobilized like in WWII. After the women’s rights movement, with women in positions they didn’t have in the past, the thought of his aunt being a slacker at the highpoint of The Greatest Generation, amused him.

Carmela, however, was no slacker. A high school graduate, a fine-looking, well-groomed young woman with good typing skills, she landed a job with the Navy Department. She worked in the Officers’ Personnel Division. Due to the Navy traditions and hierarchy, this was no ordinary job. Naval officers were gentlemen too and the Navy treated them as such. So the Officers’ Personnel Division was staffed by elite secretaries. Brian had seen pictures of the “girls” in that office. Every one of them was attractive and well dressed in the Betty Grable, Andrews Sisters style of the time. Miss Carter, the supervisor, required hats and gloves, no gum chewing, and the most refined department at all times.

The Navy Department was an eye opener for Carmela. She worked in the Federal Building in lower Manhattan. So, every day, she rode the subway out of Brooklyn to “New York.” She ate lunch with the other young working women at Schrafts, and the Horn and Hardhart Automat. Sure, it wasn’t Park Avenue. But it wasn’t Brooklyn either. It was, for her, a world of what might be. A world where people dressed nicely, and spoke and acted with some refinement. Was it really possible for someone like her, the only high school graduate out of 6 children, whose parents came to America through Ellis Island, to be a real American? Could she live in a house surrounded by grass? Could her son go to college and wear a white shirt and tie to work? Could her daughter go to college too? Maybe meet and marry a professional man? Maybe all things are possible now that she saw the other side of America.

Brian often wondered, in a world of Anthonys, Joeys, Vinnies, Antoinettes, Josephines, and Maries, how he ended up with his name without actually being Irish. Or how his sister was named Jessica. One day, towards his fortieth birthday, he was chatting with his mother on her patio while watching six-year old Sophie and three-year old Joni splash around in the inflatable kiddie pool his father would set up whenever his grandchildren visited during the summer. The subjects rambled about this and that, people from their presents, and people from their pasts. Brian joked that living in the New York area, he was 21 before he actually saw a natural blonde. That New York is so different from the rest of the country because of all the ethnic groups, that he had to trespass to the Upper East Side of Manhattan to actually see people who really looked like the models in *The New York Times Magazine*. It was a familiar light-hearted chat that was really about crossing cultural borders, a subject close to Brian as his education, profession, and experiences moved him ever outward from the Old Neighborhood of his origins.

“Yes,” Carmela finally replied. “I remember when I was working in the Navy Department. There was a young officer who dated and was going to marry one of the girls in my office. She was so refined. She grew up in Connecticut, even went to college. She spoke soooo beautifully. Her name was Jessica. He was from Massachusetts. A handsome lieutenant. All of us in the office were so sad when we found out that Brian was killed when his ship was torpedoed in the Pacific.”

“Holy shit,” Brian thought. He was almost forty and had just learned that his sister Jessica and he were named after two people his mother knew way back when. It was sad, really, but for her, not for him. She gave her children the names of two people idealized for what she thought they represented-- life’s wonderful possibilities for those who are true Americans.

Carmela’s office with the Navy Department was at 90 Church Street. Later that building stood, literally, in the shadow of the twin towers of the World Trade Center, just across the street. The building was damaged on September 11 but remained intact. The first time Brian was able to get close enough to Ground Zero he thought about his mother, now deceased, working there as a young woman with dreams, about Brian, long dead, and wondered where Jessica was now. And then, looking into the 16-acre hole in the ground where the World Trade Center once stood, thought about all the dead, and the families of the dead, and their stories and their dreams, and about the fate brings people to a certain place at a certain time. All colors and religions, and

attitudes and hopes, optimists and pessimists, lucky and unlucky, strong and weak, heroes known and unknown, living their lives, trying to realize a measure of happiness.

This is America, Mother.

Brian shed a tear, and moved on.