

Middle East Affairs

War Adventures in Tobruk, El Alamein and Rimini

ZAHOS HADJIFOTIOU

PREVIEW

DEDICATION

Dedicated to my comrades
fallen on the field of honour

MIDDLE EAST AFFAIRS

War Adventures in Tobruk, El Alamein and Rimini
ZAHOS HADJIFOTIOU

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PREVIEW

LOVE AND WAR

At the head of the table sat the school's headmaster. To his right was the professor of modern Greek, and next to him was the math teacher. Directly opposite sat Mr. Peet, the English professor who had become the headmaster's assistant.

The subject at hand: my expulsion.

The headmaster was of two minds. He awaited the opinion of the math teacher, who would accept no extenuating circumstances in my case.

"Unruly, arrogant, a bad pupil, and a bad influence on other pupils," he said.

"Nevertheless," said the modern Greek professor, "in my twenty-five years' experience I have never read more beautiful essays and more interestingly expressed ideas than from this particular pupil."

At this point, the headmaster wavered, but then came cruel Mr. Peet's head-on attack:

"To write pretty stories or jump higher and further than other pupils does not constitute a good enough reason to keep in our school a pupil who does not

follow the curriculum. He is undisciplined, insolent, and, as my colleague quite rightly says, a bad influence all around.”

Unfortunately, Mr. Peet’s word prevailed.

So my poor mother had to find another school that would accept me with the hope that I would graduate, so as to acquire a paper in hand for a “rainy day.” This was a favorite sentence of hers, as she had a bad premonition about my future.

I came last in a class that produced twelve university professors, but I did graduate.

That rainy day came sooner than expected. In three months’ time, Italy attacked Greece, and at the end of six months, the Germans marched into Athens as conquerors.

Sorrow, the menace of the Germans, the prospect of famine, and needless to say the life imposed by a foreign occupation were far from suitable for a young man of my nature. I was rebellious, unyielding, adventurous, and even a little opportunistic.

Athenian life had come to a standstill. Nightclubs and bars were shut down. Due to strict censorship, only some boring theater matinees and movie houses showed dull German films. Both venues having lost their clientele, the movies played in empty rooms...and I was confined at home due to a midnight curfew!

All this led me soon after to seek out another way of life. “Where will you go?” my mother kept asking me in despair.

“You are only seventeen years old. What do you know of life and its dangers? All around us a vicious war is underway. Where do you think you are going?”

“I will go there; I will go to war,” I answered with determination. “I will have a better chance of survival. The Germans will surely kill me here. I have already been caught twice after curfew hours.”

She shook her head, my poor mother. She said, “But whom have you taken after?”

This was the most grotesque of her confused remarks. Here I was leaving at seventeen to join a savage war, and all she was trying to find out was who in the family I had taken after!

It was not long before my decision materialized. It only took me a week to organize an escape with some others of similar views. The following Sunday, the last one of May 1941, at noon, we left by train for Lavrio,¹ where we boarded a prearranged *caïque*² at night. We avoided the German patrols, as it was after curfew hours. The next day, we arrived at Tinos Island, and from there we reached Mykonos Island after a rough passage.

Some islanders joined us there, and we sailed for Samos Island in very bad weather conditions. The following morning, in Samos Vathi, I was walking to a kiosk to buy a newspaper and some cigarettes when an Italian officer arrested me. He decided that my face and attire looked suspicious; the clothes did not resemble those of a local. He marched me to the Commando Tapa Kommandatur, where I escaped through the toilets onto the roof and jumped to the house next door.

Eventually, I met up with my companions, and we immediately set out on foot to the other side of the island, facing Turkey. We walked all night through fields, olive groves, and pine forests, avoiding Italian and German patrols. Around three o'clock in the morning, we reached a small bay where a boatman with his rowing boat, as again prearranged, waited to take us across to Turkey. The distance to the Turkish shore was no more than a mile, but every fifteen minutes, a German torpedo boat with her searchlights patrolled the area for any vessels that would help Greeks to escape.

Soon enough we heard the roar of the patrol boat's engine from

¹ A harbor south of Athens

² A small island fishing boat

behind the headland. We fell to the ground silent and hid behind the bushes and rocks.

“Heads down, and don’t even breathe,” murmured the boatman.

The beam of the searchlight danced to and fro as it scanned the stormy sea. At one point, the beam seemed to brush the tip of the prow of our boat.

“Holy Saint Nicholas,” whispered the terror-stricken boatman.

This was only the beginning of the war dangers I was to experience, and it triggered the realization that each person’s life hangs from a thin thread. Had the sailor handling the searchlight moved it an inch farther in our direction, we would all have been trapped. The sentence: death by firing squad.

Finally, with a sigh of relief, we saw the patrol boat leave the area. We then decided to split into two shifts to man the four oars. The first shift would row halfway down the strait, and the others would follow. Being a featherweight, I wasn’t even picked as a deckhand. I was simply to get out, untie the boat, and jump in again. It all happened so fast that I almost found myself in the water.

“Hold tight, hey hop,” said the boatman giving the rhythm.

The crew of the first shift rowed like savages. For the first time, I saw a boat cut six miles without an engine. The waves grew bigger and fiercer, and it seemed doubtful that we could get through the strait in less than half an hour. After fifteen minutes, we were still close to Samos and drenched to the bone.

“Change shift,” ordered the boatman, who could assess the difficulty of our situation better than any of us. Meanwhile, I was emptying the water filling the *caïque* with a small tin can. The precious fifteen minutes had gone by, and now our eyes were trained on the cape behind us, where at any time the German patrol boat and her two murderous machine guns would appear.

Luck seemed a little bit on our side as Kusadasi’s headland ap-

peared from afar. The waves had subsided, offering less resistance. The boat was lighter, thanks to my efforts, and we moved much faster. Alas, our optimism did not last for long as the much-feared beam of light made its appearance.

“Hold tight, kids. We are almost there,” howled the boatman, which gave us courage despite our despair. It seemed as if other men had grabbed the oars. The joints creaked, the rowing boat doubled its speed, and it glided on the waves like a slippery eel. With full-powered engines, the patrol boat was almost upon us. The beam of the searchlight was like a hungry beast looking for prey, and there was no doubt that within a minute we would be caught in it.

We had entered Turkey’s territorial waters, and we could discern here and there fires on the coastline that probably belonged to Turkish outposts. What would be the next move of the patrol boat, we all wondered. Would she seize us or simply fire at us? Within seconds, we were caught in the beam, bathed in its full light.

“Row, row! the boatman was shouting, and the oarsmen in a last-minute effort gave wings to the boat. We were no more than a hundred meters away from the coast now, with the torpedo boat two hundred meters away from us, as near as she could get to Turkey’s territorial waters.

The Germans were now shouting through a loud hailer, shouting words that we could not understand—nor did we wish to understand them. And then all hell broke loose. A second searchlight lit, and two machine guns raked the sea around us, while their tracers gave the night a festive look. The zip of bullets, some sinking in the water, others beating on the old carcass of our boat, and others spreading death among us, made contact with flesh. One by one, the oars stopped moving as the hands giving them power lay wounded or dead. The boatman was seriously hit, blood gushing from his

mouth and belly. He groaned and cursed before he grabbed two oars. He pulled at them with all the strength left in him, but to no avail. The holes opened by the bullets filled the boat with water, slowly sending her to the bottom of the sea and taking down with her the dead young men. The vessel that meant freedom for these youngsters became their coffin.

