

ON CRETE

On Crete, butcher stalls bled into gutters; rabbit carcasses grinned from hollow faces. I wondered how they skin such delicate ears, and just who buys those rabbits; I never saw anyone carry one home. There was lamb too, and occasional chicken, but rabbits filled most of the stalls, multiplying cadavers like babies. I couldn't see anything else.

Under my hotel window the mercantile riot of flesh clamored from sunrise to sundown -- a festival for the carnivorous. I found a bakery that sold nothing animal and sat there, hands over my ears. I was still nauseated from the smell of blood when I felt a hand on my shoulder, and the German sat down beside me.

In Brindisi, the Italian who took me to lunch insisted on veal when I asked for eggplant. The calf's flesh, he said, is more tender than any vegetable. He spread his money like an offering across the table, and invited me for coffee at his apartment. He was respected in town, he said to my hesitant refusal. It was *his* travel agency, after all, and he who sold me the ticket to Patras.

His mother and sisters lived up the alley; he even pointed out their door. Crosses hung in their windows and around his neck. He boasted of rich relatives in America and flashed his gold bracelets and chains. His livelihood depended on his good name, he said, walking so close I felt his breath on my cheek. He was a small man, but he spread himself around me like a pall, and told me not to be afraid.

The German, who never told me his name, asked what was wrong -- if there was something he could do.

"Is it material?" he said, pinching the thin sleeve of his sweater. "Or is it spirit?" He tapped his temple, and then his heart. "Because if it is material, if you need money or some *thing* -- this is easy to fix."

I shook my head; it was not material.

"The other is not so easy," he sighed. "I knew it was the other."

The Italian, who told me his name which I've tried to forget, knew I wouldn't call the police when he was through with me. He'd probably done it before: his apartment the trap and travelers his prey, another Procrustes.

I lost my voice in there; the Italian was the last man to hear me speak. He stole my words as surely as if he'd cut out my tongue.

In the bakery, I bought us tea. The German had little money, but his voice was rich and deep and as soothing as a tranquilizer. We ate sweet, stale cookies, which was all there was to eat in the only blood-free establishment on Crete. He didn't ask what had happened, or why I couldn't speak, but he burned his amber and green eyes into mine as if he could heal me.

A gaunt, bearded man in worn jeans and sneakers, he somehow filled the doorway as he left – as unexpectedly as he'd arrived. But he returned to ask if I'd like to go with him on his motorbike to the other side of the island. He fairly radiated heat, even in the dank Heraklion air, and I was so cold. I nodded yes.

Watching the Italian consume his meal, I had premonitions. I prayed to whatever god protects lone voyagers because I did not protect myself. After seven months of traveling alone, I was weak with solitude.

After lunch, Brindisi shuts down. Shutters shut, doors close, cars stop, and no one walks the street. The train station and the port were equally distant; the Italian said I had no place to go, and so many hours before my boat.

He said his apartment was as safe as a church. He would leave the door open if I was scared.

When the German held the door for me, I saw his wedding band, and then remembered seeing him before: with his wife and child on the boat from Italy. The border guards took our passports and disappeared. Anyone with anything to worry about began to sweat, and our compartment smelled of too many unclean bodies in too small a space. I stayed close to the exit and practiced invisibility.

I touched the German's ring and looked at him with a question. His family waited in Athens, he said. The ride to Crete is long and tedious; he was here only for the day, on an important errand.

I fled that Brindisi alley of my new mute world. I could not scream; I could only escape. I did not get a knife and return for the Italian's neck.

Instead of killing him, I thought of killing me.

On the boat to Greece, I leaned over the rail and watched the black Adriatic, searched for reason in the ancient sky and found nothing. I threw those clothes into the sea, saw them churn beneath the prow and imagined their disintegration. I stuck a finger down my throat, but already my insides had desiccated.

When I arrived in Athens, I knew I couldn't stay there: the city froze flesh to bone, and strangers, like scavengers, leaned into me on the streets, groping for what was left.

The guidebooks said the sun always shines on Crete, even in deadest winter. They said the beaches were microcosms of heaven, and Heraklion as civilized as any European city. On Crete, the guidebooks said, the gods still roamed.

The roads crossing Crete were old and rutted. We bounced on a rickety motorbike for only a few kilometers before discovering the slow hiss of a flat tire. The German didn't

complain and fixed it with a patch kit he found in the glovebox. When we set off again, the rain began. He shielded me from the wind, and his long, red hair tangled with my black braids, streaming over our shoulders.

