

CAROLINE COUDERC

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## Insignia

Dad is digging up the garden, and when he believes nobody is watching he throws his army insignia in a small hole, covering them with dirt. Then he uses a stick and pokes three rows of small holes, planting a seed in each of them. In a few months, asters, his favorite flowers, will grow. Later that day he comes in, carrying five rhubarb petioles. “I’m going to make a pie.”

I’m six or seven, playing with my dad’s commemoration medal until I stick the needle in my finger. Sharp pain jolts me; blood starts dripping on the carpet. I’m an Indian, I don’t cry. I put the medal back with the insignia I covet more than dolls, especially the one with the golden bee and sword on blue enamel. Dad isn’t attached to things, but these are his. He’s made it very clear.

My dad fights with my mother over a crucifix she wants mounted on a wall. She can’t understand his aversion, but I do. I’m the one who listened to the story of the dead nuns found crucified in the desert. “From afar they looked like dancing mirages,” he told me one Christmas after mum had gone to bed telling him to keep his filthy stories to himself.

In the desert, the days are hot and the nights are icy cold. My father carries his dead comrade over a mountain. He struggles and fights sleep. He’s not aware he cannot save him anymore. When he lays him down on the ground, the body exhales loudly. Nobody thinks it’s very heroic what he did. No “ordre du mérite” for my dad. Just the plain insignia almost every one else in the 93<sup>rd</sup> Infantry Company wears.

“This,” he says, “is the hand of Fatima, the prophet’s wife. It was to remind us that we were fighting in an Islamic country. The olive branch on the tricolor signifies peace abroad. The broadsword stands for France’s commitment to use force only when forced.” I know better than to ask him whether he’s not upset he’s not allowed to say he went to war but has to call it “a mission of pacification.” Isn’t it strange, I want to ask, that the act of bringing peace still wakes you, screaming, every other night, forty years later?

“Your dad is not well, there’s a risk he might die before the weekend,” the doctor says on the phone. By the time I board the train he’s already dead. I visit his widow. He’s left me his paintings, his books, and a small case. I open it and find his rings, his pendants, and his army insignia. They are covered in mud. If I didn’t know better I’d mistake it for the sands of Algeria, but it’s just the dirt of our old back garden.

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**CAROLINE COUDERC** is a multilingual writer and translator living in Switzerland and the UK. She holds degrees in French Literature, Linguistics and Cultural Anthropology. Her work has been published or is forthcoming in *Boston Literary Magazine*, *The Vignette Review*, *Ink in Thirds*, *Shotgun Honey*, *The Airgonaut*, *The Antigonish Review* and others.