

Meryl McQueen

Only Salt Remains

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*Only salt remains, of the
Tide that prays to the
Ocean, and of the tears that
Dry under a death-white summer sun.*

–Sicily, 1935

Summer, 1961

On the fourteenth of June, 1961, Antonio Vigneri returned to Sicily to bury his brother. From the three-bedroom, peach-shingled ranch in an elm-lined suburb of St. Louis to the chalk-white rinks of the salt pans in the village of Solunno, the forty-six-year-old machine fitter thumb-clicked his rosary and hissed under his breath. All these years, should have been me. Should have been the three of us. Family. Inhale, exhale. Antonio fingered his beads, searching for the narrow path between resentment and regret. He doubted he would find his way.

Summer, 1935

“Dai, Ninu, we’re late again. You know what Zi Mauru said if we miss another starting bell at the salina.” Francesco Vigneri, twenty-four, with thinning brown hair that flopped into his eyes and a sagging chin, yelled into the loft at his younger sibling. Greeted with silence, he sighed and shuffled out of his lace-less leather boots. Rigid with saltwater and three generations of service, the shoes curled under the massive kitchen table like obedient dogs. The four twine-woven chairs flailed loose ends in the burned wind that scuttled under the door.

As he jerked himself up the ladder through the slot in the ceiling, Francesco rattled off a whistling thread of abuse. “Fine, you want to wake this way each morning, I give it to you.” Kneeling in the crawlspace, Francesco stomped to the far end of the narrow room. Scorched air seeped through a propped window covered

by burlap.

He peeled the cover and drowned the attic in molten sunlight. “Get up, you ungrateful mongrel. Light means late.”

“Ceccu, no.” Shielding his eyes, Antonio rolled into the corner on the straw-filled pallet and precarious metal frame. “Another minute.”

Francesco kicked the mattress with an impatient bare foot. “Or another hour, or another week for you, and then what? Another string of babbanaria like last evening from you and we’ll both be out, foreman uncle or no. Once in your life, could you pretend to be responsible?”

Defeated, the younger uncoiled to his feet and stretched sideways under the smoke-blackened beams of the low roof. “It’s not every morning, and three late nights in a row don’t make me stupid.”

He scraped rough paws through the black springs of his hair and plucked a sweat-stained linen shirt from a nail on the wall.

Francesco growled and swatted his chin with the back of his hand. “Bah! Don’t remind me. Precious Nunu, grinning picciriddu, lucky you’re the baby of the

family. If it were me, showing up late all the time, I'd—
”

“Always the same complaint with you, Ceccu.”
Taller than his brother by four inches and much more athletic, Antonio took the ladder three rungs at a time and thudded to the floor below. “You think Zi Mauru loves me better, you’ve got wasps in your hive. Maybe when we were kids, but now? Barely notices me at all. He doesn’t say it, but Zi Mauru respects you, the eldest. Something I’ll never have.”

Toes gripping every step, Francesco followed him down. “In family, there’s heart and little heart, brother.”

Feet on the ground, a sly smile washed his mouth as Antonio winked. “Anyway, Rurú insisted on that ride up to the summit of Mt. Erice. Couldn’t disappoint her, and I had to lead her horse down in the dark.”

With an affectionate shadow punch at his brother’s chest, Francesco picked up the story. Indulgent scorn brightened the humor in his voice. “Rosalia Marielena Fiuccho. Queen of the night riders, no doubt there.” He tossed a jagged slab of pecorino

cheese and a heel of seeded rye loaf at Antonio, who juggled his breakfast one-handed.

Reaching over to the stove from his perch at the table, Francesco dribbled the grounds of yesterday's coffee into mismatched tin mugs. "Almost out of sugar, again. You been swiping it in the middle of the night to sweeten the deal with Rurú?"

Antonio dumped the bread and cheese onto a chipped terracotta plate before he sat down. "Almost out of everything. Anyway, I don't have to pay Rosalia for anything. She's happy to give it to me for free."

Francesco stirred a miserly pinch of sweetener into both cups of oozing syrup. "Yeah, a real blushing spring bloom, that one."

