

HOME FIELDS

*Coast Guard Academy Football Coach
Recounts the Unfulfilled Lives of World War II*



BILL GEORGE

PRAISE FOR
HOME FIELDS

“From beginning to end, Coach Bill George crafts a beautifully written, compelling story of compassion and courage that will leave readers yearning for more. This deeply sensitive, inspiring novel artfully maneuvers between the past and the present, providing a poignant view into the personal lives of Syrian immigrants—real people who struggled to fulfill their hopes and dreams in a world that wasn’t always fair. *Home Fields* is more than a story; it’s a highly relatable, personal testimony to strength of character that takes the reader on an emotional journey of self-discovery.”

—Sandra Stosz, Vice Admiral, US Coast Guard (Ret.), Author of
Breaking Ice & Breaking Glass: Leading in Uncharted Waters

“Bill George’s *Home Fields* provides all readers with an emotionally compelling story whose core reflects selfless commitment to family, faith, and country. He brilliantly shares his broad personal experience in roles as leader, coach, teacher, proud patriot, husband, father, and caregiver; Bill reverently and respectfully illustrates to us timeless life values of love, humility, and sacrifice; this multigenerational narrative also shows us genuine empathy for community, courage, perseverance, tragedy, illness, and loss. *Home Fields* is inspiring and deeply heartfelt!”

—Jeffrey Colt, Major General (Ret.), US Army

“As a former Coast Guard Academy football co-captain and former commandant, I have had many occasions to speak with Bill George and talk to his football teams. Bill has always understood that sports at the Coast Guard Academy become a metaphor for service as a Coast Guard officer. The discipline and teamwork required to compete on athletic fields becomes operative when a boarding officer leads a team boarding a drug-laden boat or positions a helicopter for a hoist to save a life. In *Home Fields*, Bill has created a very personal, intergenerational link that is framed by selfless service to the nation. He also effectively captures the human dynamic within families who shoulder the burden of taking care of each other while meeting the day-to-day challenges of their profession. These are timeless lessons in life, and Bill teaches us all.”

—Thad W. Allen, Admiral, US Coast Guard (Ret.)

“*Home Fields* is a must-read story about how family history shapes the life of a father, son, and college football coach and the enduring love of family in the most challenging situations. Coach Bill George served as a positive mentor that influenced and shaped hundreds of leaders in the United States Coast Guard.”

—John Loose, Assistant Head Football Coach, Army West Point,
Co-Founder of Lauren’s First and Goal Foundation

“I’ve had the honor of being a hospice RN for twenty-eight years. This memoir illuminates with stark honesty the tenderness, poignancy, and struggles of caring for a loved one at the end of life. As you read, timeless gifts are seared into your heart as childhood memories of love and loss are shared.”

—Sandra Kim, RN, BN, BS, CHPN

“As the last words of *Home Fields* jumped off the page, I closed the book and sat in a dark room by myself with tears in my eyes. I have admired Bill, or ‘Monker’ as I have called him, for over fifty years; now my admiration turned to great love and immense respect. *Home Fields* is a must-read for anyone who has been or will become a caregiver, a fan of college football, a veteran, a student of history, or anyone who is faced with challenges they may not understand. COVID robbed me of attending my own father’s funeral, a man just like Casper, gentle, humble, loving and close to God. *Home Fields* allowed me to finally and properly mourn my dad’s passing, and for that I will be forever grateful to this extraordinary work. Bravo, Monker!!”

—Paul D. Kim, MD, Executive Director, Veterans Health Administration Office of Emergency Management

“A memoir that is at once a dying father’s and a son’s, a wife’s and a daughter’s. Filled with moments that break your heart and others that send your soul skyward, in *Home Fields*, Bill George paints a delicate tribute to his family, to the game of football, to the boys he inspired and that inspired him, and to a generation that sacrificed everything.”

—Rona Simmons, Author of *A Gathering of Men*

“Honor, respect, and devotion to duty are the core values of the Coast Guard Academy. Coach George gives you a glimpse of what it’s like to be a coach, father, husband, and son. Great book and outstanding read.”

—C. C. Grant, Head Football Coach, US Coast Guard Academy

“I left Myers, and after two and a half years on the front lines, I came home and lived with the scars of war alive inside of me. So many others never came home.”

