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I OWE BUCKNELL \$300

This book is my love song to capitalism. *Capitalism works*. Let me say it again: It works! And—I'm living proof—it can work for anybody and everybody. Blacks and whites and browns and everyone in between. Absolutely anybody is entitled to dream big, and absolutely everybody *should* dream big. I did. Show me where the silver spoon was in my mouth. I've got to argue profoundly and passionately: I'm the American Dream.

I grew up in Roslyn Heights, Long Island, during World War II and just after. There was never much money. My father was an excellent plumber, though not a financially successful one; we lived from paycheck to paycheck. Because he couldn't make enough to provide for the family, my mother had to go to work: she got a job at the school cafeteria, and the little bit she brought in helped make ends meet. But I didn't realize that I was poor, and I had a wonderful childhood.

Just over the hill from Roslyn was a vast tract of hills where sand and gravel were mined. The area was called Cow Bay, and

Cow Bay sand was much sought after for all kinds of construction in New York City: roads, sidewalks, building infrastructure—anyplace concrete was used. Both my grandfathers came over from Italy when they were young, and both of them worked in the sand pits. It was dangerous work; there were avalanches all the time. My father's father, who had a good business head, also had a store in the pits—the company store, where he sold the miners and families vegetables and canned goods and you-name-it. And he bought real estate; owning property was the name of the game for immigrants, the road to riches. My grandfather bought a lot of properties that eventually became very valuable, but then in 1932 he was killed by a car; nobody ever found out who hit him. After he died, his sons fought over who was going to pay the tax bills on the properties, and none of them did, so the real estate was sold to cover tax liens.

My father's father died three years before I was born, and my father's mother had died in 1919, in the flu epidemic, so I never met her either. My mother's parents, I knew. My maternal grandparents were working people. My grandmother stayed home. My grandfather had left school when he was six years old and never went again. When he died in 1952, at seventy-two, he couldn't read or write, English or Italian.

My grandfather was a peasant. He was a lovely man, and from the time he was six years old until the day he died, he had a shovel in his hand. His right hand was totally deformed; the thumb had lost the ability to bend from sixty years of holding a shovel. His only entertainment was the opera on Saturday afternoons. He would work all week at the sand pits, then work odd jobs on Saturday morning. When he came home, my grandmother would have the bath ready for him, and he'd clean himself up. He always wore a vest, suit pants, and high-top black shoes, the kind with the hooks and eyelets. When the shoes got too old, they became his work shoes.

He would take his bath, get dressed, and eat lunch. He was a vegetarian; his favorite meal was fried peppers and potatoes and a piece of bread and a little bit of homemade wine. Saturday afternoon he'd eat his lunch, then he'd go under the arbor—he never owned a house; he always rented—and listen to the Metropolitan Opera, sponsored by Texaco, on the radio station WJZ. Last year, I was invited to the Metropolitan Opera's performance of *La bohème*, and I had dinner beforehand with the chairwoman of the Met, Ann Ziff. All through the meal and the performance I was thinking to myself, "Holy smokes, if my grandpa could see me now."

There was a man who lived in Beacon Hill, a nice neighborhood, his name was Mr. Davis. He was some sort of official for the State of New York, in the Transportation Department. My grandfather used to work on weekends at Mr. Davis's house; he would cut the lawn, do pruning and stuff. And Mr. Davis got him a job working on the roads. In those days, in the wintertime, they didn't have mechanical sanders; they had two guys in the back of a truck throwing sand over the side onto the snowy roads. That was one of my grandfather's jobs. It was steady work. And he had better benefits, such as they were; they weren't much, but at least it was better than the sand pits, and it wasn't as dangerous, though there was always a chance (especially at night) that one guy might hit the other with his shovel by accident.

My grandfather was working at Mr. Davis's house on a Saturday in August of 1952 when he reached for a branch to cut it and he had a stroke. He died four days later. Clearly, he had AFib—atrial fibrillation. But they didn't have Coumadin then; they didn't have beta-blockers. I have AFib, and I take a blood thinner. History. Genetics.

My parents, Angelina Teresa and John Francis Langone—Angie and John—were also very simple people. Neither of them

ever got close to graduating from high school. My mother dropped out in the seventh grade. My father didn't want to work in the sand pits, so he went to trade school and learned to be a plumber. But for four years during the Depression, 1930 to 1934 (this was before I was born), my father didn't work at all, not only because of economic conditions, but also because of his health: he had colitis, and he was also manic-depressive. For four years, my parents effectively relied on the help of lots of relatives and friends.