In the panic and confusion that followed, the rest of us fell in the water and swam toward the shore, not knowing what our fate would be. After our boat had sunk, the machine guns stopped firing, but the searchlights continued to look for survivors to finish off.

Germans were renowned bullies in such cases, but the Turks were even more so, and they in turn started firing at us from fifty to eighty meters away as we reached the shore, one by one. They made a pretense of defending their neutrality and then sped to arrest us.

How many of us were left? The death toll was tragic: four survivors, including myself, with six dead or wounded who were slowly drowning. Five young boys were lost, full of dreams, and an old boatman was killed like a brave captain, going down with his ship, paying with his blood. His nightly holy mission had been transporting young men to Turkey, men who later constituted the only Greek army in exile.

We spent the night around a makeshift fire trying to get dry and warm up. The weather was not cold, but we were drenched to the bone and exhausted by the long day hike and tragic events of the night. Still, this was not the only reason for my collapse. I could not come to terms with the death of these youths nor grasp at my age the enormity of my first war experience.

Finally, still in this state of mind, I fell asleep, a short sleep full of nightmares. In my dream, I walked into the sea until my head was completely covered by the water. The lack of air did not bother me, and with open eyes I continued to walk in a dim greenish light that shined fantastically in this watery sea world. Soon I approached the site where our boat had sunk next to a large rock. Inside, the bodies

of the five men lay motionless one on top of the other with glaring eyes filled with pain. The boatman was hanging halfway out of his boat.

I was glad to be with them again and felt the need to rearrange their bodies and make them more comfortable as they would stay there forever. When trying to raise them, I saw with terror and disgust hundreds of fish, octopus, and crabs already feasting on their flesh. In my vain efforts to whisk them off, I stumbled on the rock. I woke up with a jerk, realizing that I had been nudged by the butt of a Turkish sergeant's rifle!

It was dawn then, and the other kids were already up trying to make a cup of tea by the dying fire. We were all gloomy, influenced by the night's events, but when you are seventeen you can overcome anything.

By sunrise, in a much better mood, we set off, escorted on foot to a Turkish village called Kusadasi. Our escort was a mustached Horse Guard Turkish officer. He led the procession—but at the time riding a donkey—and he started to sing an *arnane*³ as we hit the road. Without respite, he finished it off as we entered the village. The time of the march: six hours and thirty minutes.

We remained in Turkey for a short while. The Turks put us up in a hotel named Boudroum Palace, otherwise referred to as a dungeon, and from there some plainclothes Englishmen took us to the train station and on to a freighter wagon labeled “Men thirty, horses eight.” It took four days for this wretched train to reach Halepi in Syria after having crossed the whole Asia Minor at the breakneck speed of forty kilometers per hour.



3 *Arnane*: long-drawn Turkish love song

THE DESERT RATS

“Neither is this one ours,” shouted Kalothetos as the swish of the bombshell approached and the deadly ironwork passed over our heads. It exploded about two hundred meters farther away, on the outer trenches held by Gurkhas, and killed four or five of them.

Kalothetos had served for six months at the Albanian front, and his hearing worked better than a radar device—which had not been invented at the time. He knew by the pitch of the swish how far the bombshell would drop as surely as he knew that someday the one swishing over his head would bear his name. We never saw Kalothetos again, nor did we bury our dead in Tobruk. We just covered their remains deep in the sand to avoid an outbreak of the typhoid fever that could spread if flies sat in their open wounds.

We had left Athens together with Kalothetos on that last Sunday of May 1941. When we reached Syria via Turkey, all the Greeks who arrived there were gathered by the English, incorporated into one of their battalions, and sent off to Tobruk. Winston Churchill had said that “Tobruk must not fall,” and the reason for our presence there was simply for Tobruk not to fall.

For three days and three nights, we travelled from Syria in a convoy of military trucks, crossing Palestine from one end to the other

on our way to Egypt. It was nightfall when we reached Kantara. We found a floating bridge there, and the convoy passed through the Suez Canal to Port Said. An air of prosperity about this town hit us. No blackout here. The first shop windows were coming to life, and as we passed through a main street, I noticed that most of the stores had Greek shop signs. For the ones living here war did not exist or was too far away. They just reaped the benefits: hotels, bars, shops, and cabarets full of Englishmen and men of all races serving His Majesty, the king. And now us, going off to hold Tobruk, a thousand kilometers away from our unfortunate country. Still, as an ancient saying goes: "Any land can be a tomb to eminent men," and we voluntarily chose a seashore tomb in Tobruk, I humorously thought.

Leaving Port Said, we entered the desert that lies between the town and Alexandria. Night had fallen and not much could be seen, but it was obvious that Alexandria was a beautiful and cosmopolitan city. When the last lights had disappeared from our view, we found ourselves again in an infinite, pitch-dark desert. Now all the vehicles turned off their headlights and drove very slowly with only their side-lights on, covered by a small tin lid. We were entering the war zone, and danger from the enemy was imminent.

Two motorcycles of the British military police took up a position at the head of the convoy following a path traced by numerous ruts made by preceding vehicles. The truck engines groaned, driven in second gear but rarely in the third, and the eyes of the tired drivers almost popped out of their sockets. One wrong swerve of the wheel and we could hit a minefield on either side of the road.

Now and then, one could discern a sign nailed to stakes directing drivers to the different units camped in the desert. On one of these, a label read "El Alamein." It was a place still unknown at the time; the decisive battle of the desert war that made this small village famous was fought a year and a half later, in October 1942. We were still in the summer of 1941 and on our way to Tobruk.

During the rest of the night, the convoy passed through Borg el

Arab, Marsa Matrouh, and Sidi Bahrani. At Sidi Bahrani, most of the desert's fiercest battles had been fought. It was daybreak, and we could see quite clearly that once there were houses, people, and shops here—but today...what in heaven's name was this?

Heaps of stones, broken window shutters, and doors, and not a single wall left off more than half a meter high. Everything had been razed to the ground by the canons, aircraft bombs, and tank shells. Right and left could be seen the ruins of burned-out tanks and armored vehicles with surely dead soldiers trapped inside and...helmets, German helmets. English helmets were scattered everywhere! What was this devastation? we wondered in awe. What sort of village was this, only fifty centimeters high? Then came Kalothetos's voice, full of humor: "Come on, there is nothing wrong with it that a few repairs and a coat of paint cannot fix."

This was now the second night spent with thirty men stacked in a jolting truck, the second night of sleeplessness. Exhaustion had taken away our zest for adventure and filled us with dark thoughts as to what was coming next. More and more I could visualize my home and kept wondering what they were doing at this moment in Athens. At dawn, we stopped near an Australian unit for a cup of tea. As we jumped from our trucks, the desert's morning frost hit our faces and brought us to our senses.

There is nothing more beautiful than dawn in the desert. It is the time when the horizon touches the sand, and tiny pink clouds rest on it. I never grew tired of this moment of the day during the year and a half spent in the desert. What I grew tired of, however, was the change of temperature, from five degrees Celsius to forty, and eating corned beef for breakfast, lunch, and dinner. I grew tired of the trenches, the war, the corpses, the blood, and the terrifying swishing of bombshells. Whoever maintains not to have felt fear is either a liar or never went to war.

The hot cup of tea and the warm white bread offered by the Australians revived us. They looked after us well, handing out chocolate bars, cigarettes, and beers. Many of them, only a few months

ago, had fought in Crete. They spoke of the Greek hospitality and the bravery of the Cretans, yet all the while looking at us compassionately. They knew we were off to Tobruk. Having just come from there, after fighting for two months in that hellhole, they were taking a well-earned rest. No one could endure Tobruk for more than sixty days and sixty nights, if of course he ever came out of there alive.