—George “Gus” Isaac, Army Company L, 30th Infantry 3rd Division, Bronze Star, Purple Heart

“I was immediately pulled into the heartfelt story of a Division III football coach’s family in New London, CT, that was inextricably tied to a group of children growing up in Upstate New York. Having worked at the Coast Guard Academy for the past eighteen years, many of the names and personalities were familiar yet seen anew through the eyes of Coach Bill George. Coach reveals himself as a vulnerable, loving, and uncertain son, husband, and father to his family as he struggles through the challenges that his father, wife, and daughter present, while revealing the strength, compassion, and determination of a coach.

“His narrative on his own relationship with religion, God, and heaven was so relatable as told through the conversations he had late at night with his father. But with every turn of human struggle in caring for his dying father are bright spots of youthful conversations on life seen fresh and new by his daughter, Lila. Equally compelling is the counternarrative of Puppy Moses and his friends growing up in a Syrian village in Upstate New York as the group experiences life and death as children and eventually on the shores of Normandy during World War II. While some certainty of life and death of the characters is inevitable, it unfolds with anticipation of a more hopeful future.”

—Andrea Marcille, Captain, USCG (Ret.)

“I read this book through the lens of a son, a father, a grandfather, an athlete, and a coach. Bill hits on all aspects with his amazing storytelling ability, starting with the Greatest Generation and through his journey as the head coach of the United States Coast Guard Academy.”

—David Palmer, Major League Baseball Pitcher for Twelve Seasons, New York State Baseball Hall of Fame

*Home Fields:
Coast Guard Academy Football Coach Recounts
the Unfulfilled Lives of World War II*

by Bill George

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Coast Guard Academy Football Coach Recounts
the Unfulfilled Lives of World War II

BILL GEORGE



VIRGINIA BEACH
CAPE CHARLES

DEDICATION

To Lila, who came from heaven; to Anna and Casper, who left for heaven; and to my wife, Nancy, who lovingly took care of us all.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

The people, places, and historic events referenced in Home Fields are real. Character dialogue, and much of the intricacies portrayed throughout this novel, are what I imagined was said or occurred at the time based upon interviews and research. Myers, New York was, in fact, the home to my father and many of the characters of the World War II generation. Also real and much admired are the players, coaches, and military leaders who I encountered during my years as head football coach of the US Coast Guard Academy.

CHAPTER 1

A thin, white cloud lies motionless above the distant tree line, pressing against the endless, blue horizon as if it were an angel waiting for the perfect moment to travel between this life and the next. The tree line slopes down to the deep, still waters of the Thames River, which seems stagnant like a New England lake in the heat of a fading August afternoon. The Thames, however, rushes past in a silent, eerie way as it flows to the Atlantic.

The sun behind me pulls the life of the day westward, leaving my aging shadow stranded on the fifty-yard line of Cadet Memorial Field, in the middle of the United States Coast Guard Academy in New London, Connecticut. By the time the sun of an August summer day in 2014 fully sets, and my fifty-six-year-old shadow has blended into the darkness, I will have begun my sixteenth season as head football coach at the Coast Guard Academy. I study my silhouette and wonder if shadows stay here forever, following around our loved ones long after we are gone. My shadow stays frozen as if it is waiting for my next move. Maybe it's impatient for me to do something good for the world and will move on to wait for someone else. I gaze up to the vast, blue sky again, and far to the left I notice two small clouds painted pink by the departing sun. My eyes shift back to the thin, white cloud, which slowly disappears. There must be a spot, somewhere in the distance beyond the cloud, where the trees blend into the horizon and the heavens touch the earth, a spot we cannot see, where all the past souls travel back and forth between this life and another to live within our hearts. Or maybe it is us, I wonder, the

living, who have traveled back to serve as angels and heal the world, here and now and only once.

“Hello, Daddy!” Four-and-a-half-year-old toothpick legs, as white as the cloud, race across my shadow from left to right. Her curly, orange hair follows her like a trailing flame. She curves her running path into the shade of the oak trees, which cover half of the south end zone. “Hello, Gido,” she says, using the Arabic word for grandfather, as she comes to a halt and lays her head in the lap of a withered, dying man who sits sleeping in a wheelchair provided by hospice care.