By the time I was born, in September 1935, my father was working again, but my parents were still struggling financially. During World War II, my father worked in the Jakobson shipyard in Oyster Bay, putting plumbing in ships to be used in the war effort; my mother volunteered at the elementary school across the street from our house, Roslyn Heights Elementary School, helping to feed what were then called undernourished children. The government sent surplus food to feed these poor kids. After she'd done this for a few years, they opened a cafeteria in the school, for all the kids, and they asked my mom if she'd like a job.

Every morning she would make me breakfast and fix my lunch ahead of time—always the same thing, my favorite, American cheese on white bread—and then walk to work in the cafeteria. My mother was an incredibly sensitive person. She would identify kids who she knew were having a tough time, whether they had mental problems or learning problems, whatever it was, and make a special effort to be good to them.

I never wanted to eat in the cafeteria, because my mom worked there, so I would come home every day for lunch. Sometimes I brought a friend home with me: Arthur Kimball, a black kid. His nickname was Bubba. When my mother knew Bubba was going to come home with me, she would make him a sandwich too.

Our address was 58 St. Marks Place, Roslyn Heights. My parents bought the house in 1944 for \$4,000; I can remember my fa-

ther getting the mortgage. The payment was something like \$28 a month. It was a small house, on a fifty-by-hundred-foot plot of land, backed up against the hill that led down to the railroad tracks. The house had an unfinished basement, with a coal furnace; on the first floor, there was a dining room, a living room, and a kitchen, with a little pantry. In the pantry was an icebox. The man who used to bring the ice came every three or four days. He had a piece of canvas on his shoulder, and he had ice tongs, and he had a chunk of ice sitting on the canvas. The icebox was wooden, and it had two compartments, one for the food on the bottom and one on top for the ice.

Upstairs there were three bedrooms. My brother, Mike—he was five years older—and I stayed in one, my parents stayed in another, and from time to time my parents would rent out the third bedroom, say if there was a new schoolteacher who needed a place to stay before getting settled.

My father found work as often as he could. He was a union plumber—Local 457, the Plumbers Union—so if he was on a job and the job wound up, he'd be out of work until he found another.

Dad was very meticulous and neat. Whenever a job ended, he'd go home and tell my mother, and she'd wash his coveralls. They had an old-fashioned washing machine, the kind with the agitator that went back and forth and a hand-cranked wringer on top. The next morning, his coveralls would be nice and folded, and he'd take his metal lunch pail with the thermos in it and go out in his car and look for union work. He'd drive all over, from job to job to job, and just ask. If he found a job at eleven o'clock in the morning, he'd say, "Can I start now?" And usually the foreman would say, "Sure. You want to start now? Start now."

Local 457 used to meet in Glen Cove, two towns over. The guys in the union hall liked my dad, but one day the union delegate came to the house and said, "You know, Johnny, it's not fair.

We've got guys down at the hall who are sitting there for days on end, and you're always getting a job." My father said, "Look, I've got two children; I need to pay my bills. When I lose a job, I can't sit at the union hall playing pinochle waiting for a boss to call in for a plumber. I get in my car and I go look for work." That's what the union plumbers did; they'd sit there waiting for work and playing pinochle all day, then go home.

"I'm in the union," my father told the delegate. "I pay my dues. The only difference is, I don't wait for somebody to call me. I go find them. I'm just going to keep doing what I'm doing." The union officials didn't like it; that was one measure of control they wanted to have over the members.

My dad worked as a self-employed plumber for a couple of years, 1948 to 1950. But he had a bad problem. He wouldn't send people bills. He'd send someone a bill three years after the work was done. He'd finished the work long ago, and the person would get the bill and say, "Hey . . ."

It wasn't out of any charitable impulse; he was just a bad businessman. He'd use his credit to the extent he could at the supply house, and it was only when he reached the point where he had no more credit that he'd start sending people bills. I remember my brother used to type them out for him, on a little Smith Corona portable typewriter, on these forms he'd had printed up. My father used to sit next to my brother and say, "Okay, two fittings, a half inch by three-quarters inch, fourteen feet of copper tubing . . ." And my brother used to send the bills.

My dad had good initiative but poor follow-through. I was different. I began working at age eleven. I was always on the lookout for opportunities, and I loved making money. I started out delivering newspapers. Then one Christmas I took some of my paper-delivery money and went to a greenhouse where they were selling Christmas wreaths for seventy-five cents each and bought

a couple dozen. I had a broomstick with me—just the stick, without the broom head—and two kids I'd hired for a half buck each. We slid all the wreaths onto the broomstick, each kid took one end, and we went door to door. I charged a buck-fifty apiece for the wreaths and netted a nice profit.

My mother said to me one night, "You know, you're going to be very successful." I said, "How is that, Mom?" She said, "Because money skips generations. Your father's father was very successful. Your father and his brothers did the best they could, but not much came of it. Now it's your turn."