An Australian, having heard me speak English, approached, took a photograph out of his wallet, and said, "This is Matina." He had met Matina in Athens and fallen in love with her. "I will return to Athens after the war and marry her," he continued. I smiled, touched by the naïve faith of this kid. Wait first till you come out of this alive, I thought, and then you can marry. I left him to his daydreaming and finished my cup of tea.

After an hour, we set off for the rest of our journey. The sun was high in the sky by now, and soon our trucks would turn into forty-degree furnaces. Complete silence. No one spoke. Some slumbered, and the rest of us were deep in thought. As we approached our destination, fear had become our only companion. Soon we passed through Soloun, a small deserted native village, and at dusk we arrived at El Adem. From there we would leave the coastline and head southwest, deep into the desert.

I was entrusted with the itinerary by the English sergeant I had befriended since being his interpreter. The English always followed a strictly detailed program, so we arrived at El Adam at dusk and left our trucks, taking our kit bags with us. It was five o'clock, and come what may the English must drink their "five o'clock tea." So, we adopted their habits: tea for the English, tea for the Greeks. Only this cup of tea was drunk under the far-away pounding sounds of cannons and bombers.

Tobruk was no more than ten kilometers away. We would cover this distance on foot so as not to risk being hit by Stuka aircraft sitting inside the trucks. In order not to be detected from the German observation posts, at night we entered Tobruk's stronghold from the protected southeasterly side through a narrow hidden passage cleared

of mines. The whole company of 150 men set off for the ten-kilometer march toward Tobruk, when the British sergeant, whom I still remember well, and whose name was John McNabb, a Scotsman of course, said to me, "You wait here." So I stayed behind; I sat on my kit bag and waited.

A quarter of an hour passed, and the sergeant was nowhere to be seen. Better still, I thought. I will go to El Adem and join some British unit there, eat, sleep, and let the others go to Tobruk. The more I heard the bombardments and Tobruk's artillery, the more I was pleased with this idea. Before I could finish laying out my plan, though, I heard the noise of caterpillars. I froze. Surely the Germans couldn't have come this near. Only when I discerned in the semi-darkness the outline of a Bren Carrier coming in my direction did I relax. I knew the Bren Carriers. Many had been brought over to Greece by the British. They were a small, open-top type of tank, and they were armed with two Bren machine guns. When one stopped in front of me, in the same manner as a Rolls Royce with a chauffeur opening the door for his master, I saw my friend McNabb at the wheel. He told me to "hop in." Never in my wildest dreams could I imagine going to Tobruk in a desert Rolls Royce!

For the first time, I began to realize that my well-remembered mother, Mrs. Polytirni, was far from being wrong when she insisted on bringing home private tutors for me to learn two languages, French and English, for a rainy day. That rainy day had come. Once of these two languages had just saved me from a two-hour night walk in the desert. Furthermore, my regiment had been detected by the flares of a Stuka plane and machine-gunned. Three of my companions were the lucky ones that night. They remained in the sand before having had the chance to gain some glory. I was given the sad news next day in Tobruk when I met up with my regiment.

Meanwhile, the carrier entered the Tobruk stronghold from another passage, because McNabb, who had been in the desert for over eight months, knew his way around very well. This passage, through a dense minefield, was unknown to others. I could see McNabb's eyes

wide open, the wheel in his hands motionless, his lips tight, not a word coming out of his mouth. It took seven to eight minutes to get to the other end, and suddenly we came face to face with ten Tommy guns that were aiming at us.

Two or three of these soldiers belonged to McNabb's unit and recognized him, lowered their guns, and let us through. We were inside Tobruk now.

One would not need an author but rather a film stage director to describe what Tobruk was like and how I felt at the sight of that horrifying scenery of my first so-to-speak night at war. Blackout was complete, but from the glares of the British artillery one could see clearly enough soldiers wearing their helmets. They were armed much like men-of-war crabs, holding machine guns, and five or six hand grenades hung from the pockets of their jackets. Some stood alone, some in groups of five or ten. They ran here and there, either to replace others at the outer trenches or down to the harbor where a small landing craft unloaded the ammunition they had to carry up to the stronghold. Each time a German bomber aircraft made its appearance, they fell to the ground among the rubble or in the improvised trenches to escape the shell fragments. The harbor was also in complete darkness, but the surface of the sea shimmered from the glare of the cannons. And though many bombs were also aimed at the sea, the small landing craft was not hit.

We left the carrier and walked with McNabb to the sector where my people had been detached. Some English soldiers informed him that this was the forty-second air raid of the day. That is to say that in twenty-four hours there were forty-two air raids, which meant one almost every half an hour! One could see several fires here and there caused by incendiary bombs, but no one bothered to extinguish them—there was nothing left to be burned, after all. We proceeded carefully, and now and then fell to the ground for protection. I felt completely lost and very frightened in an unknown world. Bombs were falling.

German guns roaring outside in the desert, the canons in Tobruk returning their fire, screams, fires, soldiers running everywhere,

some carrying the bloody moaning wounded—it was a scene difficult to bear, for anyone. Thousands of men, young kids at that, were part of it, night and day, for weeks and even months. I think I was trembling, and I stuck to McNabb like a child afraid to lose his mother. He was cool-headed, used to this pandemonium.

At one point, he turned around and said to me, “You are brave.” I was taken aback! “Others,” he said, “go around the bend as soon as they get here and become hysterical.”

That was it. I took his words to heart and no longer stuck to him. I walked firmly and calmly, so much so that at the next loud bang, caused by three or four bombs falling a little farther away, I stood up behind a sand mound, a deadly mistake, of course. As I stood erect, I felt a hand grab me from behind, and it threw me face down onto the ground. As soon as the noise from the bombs and the stones and sand subsided, I got up, a little shaken, to thank McNabb, who was standing silently nearby. It was then that I saw an English Captain standing next to him in the semidarkness and looking at me furiously, obviously for my carelessness.

Two years ago, you must remember, I was expelled from college by my English professor, Mr. Peet, who could not accept that a spoiled brat did as he pleased because his parents paid eighty thousand drachmae in yearly school fees. It was a large sum at the time. So I left school and found my peace, and so did he. And now these eyes looking at me grew bigger, full of astonishment. I started to shiver all over. This is impossible, I said to myself.

“You? Here?” he said with an even more baffled expression on his face.

“Yes, sir,” I answered humbly.

Here was Peet, cruel Mr. Peet, a captain standing here in front of me! To stumble on him in this hellhole was both unfair and inadmissible. A pure condemnation! Suddenly the look on his face changed. It took on a serene and protective expression as if he were pained for his own child.

He said, “But you are only a young kid,” and gave me a friendly pat on the back.

I was no longer the little villain and bad pupil, but a well-behaved seventeen-year-old youngster who had left the comforts of home and put his life on the line to serve in the Allied forces against those who had enslaved his country. Peet was mobilized by the British Government when Greece was occupied, and he had been given the rank of captain because of his profession. He knew of the courage needed to sail from one island to the other, hiding from the Germans until reaching Turkey. That was the reason for this change of heart.

“I had him as a student in Greece,” he proudly told McNabb, who was watching us, amazed by what was going on.

I was informed later that Peet was the liaison officer between the unit comprising Greek soldiers and the headquarters of the British commander, General Auchinleck. From this position, he often proved a great help to me. Anyway, we said our good-byes, and, with McNabb, I proceeded to find my battalion, which had been positioned on the north side of the stronghold where most of the German attacks were being directed. You see, the glorious Albanian Epic was still very recent, and the Greek soldier and, in general, the Greek army, was considered then to be the best in the world.

