

THE SENTRY

I screwed my fist hard into my palm as my father adjusted the knob of the 1940 Philips shortwave radio. His knuckles, swollen from the days he used to win amateur boxing matches, stretched white as he made incremental changes on the dial. Miraculously, the static cleared. A purple baritone came on: “April 27th, Nineteen hundred and forty-five will go down in history. It has just been confirmed that Benito Mussolini has been murdered!”

“*Ade vre!*” My father’s rapture at the news turned into a celebratory dance. He wheeled around the room. His rosy arms stretched out, and his fingers snapped loud, round pops as he flung himself toward me in a ragged version of the *Hasapiko*, and huffed, “*Oppa!*”

In an attempt to interrupt this dangerous indulgence, I cried, “Papa!” and bounded to the window of our second-story living room that overlooked the entrance to our family home. The Germans had occupied Greece the previous May. Because we were one of the few families on the Peloponnese with electricity, they had set up headquarters in our house. Our occupiers would leave the property at least once a week, which allowed our secret and dangerous listening sessions to become routine.

“*Papa, Papa! Aftos erhete!*” I said, making frantic signals. “He’s coming!” My mouth went dry as I watched a German officer, blond, straight-backed, his uniform casually opened at the throat, walk toward our house. He strode over the parched ground of what was left of our garden. The arrogant cock of his head and the huge confident steps of his gait made me want to bash him. A soldier of lower rank sat in one of our garden chairs. When the officer came up to him, the soldier stood and saluted. The officer saluted back, and then he must have told the other to relax because they both sat down and chatted like old friends.

“Hurry, Papa. I don’t think we have much time!” I had become our warning system.

Papa hissed, “*Isychia, pethi mou,*” which meant, “Silence, my child.” Though I was fifteen and his only son, Papa still called me “child.” The news report turned to static, so he turned down the volume and crouched closer to the radio. He murmured phrases I would imagine a lover might use when trying to coax cooperation from his sweetheart.

Outside, the two Germans lit cigarettes and laughed.

“Papa, please. If they catch us using the radio they’ll kill us!”

A fury ignited in within my chest as he went on whispering to the radio, his words creating small circles of fog on the shiny black plastic.

Down into the garden, trails of smoke streamed out of the officer's nose as he talked. Mid-sentence he glanced up and I ducked. It wasn't our window he looked at, but the story above us, which was my sister's window.

I made a low whistle, and my father shot me a glance that said *it is your fault I have to stop, your fault I can not listen any longer*. The radio was his oracle, an electronic god for which he had paid a fortune.

"Hurry! You're putting us all at risk!" My mother and sister had stopped begging him to give up the clandestine radio sessions. Occupation had made Mama silent and my sister timid. How I wished that I stood tall enough, strong enough to take on my father, to shake him, to punish him for his stubbornness that put us in jeopardy.

But Greek sons do not admonish their fathers. Therefore I was the one punished. Papa clamped a powerful hand on my shoulder and squeezed until I saw shards of light.

"I do everything you ask of me," I gasped.

He yanked me closer. The minty smell of his breath was overwhelming. His eyes narrowed, an anxious shine coated his face, and he pinched harder. "Please, Papa," I said. What I wanted to say was, *What must I do to make you happy?* Papa released his grip with a shove. I caught myself from falling and stumbled back to the window.

The Germans were now standing, grinding their cigarette butts out with their heels. We had less than a minute to get the radio out.

"*Grigora!*" I whispered. "Quick!"

Finally he disconnected our power supply, lowered the antennae, and reconnected the German's shortwave. We dumped our radio into a laundry basket, covered it with sheets. Together we toted the heavy load down the back stairs and headed for the laundry building where we would hide the precious oracle behind a sooty pile of coal.

The pavers in front of the laundry were slippery with goose shit. Cleaning up of the property had been neglected, a hopelessness that comes with occupation. Papa's foot slipped, his hands flung out to catch himself, and he let go. He landed on his rear. I tried to catch the basket, but it was too much for me. The radio rolled out and hit the pavement hard.