"Watch it—that's the reputation of my ragazza you're trammeling." Hands in prayer around his coffee, ragged nails gilded with week-old grime, Antonio recited the obligatory objection. Nothing much but reputation in a village like Solunno, where youth blurred into arranged partnerships before most girls turned eighteen.

"She's only yours because her two older sisters up and married when the time came. At the outside, a

few months with Rosalia, until her father finds someone else for her, too.”

“Maybe.” Antonio traced the erratic flight path of a humming mosquito and slapped the table with an open hand. A snail-sized stain bloomed on the wood, and he dabbed at the blood with his sleeve. “Her patri? That old mule, won’t be thinking wedding bells at least until next spring. Sixteen’s too young.”

“You’re not thinking he might choose—”

“Can’t.”

“Don’t.” The brothers’ rolling banter skipped a beat, as they both avoided explanation.

In the airless two-room cottage, summer’s threat caulked any chance of a cooling breeze. The walls leaned in like an audience, daring either player to veer from the expected script.

Francesco recovered first and played with a neutral smile. “Must be a spell that girl’s got you under, I swear.”

The senior Vigneri crossed himself and kissed the tiny tin cross on a leather strap around his neck. “Magic, that’s what it is. You be careful, up on the mountain, with all the sprites about in the dark.

Especially when there's no moon."

Antonio picked a stone from his boot and joined the retreat from subjects best ignored. "No witchcraft, Ceccu. Or if it is, it's the irresistible curse of me. She can't keep away."

"Cu si loda s'imbroda, little brother. Best leave the arrogance to God."

"Not a boast if it's true." Digging in his pocket for a smoke, Antonio found two hand-rolled cigarettes and tossed one over the table to his brother. "Besides, we're passing the time, that's all."

Francesco fumbled the catch and picked the cigarette off the floor. "Better to pass time making up for lost loads at the salina. They started twenty minutes ago—we'll be there until our shadows disappear if we don't get there before the cock crows everyone else awake."

Open palm over his heart, Antonio fluttered his eyelashes and rocketed into an off-key serenade. "Moon, tiny moon, like a slice of bread, like a bouquet of lilies, small, immaculate moon."

With a performer's flourish, the singer bowed and scattered crumbs from his mouth to his sleeve.

Mimicking his brother with hand over hip and a deep curtsy, Francesco swallowed the last of his breakfast. On their way out the hefty door, the brothers' hands splashed the half inch of water from a shallow, mint-green basin that squatted on the only other piece of furniture in the room, a polished oak bureau with a missing bottom drawer.

Nestled like a suckling pig against the root of Mt. Erice, the village of Solunno stared history in the face. On a clear day's view at the summit, the coast of Africa shone splinters of light from the ruins of Carthage to ancient outpost. The Phoenicians used the west coast of the island to leapfrog trade across the Mediterranean. Solunno, abandoned and re-settled by every invader for the last four thousand years—Greek, Roman, Norman—carried little archeological record of its founders. In the 1930s, foreigners searching for Phoenician treasure unearthed a single clay mask of a long-dead merchant's wife. Only scattered seedlings of stone on the mountain's flank attested to the rest.

Ignoring the passage of time, the land sprouted balding patches of maquis from tide lines to hilltop. The

assortment of scrub plants boasted spiny bushels of oleander, white-tipped myrtles, and the occasional olive or oak. Under the blanched disk of summer sun, the scent of desiccated vegetation curdled like milk on the wash of moving air.

The maquis smelled of dried apricots, burned sage, and limestone dust. In distinct clumps from the natives, intruders like agave and prickly pear kept their distance, but held their ground. Animal, vegetable, or mineral, outsiders were only grudgingly accommodated in Solunno.

Along the coast, south of the salt pans, the houses held each other up in a narrow band of whitewashed cubes. Most of the buildings in the village, including chapel and belfry, reflected the rusty mocha of dark stone that spilled from quarries on the other side of the mountain.

In July of 1935, as the Vigneri brothers skidded down the rough incline of the path that led to their house from the main road, Solunno was still seven years away from the war, from the tumble and crack of masonry and bone under misdirected Allied bombs from the Anglo-American front in North Africa.

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