When I arrived at my destination, I found everyone digging... their homes—by this I mean, a pit one meter deep by two meters long, enabling one to lie down. We each pitched our tent, under which, in pairs, we spent the icy cold nights and scorching days during the air raids.

For the first week we did next to nothing, except ride out the bombardments we had grown used to after a while. As soon as the airplanes made their appearance, we jumped in our house-cum-cum-bedroom-cum-whatever else it represented. In there, a bomb could only harm us by a vertical direct hit; otherwise, if it fell even ten meters away, it only covered us with sand and stones. At night, small groups of seven to ten soldiers would go out patrolling around the

minefields. Just routine without heroics!

By the end of that week, though, the situation changed. General Auchinleck, commander of all the desert units, decided to go into battle with armored vehicles and promote his motorized units by opening large passages from the desert to the stronghold, as the only open road of the encircled Tobruk was from the coast. Then, with the support of the liberated Tobruk at the rear, he could proceed to Benghazi.

So, at dawn on Saturday June 29, 1941, an attack was launched outside Sidi Bahrani. After a six-hour formidable battle, the Seventh British Armored Division broke up the famous *Italian Ariete Division*, probably the only Italian unit that fought bravely in the desert front. Unrestrained now, Auchinleck pushed his Seventh Division toward Tobruk. Nevertheless, his tanks were far from their base and supplying them could prove a problem in the event of another clash, something Rommel had thought out better than Auchinleck.

Rommel was waiting for him outside of the southern side of Tobruk with his handpicked Fifteenth Armored Division (Panzer Divisione). The impact was disastrous for the British. Their Matilda-type tanks were faster and more flexible but lighter armed than those of the Germans, and, other than the distance from their base, both men and their machines were exhausted from their fight against Ariete. As a result, Auchinleck was annihilated, and Tobruk was surrounded from all sides by the Germans, leaving the small harbor to serve yet again as the only route of communication.

The “confined” men numbered seventy-five thousand. Of those, most were Australians and New Zealanders, many Indians and Gurkhas, and a few English and Greeks. This was the beginning of the tragic Tobruk siege, which lasted for eight whole months. It is carved in gold letters in the history of war.

Much has been written about the “battle of Tobruk’s desperados,” about life in the “holes of the desert,” about the “Desert Rats.” I have no quarrel with historians’ detailed descriptions, which are very

near the truth, but I have to wonder about the relation between the man writing based on information and the one who actually lived through 250 frozen, anguished nights, burying his companions for whom often death meant deliverance. Yes, death—but instant death, not lingering, painful, atrocious death from hemorrhage or the putridity of gangrene.

For two days, a young man from Samos Island who had been hit in his gut begged me, “Please finish me off.” Eventually, he rested.

The news of the overall siege reached the stronghold at dawn on that Saturday morning. From afar, looking through binoculars, one could still observe a few German tanks coming down south behind the broken Seventh Armored British Division. We were now the defeated of legendary Field Marshal Rommel’s African Corps.

The air raids stopped. This was a sign of the uselessness of spending bombs and fuel. They had us all caged in, seventy-five thousand men with few supplies and little hope of replenishing these through a very difficult sea outlet. They surely thought, let them die of thirst or else they will have to surrender or leave by sea. They knew of the English stubbornness, patience, persistence, and self-control. Tobruk must not fall. At once, within twenty-four hours, the orders were issued for planning the defense of the stronghold.

Being a seaside stronghold, Tobruk lay half on the sea, with the other half on the sand. About ten kilometers out was the semicircle, which bordered the sand with its two ends touching the sea. These ten kilometers, no more than a mile deep, became the most deadly and formidable minefield ever in a war zone. Such was the density of the mines that no square centimeter was left that would not blow up. Sometimes we took a stone from the rubble and threw it outside the stronghold, and within seconds could hear the explosion. As if the rest of the explosions were not enough, we caused our own.

The defense plans drawn by the English were ingenious. They opened narrow passages thirty to forty centimeters wide through the minefields, leading up to a square trench of two-by-two meters and

as deep as a man's height. These were the famous "boxes" that were surrounded by barbed wire and sand sacks. Many of these "boxes" were placed in a radius all along the half-moon-shaped stronghold facing the side of the desert. They consisted of the vanguards or fortifications, so to speak; these had to fall first, before the Germans could occupy Tobruk.

The "boxes" were occupied by six soldiers and one noncommissioned officer, enough men to ward off an attack by a group of Germans coming crawling through the minefield. Duty in the "boxes" lasted for two long weeks, before soldiers were able to return to their units. After two weeks, they were back again below ground with the sand up to their necks.

It was quite difficult for a "box" to be captured. Even if a tank passed over it, one could hit it from behind with an antitank weapon. So, the only way to seize it was by a man-to-man fight and, after all, its defenders were slaughtered first. The Germans, being aware of this, would very often send handpicked commandos crawling in the darkness through mines and barbed wires to catch us by surprise. Especially on very dark nights, they had become a real nightmare; we waited with our eyes wide open with anticipation, our ears by now trained to hear even the flight of a fly fifty meters away. We were lucky if keeping guard coincided with a moonlit night. Then our job was easy and...romantic! During the day, our pit covered by the tent to protect us from the sun, which was like a furnace. But after those difficult nights, we slept like logs.

These were the "boxes" of Tobruk and the men living in them were the Desert Rats.

Within a week, the passages had been cleared of mines, and the "boxes" were ready. This was when I had proof of Mr. Peet's magnanimity. He detached me from my unit for quite a long period and used me on translating jobs. He could not keep me there forever, and my turn eventually came; off I went for my fortnight in the "boxes."

My experience there wasn't as tragic as I had imagined. It was my

good luck that the English sergeant heading my group had hearing so acute that he took wind of the Germans from a great distance. He then let them approach as close as thirty meters to our "box," ready to rush us with their bayonets. That point was when they were met by a barrage of our machine guns, aiming at the mines, which exploded and tore them to pieces. The following morning, a whole operation would get underway to collect the remains and bury them in the sand for fear of the black cloud of flies feasting on the pieces of flesh as soon as the sun was high up in the sky, spreading typhoid fever among the men.

The second time around was not similar to the first. Here, the human element, the human error as they say, triumphed. It was past five o'clock in the morning on a less-feared moonlit night.

"I am going off to sleep," said the English sergeant to me. "There should be no problem, but let the others know, and keep your eyes wide open for another half hour until daybreak."

He lay down on his blanket and fell asleep. We all started to chat, drinking coffee from a thermos, reminiscing, telling one another how we got here from Greece, and wondering when we would be able to return to our homes. It was just as we would do if we were sitting in a coffee shop in Athens's main square.

Suddenly, a flash reached the sky and bathed in its light the whole minefield. It was coupled soon after by a blast that broke our eardrums. A type Telerman mine, the largest of its kind, had exploded twenty to twenty-five meters ahead of us.

It was obvious that the Germans had crawled that close and stood up bayonets in hand to attack us when one of them tread on the mine and blew it up. The rest of them saw us in the glare, coffee in hand, and pounced to slaughter us. But twenty-five meters are twenty-five meters, representing twenty seconds, which is time enough for trained soldiers. Of course, there was no time for us to use a machine gun, but our tommy guns went to work like lightning when we saw them standing there. Their bodies begun to fall all

over us, dragging us with them into the pit. We huddled together in the darkness, not knowing who was on top of whom. I didn't know whom I clasped in my arms, if it was a German or one of our own, if he was dead or alive, if the blood I touched was mine, if, if...

