

**(EXTRA)ORDINARY  
(WOMEN)**  
TEN  
INSPIRATIONAL  
STORIES  
KRISTIN  
BARTZOKIS

THIS IS AN UNCORRECTED PROOF  
It should not be quoted without comparison with the finished book.

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Mom, this incredible life wouldn't have been possible  
without your constant strength and unwavering love.  
*(hand squeeze, hand squeeze, hand squeeze)*

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## Introduction

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What makes someone an inspiration to others? That is a question I asked myself a lot while growing up. Because I was born with Treacher Collins syndrome, people often told me *I* was an inspiration, but I never felt like one. I was just an ordinary person who handled her life of reconstructive surgeries with as much strength and courage as she could. What other choice did I have? I was simply living my life the way anyone would.

As I matured, I realized I had the ability to compartmentalize my life and not let my syndrome take control. I chose to see it as a piece of me, rather than the very thing that defined me. I not only accept my differences; I embrace them.

Today, I walk through life with the understanding that what makes someone an inspiration is not that she has accomplished a monumental feat; it is how she chooses to live her everyday life and overcome adversity. Being an inspiration doesn't mean you have to do something drastic or huge; it means you have found a way to face your obstacles in a manner that others will strive to emulate.

Each of us looks for a hero, whether we realize it or not. We find particular traits that we admire in others and then adopt them as our own. Sometimes this happens automatically

because it's all we have ever been exposed to. I learned how to be strong from my mother. As she sat by my hospital bedside time and time again, I watched her stay composed in the most challenging situations. Witnessing her fortitude helped me find my own strength when I needed it most.

My story is not the only one with an influential mother. The mother-daughter relationship shines throughout the stories in this book. Many of these inspirational women are who they are today because of what they learned from their own mothers.

Each of the women in this book found a way to beat the odds stacked against her. Every one of these women proves that although we do not always have control of the situations in our lives, we can control how we react to those situations.

These women chose to learn from their most difficult moments. They chose to view their pain as an opportunity to make positive changes to their lives and become the best versions of themselves. They also chose to turn their pain into compassion, using their experiences to improve the lives of others.

In my opinion, that's what inspiration is all about: growing from your trials and choosing to make a difference.

This is a pivotal moment in history for women—a time to rise, unite, and show the world what we're made of. The women in this book remind us that even everyday acts of fearlessness and fortitude can leave a lasting impression for generations. I hope you find strength and empowerment in these chapters, just as I did.

## Olga

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Few Americans know that after World War II, Greece suffered through a terrible civil war, which brought more misery and bloodshed to a population that already had endured four years of hardship. In fact, post-World War II Greece was marked by a type of brutality that at times was comparable to, if not greater than, that of the sadistic Nazis. Olga Gatzoyiannis knew all of this far too well. The emotional scars she suffered as a result of the Greek Civil War never healed, and she continued to feel the effects of those scars throughout her life. (Olga passed away in January 2018, at age eighty-nine, while this book was being edited.)

In 1946, Communist insurgents in Greece rose up against the Western-aligned Greek government and sought to institute Communist rule throughout the country. Towns and villages in the northwest portion of Greece were particularly susceptible to the uprising, as they were bordered by two Communist countries, Albania and Yugoslavia. The tiny village of Lia, home to the Gatzoyiannis family, was situated in that area, only a few hundred yards from the Albanian border. In November 1947, Lia was overrun by Communist soldiers, effectively cutting off the village from the free

world. Olga and her family became prisoners in their own village.

Before the war years, Olga had been very happy in her secluded mountainside home. She, her four younger siblings, and her mother lived in a small four-room house, where one room served as the bedroom for all. Olga's father lived in the United States, in Worcester, Massachusetts, where he worked various jobs, sending money back to his family whenever he could, hoping someday he could afford to bring them all to America to join him. But Olga knew any such move would be far off in the future, as her father was struggling to support even himself in the New World.

