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August '48

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AUGUST '48

THE CAPTAIN asked for volunteers and three men stepped forward. The sergeant was a Macedonian and the other two were Peloponnesians. The captain took his binoculars and told them to approach him. They walked up to the abutment and crouched behind some rocks. Rising before them and facing them was the town of Voursiani. The captain began the briefing.

—Check the hill right in front of you. There is a goat trail to the left. On the side of it, you can see a small landing. The shell crater is in the middle of the landing. The soil is reddish. The soldiers are lying face down around the crater, like men drinking water. Do you see them, sergeant?

—Yes, captain, sir.

—How about the two of you?

—Captain, sir.

—Here, take the binoculars.

The soldier held the binoculars a little awkwardly.

—Don't do anything to them. Hold them up to your eyes just as they are.

The sergeant turned and looked at the man holding the binoculars.

—O.K., follow the goat trail, said the captain.

The soldier was a bit slow.

—Yes sir, he said, but his voice was somewhat uncertain.

—See the hill? The landing is right above it.

—Yes sir, the soldier said again.

The captain took a deep breath.

—See the crater in the middle?

—Yes sir.

—The men have fallen down all around it; they look like they're drinking water.

The sergeant thought to himself: more like they were looking down into hell.

The soldier said nothing. His eyes had gotten used to the lenses. He stared motionless at the three almost shapeless bodies.

—Memorize the details, said the captain. It will be harder in the dark.

The soldier took the binoculars away from his eyes and the four men stood there without speaking.

—You will only carry hand grenades and pistols so you can move more easily. Your rifles will stay behind.

The sergeant thought of something and was about to speak, but changed his mind.

—You will leave from the back of the kitchen area as soon as the sun sets. You will wait by the roadside shrine until night falls. To reach the ravine you will walk by moonlight. The moon sets at midnight. The plateau is within their firing range. You will have to work fast, so as to finish before daylight. Their men shouldn't see you carrying them.

There was a flash of light from the crater in the distance. One of the soldiers saw it first and raised his hand without speaking and pointed towards it. The captain paused. It was just a small flash of light. Then there was another. It was as if someone was signalling. They all held their breath. It was the captain who finally figured out what it was. The sun had begun to set.

—It's only the glint of the sun on their belt buckles, he said, relieved.

They rode to the roadside shrine. They dismounted and sat down until nightfall. They climbed down to the ravine in the dark, tied the mules and lay low. It was a warm night. Countless bugs swarmed through the darkness, spreading out like an orgasm; stones and pebbles thrilled to the erotic rush. One of the soldiers leaned towards the other and said quietly:

—It's the fifteenth of August, the Dormition of the Virgin.

The other man nodded in the dark.

—Back in the village people will be fasting, said the first man.

The sergeant gave them a nudge and signalled for them not to talk.

The first two men were from the same village as one of the men in the crater. The sergeant had been drafted at the same time as the other three, but that was all they had in common. The waxing moon shone faintly, a thin sliver which gradually descended and disappeared behind hill 1232. The night grew darker by yet another shade. They set out crawling along the trail on all fours. Some animal let out a yelp high up behind them. A piercing cry. They pinned themselves to the ground and waited, but nothing else was heard.

They reached the foot of the rocks, their armpits drenched, their limbs cold, like reptiles. They came to a halt, keeping their ears cocked for the sounds of the night. The stars made the distance even more awesome. They could almost feel the three bodies lying above them, desolate and resigned in their frightful immobility. And higher still, at the crown of the summit, were the machine guns, squinting with a mean indifference, a menace larger than existence itself. They consulted.

—We're going up, the sergeant said in a whisper.

Slowly, they began climbing up the face of the rock, the sergeant in the lead. He reached the top and stretched his arm out to the man behind him to help him up. He then crawled further ahead until he felt something woollen brush against his cheek.

—Here he is, he said turning to the next man.

He fumbled and groped with his hand until he felt the shape of a man's leg against his palm. The pelvic bone was in rigor as if life had never stirred in it.

He got on his knees and lifted the corpse by the armpits. As he did this, something sprang loose from underneath it. The sergeant had no time for another thought; the explosion shattered the night and immediately afterwards machine guns opened fire on them from the top of the rock. The third man was still there and, as all hell broke loose, he curled himself up into a ball, a mere nothing, neither man nor stone.

After the violence had subsided, amidst the calm that followed, he heard someone whispering something to him.

He found the sergeant fallen crosswise over the corpse he had been trying to lift and the second man writhing and holding his abdomen with both hands. He bent down over him and the wounded man put his hands round his neck.

—Vassilis.

He carried the man hanging onto his neck down to lower ground, their bodies touching so that the wounded man's blood soaked right through his own clothes. He could feel it coagulating on his navel. Ever so softly, he laid him down.

—Ay, Vassilis.

—Don't talk.

—They booby-trapped the dead.