The firing had stopped, and the Germans surely must all have died. We freed ourselves and lit a hurricane lamp to see what was going on. We finished off any Germans we thought were still alive with a bullet in their heads and threw them outside the pit. On the other side of the "box" there was a German who would not move from on top of someone under him. This someone was Vangelis, who worked at the Piraeus harbor slaughterhouses. But what had happened here?

Vangelis was unable to use his Tommy gun in time, but he always carried a huge knife strapped to his belt, the type of knife he slaughtered beef with, and when he saw the German, he drew it and stabbed him. As the German fell, his bayonet pierced Vangelis's gut and came out on the other side. When we pulled the German from on top of him, he was on his last gasp and his wonderstruck open eyes seemed to say, "How could I have put my foot in it?"

Meanwhile, our English sergeant had jumped up and furiously—quite rightly so—turned to me to give me a good dressing down, as I understood his language, for having carelessly allowed the Germans to reach the "box."

"You had two of them on top of you and all you did was drink your coffee," he said.

That was not exactly what had happened. I had anticipated one of them, and I am sure I killed him. The other must have been had by the English sergeant right behind me, still holding a gun in his hand. I owed him my life.

In the morning, we buried Vangelis out there, outside our "box," and when a soldier came carrying a wooden cross and some paint to write his name on it, I grabbed the paintbrush and wrote underneath, "The beef got you." By that I did not mean the Germans but the beef he slaughtered in Piraeus...taking their revenge.

Of the eight months that the Tobruk siege lasted, I spent three in the “boxes.” It is difficult to describe how hard-hearted a person can become, once used to filth, flies, blood, dismembered corpses, being in a furnace during the day, being frightened all night, and having despair turn into a death wish—and, as I said, this death should be quick, not a lingering one. I witnessed such savagery during these months that I could hardly recognize myself. I had turned into an indifferent, cold-blooded beast. I buried my dearest companions without shedding a tear; instead, I felt grateful and pleased to be alive.

Once more, the air raids came in waves of twenty to thirty a day, once the Germans realized that we did not give in and that Tobruk was still holding on, preventing Rommel’s plan to launch a general offensive that would enable him to enter Egypt and from there continue on to the Arabian oil wells. With Tobruk at his rear, he could not risk it.

So, this was our life. There were moments when we became hysterical. When will it all end? Let the Germans take all of us prisoners, let us die, anything is better than this! Living for eight long months in this hellhole seemed to last forever. But man has great powers of endurance...and one morning, by the end of these eight months, after a fierce battle, the heroic New Zealand Second Division under General Freyberg, the famous warrior of Crete, and the shock forces of Alexander’s Indian Division came to end the siege and isolation. It seemed as if tombs had been opened and the dead resurrected.

Churchill had asked the sacrifice of seventy-five thousand men to hold Tobruk and win the desert war. This sacrifice cost thirty-five thousand wounded, several thousand dead and twenty-five thousand living dead! All of them were young men, twenty to twenty-five years old, and they were buried in an immense desert. Thousands of crosses stuck in Tobruk’s sand, witnesses of the sacrifice that turned around the outcome of the war. Among them were a few Greeks of the 1940 generation, who added a small stone in the road to victory against Rommel’s formidable army.

After the war, the men of the so-called Desert Rat unit founded

a club in London that the English hold in great respect. They always regard the survivors with the highest admiration and esteem.

Characteristically, when in 1968 Queen Elizabeth awarded the Beatles an OBE for the foreign currency influx due to their records, the Desert Rats were advised by their committee to return the equivalent decorations received by King George, father to the present Queen, for their heroic eight months in Tobruk. The survivors, as well as the families of the dead, did so as a sign of protest. This great sacrifice of young lives could not compare with the foreign currency imported in England by some longhaired singers.

Many of the Rats were still alive at the time, and the Queen sent an apologetic letter to each of the Tobruk veterans, as well as the families of the dead. The letter read, "Your sacrifice brought victory to England, but Great Britain must win the economic peacetime war." With the letter, she returned the decorations.

Small war stories have great moral importance.

When someone asked me, "If your house caught fire, which most valuable item would you try and save?" Without a second thought, I answered, "My war decorations because they represent the most significant part of my life."

Within two days, we handed over our positions to the New Zealanders, and the living ghosts of Tobruk took the road for Cairo or Alexandria. Most British units went to Cairo, while the Greek ones went to Alexandria as the First Greek Brigade was being established there. It consisted of Greeks fleeing their country or others coming from elsewhere to join the ranks, as well as the ones living in Egypt mobilized by

the Greek government in exile, with its headquarters in Cairo.

On our departure, before getting in the trucks transporting us to our destination, I turned around and cast a last glance at Tobruk with very mixed feelings. I was overwhelmed with joy for leaving behind me an open grave where I had lived the worst moments of my life. Yet, I felt an uncalled-for nostalgia for a place I had grown fond of. How could I possibly feel affection for a place where I had spent 250 days and nights in fear and sheer agony? How true was the Greek saying that the soul of a man is like an abyss? I felt I had to give thanks to God or to Tobruk for getting me out of there alive and for not sharing the misfortune of the dead soldiers left buried in the sand.

My thoughts were interrupted by a hand pulling me from behind. It was the same hand that pulled me to safety on my first night in Tobruk. It was that of my professor Mr. Peet.

“Come ride with me to Alexandria in my jeep,” he said.

Two joys in one day! This would save me two days and two nights of jolting and discomfort. The jeep was put at the disposal of Mr. Peet by the New Zealanders, and his first thought was for me!

As we drove along, he suddenly said, “You have survived. You know the meaning of this? If you have survived Tobruk, you will not die in this war in as many battles as you may take part.”

I remembered these words more than once, and whenever I had a narrow escape would say to myself: Peet was right!



THE MAN I LOVE

Night had fallen by the time we had arrived in Alexandria after a fifteen-hour drive by jeep in the desert. I had never been to Alexandria before but many of my friends from Egypt came every summer to Kifissia,⁴ where my home was, and I knew many young navy officers, who, when still cadets, also came often enough to Kifissia. Having been informed by a Navy officer I met in Syria that all Greek Navy officers frequented or resided at the Metropole Hotel, when Peet asked me where I intended to stay, I answered, "At the Metropole," leaving him speechless. Peet knew Alexandria pretty well, having served there for some time.

"It is for officers only, and it's very expensive."

"Sir, I haven't come out of a tomb just to get into another one because it will be cheaper," I answered.

This phrase was very representative of my character and the mentality of a man like me who could live in a grave on the brink of death one day and the next live like a prince without a care in the world. This is what I have been like all my life. Besides, the last thing I could think of at that precise moment was how to save money...

⁴ *A suburb north of Athens, the equivalent of Hampstead*

This reminded me of the remarks made back home by my father and got on my nerves. Here I was living on borrowed time, a leftover, so to speak, from a massacre, and I was expected to consider the cost of a hotel!

Peet drove me to Saad Zhagloul Street and deposited me outside the Metropole.

“Good-bye. See you soon,” he said, as if bringing me home from a party. This was wartime, and too many emotional scenes were quite unnecessary; otherwise, one would be permanently upset by endless good-byes.

My appearance was terrible. Though we had changed into clean uniforms before leaving Tobruk, I was unshaven, shabby looking and overly tanned, scorched by the desert sun. At the hotel entrance stood a huge Arab in a red uniform. He looked down at me with disdain, and then peered at my shoulder to look for a star.

