

The Diner

THE DINER

By Ares Demertzis

The squat structure was an anachronism, an incongruity in discord with its surroundings. A contextual error. Out of place. Incompatible. The rectangular building lay prone, cowed as if in abject, humbling prayer on the surface of the earth, surrounded by the glass façades of skyscrapers thrusting their slim metal structures skyward to touch the myriad stars in a darkening sky; and even beyond, into the mysteries of an as yet unconquered Cimerian universe. A neon sign crowning the exterior flashed intermittently in a blatant attempt to attract attention, announcing unambiguously its origin and function: "Acropolis Diner."

A young man approached walking through the oppressive, viscous heat of August. John moved slowly, deliberately, from one streetlamp to another, beneath the circles of light they spilled to the simmering sidewalk, isolating him temporarily from the enveloping darkness. Ominous, dark clouds were forming overhead, threatening him with their approaching inclement weather. He walked up nine stone steps and through a transparent glass door into a welcoming air conditioned coolness.

Inside the diner, the decoration consisted of a sumptuous and singular use of the colors blue and white. Large plates and urns boasted Classical Greek figures. Plastic Doric and Ionic fluted columns sustained artificial grape vines, lush with large, purple grapes. Faded photographs of a mutilated Parthenon covered the walls, its broken marble columns strewn haphazardly across the scorched and barren earth. Eroded with the passage of time, the features of the Caryatids supporting the Erechtheon were now unrecognizable. The environment manifested a nostalgic paeon to a culture reluctantly abandoned by the Greek proprietor, similar to that of the Mexican restaurants that had sprouted about town. Theirs were the colors red, green and white, with broad brimmed sombreros, sarapes and long lines of strung chile peppers melancholically reminiscent of a forsaken Hispanic homeland; all now wilted and crumpled, transformed into a fragile reverie of the past.

It was rumored that ninety nine point nine percent of the diners on the East Coast were owned by Greeks. The Greeks joked for decades that they could take over America without firing a shot, simply by poisoning the population. The Mexicans enjoyed a similar irredentist vision with their ceaseless migration. They claimed that they too would conquer the United States without firing a shot, simply by virtue of demography. There were those who considered that the Mexicans, unlike the Greeks, had an agenda and were plotting in earnest, although inadvertently neglecting to take into consideration the compulsive nature of change. Two thousand five hundred years ago, the Greek philosopher Heraclitus understood that "you can never step twice into the same river."

"Booth for one?" the seating hostess asked.

"I'll take a stool. Thanks just the same, Argie." Argie was the diminutive for Argyro, the Greek word for silver. When they were in grade school together, the American children, perplexed by her unusual name, taunted Argie by calling her "Orgy," regardless that they didn't know the precise meaning of the word. It was just a word, like fuck, which, considered offensive, made its use provocative.

"Take a table. It's late, you won't be chasing a big group away."

John shrugged, amenable, and she escorted him to the last booth at the far end of the diner. Argie was a dark haired, dark eyed, statuesque young woman with an olive complexion, walking straight backed, resembling a Phidias sculpture come to life. She was big boned and had the wide hips nature designed to facilitate childbirth. Bones and hips that, with time, would produce a "gazuntafrau," as his German friend was fond of threatening, intimidating all possible suitors of anorexic young women. But then, who knows if he provided the information without guile. He was gay.

John glanced surreptitiously at Argie's firm breasts and concluded she really didn't need the sustaining brassiere that marked her blouse. He focused on its wide straps and uninspiring lace-less functionality that seemed to purposely subvert feminine seduction. It was a "utilitarian bra," he concluded; the term he unkindly used to wryly describe, in sardonic amusement, the particular style of that article of lingerie. She had always been such a practical girl, he mused.

Argie handed him the menu and he noticed the fine fuzz sprouting on her upper lip. She's going to have a mustache just like her mother, he thought.

"Enjoy," Argie repeated the mantra tendered to all customers and retraced her steps to assume her assigned position by the door, next to the cash register.