"*Friki!*" Papa cried out. "Bad luck has befallen us." On all fours he quietly keened and fondled the radio with his roughened hands as if it were a wounded animal. Seeing him down like that made my stomach curdle. I leaned down to help him up. One

of his iron arms flailed at me, a weak, unfocused swing. In my mind I jabbed back: *If you don't want my help, stay down there!*

Raucous laughter punctuated by Germans coming from the front of the house, warned us that we must move. We shoved the radio back into the basket and hurried into the laundry.

In the dim, cool basement of the building, my father watched as I removed the back of the radio and exposed the guts. One of the power tubes had been jerked out of its socket and its glass enclosure cracked, end to end. I knew the accident meant trouble. I sat on my haunches, my face in my hands.

“What’s the matter with you?” my father asked. “It’s not *your* radio that’s broken.” He let go a series of hard jabs at his old training bag. “You’re so clumsy,” he said.

In my mind I railed, *You were the one who slipped!*

It was as though he’d read my thoughts, for he whirled on me, blistering fire in his eyes. “If you want something from me, say it.”

Though my lips moved, I spoke no words.

“*Agh!*” Papa said. He paced, and every time he came within arm’s length of the punching bag, he threw a jab. “What am I going to do? How will I find out what’s going on with the war?”

I bounced on my toes and feigned a couple of blows, ducked and bobbed like he had taught me. He snickered at my moves.

“I have an idea,” I said.

He stood in the doorway. The light behind him turned his bulky presence into a huge silhouette that filled the frame. His massive arms hung down with hands the size of pie pans. I couldn’t see his face, but I heard the familiar disgruntled huff, and then he left.

Damn you, old man!

Now alone in the room, I danced like a fighter, throwing quick, hard jabs at the bag. “Damn you!” I imagined I was a freight train that could move through anything, including my father, and then I tripped over a sheepskin rug, almost falling on my face.

He’s right. I am clumsy.

I threw an angry right that connected with a galvanized bucket. The pain vibrated through my arm and up into my neck. I took deep gulps of the dark, damp air to keep

from crying. My knuckles bled. A musty blanket lay on the ground, and I fell onto it, curled up like a baby. It wasn't minutes before Papa's voice thundered into the dim. "I have to go to *Toagia Varvarai*. The swine have given me permission to leave. You go upstairs and stay with your sister. I won't be long."

"I don't feel well, Papa."

"Go!"

My sister, Anastasia, had turned seventeen the previous week. Everyone thought her beautiful. In the village I heard people whispering as she passed, "*Omorfi copella*," which meant, "beautiful young woman." She had olive skin that flushed with the slightest compliment and great oval eyes. When she went into the garden to pick vegetables, every German soldier that occupied our house watched her, their tongues licking their lips. Mama insisted she wear layers of roughly woven material to cover her figure.

"Don't leave her alone," Papa shouted. "Apostolou's dying. I'm off to say goodbye."

Papa paused, his eyes searing mine. Then he marched out of our garden, on to the street, and into the whiteness of the Peloponnesus sun, scuffing the powdery earth as he went. I glanced up at my sister's window and then surveyed the yard. I saw no one. I checked out the places where the Germans usually lounged. Empty. They must have gone into the village. All was quiet.

Back in the laundry building, I intended to practice sparring and threw one quick right, resulting in a shot of hot pain. I let out a loud yelp, and my knuckles opened up into small bloody rips. I sat down and leaned against the damp wall. With a corner of an old towel, I dabbed at the broken skin and thought about dying. I knew Apostolou, a crusty old man and a surrogate father to my papa, would die right. He did everything right. He must have earned loyalty and approval from my father. When Apostolou took his last breath, I was quite sure it would be deep and glorious. I decided I, too, would die like that.

I sucked at my knuckles and allowed myself to contemplated death's mysteries, when suddenly there came a high-pitched hack, like a sick dog. I scurried out of the darkness and into the light. Something was wrong.