Not seeing one there, he said, “Officers only.”

I took out of my pocket a bundle of money given to us by the British before leaving Tobruk and handed him a pound. In Egypt, a tip amounted to two piasters (one hundred piasters to a pound), and one pound was the equivalent of a month's salary for the Arab. I had no idea of the value of that money. The next day I was due to go to the Military Police headquarters with a paper issued to us and get double that amount from the cashier of His Majesty, the King of England. All in all, I was owed nine salaries plus extra benefits and bonuses. We had put our lives on the line; at the very least, we should get paid for it!

In the meantime, the Arab porter almost fainted at the sight of the pound. He took off his fez, broke his back dropping low bows, carried my bag, and I thus arrived at the front desk.

Two or three of the employees there gave me another look while repeating, “For officers only.” At that moment, a rather short, rather bald gentleman appeared, intensely searching my eyes for recogni-

tion. I shared the same feeling.

“You are...?” he said. At the sound of my name, he smiled. “John Tamvakakis,” he introduced himself, and at once the summers in Kifissia came to my mind.

He was the owner of the Metropole and had turned his hotel into a naval transit point, as he knew many young officers from Greece, including captains and admirals. This place felt more like the Greek Admiralty than a hotel.

“Have you just arrived from Greece?” he went on asking.

“What are you talking about...? I have come from Tobruk,” I answered.

At the word Tobruk, his eyes goggled, and he went speechless.

After a while, he repeated in a loud voice that was heard down the hallway, “From Tobruk?”

The man couldn't believe his ears. Everyone knew from the newspapers and radio what being in Tobruk meant and had heard that the eight-month siege had been lifted only two days ago. And now, here in front of him stood someone who had just come from there! No wonder he had turned into a stone statue.

In the meantime, his loud exclamations had gathered around us the navy men from down the hallway and from the bar, all of whom wished to have a look at the man from Tobruk. Some faces were familiar. Finally, John T. gave me the key to a room and said, “Go upstairs, have a bath and a shave, and then we will see what we can do with you.”

John T. is no longer with us, but he was an exceptional man, a true patriot who welcomed to his hotel the whole of the fighting Navy, whether these were friends or newcomers. Some of them paid when they had the money, others went broke playing cards or celebrating. Yet John T. always offered his hospitality and affection to everyone. We later became great friends. Wherever he is now, if there

are books in paradise, let him read this one to remind him of Alexandria, the war, our brawls, and our friendship.

I got into a hot bath and soaked in its perfumed water. But when I pulled the plug to let the water out, the tub practically clogged up from the filth and the sand. Where I came from, all we had was a flask of water to last for two days just to make sure our lips did not swell from thirst. If we were lucky enough to steal a few minutes away and have a dip in the sea at night that was what having a bath meant, and it ensured cleanliness for eight long months!

I shaved and was about to dress when the telephone in my room rung. It was John T.

“Have you got any clothes?” he inquired.

“What sort of clothes are you talking about? I have my clean uniform.”

“A soldiers’ uniform? That is out of the question. There are only officers here, and you will not be able to join us. Wait for me; I’m coming up.”

He came up to my room with Noni Steryiakis, an acting sublieutenant friend from Athens, and they began to discuss whose clothes—of those now out on patrol—would fit me. They decided on Marios Horsch’s civilian clothes. Of course, as John T. had skeleton keys to all the rooms, all three of us went along—I was in my bathrobe—to the room that Horsch was sharing with Loundras, who was also out on patrol in his submarine. I tried on a casual checked jacket and a pair of gray trousers that fit me. They must have been Horsch’s, though Loundras to this day insists that the jacket was his. Anyway, I took the clothes. John T. gave me a shirt and tie, and upon getting all dressed up and looking very handsome, I went down to the bar.

Had I entered any bar in Athens or Kifissia I would have come across fewer acquaintances than here. Other than the young naval officers, there were some girls who had escaped from Greece and did voluntary work as nurses at the Alexandria Kotsikio hospital.

Oddly, though they all surrounded me, falling all over me and asking what I would drink—one ordering beer, the next one sandwiches—at the same time, they stared at me and whispered to one another as if a strange phenomenon stood in their midst, a sort of extraterrestrial of our days. The newspapers and radio had done a good job of informing the public that there were no survivors in Tobruk, so they fired so many questions at me that I had to stop them.

“Slowly, guys. Of course there are survivors, two and a half thousand of us, and I was one of the first ones to get out the day before yesterday.”

Someone asked, “How many were killed?”

When I answered, “Thirty-five thousand wounded and several thousand dead,” everyone froze.

The newspapers hadn't mentioned any numbers. They froze because they had fought at sea on surface boats or submarines for only twenty days and were in Alexandria for the last ten. Each time they left on a dangerous mission, they knew that they may or may not return as many of the Queen Olga, Adrias, Katsonis, and Triton warships didn't do so. The meaning of war and death was familiar to them, but so many dead in one confrontation was too much to fathom.

In the meantime, with so many “drink ups,” “bottoms ups,” and “chin-chins,” we got really stinking drunk. At some point I shut my eyes, reminiscing about where I was only two days ago and taking stock of where I was today. Not even in my wildest dreams could I have imagined all this luxury and wellbeing when I was out there.

I opened my eyes to erase the black thoughts and horrible images. Life is wonderful, I thought, and I must live it to the full.

“I am hungry,” I said, and I suddenly realized that one's stomach is not just there to take in drink but also some food.

At that moment, the famous “Rabbit” appeared, looking fresh and dressed to the hilt. Rabbit was a notorious Athenian prewar and

postwar character. The older generation will remember him well, but I will give you a description of his virtues and merits. To begin with, he was very astute, with a fast brain and a quick sense of humor. He never did any kind of work, but he was well established in the Alexandria and Cairo casino network and even more so in the racecourse one.

Sometimes he was loaded with money; at other times, he was penniless. Mostly, he was without a penny—dry as he used to say—but tonight he was far from dry, for as soon as he heard me say the word “hungry,” his reaction was immediate: “Let’s go to Santa Lucia.”

In fact, he used that magic word with the panache and the debonair expression of a rich man about to invite everybody present. We all stopped to stare at him—even with his arms raised above his head, he was no more than a meter tall—wondering where he had found so much cash. He lifted the folded newspaper in his hand and smacked it with his other hand, saying with a roguish expression on his face, “For God’s sake, can’t you see the bloodshed?”

The headlines read: **SLAUGHTER AT THE RACECOURSE.**

“Ivan brought in big money.” Ivan was the horse he had put his money on. So, Rabbit was loaded and hosting at Santa Lucia (one of the smartest restaurants in Alexandria and where the navy officers usually went—if they were in the money).

I really and truly lived again. At Santa Lucia, I ate my bon fillet with a knife and fork, on a dazzling white tablecloth, with Arab waiters serving wine and wearing white-starched galabiehs and white gloves. No more holding a tin in one hand as I had for eight long months, flicking the flies with the other hand while hurriedly pushing some corned beef in my mouth.

Life was wonderful after all, and the wine had done a great job.

Yet, while eating my thick, juicy steak, I caught myself several times furtively looking around for flies. Rabbit paid the bill as promised, and we left the restaurant. Sleep was out of the question. Rabbit had already worked out in his mind that after so many months in the

desert I must be loaded.

He said to me, "In Tobruk, one cannot spend money, right? Let us go to the Carlton."