As a young girl, Olga passed her days working alongside her mother, Eleni, threshing wheat, tending the sheep and goats, cooking, cleaning, and keeping an eye on her siblings. As long as Olga had her mother nearby, she was happy. The two possessed a special bond, and Olga cherished that relationship.

During the early years of World War II, Lia was left pretty much untouched by the invading armies, its isolation being a deterrent to any military campaigns. But in early 1944, that all changed. The German army stormed into the village, seeking to flush out Greek partisan fighters. Olga trembled at the sight of the mighty army as it passed through her village, and she prayed the Germans would move on without incident. But when Greek resistance fighters hiding in the mountains took shots at the passing enemy troops,



the German commander ordered an all-out retaliation. He instructed his soldiers to burn the village to the ground; no structure was to remain standing.

Most villagers, including Olga, fled to faraway places, high up in the mountains, in order to escape the wrath of the Germans, but one of Olga's aunts chose to stay behind. When her home was set on fire, she began to wail and scream. A nearby German officer told her to quiet down, but she was too distraught to stop. After several minutes of this "nuisance," the officer ordered his subordinates to throw her into the burning home. They picked her up, tossed her through an open window, and laughed as she screamed in agony for the next several seconds. Soon the noise faded away.

News of the brutal murder shocked the people of Lia, including Olga, who was particularly traumatized by the event because it involved one of her favorite aunts. She couldn't believe anyone could be so evil as to kill an old woman simply because she was crying. Unfortunately, Olga's lessons in brutality did not stop when the German threat ended the following year. In fact, the worst was yet to come.

After the Allied defeat of Germany in 1945, Olga expected her father to arrange for their move to America so they could all be together. Unfortunately, he was woefully short of funds and told his family they would have to stay in Greece a while longer. As of autumn 1947, the family was still in Greece, and by then, Communist insurgents had risen up

throughout the country. When the insurgency arrived in Lia in November, whatever hope Olga had of escaping to America ended with the pronouncement by the Communist leaders that the village had been “liberated.”

For Olga, liberation meant that guerrilla leaders confiscated her home. It also meant that her mother, Eleni, had to give them all the family’s valuable possessions, as well as most of their food. Everyone in the family was required to work the fields so anything edible could be harvested for “the cause.”

Life under the guerrillas was difficult for Olga. Her mother used all the resources available to her to keep the family fed, and although they weren’t eating the way they had before the war, they were not starving. One day, however, Eleni learned that the older girls in the village were going to be conscripted into the army to become guerrilla fighters. They were going to be forced to carry guns and other weapons and fight as soldiers alongside the men.

Olga was horrified when she heard the news, knowing she would be taken. She had heard stories about how some young women conscripted by the Communists were raped and abused by the male soldiers, especially if they were believed to be sympathetic to the Greek government. “I knew I had to do something to keep from being taken,” Olga recounted years later. “I would surely have been killed in battle or abused by the guerrillas if I went.”

That night, Eleni told Olga she had an idea. It was the only

way she could think of to keep Olga from being taken by the Communists the next day. It was a trick Greek women had used for centuries to keep their daughters out of harm's way. It would be painful, but if it worked, Olga would be safe. Olga was afraid but understood that whatever her mother had in mind needed to be done. "I knew what was coming," Olga admitted, "and I knew the pain would be like nothing I had ever experienced before."

When Eleni was ready, she called Olga over to the fireplace where she and Olga's fraternal grandmother were seated. Eleni ordered her mother-in-law to hold Olga down as firmly as she could. Then, without warning, she poured a pot of boiling water over Olga's right leg. Olga let out a terrible scream. Eleni threw the pot away and looked at the leg to see if the boiling water had done its job. To her horror, it had not. Despite all the agony she had just put her daughter through, the leg did not appear disfigured. It was red in color and had a few blisters, but it was not grotesque and certainly would not impress the guerrilla officers when they came calling the next day. They would take her despite her injury. Olga's ordeal was not over yet.