—Don't talk. Don't exert yourself.

—Ay, Vassilis, I'm dying. I'm shot in the belly.
—It's nothing. Don't talk.
—I'm losing blood fast.
—Be strong.
—Vassilis, I'm going.
—It's nothing.
—Ay.
—Don't start feeling sorry. Think of your loved ones.
—Vassilis.
—Think of the village back home.
—Harvest time must be near.
—Yes, just about.
—Where's the sergeant?
—He's still up there.
—We'll be going away together.
—Don't say that.
—Daylight is taking forever.
—It will be any time now.
—Ay.
He touched the other man's forehead.
—Mother.

His forehead turned cold beneath his touch. He felt like crying. Somehow he found the courage to go up the rock once more. He lifted up the sergeant and carried him down. Then, he carried down the other body.

The night was drawing quickly to an end. The rock posed no problems any more. He went up a fourth time and walked around the rim of the crater. He found the remaining two men. He could not recognize them. He pulled out his belt and passed it around the ankles of one of the two. He took cover behind an outcrop and began pulling, gently. He expected to hear a mine explode and then the machine guns. There was nothing. Then, he pulled the other body. Again nothing. He carried them both down.

With ant-like persistence, he scurried back and forth to the stream until, finally, he was exhausted. He sat down to catch his breath. There was a stench of butchered flesh about him and he had just become aware of it. Then a breeze blew up. He knew morning had come. Trembling, he got up and untied the mules. He lined up the corpses along the edge

of the stream. He pulled the mules into the water so that their saddles were level with the surface of the water, then loaded two on each mule. There was one corpse left over. He did not know who it was. He brought the third mule up close. He leaned over and took the body in his arms, as though it were a wine skin and, with one final effort, he hoisted it up onto the saddle. The body, as though some trace of life were still left in it, slid gently over to the other side and fell, head first, into the water.

He screamed hysterically: "For chrissakes, man."

He got in the water. The body was impossible to lift. First, he pulled it out of the water. He hitched the mules in a row, mounted the first one, moved closer to the bank, bent over sideways, took the body by the hair and pulled it up to his level. He was dripping wet. He placed it across his thighs, as one does some valued possession.

A bird warbled and it was dawn.

Soldiers were emerging from the depths of the earth like rats. They splashed water from their canteens on their faces, had something hot to drink, and vanished again. Someone saw the mules approaching the road shrine and went and told the captain. The captain had heard explosions during the night and was not expecting them. He leaped up with joy. Another ten men or so gathered round him. They stared at the approaching procession. One of them took off his hat and began waving it in the air.

Then they froze.

There he was at the head of the convoy, the dead man on his lap. He sat upright as he rode towards them. The morning sun made his unexpected cargo appear particularly splendid.

As he rode through their midst, the men stepped back silently. The mules came to a halt by themselves. He looked round at them from his saddle. Having passed beyond the limits of human endurance, he had sunk into a state of total indifference. Someone moved forward to help him, extending his hands until the dead man was placed in his arms. Then the rest of the men got busy unloading the dead. There followed a frantic surge of activity to and fro, as if they were running out of time.

He knew the weight had been removed from his thighs, but the lower half of his body was completely numb. He raised his leg up over the mule in an effort to dismount. His leg obeyed as though it was not his

own. Still, he knew there was some difference separating him from the dead man. He jumped down like a wooden soldier. He took a couple of steps, unable to control his legs.

He heard the captain calling him. He turned and looked at him. The captain took him by the arm and squeezed him, without saying a word. Someone brought him a canteen filled with tea. Weary, he sat down on a rock. This gave him a sweet feeling of reassurance. There in the open air, the encampment resembled a sanctuary. The soldiers had placed the cadavers in a row and were staring at them, speechless. He felt the warm liquid sing as it went down his throat. Something stirred inside him. It was his body's irrepressible longing for life. He raised his eyes high above the treetops and looked at the sky.

"It's the Feast of the Fifteenth of August," he thought. "People will be fasting in the village."

He thought next of the man who had his belly blown away. He was sad. But deep inside him, joy had begun to well up; a wild, ineffable joy.

1960

THE RIVER KÁYSTROS

For Angeliki and Iakovos

THOMÁS FIRST MET HIS WIFE in the street. It was the last year of the German occupation, and he had a dried fruit pushcart in front of the Ophthalmology Clinic. Just one block over, in the basement on the corner of Homerou and Panepistemiou, there was a dressmaker's shop.

Every day, during her noon break, Anna came out to buy pumpkin seeds. Being the youngest in the shop, she had to do the errands for the other girls. She would leave the money on the glass top of the pushcart, and while Thomás was busy weighing the small paper bags, she was busy studying him, unobserved. She would take them and, blushing, leave in a hurry. She was small—not too short—and slender, around sixteen. Thomás thought about speaking to her but, in the meantime, the shop closed down and he did not see her again.