

Deserters

Joanna Eleftheriou

In the violent July sun, the five soldiers made for Pyrgo harbor. Aircraft flew low. Parachuters fell. Smoke rose behind the hills, all the Pentadaktylos a raging wildfire. The men walked faster.

The sun burned their necks as they walked on rock-dry earth. Dimitris began to limp around noon. Thomas walked behind him. He remembered the day they had been shooting at blue rock thrush in these, the hillsides of Solea, and Dimitris took a bullet in his leg.

The men said nothing about the limp. Their tongues hung in thirst. Thomas scanned the riverbed for leaves to wet their mouths. But drought had left only brittle oleander, dead myrtle, sage and thorns.

Soon, they reached a low house with broken windows. Kostas, the tallest, pushed in the door. Thomas followed and sat on the cool tile floor. He cut into a can of Zwan and ate. He passed the boiled ham to Dimitris, who said, “Thomas, go, they won’t find me here.”

Thomas dropped his knife onto the tiles. He wanted to be fearless. He said, “You will lean on me, and we will walk the fifty miles.”

The others filled their flasks, stuffed the pockets of their dank fatigues, and went out. From the door, Kostas said, “Hurry, move.”

Thomas stretched his hand out to Dimitris. He stared into his old friend’s eyes. Kostas yelled, “There’s no time. We’re leaving him.”

Thomas bent to take Dimitris’ arm. He pressed his palms against the tiles. Cicadas droned. Gunfire rumbled like a storm closing in.

Thomas straightened. He felt he ought to tell the men to leave him. If he stayed with his friend, they’d both survive. But again the guns rumbled like death. “They don’t know the way. I must go,” he said.

As if he had a debt to pay, Thomas removed the five things he kept in his pockets, cupping them in his left hand. By Dimitris’ knee, he dumped them all—a rusting knife, a fountain pen, a dirty comb, a lighter, and the heavy gold cross he had worn until the chain broke.