Olga's grandmother quickly removed a hot poker from the fireplace and, again, without warning, pressed it against the side of Olga's right foot. The smell of burning flesh quickly filled the room, and Olga cried out. In a few seconds, the poker was removed. Skin clung to it as Olga's grandmother tossed the poker away. When she looked at Olga's ankle, she

was appalled at what she saw; the poker had burned through to the bone, exposing it as well as the surrounding muscles and tendons. Olga tried to stifle her cries, but the pain was so excruciating she continued whimpering for several minutes. Still, Olga felt relieved, knowing she would be safe. Years later, she would tell her own children how she felt after her ordeal: “I knew when I saw my leg I was not going to be taken by the guerrillas. I even thought I might never walk again. But it was worth it, because I wanted to live. I didn’t want to be taken from my mother and my family. I also wanted to have my own family someday.”

The next day, when the conscription officers showed up to take Olga away, they were shown the young woman’s injury. With skeptical eyes, they scrutinized Olga and asked what happened. When Eleni explained Olga had hurt herself in a kitchen accident, the officers grunted angrily and stormed off.

The next few weeks were difficult for Olga, but eventually her injury healed and she regained full use of her leg. One of her sisters had been taken by the guerrillas in her place, but she was younger and less mature. After a few weeks of service, Olga’s sister proved so inept as a guerrilla fighter, her commanders let her go.

Now that the family was together again, their goal was to survive their virtual imprisonment. They had enough to eat thanks to the efforts of Eleni, although she put her life at risk many times by holding back some of the crops she

had harvested for the guerrillas. The family members also kept their distance from the Communist leaders, making sure not to offend them in any way and doing whatever was asked of them.

By early 1948, the war was not going well for the Communists, and they were losing ground to the Greek government forces. The national army had made so much progress that they were only a mile from Olga's village, encamped in a nearby mountain known as the Great Ridge. In February of that year, the government launched a massive assault against the Communist forces in the area, hoping to crush their resistance and win back all the territory the Communists had gained. When the battle was over, however, the Communist fighters repelled the Greek army and sent them scurrying back up the Great Ridge. Olga and her family would continue to be captives in their village and could only dream of freedom.

Several weeks after the government defeat, even worse news hit Olga's family. Since the war was going so badly for the Communists, they decided to relocate all children from occupied areas to nearby Communist countries. This meant all children would be taken from their mothers.

Eleni panicked when she heard the news. Her children would be taken from her, and they would be sent to faraway places, perhaps never to be reunited again. It was inconceivable. She had to act quickly to combat the forces that were working to tear her family apart.

Very soon she had her answer: Her children would have to escape from the village and seek refuge with the government forces encamped on the Great Ridge. There was only one problem. Another one of Eleni's daughters, Lillia, had been taken by the guerrillas to work the fields, and she was now with them somewhere in the mountains. What would happen to her if the rest of the children escaped?

Eleni agonized over what to do, knowing that time was running short. Already there were rumors that the gathering of children would start any day, which meant her children might be taken from her within the week. She would have to act fast.

The following evening, Eleni gathered her four remaining children and told them of her plan. Olga, age nineteen, would be responsible for leading three of her siblings to freedom while Eleni stayed behind to watch out for Lillia. Eleni told Olga it was her responsibility to care for her siblings, and Olga accepted the task. She felt overwhelmed by the responsibility but understood she had no choice. The escape would take place the next night.

After tearful goodbyes and a promise by Eleni that she would meet up with her children as soon as she and her other daughter could arrange their own escape, Olga and her siblings began their dangerous march toward freedom. Although the Great Ridge was only a mile away, the escape route would take them through a vast wheat field littered with landmines and marked by a number of enemy guardhouses

placed strategically along the perimeter. But first they had to meet up with another group of refugees in the lower village who had asked to join in the escape.

