

Rusty Nail part c

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But this particular bride had had her way, and the black stone was duly cast as she sailed away from the island. As for the goods inside the chest, she had no use for them in her new life, and they were left behind. But she took her memories and her stories into her new world, among them the stories of Arapi and Irma. Irma was the stray dog which had been smuggled into the family by her little brother.

Arapi was the mule that her father, our grandfather – Papou – had spotted fighting its owner on the port at Kapsali. Rebellious and untamable, it was clear he would not earn his keep so he was being sent back to where he came from. Possibly Italy. But there was something about him that appealed to her father, so bought the creature for the price of its return fare, and started training him.

It took a combination of gentleness and cunning to tame Arapi, plus the judicious application of figs. Placing Arapi on the sand where he it would be hard for him to buck and kick, Papou, gradually accustomed him to wearing a saddle and accepting a rider. Each time Arapi behaved, he was fed a handful of figs. Figs became the currency that facilitated all their negotiations, but man and beast loved each other, and Papou rode him proudly, while Arapi carried him gently.

Olive oil impregnated island life. It was present at birth and in the rituals surrounding baptism, marriage and death. The landscape shimmered with the silvered patina produced by the thousand-leaved flutterings of the grey green olive trees. It still does. In ancient times it was used for soap and perfume and gave a sheen to fine linen. The mythical hero-king, Nestor of Pylos, the richest Achaean to don sword and sandal to march on

Troy, was the earliest recorded oil billionaire. Its use has never diminished and from the warm, homely smell of food basting, roasting, baking in oil to the olive aroma of a newly-christened baby's hair, Athena's lustrous gift had insinuated itself into the very heart of the people. Their houses were lit by oil, warmed by oil, perfumed by oil, coated in oil, and the familiar smell of oil still tickles the memory.

Equally important was wine. Dionysus' much trickier gift was metaphoric as well as literal. Wine took on another identity in religious ritual and its common uses went well beyond thirst-quenching intoxication. It signified hospitality, plenty and comfort. Like oil, it was present from birth to death. While olive oil was rubbed into the skin of a newborn baby, the dead were washed in wine.



«He's here»
«Where?»
«Over there, don't look, don't look, he'll see.»
«Ah there he is.»
«Is he looking at me? Can you see? Is he looking for me....»

It's the fifteenth of August, the Dekapentismo and the name day of Maria, Panayioti and Despina. The Virgin has many names. Maria is walking with Despina, while her mother and Panayioti are riding the donkey. Their father has the bridle in one hand, a cane in the other. The swish, swish, jingle, jingle of harnesses and the crisp clip clop of hooves on dirt, cover their conversation. Everyone is excited. Fifteen days of fasting are over and already the smell of roasting meat is filling the air. The family got up before dawn to join this colourful, gossiping caravan making its way down the

winding road to Myrthidia. Boys make eyes at haughty girls. A blushing Maria glances away, pretending she doesn't care.

An old woman, who had once been beautiful and had experienced a searing, transformative moment of tragedy, dies on the eve of the celebration of Agios Theodoros. Everyone in the village comes to her house, straight after the evening service. By the time they arrive, she has already been washed with wine, wrapped in a linen shroud and covered to the chin with a blanket. She doesn't look dead, she looks absent.

Throughout the night, the women make batches of paximathia, firing up the huge clay oven three times, adding more twigs and branches to keep the heat constant, kneading more dough, rolling it into shape and serving it hot. They serve wine, cheese tsiporo and almonds, honouring older gods.

Many people sit in the platea next to the house. Small children sleep huddled against their parents. Their older siblings play in the square. Maria nurses Panayioti and whispers secrets to Despina, not expecting Panayioti to understand. But he does. As wine and food are replenished, the guests reprise aging gossip, reminding each other that the dead woman had once lived in Smyrni and talk of her hurried wedding on the day of her return when, to ensure that a disappointed suitor did not abduct her anyway,

