

Rusty Nail part d

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Between 1890 and 1910, nearly a sixth of the entire population of Greece emigrated. A nation that had not yet achieved its first centenary was already hemorrhaging people; largely young men. With them went almost a tenth of its cleverness, its muscle, its strength its energy. Its youth. Imagine that. What brand new nation could survive that?

These young men and women became the absent buttress of the family.

It was in an America proclaiming itself a brave new world, that many of these men reconstructed themselves from peasants with knowledge irrelevant to their new lives, to skilled workers, businessmen and people of note. They had arrived in the USA at the very time it was undergoing its own metamorphosis when it was exploring its own strength and rushing towards global preeminence. This creative, transformative energy suffused the country, inspiring even the humblest with the notion that they too could share the dream. And they could. And they did.

Many brought that dream and that energy to Australia and in creating the Greek cafe, they imported the Californian aesthetic, often partnered with the cinemas, like the Roxy in Bingara. But you could always see their Greek roots, not in the menus, which concentrated on plain Australian food, but in the decor or the names of the cafes. The Paragon in Katoomba was as celebrated for its Art Deco design with its many references to Greek mythology as it was for its chocolates. Among the tapestries that decorated the New York Cafe in Nowra (built by Kytherians and owned by a further two generations of Kytherian families) there was one depicting Achilles and the Trojan War, right next to the one featuring Napoleon.

As these people became more prosperous, many elected to stay, establishing a network of family and friends and Greek connections which was spread like an invisible mesh all over their new country. They used it to find jobs, businesses, staff, spouses. Connections forged at home, were vital somewhere else. In the meantime mainland Greece and islands like Kythera, Kalymnos, Simi, Crete and Ithaka began to empty and the houses shut down. The villages died. Vagrant roads, bereft of destination, wandered pointlessly towards - where?

The children of those houses, and their children, see them at best, as holiday homes. At worst, they are left to molder and die. They are the crumbling monuments to another way of life, one that at times was steeped in poverty and need, fed by ignorance and sustained by superstition. It



was not a life that many would willingly choose.

But these villages, and churchyards, and houses are also a reminder of family and community and a strong sense of identity. They provide a place for the family history - a provenance. They are the repositories of our former generations - for our family bones.

There was a time when life pulsed through the souks of the villages, eddied around the squares and settled inside those houses, keeping them open, warm, lively, sound. They were full of the smell of jonquils or lemon blossoms or fermenting tsiporo or wood fire, or countless sides of roast lamb, marinated in lemon, garlic and oregano, and turned on a spit on festival days, filling the air with promise.

A rusty nail in a plastic bag is an

unlikely heirloom. The great-granddaughter of the man who built the house from which it came treasures it. For her and for her family, it is so much more than the sum of its parts. This is the only tangible item they have that connects them to the dilapidated house in Pitsinades. They love the nail because the house exists. Other things also link them to it; a recipe for paximathia and a name. But the nail is meaningful because when they went there, they were moved by the welcome they felt. It was as if they had come home. They wanted to carry a little bit of that warmth with them, so they picked up a nail they found lying in the dust.

I have the key from that house. Like the nail, it's very basic. It's a lever lock key, about four inches long, with its shank and bow made out of cast metal. Like the nail, it is completely covered

in coarsening rust that has obliterated all its distinguishing features. It has a pleasing solidity. This is a key that can be trusted. I also have the lock into which the key fits neat and true. I have hung the key beside my front door and the lock sits near it on a bookcase. Those two items are my souvenirs from the house belonging to the grandparents most of us never met. I will never live in that house. Never spend a single night in it. At most, I will visit it on

hot a summer's afternoon, to push my way into the vaulted hallway - the fossa - to feel the cool, dry air and bask in its soothing shadows. I will pick some