My eighty-seven-year-old father’s heavy eyelids rise and the whites of his eyes peer down from his vacant skull. His bony fingers, wrapped with deep blue veins, rest on her sweaty forehead. His tan arms, covered with pale blotches, are in deep contrast to hers. The two of them stay frozen in an exhausted embrace, one exhausted from youth, the other from life. His bald head still holds a few strands of his once thick, white hair, which now covers my head, as well. With great effort, he raises his eyes to me as I approach and then quickly lets them droop to Lila.

“I love you, Gido,” Lila says, raising her blue eyes to my father. His touch on her head is gentle; he could not even leave a fingerprint.

“Lila Marguerite.” Casper whispers her first and middle name into the evening. “You were sent from heaven.” He smiles softly as he continues to whisper. “I love you more than anybody ever loved anybody.”

Lila looks up and smiles back at Casper. She climbs onto his lap and takes his glasses out of his pocket and puts them on his long nose and around his big ears. She delicately studies the features of his head with slow, soft touches from her tiny fingers. She does not realize the muscles of his skull have recessed. All she sees is his loving face.

“Lila,” calls my wife Nancy, seated a few feet behind the wheelchair on the end zone padding. “Stay with Gido in the shade.” At fifty-five, her petite frame and cropped blonde hair disguise her age. Her life was spent dreaming of being a mother and when she was fifty-one

and I was fifty-two, we adopted the first and only child for either of us, Lila, who was placed in our arms at one-minute old. Lila was a result of Nancy's never-dying quest.

"She thinks he is her brother." Nancy says to me as I sit next to her.

"Those boys," Casper says. "Why do I think of those boys so much lately and those two girls?" His whispering voice carries an echo of sadness.

"I don't know what he thinks," I say to Nancy. "I do know that Lila has brought him back to life. The hospice nurses and caregivers love Casper, and once they cut out all of his meds his mind became clearer, but Lila is keeping him alive."

"Those boys," Casper tearfully whispers again.

Nancy pauses. "I know at least she brought his memory back to life."

I start to think that Lila's youth has somehow ignited Casper's. "I don't know," I wonder aloud to Nancy. "Maybe those boys and the other children he grew up with never left him. Maybe they were with him all along. Maybe they are more than a memory. He told me all of those stories years ago and now they are coming alive again."

Nancy gives me a quizzical glance. "You sound as confused as Casper."

"You always say Lila was a miracle and you say miracles can multiply," I answer as I move beside Casper and Lila.

Casper's eyes open wider, and I can tell his mind is suddenly clearer for a moment. "Why do I think of Myers and those boys and those girls?" Casper asks, referring to his childhood in the tiny village of Myers, New York. "Does Lila make me think of them?" Then his eyelids droop again, nearly shut, and I cannot not tell if he is looking at me through the cracks.

"I am here, Gido," Lila says to Casper as she gently pats his face. "I am here," she repeats as if she believes her love will cure all his ills.

My attention abruptly shifts to the upcoming Coast Guard football season and my eyes search the area around the stadium for

a player, any player, but I see none.

The bleachers of the stadium run up into a twenty-foot stone wall that surrounds half of the stands and gives it a touch of Roman architecture. The players will soon all be beyond the wall, seated for lectures in the large McAllister Hall, the engineering building at the back of the stadium, waiting for me to walk in and start the football season. The team has arrived at the Academy after a summer of military training, and before the return of the rest of the Corps of Cadets, giving up a precious week of summer leave to begin the football season.

I look away from the bleachers and out to the Thames River again. *It's like Myers and Cayuga Lake*, I think. *A train runs through a national service academy and along the water.* The scene reminds me of Cayuga Lake and the train that runs along its eastern shore and through the hamlet of Myers. My mind drifts back to Casper and his childhood in Myers. I remember stories told of the town years ago, and now they are coming back to Casper, and me.

I close my eyes to football for a moment and let Casper open my memory to Myers.



In May of 1935, Takla (pronounced *Tutla*) Moses watched the morning sunshine creep into the bedroom of her youngest child. The sunshine moved like a soothing wave that did not recede, but instead stayed ashore and covered her twelve-year-old son like a warm blanket.