I rushed inside the house and stood in the marble hallway, raised my head, a cat sniffing. It was stone quiet, not a breath, until a fly droned at a window, knocking and buzzing, desperate to escape.

That's when I tore up the stairs, pulling my body forward, hand over hand using the railing. My heart grew large, and I felt animal force curl in my gut.

At my sister's door I stopped and listened.

A man's voice.

I took a deep breath and barged into the room. Anastasia sat on the end of the bed. A German officer knelt in front of her, her hand in his. His shoulders were broad and a damp spot on his uniform shirt clung to his back. His jacket draped over his arm. Though tears hung in her eyes and her lips turned down in disgust, it was clear he hadn't hurt her.

He stood, and I realized he was no taller than me. He said in English, the only language we had in common, "I have asked your sister to marry me." He was the same officer who had smoked in the garden that morning while we were listening to the BBC.

My mother stepped forward, her arms crossed over her body. Though she didn't speak, her pinched look said, *Don't do anything, it's too dangerous.*

The German allowed a slight smile, maybe out of pride, maybe out of bare recognition that somehow we would be brothers.

Before he could speak another word, I rushed at him and clamped my hands around his throat. Bull strength flooded through me, pulsed in my arms, my legs. The shine in the officer's eyes became flat, and his lips turned blue. At first he made sounds that I thought must be pleadings in German, but soon I realized they were choking syllables.

Suddenly the German's hands shot up between my arms and thrust sideways, hard, precise, forcing me to release him. He grabbed hold of my shoulders and sent me toppling backwards, my feet taking small, quick steps trying to stay under my body. I stopped my fall by grabbing onto the door frame, which I used to launch myself back at him. We collided, and he went down. I pulled him up, doubled my fist, and sent it smashing into his face. Blood spurted from his nose. I picked up his coat, slapped it into his hand, and pushed him toward the door. He reeled for a moment before he managed a series of furtive steps out of the room. I watched him stumble down the stairs. My father, who had just returned, stood at the bottom. As the German passed, Papa mocked him by making an extravagant bow.

Papa looked at me still at the top of the stairs. Our eyes met, and we both knew that the officer would say nothing about my assault. German pride wouldn't allow him to face the humiliation of losing a battle to a boy.

I took two steps down. Despite the painful scream that came from my knuckles, I was comforted by the thought that surely this would be it. I imagined Papa reaching out to me as I descended. He would pull me close and run his rough palm over my cheek. I held my breath as his sharp brown eyes took in all of me.

He took a handkerchief from his pocket and wiped his mouth, then turned, and walked away. I watched him go to the laundry house where I knew he would spend the rest of the day sitting next to the coal pile.

“You stubborn old goat,” I muttered. “I’m not through with you.” I rushed up to the library on the third floor and went straight to the bound *Helios*, sun in Greek, a book something like the American *Popular Mechanics*, where I found a recipe for glass glue.

Following the instructions to the letter, I mixed ground window dust with the white of an egg my mother had bartered for with a pendant that once had belonged to her mother. I knew there would be a high price for my egg thievery. In the laundry building, I convinced Papa to get the radio out of its hiding place. With great care, I bathed the power tube in my glass glue. His brows furrowed with doubt.

The next day the entire German contingent left the house to meet up with another unit for maneuvers. Papa and I hiked the radio upstairs. As usual I kept a lookout. Papa crouched next to the shortwave. He rubbed his hands together, his skin raspy. I held my breath as, tentatively, he turned on the radio.

Papa adjusted the knob, coaxing and pleading, but to no avail. No BBC baritone. No news of the war in Greece. Nothing.

I had failed.

Papa stood and came toward me. I stepped back, prepared for a blow. Then he did something I’d never seen him do. He winced. His eyes held almost imperceptible tears as he placed one of his huge hands on the back of my neck and drew me to him until our foreheads touched.

The End