



her parents had kept her arrival such a close secret that they had to use grapevine stefana, because the purchase of the traditional wax-flower wedding crowns would have alerted the wrong people. They talk of the tragedy that blighted her life, discussing it again as if it was fresh and had not happened over fifty years before. Her nephew entertains them with jokes that range from the mildly suggestive to the downright dirty. Ten-year-old boys laugh too loudly to show that they understand and unmarried girls, fight to produce a blush to confirm their virginity. This is a sombre merriment.

It was the women, of course, who prepared her. The men will bury her. The priest walks in front. As he marches ahead, he is not permitted to look back, this is considered unlucky. A bad omen. It could herald another death. He has already prayed once over her body, sprinkling her with holy water with a sprig of rosemary. The funeral service will promise her eternal life in a place of cool water, in a place of green pasture.

Wheat, flax, thyme-flavoured honey that trapped the sun, vineyards, olive groves, almond trees, orchards and all the associated products of sheep, goats and beef promised, but not

always delivered, prosperity. During WWII's German and Italian campaigns, when hundreds of German planes darkened the skies, bringing war and thunder to Crete and little boys were forbidden to speak to their mothers who had been taken hostage by fellow Greeks (because war covers a multitude of sins), much of this was requisitioned by the occupying army. The people were left with little. So they took risks. They concealed valuables and documents. They hid food, baked in secret, buried barrels of oil, swapped, bartered, shared and found a way to hunt without their rifles, since guns were banned. They reused, repaired, reinvented. They carved shoes out of wood or rubber tires because leather was worth more than gold. They made do. And they defied, by making sure the news got through to the other villages, even if it meant standing in a field and broadcasting it to the next town with a megaphone.

As life got closer to the edge, they became more resourceful. They showed their true colours, some joined the Resistance and some kept their own counsel or accommodated the enemy a little too much. After a second, more visceral, brother-killing-brother killing war, memories lasted just long enough for the early peace and a brutal

reckoning. For some it proved impossible to stay and another outflow of people began.

War and need emptied the villages of their men leaving the women to do what they did

best; to carry on, to keep things going. To wait. The village may have been an essentially female place but even in their absence, the men had power. They left to earn money to support their families, increase their holdings and provide dowries for their daughters and sisters. Many of them returned, wearing three piece suits and Homburg hats, sporting gold pocket watches suspended from fobs and chains and bearing gifts. Some stayed a while, got married, made a child, then left. Others chose to stay. Others relocated their families in their new homeland. They left as children and came back as men. Some never returned but maintained their relevance through the money they sent. A These men put their own dreams of family aside; living their lives in the kitchens of other men's businesses, sleeping in a series of boarding houses, gambling away their spare cash. They were the sacrificial lambs.

And a few were never heard from again.

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