The sun was cresting above the hills and into the tiny valley of Myers, which lay almost directly on Cayuga Lake. Route 34 ran from the city of Ithaca and up the east side of the lake to Auburn. Seven miles north of Ithaca, at a crossroads, was the Ludlowville school. Ludlowville Road led, of course, to the village of Ludlowville. The left turn, Myers Lane, sloped down toward Cayuga Lake and into the

valley of Myers, where the International Salt Company had created a community for its Syrian and immigrant workers. The only stop for the immigrants between Syria and their new paradise had been Ellis Island.

All along sloping Myers Lane were small, two-story houses built by International Salt—all two-stories with two bedrooms, coal furnaces and no indoor toilets. They were mansions to the immigrants. At the bottom of the hill, where Myers Lane turned right, was the only grocery store, Myers Grocery, which was smaller than the houses. Alongside the store was a short dirt road, which led away from Myers Lane and back to the Moses house.

Myers Lane continued toward a bridge about twenty yards long that crossed Salmon Creek. The road forked thirty yards after the bridge. The left turn led to the salt plant, which was on the lake. There, salt mined from the ground was processed. The road split to the right, curving upward and connected back to Route 34, led to Syrian Hill, which overlooked Cayuga Lake and the salt plant. The road that sloped down into Myers was called American Hill because most of the people were not first-generation immigrants. In the valley, where the Moses house stood, there were a few Syrian families, a family from Poland and another from Czechoslovakia. At the center of the village was the Eastern Orthodox Church, perched on the end of Syrian Hill, overlooking the valley of Myers, Cayuga Lake and the salt plant.

Takla Moses stretched her thick calves and leaned her stocky frame over the youngest of her seven children. “My baby,” she sighed as she thought, *My twelve-year-old little baby. You will always be my little baby.*

She wondered if the demands of survival had made her too mechanical with her first six children, or if it was the gentle, shy kindness she saw in her youngest boy that made her feel a deeper affection for him. Or perhaps it was the fact that he did not talk until he was five and then suddenly spoke in full sentences. *He was*

silent for so long. I thought he was deaf, she thought. But no, he was studying the world, letting all the good in the world enter his heart, and stopping all the evil.

“Michael, I will kiss you while you sleep. You will feel it, but you will not know I kissed you. I love you,” she whispered, barely mouthing the words. “If you felt my kiss in your dreams, maybe it is trapped within your heart or dreams. I wonder if long after I am in heaven you will feel that kiss in your dreams and it will awaken you then. And you know I will love you forever, even from heaven.”

Takla Moses looked at Michael’s feet and gently touched each of his toes on one foot. “One, two, three, four, five,” she whispered to herself. *You were born right in this room and it seems like only moments ago. I counted your toes on the day you were born and I have counted your toes every day I have seen you sleeping since that day.*

She ran her fingers through his bushy, black hair. *He looks like my husband when he was young and my other two sons, she thought. And he has hair like his four sisters.*

When Michael Moses opened his eyes, his mother bent down, cupped his face and kissed him as if he were only a minute old.

The room he shared with his brothers was empty, as was his sisters’ room. He followed his mother downstairs to the kitchen next to a small living room, which turned into his mother and father’s bedroom every night.

Michael Moses ate his breakfast quietly. He slowly broke off pieces of flat, round loaves of Syrian bread and dipped it into a bowl filled with *shanklish*, a Syrian cheese that tasted like feta made from aged cottage cheese. It was the size of a baseball, covered with oregano and swimming in olive oil. He felt the house shake lightly from a train, which traveled only a hundred feet behind his house as it traveled through Myers on its journey up and down the east side of the lake. He ignored it in the daytime but at night, when he lay awake, he would listen to the tracks rattle as the cargo cars rolled by. When he finished breakfast, he walked with his mother from

his house to Myers Grocery, which was only a hundred feet in the opposite direction of the tracks.

On the store's cement porch, his mother met with two other Syrian ladies, Helanie, the wife of Abraham George, who ran the grocery store, and Helanie's sister, Atina Saleem. They were about her age, but thinner and taller than Takla. The sister's maiden name was also Moses, but their families weren't related. They all wore dull-colored flowered dresses, simply made and fit for housework. Their true faces were hidden behind the tired mask of hard immigration woes. Takla bent to kiss her son and went into the store.