The Carlton was another hotel with a fantastic nightclub in the basement. The officers left us to it. Some were leaving at the crack of dawn and went directly to their ships, and the others headed back to the Metropole to get some sleep.

Rabbit entered the nightclub first and found the owner. God only knows what he whispered in his ear; we were shown to the best table near the dance floor. A group of dancers named the Zanolfski Trio were performing. I remembered them well, as in every nightclub I went to, whether in Alexandria, Cairo, or Port Said, I found them dancing there. The Trio consisted of two girls and a man, Zanolfski.

"Don't look at them," said Rabbit. "They are not worth it. Wait and see."

I patiently waited for the worthy one and worth it she was! When the warmly applauded Trio retired a sensational pianist named Johnny Haysmith made his entrance, greeted Rabbit with a nod—Rabbit being a trade name—sat at the piano, and began to play. My ears hadn't heard the sound of music in months. I was in seventh heaven.

As the pianist went into the second song, "The Man I Love," a gorgeous creature whose beauty left me speechless appeared from behind the curtain. She walked nonchalantly to the grand piano, leaned on it, and began to sing, "Someday he'll come along, the man I love..."

She was tall, with blond hair and blue eyes. Her long white gown with a deep neckline and an open back revealed her fantastic figure. Two strings of white pearls were around her neck. She had all of this, plus a warm voice that made me fall in love with her at first sight.

As soon as I recovered from the shock of the moment, I uttered, "Rabbit, what kind of creature is this?"

“Let it be,” he answered. “She doesn’t go for it.”

The others are not worth it, this one doesn’t go for it, what am I supposed to do, I thought, take the Arab with the galabieh? Rabbit shook his head, but I couldn’t take my eyes off her. As soon as she finished her song, the pianist introduced her. Her name was Yuki Russel and, as Rabbit informed me, she was an American Jew. Now the question of why, instead of being in the war-free United States, she chose to be two hundred kilometers away from Rommel was worth getting into.

Our table was at the very front near the dance floor, and together with two or three others like it was the best and always the center of attention regarding any noting of who’s who. But mostly the performers had an eye on that, and so Yuki cast a glance in our direction. It was obvious from the way she looked at him that she had seen “trademark Rabbit” before.

I was of two minds as to whether this was a good or bad sign. Still, I doubt I went up in her esteem for the company I kept. Before she ended her program, she cast another glance, and when she left the floor, I said, “Rabbit, go inside and invite her over for a glass of champagne. I don’t want to send the waiter and risk offending her.”

“I am not going. She is not a club hostess.”

“Go, damn you, and tell her I’ve come from Tobruk.”

“She will not give a shit,” said Rabbit.

“Aren’t you ashamed that poor old me was fighting while you were having a good time?”

He always had a ready answer. “Don’t blame me if you were taken for a fool!”

“Rabbit,” I said, this time in anger, “tomorrow I will go to the Military Police headquarters and have you arrested for not having reported even once to your unit since your arrival here.”

At the mention of the words *Military Police*, he gave in.

“I’m going, but do not expect her to come.”

I drank two whiskies in one gulp from sheer agony and waited for his return. Rabbit came up trumps, and he did bring her to our table. I got up to welcome her and when she gave me her hand I almost flipped, blood rushing to my head. Really and truly she was a divine creature. She sat next to me, and on the other side sat Rabbit, whose presence now annoyed me.

“I came when *le Lapin*⁵ mentioned you were in Tobruk for eight months and today was your first night away from the war. I would be a monster not to come.”

It seemed *le Lapin* had worked on her feelings pretty well and had moved her. Apparently he befriended the pianist and that explained how they knew each other but how his mind worked pretending he didn’t know her was difficult to explain.

We got talking about the war, of course—what else?—about Tobruk, the minefields, the dark nights. She kept looking at me in silence, thirsty to hear and learn all about it. I was cashing in on Tobruk, realizing that I was gaining her through my misfortunes. She did not order champagne, just drank one whisky after another, all the time listening to me and looking deep into my eyes.

I cannot remember or recollect for how many hours this went on, but at some point I knew that the foreplay had done its work. It was time to get into the next stage and see what would happen from then on. So when the orchestra began to play “Again,” at the line “it never happened again,” I got up saying, “Come on, Yuki, let’s dance. Enough with the war.” And as the singer was at that moment repeating the words “it never happened again,” Yuki, looking straight at me, said, “Are you sure?”

That’s it; I thought to myself, the time for the warrior’s repose has arrived. When we returned to our table, I said I was very tired and must catch some sleep without adding any of the usual when

⁵ French for “the rabbit”

will I see you again, or may I take you home, which can put a woman on her guard by revealing exactly what you wanted her for.

She seemed surprised, not that I expected her to have already fallen for me but by my behavior, which was different from than that of the usual male clientele of the nightclubs.

Walking to my hotel, which was just across from the Carlton, in the warm Alexandria night, Yuki was constantly in my dizzy head. I woke up the following evening, not surprisingly, as I had not slept for the last forty-eight hours. I went to the movies with my friend Mourginakis, an officer in the Royal Navy whom I knew from Kifissia, and we saw *Down Argentina Way* with Carmen Miranda. I decided not to go and see Yuki that night so she wouldn't think I was chasing after her, and my friend, a professor in matters of the heart, agreed with me. But I went the following night. When I walked in she was singing "The Man I Love."

The waiter showed me to the same table, having realized he had to deal with a good future client, and this is what happened next.

Yuki took the microphone in her hand, came to my table, and sang "The Man I Love" just for me, the emphasis on each word and all it implied. The syrup had set!

"Today, no war talk," I told her. "Today we will—"

She didn't seem to listen and interrupted me. "Why did you not come yesterday?"

"So that I would miss you more," I answered, enjoying this dialogue full of innuendoes.

She smiled, sat next to me, and ordered a whisky. Tonight, she was wearing a long black dress that enhanced her blond hair and blue eyes, giving them a special glow, and I knew then exactly what was happening to me...

We spent the first fortnight of my leave in heavenly bliss. During the day, we went sightseeing—among other places we visited was

King Farouk's summer palace in Montanza—but mostly we spent our mornings swimming at the Sidi Bishr beach. At night, after she finished her floorshow, we went to other nightclubs, dancing and drinking.

One evening, while dancing at the Excelsior Club, some wretched Italian pilot chose to make his rounds at a safety height, as per usual, of several thousand meters over Alexandria. The air-raid alert sounded, and at that moment I broke out in laughter at the sight of the panic-stricken people who were obviously completely out of touch with the war. I was left alone on the dance floor with the shivering Yuki in my arms. I was really having fun with the situation and tried to reassure her that even if a bomb fell on the building at the very most it would damage the two top floors out of the eight and that for it to reach the basement where we happened to be it would take at least the direct hit of another ten bombs. The following day's newspapers headlines read: Alexandria Endangered by Enemy Planes!

At the end of the fortnight, Yuki's contract with the Carlton came to an end. The next week, she would start singing at the Heliopolis Palace Hotel nightclub. Heliopolis was the most aristocratic suburb five kilometers out of Cairo and practically all of it belonged to French Baron Empien. It had been built by his father at the end of the last century, based on the plans of French architects and in the grand style of that era. The hotel itself was similar to the Cote d'Azur's Negresco and the Carlton Hotels.

I moved to Cairo with Yuki and, as her contract included hotel accommodation at the Heliopolis Palace, I moved in with her to save on my hotel bills. More bliss here in Cairo: The Pyramids, the Sphinx, and the rest of the sights, which thanks to Yuki's presence took on an even more special meaning.