Old man George, Argie's father and owner of the establishment emerged from the kitchen. He saw John sitting in the booth and joined him, dropping a tired body wearily into the blue and white plastic covered bench across the table. He was a squat man, like his diner, with a pronounced and undisguised parochial mentality; bald and overweight, a bulging stomach testimony to his having savored, with sybaritic pleasure, too many of his recipes. His sweaty face sustained a nose too large for its dimensions and fleshy ears that had sprouted small islands of bristly black hair. He wore a perspiration stained shirt and a long, soiled white apron.

"Pos pan ta pragmata?" he asked in flawless Greek, pulling a string of komboloi beads from his pants pocket.

"Kala, kala." John answered clumsily, a heavy accent pervading his mother tongue.

"You no like speak Greek no more, eh, Giani?" he scolded, addressing John by the Greek pronunciation of his name, communicating ineptly in the idiom of his adopted country, which he had yet to master after all these years.

"It's just that I don't speak it well, you know. It's awkward. I'm more comfortable with English."

"English...English." George made a disapproving face. "That all right too, I guess," he added without conviction.

The waitress appeared by the table. "What'll it be tonight, John?"

"Geez. Haven't even looked!" Hurriedly he opened the menu, glancing through thirteen pages of bewildering and exotic Middle Eastern dishes haphazardly incorporated into the more straightforward American fare.

"Should I come back?"

"No. I know what I want." John let the menu slide to the table.

"Burger special, medium rare. And a beer."

"Same as always." The waitress smiled down at her pad as she wrote up the order.

"Didn't really have to ask, did I?"

"Ne. Ne. Burger special. Good. Good. Specialty of house" George intervened, looking upset by the waitresses gratuitous comment and her excessive familiarity with John, which he considered inappropriate of an employee.

The waitress took the menu and left.

"No easy get good help," George lamented, pulling the amber komboloi beads through coarse, agitated fingers.

"She's Okay. She's a good waitress, George," John responded, admiring her retreating buttocks.

George turned to follow his gaze. "You want that? For desert maybe?"

They chuckled quietly. Abbreviated, insignificant amusement between two men of disparate ages lacking that intimacy necessary for a more lascivious comment.

"So what you do, Giani?"

"Pretty much the same thing. Writing. A lot."

"Writing. Writing. What this writing business?"

"I'm a writer, George."

"A writer he make living writing. You make living writing?"

"Not yet."

"Not yet. Not yet. And you look big ass of waitress?" George shook his head negatively, striking the polished komboloi beads together noisily.

"Ass it cost money, Giani," he added gravely.

John smiled broadly, with youthful ingenuity. "Not to look."

Appreciating the innocent comment, George guffawed immoderately, exposing discolored teeth held in place by thin, gold edging. "You good boy, Gianakimou. Good boy. Know what I think? I think is time for you get married, eh."

The waitress brought a bottle of beer to the table. John took the opportunity not to respond by taking a long quaff directly from the bottle, simultaneously handing the waitress the glass.

"Don't need the glass."

"Sorry. Forgot." As she walked away, John's eyes followed her again.

George leaned across the table conspiratorially. "I sure is time for you get married. You listen?"

"I don't need to get married, George."

"Before your Saint mother she die, God forgive her, I promise that I get you marry."

"Yeah, well..."

"I promise your Saint mother, God forgive her, you have children. Greek

children. You understand?"

"Sure."

"Sure you sure?"

"I know what you mean."

"Your Saint mother, Saint father, God forgive them, roll in grave if you make foreign baby. Children they must be Greek, Giani."

"Why?"

"Why? Why? What you mean, why?"

"Why do they have to be anything other than children?"

George flipped the string of komboloi beads nervously back and forth across his fist.

"Because Japanese marry Japanese and Mexican marry Mexican. For the race. To no forget tradition."

John was irritated by the coercive word. Tradition. He considered it a manipulative word. Tradition. That inflexible, habitual enslaver of progress, change, diversity, ambition and aspiration. The hereditary buttress of convention, sidekick of tribalism, consort of aristocracy, ally of suppression, crony of corpus juris, supporter of exploitation, accomplice to death by stoning.

"The strangling jock strap," he mumbled inaudibly. That hallucinating Chimera, tenacious, unalterable, unyielding; invariably looking back at a vainglorious past, intimidating the promise of the future.