Michael peeked inside to see if he could see two of Atina's five children, Michael and Martha, but he did not. He saw Abraham, the grocer, standing near the small butcher's block in front of a wall lined by cans and behind a glass counter with penny candy. He looked for Abraham's son Casper, who was four years younger. Casper had two younger brothers, Alfred, called Otsie, and Nicholas. Abraham caught his eye through the glass and smiled. He was shorter than his wife, Helanie, and he spoke gently. Abraham had traveled to America on the *Lusitania* and left a daughter and his son Abraham Jr., who everyone called George, behind in Syria along with Abraham's wife. When the RMS *Lusitania* sank on its return voyage, World War I had begun, and Abraham's family was stranded. His daughter died in Syria before he ever saw her again. Helanie and George had to wait until the end of the war to rejoin Abraham in America. Abraham had spent years working in the salt plant and then opened Myers Grocery.

Michael turned away from the window and stepped his stocky frame out into the street. He looked around and paused; he had felt confused lately. He could feel himself maturing emotionally but he did not understand the changes. He looked to where the road sloped toward American Hill, a hovel where non-Syrian workers lived.

Myers, he thought. It is like the rest of the world but I also think it is not. I think someone like the President of the United States could stop the sad stories of the world, but I also wonder if I could, too.

Michael started down Myers Road past a row house that looked just like his. Two houses before the bridge he stopped at the small cement pillars marking the entrance to the Georges' house. He waited a few minutes, but no one appeared. He then walked to the bridge, stopped and leaned over and watched the clear, thin water of the creek run beneath the bridge. He watched the water run over the gravel and create white bubbles that faded as they floated downstream and entered a wider, quiet pool where he swam in the summers. The pool stretched beneath the railroad trestle and then moved on to Cayuga Lake. Michael lifted his head up and looked out to where the mouth of the creek flowed into the shallows of the deep lake.

He looked to where the creek ran against the steep shale bank for a hundred yards downstream until it reached the bridge. The small bridge was a truss type with a large metal lattice skeleton extending up from both sides and spanning overhead its entire length. The deck of the bridge was supported on each end by two concrete and metal girders. From where he stood, he could see a part of the big bridge, which ran along Route 34B and over the creek. *The bridges, he thought, run over the same creek, but one is so high and big and the other is so small and short. Yet they both take people to the same place.*

Michael leaned his head back and felt the cool breeze of the May morning blend with sunshine that covered his face. When he opened his eyes, he immediately noticed the beauty of the cumulus clouds racing across the sky. Almost instantly, he felt a tap on his arm.

"What do you see?" Casper George asked.

Michael looked at Casper and thought back to when he was five and did not speak out loud. He thought back at how his mother, Takla, would visit with Helanie in the store or at their house, worried about him, thinking he was deaf. When he was alone with baby Casper, he started to talk to him, sometimes in baby talk and sometimes with his own words. Michael remembered a simple story he would repeat over and over to Casper.

"Do you remember when I would tell you the story of the good

cat and the bad cat?" Michael asked Casper.

"Yes, but tell me again," Casper smiled.

"The bad cat went from house to house on the Syrian Hill and asked everyone, 'Do you have any candy for me?' Everyone would say, 'No, we have no candy for the bad cat.' Then the bad cat would walk from the Syrian Hill down to your house and ask you, 'Do you have candy for me?' And you said to him, 'I do not have any candy for the bad cat.' Then he would stop at your father's store and ask everyone at the store for candy and everyone would say, 'No candy for the bad cat.' Then the good cat would go to everyone's house on the Syrian Hill and ask, 'Do you have any candy for me?' and everyone would say yes and give him candy. Then the good cat would walk down the hill to your house and ask you for candy and you would say, 'Yes, I have candy for you.'"

Michael finished the story, saying, "The good cat would go to the store and then ask for candy, and everyone would give the good cat candy."

"Why did one cat get candy and one cat did not get any?" Casper asked.

"The good cat helped people who needed help. He shared things. The bad cat, he was not really a bad cat, he just did not share, he did not help other people," Michael explained.

"Oh," was all Casper said back, although smiling.

"Yes, you know it well. Now you can tell it someday to another little child," Michael said to Casper.

Michael suddenly realized that repeating the story to Casper is what drew his own voice outward. *I still keep most of my thoughts to myself.*

"You stand on the bridge a lot. I can see you from my house," Casper said.