When Olga met up with them, she was shocked to find sixteen people in the party; she thought the group would include only her uncle, his wife, and their two children. “I thought there was no way twenty of us would get past all the guards and landmines,” Olga recounted. “But my mother told me we had to go, so that is what we did. Inside, though, I thought we were all going to die. I only hoped I could save my sisters and brother.”

As they wended their way through the wheat field, the line of refugees began to thin out. In a short while, Olga found herself and two other women separated from the rest of the group. She didn’t know how it had happened, but they were alone. She tried calling out for the others, but her calls went unanswered.

Realizing they could not stay where they were, the three stragglers began walking in the same general direction as when they started their march, and after a few minutes, they ran into the rest of the group, who had doubled back to find them. Olga hugged her sisters and brother and thanked the heavens that everyone was still safe.

At about this time, several hundred yards away, a guerilla search party was combing the wheat field looking for possible defectors. The local guerrilla leader ordered his men to apprehend or kill any escapees they found.

Olga and the other nineteen refugees continued their harrowing journey toward the Great Ridge, and in the early-morning hours, they reached the base of the mountain. Freedom was close. All they had to do was climb to the top and be rescued. But they had to wait until morning so the government soldiers would not mistake them for spies.

At the first light of dawn, Olga called out to the soldiers above to allow the refugees to climb up. At first there was no answer, but after a few moments a voice responded: "Come on up, but in single file. Follow the path and you'll see an opening in the wire."

The group followed the soldier's instructions, twenty desperate individuals snaking their way up the mountain toward their salvation. A few hundred yards away, a guerilla guard who had spent the entire night looking for the refugees observed the scene and shook his head in amazement, shocked that they had gotten away from him. He didn't shoot at them for fear of giving away his position. The twenty refugees had won their freedom.

Olga and her siblings were eventually sent to a refugee camp in a coastal city of western Greece, where they anxiously awaited news about their mother. But days and then weeks passed with no information. Then, in late September 1948, their grandfather arrived at the camp with something he needed to tell them. It was that day that Olga's world came crashing down around her, for that was the day she learned of her mother's awful fate.



When the Communist leaders discovered that Olga and her siblings had escaped, they imprisoned Eleni and tortured her for her treasonous acts. Her crime: allowing her children to flee the village. Her punishment: death by firing squad. On August 28, 1948, that sentence had been carried out.

After learning of her mother's execution, Olga went into a deep depression. "I didn't want to live anymore," she admitted. "With my mother gone, I had no reason to live. But then I remembered what she told me about my sisters and brother, and I knew I had to keep going. I made a promise to her and I had to keep it."

The ensuing months were a blur to Olga. Then, in March 1949, she and her siblings learned they were going to be moved to the United States, where they would be reunited with their father. Olga's fourth sibling, Lillia, was still being held by the Communists, and the family had heard no news about her. They could only hope for the best.

The trip across the ocean on the USNS Marine Carp, a converted warship, was torture for Olga. She remained in bed in her steerage compartment for almost the entire two-week journey, eating very little and becoming dehydrated due to excess vomiting. When the ship finally pulled into New York harbor, Olga had to be helped off by her siblings.

After the Gatzoyiannis children cleared customs, Olga's father loaded them into his leased car and drove them to Worcester, Massachusetts, where they would start a new life together. The reunion between father and children was

strained, but for Olga it was a relief to have him there so she would no longer have to shoulder the burden of the family's survival. "I thanked God we now had a father to take care of us," she said. "I could barely take care of myself at that point, let alone two sisters and a brother."

Olga was miserable in her new environment; Worcester was an old factory city with rows and rows of tenement houses. Her family lived in such a house, on the first floor, in a poorer part of the city. Her father worked as a chef at a restaurant, earning barely enough to pay the bills. Olga lamented her station in life: She lived in a place she hated, she couldn't speak the language, her mother had been brutally killed the previous year, and there were no prospects that the family's fortunes would ever change—they were destined to be poor forever.