He had dedicated himself to pursuing an anguished apostasy that painfully extirpated, from the deepest recesses of his psyche, that inconsequential baggage of unsolicited obligations received, without the possibility of protest, at

birth. He made the conscious decision to betray the society to which he belonged by virtue of family; some absurdly claiming, by blood. He rejected unquestioning loyalty and allegiance to eternal ancestors. John endeavored to exist subservient to the constraints of no god, no religion, no government, no institution, no philosophy, and no person. A prerogative of self-determination.

"My race is American, George," he replied categorically.

"There is no such thing!"

"Yes there is. We're all the races in the world mixed together, living and thinking as Americans. American is a way of life. A state of mind."

"Bravo! Po, po, po. I no know you politician," George retorted mockingly, expressing his profound disdain. "Is possible you forget glorious history of your country?"

"America?" John teased provocatively.

"Eise vlakas, vre?!" The kombloi beads slammed noisily against the table under the force of George's open palm. John was surprised by the sudden and unexpected vehemence, which George hastily controlled with visible effort.

"Okay. Okay. What you care about history, eh? You young. You care about eat hamburger, drink beer and look big waitress ass!" George passed the smooth beads sullenly, one by one, between his thumb and forefinger as though the kombloi were a rosary. "But you Orthodox. Your children be Greek Orthodox. It original church of Christ. Catholic heresy start 1054! Protestant heresy sixteenth century!"

"I'm not religious. I don't go to church, George."

"So? I also no go church, but I Greek Orthodox."

"Why is that?"

"You think you Socrates, eh? Question. Question. Always question. Okay. Okay,

I tell you. I baptize in church. I marry in church. And when I die, priest will say beautiful talk over me in church!"

"Is that enough to get through the Pearly Gates?"

"Sometime I go Easter...Christmas..." George continued apologetically.

"Yeah. But is that enough?"

George's features creased with irritation. "Enough? Enough? I no know!" he responded with annoyance, then added frivolously "I ask God when I see him and tell you, Giani."

"I may see him before you do, George. Life has no guarantees."

"Ah! You smart boy, my Giani." George leaned across the table and slapped him playfully on the cheek. An affectionate caress. "My Gianaki. You think change subject, eh? No. You Greek and must to marry Greek girl."

"I don't know any Greek girls."

"Yes you do."

"No, I don't."

"Yes, you do."

"Ha! Who?"

"My daughter."

A silence.

"Argie?"

"Ne. Argie. My daughter, Argie."

Another silence.

“What wrong with Argie?”

“No. Nothing’s wrong with Argie. I grew up with Argie.”

“So?”

“I knew Argie when she had pigtails and wore braces. We played stickball together.”

John remembered when, as children, they once hid behind bushes in the park to urinate and inadvertently discovered that fascinating difference of their physical bodies. They touched each other, and in that breathless fear of parental wrath at their discovery, never played alone together again.

“Now she woman.”

“She’s your daughter, George!”

“So?”

“Listen, George, let’s talk about something else. I don’t want to get married. I’m not interested in getting married. I’m happy just the way I am.”

Geez!, he thought. This was the reason he had always avoided meeting Greek girls. Precisely because everyone wanted to marry you off. A Greek girl wasn’t just some girl you maybe were or weren’t screwing, she became immediately, on the first date, your fiancée! That was why, more than anything else, he had never jumped on Argie’s bones. Geez! And now her dad was offering her like some unnecessary commodity he wanted to discard.

“Ne? Happy? Ne? Look you! Shirt wrinkle. Skinny. Come here every night eat hamburger! A wife she will care to you. Wash shirt, mend sock, clean house, cook. Argie cook good. You eat avgolemono, mousaka, kai arnaki, salata horiatika with olive oil. Put fat on bone. You listen?”

"No."

"Giani, marry my daughter. She good girl. Decent. Argie never have boyfriend, I no let her. Only man touch my Argie be man she marry. After wedding in church! She smart, but that no problema, she be good wife."