One evening, Yuki had an all-night rehearsal due to a program change, and so as not to stay alone, I went to Cairo for a change of scenery. Too much of a "married life" risked tiring me.

So I took the small electric train connecting Heliopolis to Cai-

ro and after fifteen minutes arrived at the Kasr-el-Nil Square. From there, I walked for five minutes to the cosmopolitan Shepheard's Hotel, where I was sure to find acquaintances and see familiar faces.

It was nine o'clock in the evening, and the bar was blurred with smoke, heroes, spies, traitors, deserters, usurpers, princes, legionaries, and warriors. All the little men were in colored uniforms, moving around with glass in hand, making new acquaintances and telling one another of true or make-believe heroics. Some were trying to sell lots of car tires stolen from the British Army to international crooks. Others were buying gold pounds from rich Jews who had fled Europe to escape from the Nazis. The women were also selling their goods of hashish and opium, and some were selling sex. The whole atmosphere reminded one of the Humphrey Bogart film *Casablanca*, which happened to be on at the nearby movie house.

I took a glass of whisky from the bar and was looking for a quiet table to have my drink when I heard a familiar voice. I turned around and saw a couple sitting at a table—a handsome navy officer and next to him a gorgeous young girl with long red hair and slit eyes. It was my friend Mourginakis, the one I had met in Alexandria, a daredevil on board his ship as well as in the matters of the heart. With him was Niki Demis, who was one of the most beautiful girls of her time and had just arrived from Greece. They made a handsome couple and seemed very much in love, a strange contrast in this mysterious colorful chaos of the Shepheard's bar.

"Sit down," he said, "and fill me in on the outcome with Yuki after I last saw you in Alexandria."

"All is well," I answered. "Don't worry about me. I am leading a perfect married life, living with her at the Heliopolis Palace while she sings downstairs at the nightclub."

"Well done. I'm proud of you. She sings, and you sleep in her room. Now, let's drink to your health...And, by the way, how long are you on leave for?"

"I have no idea," I answered, and he advised me to go and pay a

visit to the Military Police headquarters the following day to find out.

“Go and find them before they find you.”

We went on talking and laughing. Even the saddest topics were met with laughter. It was out of a spontaneous joy for being alive when thousands every day were killed or died in the desert, at sea, or in the air—the same wellbeing one feels when in a warm firelit room while it is stormy and freezing outside.

My friend lifted the bottle, filled my glass, and said, “Drink, drink up. For you are living on borrowed time. You are a leftover from where you came from.”

I had heard this before. The following day, Niki would be on her own; my friend was leaving on patrol with his other girlfriend named Niki.⁶ We said our good-byes with a squeeze of our hands and a pang in our hearts. What could I say to him? Hope to see you soon, if you don’t get killed? So, we simply and silently went our separate ways.

I walked leisurely in the warm Cairo night up to the Kars-el-Nil station to take the small train back to Heliopolis. A couple of drunk English soldiers stopped me, asking for a shilling to buy one more beer. Who knows what these poor devils had been through and needed to drown in beer in order to forget? On the train, leaving behind Cairo’s last districts, we entered the desert. Heliopolis was built on the sand. Suddenly, shivers ran up and down my spine, and all the memories of Tobruk, the boxes, the dead came rushing to my mind. Going up to the hotel room, I was seized by a bad premonition.

Yuki was already asleep. I got into bed and slept in her arms as if this was the last night with her, scared of losing her.

I woke up at eleven o’clock the next morning in a lousy mood, having been badly affected by my journey in the desert at dawn. I also couldn’t get out of my mind the words of my friend Mourginakis: “Go and find out.” A month had gone by since I had left Tobruk,

⁶ *Niki (Victory), a destroyer torpedo boat*

and the war hadn't come to an end—quite the opposite. Rommel, under pressure from Hitler, was preparing a major offensive building up new forces to enable him at any cost to advance toward Egypt and across the Suez Canal so as to reach the Middle East oil wells.

So, I put on the uniform I had not worn for over a month and got ready to present myself at the Military Police headquarters to find out how much of my leave I had left. I kissed Yuki, who was still asleep. She opened her eyes, saw me in uniform—she had never seen me in it before—and jumped up, shouting hysterically, “Where are you going?”

I explained, trying to calm her down, but she was kissing me over and over again, not believing a word I was saying. Only when I told her I was going to get my suit to be pressed did she relax. By my suit I meant, of course, the jacket that probably belonged to Loundras and Horsch's pair of trousers.

When I arrived in Cairo, I took a cab to the posh part of town named Ghezirah, where the premises of the Greek government and the War Office were situated. I inquired after the officer on duty, and when I entered his office this is what happened.

I saluted, he returned my salute, and, as soon as he saw me wearing the Desert Rat's British decoration, he took on a look of admiration. But as soon as I showed him the British leave issued to us on our departure from Tobruk, his face clouded over, and he got rather angry.

“Do you know you are in the Greek army and not the British one?”

“Of course I know.”

“So why did you not present yourself at the Alexandria Military Police headquarters to verify your permit and take a leave for specific days from the Greek army?” He continued, “Are you aware that you have been unjustifiably absent from your unit for thirty-two days in time of war? Do you know that I am under the obligation to arrest you?”

Now it was my turn to get a little angry, as angry as a soldier

could get at a superior officer.

“Do you know where I have come from, Captain, sir?”

Here is where I made my deadly mistake given the fact that “Captain, sir” suffered from our national ailment: an inferiority complex. I had wounded his pride—and the three stars on his shoulders he gave a shine to every morning.

“You are not the only one that went to war. We have our own war, too,” he retorted.

What could I tell this man who was fighting his own war from the most sought-after district of Cairo, from his bureau with a view of the Nile!

Of course, I did not keep my big mouth shut, I said, “No doubt the enemy is everywhere.”

Captain Sir caught the irony of my words and became livid.

“Sergeant!” he shouted, and his desk in Cairo’s most sought-after neighborhood shook.

In came a very tall, mustached sergeant, an ex-policeman and ex-gendarmerie hero of the Cairo Military Police headquarters. This hero arrested me by order of “Captain Sir” and escorted me handcuffed to Palestine and to the First Greek Brigade, to take part in the desert battle against Rommel. Normally, I would have been issued with marching papers and presented myself to the brigade, but already the handcuffs had been put on and the escort ordered by “Captain Sir.”

When leaving his office, I saluted him and said, “I don’t wear my medals as you do, Captain, sir, on my shoulders, but on my chest.”

During the twenty-four-hour trip from Cairo to Palestine, where this Tobruk hero was escorted in chains, I could think of nothing else but poor Yuki, who waited for me with the pressed suit at the ready. I would never show up. She would wait alone in the room until it was her turn to sing, and I wondered how she could possibly sing

“The Man I Love” tonight. Surely many unfair thoughts concerning my person must have been crossing her mind, but the last thing she could ever imagine was what was really happening to me.

All the adversities in my life have been caused by cowards, idiots, and people ridden with inferiority complexes. This “Captain Sir” with a smokeless gun could not hide his envy for someone who had really been in action and was now mocking him with contempt. Truly, I did feel contempt for this little man comfortably sitting at his desk, who had supposedly fled Greece to fight for his country. And there were quite a few such little men in the Middle East, playing at being heroes on their return to Greece.

Thanks to such a man I was never able to say good-bye to Yuki, to say the farewell I should have as a man who had fallen in love with her, loved her, and lived the most wonderful month of his early youth with her. All that remained was a sweet memory of the war years.

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