As bad as things were for Olga, they were about to get much worse. A few weeks after her arrival in America, her father took her to a doctor because she had a lump of some kind on her neck. After taking one look at the growth, the doctor ordered Olga to be taken to a hospital immediately so he could operate on her. The growth might be cancer. Olga was terrified about what lay in front of her, but in a way, she hoped her disease would take her life. If it did, she thought, at least her misery would end.

When the surgery was over and Olga was strong enough to get out of the hospital bed, she walked over to the mirror to see herself. She knew the doctor had removed something

on her neck, but she didn't know exactly how bad the surgery was. None of her family had told her what her neck looked like. When she finally observed the condition of her neck in the mirror, she almost fainted. A good portion of it had been removed—she was horribly disfigured. Olga buried her face in her hands and cried. As bad as her life had been before, it had just gotten much, much worse.

For the next few weeks, Olga suffered through depression, rarely leaving the house or seeking out company. Life simply had no meaning for her. "I just wanted to die," she remembered many years later. "My mother was gone, I never went out, I couldn't work, and because of my neck I was sure I would never marry and have children. What kind of life would I have with no children?"

But soon, Olga and her family received some wonderful news. Olga's sister Lillia, the one who had been taken by the Communists, had escaped captivity and was headed to America. She would be reunited with the family any day. When she arrived in Worcester two days later, there was a raucous celebration in which even Olga participated. For a while, at least, Olga's spirits lifted.

Olga was about to get some more good news. Several months later, her father had received a letter from a young man named Dino who grew up near Olga's village, asking his permission to marry Olga. Dino had never actually met Olga, but he knew she had a spotless reputation and he would be honored to be her husband. Olga's father agreed to the match.

Olga was excited about the news, but she was also uncertain if the marriage would ever take place. She didn't know if her suitor would be up to it, given her appearance. "Will he still want to marry me when he sees my neck?" Olga wondered. "Or will he be too ashamed to be with me because of the way I look?"

In September 1951, Olga and her father greeted Dino when he arrived at New York harbor. Dino beamed with excitement as he hugged his future father-in-law and kissed his future wife's hand. And much to Olga's joy, later that day when she showed Dino the terrible scar on her neck, he simply dismissed it as a minor imperfection. "I remember what he said to me when he saw my neck," Olga recounted. "We all have something wrong with us. That's nothing to worry about.' Right then, I knew my life was going to get better. That's when I thought to myself that all my sacrifices were worth it."

Dino and Olga married in October 1951 and in just a few short years had four children. During that time, two of Olga's younger sisters married as well. The three families eventually moved into a tenement home in which each family occupied one floor.

For Olga, those early married years in Worcester were some of the best of her life. She had four beautiful children and two sisters living in the same home, and soon her sisters had children of their own. Life was wonderful. That the family was poor was not a problem for Olga, because all she

cared about at the time was her children.

One day, however, Olga went to a toy store to buy a small gift for a friend's baby, taking along one of her young sons. With only twenty-five cents in her pocket, she couldn't afford much, but it was enough for what she intended to buy. But when they entered the toy store, Olga's son saw a race car set he liked, and he excitedly asked his mother if he could buy it. Olga said no, but the boy persisted. She said no again, but the boy wouldn't stop. Finally, Olga shouted at her son in Greek and then smacked him in the rear end. The boy looked down in disappointment and followed his mother down the aisle to the ten-cent toys.

Later in life, Olga would recount that day with tears in her eyes: "My son only wanted a little toy, and I couldn't give it to him. I felt so worthless. That's the day I decided we needed to do something. I didn't know how, but I promised myself we would not be poor forever."

Olga's opportunity came two years later by pure happenstance. The family was returning from a day at the beach when one of Olga's sons had to use the bathroom. Olga told her husband to take the next exit so they could pull over somewhere. As Dino drove off the exit ramp, they entered the small, affluent town of Needham, Massachusetts. Olga marveled at the beautiful homes that lined the street, all with lush yards. The town was idyllic. When they reached the downtown area, Olga spotted a vacant storefront that had a "FOR RENT" sign on the front window. She wrote

down the number on a piece of paper and placed it in her purse.