John drank from his bottle of beer in lieu of a reply. The image of his mother came to mind, and his mouth twisted into an ironic smile as he imagined her irritation at what she would certainly consider George's audacity and impertinence. She frequently mentioned, in reference to his newly acquired wealth, that he had worked as a field hand in the old country; shoeless, clothed in rags, his meal at lunchtime consisting of a lemon prudently guarded in his pants pocket. Offering his daughter to her son was unquestionably an act of unmitigated, ostentatious pretentiousness! "As though residing in this country eliminated class barriers," she would surely have remarked.

George sighed. Shifting the beads through his fingers, he added somewhat reluctantly, "I also give to you diner for dowry. This good diner, Giani. Good business."

"I'm a writer, George."

"Okay! Okay! So you writer! Okay, writer, you sit here. This table. Here!" Exasperated, George thumped his thick, short fingered farmers hand for emphasis on the tabletop.

"You write, watch people work, count money every night after close. This good place to write!"

The waitress brought the hamburger special and placed it in front of John. As she walked away, he forced himself to look out the window at the traffic, embarrassed by his shrieking hormones that made patent his awkwardly obvious need.

"So what you say?"

John took a bite from the hamburger and chewed slowly, methodically, making time.

"So what you say?" George insisted.

"If you give me the diner, what are you going to do?" John asked with his mouth full.

"I go back to Old Country."

He looked at George questioningly, chewing.

"To leave bones. Like do your Saint mother, Saint father, God forgive them. They put my bones in chapel behind church, with bones of family. Here foreign country, I rot in hole in foreign ground."

"Let me think about it, George."

"Think about it?"

"Yeah. Listen, thank you. I really mean it. Thank you. Efha...Risto...Poli..." he attempted in a halting, insecure Greek, then repeated more fluently and resolutely, "Efharisto poli. I mean I appreciate your offer and all, you know..."

"Offer? Offer!" George stood up suddenly, with surprising agility, although looking weary, feeling defeated and humiliated. Slipping the kombloi beads back into his pocket, he leaned over the table to bring his face closer to John: "Don't think long. Somebody else take my Argie," he snapped his fingers for emphasis, "under your nose, eh!"

Without another word, George turned and waddled resolutely away.

John put his hamburger down and drank lustily from the bottle of beer, relieved that George had left. Like his deceased parents, George was the past. His was a new generation, a different mentality. He was the immediate future.

Pulling a small notebook from his pocket, he began scribbling the conversation that had just taken place, reluctant to trust its subtleties to memory. He felt inspired, this was indispensable material. Finished, he replaced the notebook

with satisfaction. His apartment was stacked with notebooks just like this one, all carefully labeled and secured in the wood-slat produce crates he scavenged from the garbage in the alley next to the diner.

His mind wandered to that poignantly stressful time when, as a young boy, he experienced firsthand the schizophrenic world that was his as an immigrant's child. His parents had enrolled him in a parochial school which divided his education between English and Greek. He was instructed, indoctrinated, he would later bitterly allege, with the values of a distant, irrelevant homeland. Augmenting his disaffection, upon crossing the threshold into his home, the only permitted idiom of communication was Greek; the only acceptable cultural behavior, that of a country rapidly fading from his memory.

He never invited American friends to his home, embarrassed they would find the surroundings and his parents peculiar. The oversized living room furniture was covered in transparent plastic, the bare walls were devoid of decoration except for a lithograph of Saint Fanourios with the eternal flickering votive candle at his feet, and draped in a corner, the Greek flag that hung from the window every year on the 25th of March to commemorate Independence Day.

Only on one occasion, as a college student, he unavoidably, and reluctantly, permitted a clandestine American sweetheart to accompany him into this esoteric inner sanctum.

"I have to pick up some stuff I forgot. I'll be right out."

"I'll go with you."

"No. That's o.k. I'll just be a minute."

"Can't I go into your house?"

"I'll just be a minute."

"Can't I go with you?"

"Well, yeah. It's o.k. If you really want to."

They were, as fate would have it, confronted by his mother. She was polite to the young woman, but when he later returned alone, she angrily challenged him.

"You never to bring putanas to house! Understand?"

"She isn't a putana, mom. She's a student, she goes to my college. We have classes together, I was just taking her home."

"Do not lose the respect! Girl who walk alone with boy is putana! Into my house will come only girl you to marry. Greek girl you to marry! Understand?"

"Geez!"