He pointed to old women clustered by churches like blackbirds -- mourners who never stopped mourning. Tourists in sports cars passed us on their way to Minoan ruins, and we passed a boy hoisting a yoke of dead rabbits, their furred bodies still dripping a trail.

When I arrived on Crete, after twelve hours at sea, I searched for the reputed beaches, hoping to shed my skin in the leavening sun. But the damp air gnawed at me; everywhere I saw people adding layers instead of removing them.

I didn't realize, when the hotel proprietress led me to my room, that she'd deposited me above the butcher stall.

Perhaps it was warmer in America; I considered returning. But the journey home required too much strength: fleeing the Italian and trying to forget took all my concentration. I planned to visit the palace of Knossos; I thought the myths might have something to teach me.

We got out of the rain in a town whose only store had a smoking chimney and three donkeys tied outside. The German spoke Greek. He chatted with the old men around the stove, laughing and at ease. They must have talked about the weather and wives. One of them pointed at me and the German nodded yes, and put his arm around my waist.

A man in a red-splattered apron served us bread and cheese, and cut a tomato with a knife like a sword right in front of me on the tabletop. He wiped the blade on the white fabric covering his thigh, leaving a stain.

He poured us Cretan tea with honey, which tasted as I imagined nectar to taste; sweet, thick and smooth -- better than wine.

"For our ichor," whispered the German. "This is magic tea. I knew I would find it here."

We drank an entire pot, and the sun came out while the German laughed in Greek and wrapped his hand around my hand around a cup. A ray of light slanted in the window, bathing us for just a moment; he was a lion with his mane of feral hair. Our clothes dried quickly, and we left the old men on the porch, waving and shouting goodbye.

"They asked if you were my wife, and I said yes. To say otherwise on Crete is to invite suspicion," said the German as we rode away. "It is already peculiar that I speak Greek."

I nodded to show I understood.

I understood nothing, not where we were going or why or who he was. His warmth spread through our layers of clothing and kept me from the cold; I didn't mind being his wife for the day. Watching orange groves blur by and olive-tinted children calling to us from the side of the road, I pretended Brindisi never happened. I held tight to the German and knew I was safe. I trusted this instinct as I had not trusted the one that told me to run down the deserted streets of Brindisi.

When we reached the meadow he said was our destination, thunder rumbled in from the Icarian Sea. Low stone walls and wind-sculpted granite appeared to be remnants of a maze. I opened my mouth to ask the German if he knew the story of the Minotaur, but no sound came out. He was walking ahead and turned just as I attempted to speak. He waited -- his lips quivering as if sharing my effort -- but I had to shake my head.

"Maybe you can help me," he said, scanning the darkening horizon. "I buried something years ago under a rock that looks like the head of a bull. You go that way, and if you see it, wave for me. I'll find you."

I walked among the stones, barely able to decipher the walls of the labyrinth. Perhaps, when the stone was cut and the plan laid, the way out was obvious.

What was the German looking for? I was beginning to think he'd imagined his treasure when I found it: two unmistakable horns jutting from a rock the size of a man's crouched body. I turned to look for the German but he was already running toward me.

"I knew you'd find it!" he shouted, eyes burning above cheekbones so sharp they might pierce his skin. I saw thunderclouds reflected in his fiery irises. He began digging with his hands; the ground was soft and wet and gave easily. After only a few minutes, he uncovered something wrapped in plastic, gradually unearthing a parcel the size of a shoebox, tied with string. He scanned the field as if expecting someone he did not want to see.

"Is there anybody coming?" he asked. "Your eyes are better than mine."

We were alone. The storm came closer and the clouds hung heavy all around us; the land was empty except for the wind scattering twigs and trash.

He carefully peeled the layers of plastic, his long white fingers trembling. The box was silver and covered with writing that must have told a story, like figures on a sarcophagus. I ran my fingertip across the letters, hoping for an explanation, but he said he couldn't read ancient Greek.

Inside the box, coils of gold and crosses of silver hissed metallically as the German fished his hand through the dazzling filigree.

"I am a thief, you see."

I didn't want to believe him. I thought he was a pilgrim, a savior in blue jeans.

"My family will live well for a while," he said.

He strapped his knapsack backwards, with the burden on his chest, and said that if anyone stopped us or tried to follow, he would throw it in the ditch -- no one could prove anything. I was to say I knew nothing; he was just giving me a ride.