Michael wanted to say something, but he did not answer. *Maybe, he thought, maybe if I practice on Casper like I did with the cat story, I can practice expressing my thoughts. Maybe someday I will be able*

to tell others what I really think.

Michael began to speak softly. "The clouds are big and white like giant bubbles, sometimes they have a shade of gray underneath the white, or sometimes a shade of orange or pink around them. The bubbles of the clouds change every moment, like a painting that is not finished. Every day we forget what they looked like yesterday. We might remember that they were beautiful, but we forget what they looked like. They are always more beautiful than the day before. Almost always we walk by them day after day without looking up."

"A lot of times I see you looking down," said Casper.

"Yes, I watch the water as it flows down the creek to the lake."

"And at night? When I see you standing out here in the dark?"

"At night I sometimes see the stars and stare at how they make the night alive. And sometimes I just wonder what is out there and where it all goes to."

"You mean like outer space?" Casper asked, confused.

Michael did not answer. He turned his head back to the morning sky. "Casper, you can stand on the bridge in Myers, and you can feel like you are at the center of this world, or maybe the universe."

A few minutes later, Casper's mother, Helanie, and Aunt Atina Saleem led Casper across the bridge, up to Syrian Hill and out of sight. Michael looked at the creek and then the sky and then the creek again. When he crossed the bridge and came to the fork in the road at the bottom of Syrian Hill, his eyes followed the empty lane leading to the International Salt Plant. When it was quitting time, he would stop at the split in the road and watch the men walk from the salt plant and down through Myers or up to Syrian Hill. He started up Myers Road as it headed back to the main highway, but before he reached the turnoff to Syrian Hill, he stepped off the road and onto a path cutting up the side of Syrian Hill through the brush. The ground of the shortcut was hard dirt beaten down by those who traveled to the salt plant for work or to Myers Grocery. The trail cut through the underbrush covering the slope of Syrian Hill. The smaller trees and

bushes on the side of the hill were not yet thick with their summer growth. He followed the path as it angled upward. When he neared the top, he kneeled and looked out onto Syrian Hill. In front of him was a small patch of grass leading to the green-shingled sides of the Syrian Orthodox Church. The church had been built for the Syrian workers eleven years before, in 1924, by International Salt. The house on the left belonged to the Isaacs and the next to the Solomons, then the Caliels and across from them was Abraham's brother John's house, then the Saleems, where he was headed, and the Abrahams. Michael Moses turned away from the houses on the hill and looked out onto Myers. *When I stand on the bridge in the daytime, I can see the whole world but the whole world can't see me. On the path I can see the whole world but sometimes I can hide from the world.*

He looked down at the bridge where he had just stood and could see the trail of the water heading out onto the vast blue lake. Only the tall, white concrete of the salt plant off to the right detracted from its beauty. His eyes found the train tracks as they crossed by the salt plant and moved across the creek and out of Myers. He looked down on his house and Abraham's grocery store. *Yes, I can see the whole world better from up here,* he thought. He studied Myers as if it was a painting. *I think that the railroad tracks must lead to the rest of the world. The world outside of Myers.*

He emerged from the brush-covered path and walked across the small lawn of the Isaacs' house and stopped at the front of the church. In the middle of Syrian Hill, on the dusty dirt road walking toward him, were three children his age, and Casper. Martha Saleem tiptoed over the scattered pebbles with her bare feet. Her wavy black hair fell to her shoulders. When she stood in front of him, she kept her lips sealed to hide her slightly buck teeth, but she had been born with an instinctive smile when she approached people. Martha was thirteen, one year older than Michael Moses, and her younger brother, Michael Saleem, was his classmate and friend. The Saleems had a family of five children: Michael and Martha, Sam, Scandera, and Mary. Michael and

Martha who were inseparable and Michael Moses paired with them both in the tiny confines of Myers. Michael Saleem was longer than him, skinny in terms of immigrant children and pale compared to the other Syrians. His eyes were always alive, peering at the world through his thin-rimmed glasses, which he rarely took off.

They look like cousins, he thought as he compared Michael Saleem to Casper George. *They have a soft, slim handsome look about them*. He glanced at Martha and the butterflies in his stomach stirred. *Not like me*. His comparisons stilled the butterflies.