The next day, she mentioned the vacant store to Dino and suggested they could open a small restaurant at the site. She urged Dino to call the landlord to inquire about the rent. At first Dino showed no interest, but Olga was insistent, and soon Dino was on the phone with the landlord. That one call would change the family's fortunes forever.

Within two months, Dino and Olga opened a pizza restaurant at the vacant store. And then, only two years after that, the restaurant had done so well the couple bought a three-bedroom house in Needham, which came with an in-ground swimming pool. Olga had realized the American dream, but more importantly, she had fulfilled the promise she made to herself several years earlier after her visit to the toy store.

On a daily basis, Olga would get her children ready for school and work at the pizza place for the noon rush. Then, she would pick the children up from school and go back to work for the evening rush. Olga worked fourteen hours a day, seven days a week, doing various jobs, but she couldn't have been happier. Her family was thriving. "I would do anything for my children," she would say, "even if I had to kill myself working. I always remembered what my mother did for me, and I wanted to do the same for my children."

But Olga had her down moments as well. The death of her mother continued to haunt her, and she was prone to

anxiety attacks. Her doctors explained that these attacks were brought on by the horrors she had experienced when she was younger, and all they could do was give her anti-anxiety medication. With the medication, however, Olga learned to cope.

There were also setbacks with the pizza business. Three times, a local competitor who was connected with the Mafia hired arsonists to burn down Olga and Dino's pizza place, but three times Olga and Dino built the business back up. "I was not going to let anybody stop me," Olga said about the fires, "not even the Mafia. The FBI told them to stop burning down my business, and for some reason, they obeyed."

After the third fire, Dino and Olga were forced to buy the block of stores the pizza place was situated on, because their landlord refused to rent to them anymore. This proved to be a blessing in disguise, as Olga's eyes were opened to the world of real estate. Soon, Olga and Dino opened eight additional pizza restaurants in nearby towns, working them all themselves or with their children and other relatives. Eventually Olga and Dino bought more commercial property, quickly becoming real estate magnates. It seemed as though everything Olga touched turned to gold; her restaurants were thriving and her commercial real estate was bringing in substantial rental income. There was no stopping Olga. The poor immigrant who couldn't afford a toy for her son just a few short years prior was now a successful businesswoman, earning enough money to give her children

a very comfortable life. All she asked of them in return was to study hard and do well in school.

Olga's children did not disappoint her. Two attended Harvard University, one attended Tufts University, and the last went to Boston College. Two would go on to become doctors, the other two lawyers. Olga would proudly announce to anyone willing to listen, "I might be an uneducated village peasant, but this stupid woman produced four smart children—two doctors and two lawyers. Not too bad."

Olga and Dino retired from work in 1981 and spent the next twenty-five years enjoying life, traveling all over the United States and Europe, and spending time with their children and grandchildren. Dino died in 2006, and Olga's own health began to deteriorate after that, but the two enjoyed many good years together as husband and wife.

When she passed away, Olga still lived in the same home in Needham that she'd bought with her husband in 1966. She suffered from dementia but was very well taken care of. Though Olga did not fully understand what was going on around her near her life's end, the painful memories of her mother's torture and execution had been banished from her consciousness. For every cloud, there is a silver lining.

Olga Gatzoyiannis is an inspiration to any woman who must overcome oppression, tragedy, hopelessness, and poverty to achieve success. She found what motivated her the most and used it to fuel her determined spirit. In Olga's words, "If a poor, uneducated shepherd girl like me can



## TEN INSPIRATIONAL STORIES

make it, anyone can. All it takes is hard work and sacrifice, and the willingness to take a chance. But the greatest motivation is love of family. You don't work hard for yourself; you do it for your children.”

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If you'd like to make a donation in Olga's name, please visit Beth Israel Deaconess Hospital Needham at <https://www.bidneedham.org/>.