We left the stone debris of the maze glistening from the first wave of the storm. We passed hotels and homes boarded up for winter, and the German said he'd stolen from the rich in almost all of them.

"Are you frightened?" he asked. "Or sorry you came?"

I shook my head. If I could have spoken, I would have told him that for the first time since Brindisi, I was not afraid.

We drove a different road back to Heraklion, stopping at a farmhouse where he said he'd left a set of clothes. Before we entered, he asked my name.

"I must introduce you as my new wife. To do otherwise is to invite suspicion."

I found a stick and wrote my name in the dirt: Ariane. He did not tell me his.

The mother and daughter kissed and hugged him as if he were a lost son returning after many years. They smiled, offered bread and wine, begged us to stay for dinner. The German said he wished he could stay, but we had to catch a boat. Did they, perhaps, still have his clothing?

They shouted yes simultaneously and bumped into each other in their eagerness as they rushed from the kitchen. He shifted his weight from foot to foot, looked out the window and at the clock, watched me with wide eyes, questioning.

His knapsack with the gold and crosses lay at his feet near a household altar to Jesus. When the women returned, their arms outstretched, bearing pressed pants, a clean shirt and sweater, the German bowed slightly and clasped their hands with tenderness. Again they implored us to stay, but he insisted we must leave.

As we settled ourselves on the bike, he said that if the women knew he were a robber of churches, they would turn him in without hesitation.

"They're humble but foolish people," he said. "They think they can find holiness in *things*."

He planned to melt the metal and sell the crosses on the black market in Germany.

"The icon business is very lucrative," he said.

We saw the storm come in from the south and watched it overtake us. We were completely exposed. The sky thundered open and a fusillade of hailstones threatened to

blow us from the bike. He wore no helmet; the rain froze his hair into a crown of ice and laced his beard with frost. The roads slicked out and our meager headlights shined on more than one accident. I saw a woman weeping in the back seat of a stopped car and heard her wails cleave the wind. Whenever a car came, from either direction, the German pulled to the side and held his breath. The oncoming lights trapped us in their beams; the German's eyes glittered yellow. We drove, stopped, continued, saturated with rain, but still his body was hot to touch.

We heard sirens in the city, and I saw him ready to heave the knapsack. Police cars and ambulances sped past us toward the accidents on the main road. When we reached my hotel, the owner was surprised to discover my Greek-speaking husband. He demanded that she turn on the heat and hot water, and after much resistance, she acquiesced. Soon we were clean and dry and the German wore his new-old clothes after throwing away the others.

He paced my room, fumbling with boat schedules and a handful of passports, fretting about his wife and daughter waiting for him at the port of Piraeus. I could still smell blood in the room, but the German didn't mention the odor. The more agitated he became, the calmer I felt; I was glad not to be in flight.

"What will you do now?" he asked suddenly, sitting beside me on the bed. "I wish I could have helped you, but you know it's not possible for one to help another. It must come from spirit -- inside." He touched his heart and then his temple.

He whispered that it was wrong to take from the poor, but what he did was just. He might even save a few superstitious souls by stealing their icons.

"The godhead is in us and around us -- not in *things*," he said, lifting the heavy knapsack. "Remember that, and you will heal."

I was looking out the window at the empty stalls washed clean from the rain, and when I turned around, he was gone.

The next morning I made my pilgrimage to Knossos. The bored young man who took my entrance fee said there were no more maps, and the tour guides did not work until afternoon. I would have to explore alone.

The ruins had been looted bare thousands of years ago. The piles of stones did not speak of kings and queens; weeds grew in the cracks of the courtyard. Theseus had long since vanished, leaving nothing but impalpable rock.

I followed a path that wound up a hillside through a patchwork of vineyards. There were still a few leaves on the vines, deep red, shining with dew. Far away, someone was singing a sad and steady melody, or perhaps it was a bird. From the top of the hill I could see the remains of Knossos, Heraklion, and the silver sea spreading before me.

The sun burned down from a noontime sky. I took off my jacket, then my sweatshirt and sweater. The air smelled of wine and made me drowsy. I spread out my clothes and fell asleep to the melancholy music.

Sweating and terrified, I awoke to something rustling in the bushes.

"Who's there?" I shouted without thinking, and found my fingers around a rock.

The sound of my voice so amazed me that I was not surprised to see a pair of rabbits run past me down the hill.