Next to him was Dawn Worsell. She lived on Ludlowville Road across from the Ludlowville school on the other side of Route 34B. Dawn was ten years old, one year younger than Michael Saleem and two years younger than Martha. Dawn was shy and blond, with skin as white as milk that bruised easily. When she was cold, the blue veins and arteries bulged against her white skin. Dawn was also in the same classroom as both boys.

They walked from where they had met at the front of St. George's Syrian Orthodox Church, the only building on the hill that was not a home inhabited by immigrant workers from the salt plant. They stood next to the small, one-story oval building covered with green shingles.

"I can see all of the world from here," said Michael Moses, looking down on the valley and taking it all in. "The creek looks silver from up here. I can see all the older children on the bridge. And all the people going to Abraham's store to get their mail or maybe ice cream. I can see my house but not my mother."

"Here comes the train," pointed Michael Saleem. The engine chugged in unison with the iron wheel rattling against the steel rails as it moved north across the creek and to the salt plant. It echoed throughout the valley and through the hills.

"It came from Ithaca."

"My father went to Ithaca once, told me I could go someday," Dawn said shyly.

They gazed across the deep blue darkness of the last seven miles

of Cayuga Lake to the city nestled on its southern hills.

“I think the train must stop at Cornell,” said Michael Moses. He remembered a teacher, Mr. Smith, at the Ludlowville school was from England and was studying for his doctorate at Cornell.

“He told us all we had wonderful parents but they had to take care of us. He said that we should think about life beyond Ludlowville school and the salt plant.”

“Beyond Myers, what did he mean by that?” Michael Saleem asked.

“He means over there, where the rest of the people of the world are.” Martha Saleem pointed across the width of the deep blue lake to the rising hills on the western bank. She traced the tree line until it blended into the horizon, as if the two were connected.

A small whimper rose from just beneath their feet at the edge of the brush as the hill sloped down.

They all looked at each other.

Again, a soft whimper repeated itself.

Michael Moses slowly parted the thin brush with his hands. The sad, watery eyes of a tiny, brown-and-white beagle puppy stared at all four of them.

“It’s a puppy!” shouted Casper.

“How did that get here?” Michael Saleem wondered.

“There are no dogs on this hill or all of Myers,” said his sister.

Michael Moses cupped the tiny dog underneath its front legs and picked it up with the gentleness of a newborn baby. He held it close to his neck and the puppy settled against him. The dog whimpered again.

“What do we do with it?” asked Michael Saleem.

“Let’s take it down to Myers Grocery. Someone there will know where it came from and what to do,” Martha answered as she leaned her face into the puppy.

Michael Moses felt the dog turn slightly in his arms, reach its neck out and gently rub its face against Martha’s cheek. Martha looked into Michael Moses’s eyes and smiled.

“A story of compassion and courage”

—Sandra Stosz, Vice Admiral, US Coast Guard
(Ret.), Author of *Breaking Ice & Breaking Glass:
Leading in Uncharted Waters*



IN THE FALL OF 2014, Bill George is entering his sixteenth season as the head football coach at the United States Coast Guard Academy. He has a wonderful wife and young daughter and is caregiver for his father, Casper, who is slowly slipping away. As Bill’s daily challenges mount, Casper shares fascinating childhood stories of growing up in the small Syrian immigrant village of Myers, New York, during World War II.

Bill George’s memoir covers coaching football, the challenges of caregiving while also being first-time parents, and the loving interactions between an eighty-seven-year-old man in hospice care and his redheaded granddaughter. Visit New London, Connecticut, on game day and Myers, New York, starting in 1935, brought to life by a dying man’s memories.



BILL GEORGE was born in Glens Falls, New York. He received his undergraduate degree from Ithaca College and holds master’s degrees from the Ohio State University and the State University of New York at Albany. George is a member of the Ithaca College and the Glens Falls High School Athletic Halls of Fame. Prior to entering the coaching field, George spent three years as a special education teacher in Upstate New York.

George served as an assistant football coach to Jim Butterfield at Ithaca, as well as at Princeton (1984) and the United States Military Academy Preparatory School (1987–89), and as a graduate assistant at Ohio State (1985–86). George retired in 2020 following twenty-one seasons as the head football coach at the US Coast Guard Academy.

George resides in Salem, Connecticut, with his wife, Nancy, and daughter, Lila.

AUTOBIOGRAPHY / Sports

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