

## One Last Lemon Soda in Tunis

Antonio is already a man at thirteen, from the moment the Bishop of the Diocese of Monreale thumbs a cross, traced with the sappy aroma of balsam and olive oil, on his forehead.

“*Pax tibi, Augustini,*” the bishop’s voice echoes off the marble floor.

In the pews, his father nods. His mother clutches her veil.

“*Et cum spiritu t-tuo,*” Antonio recites the secret words just as Sister Saint Stanislaus had instructed.

After mass concludes, they take the cart back to Partinico, where his mother and aunts prepare the meal. Sleeves girded, they slap dough with wheat flour and sprinkle sesame seeds. They unfold brown butcher’s paper and drop veal spleen and veal lung into a pot of steaming fat. When the bread is crisp, they draw it from the oven and spoon veal into the slits, topping them each with a paste of spicy, straw-yellow cheese spun from the *Cinisara* cows. They platter everything with sliced lemon. Antonio is the first to eat. His whole family crowds around him—his father Giuseppe, a barber, his brother Pietro, a barber, his father’s father Salvatore, a barber, his father’s brother Pietro, a barber, and his brother Saverio, a wood-carver who details the interiors of luxury train cars.

“So, now that you are a man, have you decided your profession will be?” his brother Saverio laughs from behind a cigarette.

“You already know what I will say,” Antonio crosses his arms.

“You never doubt? You’ve never seen yourself doing anything else?”

Antonio smiles.

“Pietro, look at this *mimmo*,” he pulls his brother in, “only thirteen and has written the book of his life.”

“Bah,” Pietro swats his hand and returns to the rest of the family, who swarm about platters of veal.

The sun is falling behind the hills by the time an automobile grumbles down the gravel onto their street. The hood shines, and Antonio can see on it streaks of recently applied wax. Vincenzo and Camillo Minore step out, each with one hand on their pistol holsters. They have the most immaculately cared-for pencil mustaches Antonio has ever seen. Most of the guests disappear by the time Vincenzo swallows his first cannoli.

## One Last Lemon Soda in Tunis

“Where is the big man, eh?” Vincenzo announces. “Is it true Antonio saw the bishop today? I could see the light from your halo all the way in Castellamarre del Golfo.”

Antonio’s brothers all stand in front of him; his mother lays her hands on his shoulders.

“Now that you’re a big man, Antonio, perhaps you can join us,” Vincenzo projects his voice across the street because Antonio is hidden behind his brothers. “Ever since Diego left us, bless his soul, we have had a spare gun for any man with the courage to accept the Duke’s call.”

Vincenzo touches a middle finger to his forehead, then his chest, then each of his shoulders. He pulls a second pistol from his coat, flashing it against the burning red sunbeams of the Mediterranean sunset, showcasing the pistol’s walnut grip. Antonio knows from his brother that walnut coffins are for dukes and duchesses, though he does not know who walnut guns are for. Perhaps his belt is big enough to fasten a holster; the pistol would certainly look suave on his hip. Vincenzo snaps his fingers, and Antonio’s father drops twenty lire into his hand. Then they are off, and the dust settles where the automobile once grumbled.

“Clouds are rolling in from the sea,” his mother says. “My sons, help me stow the tables back indoors.”

That night, he hears hushed discussion between his mother and father.

“The Black Hand have their eye on Antonio,” his mother says. “He cannot stay.”

The next morning, his father flips the store sign to *closed*, which Antonio has only ever seen him do on Sundays, and pays a horse-drawn cab to take them to Palermo harbor, where he lays down five lire for a ticket to Tunis.

At age thirteen, the day after becoming a man, Antonio sits for six hours on the deck of a steamer. His legs are just long enough to scrape the deck, and his suitcase outsizes his lap. He tells the woman next to him that not even one year has passed since the *Titanic*’s sinking, and only six months from the day where he nearly drowned trying to swim off the beach at Castellamarre del Golfo. The steamer chugs, hugging the coastline of Sicily, green hills at their left, the shimmering Mediterranean on their right. The sea might be glass; it sends shards of sunlight his way. Soon, the hills of Sicily disappear, and he is alone.

\*

## One Last Lemon Soda in Tunis

Uncle Pietro meets him at the Tunis harbor. He is the first person Antonio sees after stepping onto the hot stones of the quay.

“*Mimmo!*” Uncle Pietro pulls him close, but Antonio does not hug him. He is not a *mimmo*.

Uncle Pietro has not a single hair below his nose. His sideburns are pressed close, and a perfectly straight part outlines his scalp. Even when the sea-breeze blows hard enough to flap the French flags, his hair is so thick with shining pomade that the wind cannot tussle it. Antonio nods his approval. Uncle Pietro presses a cold bottle into his hand—a lemon soda—takes Antonio’s suitcase, and carts him away. They pass a crowd of soldiers in khaki and rolled sleeves searching a man in a robe, perhaps speaking in French, perhaps speaking in Arabic; he does not understand either way but cranes his head to follow them as they pass. The sun shines more intently here than in Sicily, so he must squint.

“The day is almost over, *Mimmo*. Let me take you back to the shop, and when we are done, we will have our introductions. Yes?”

They walk to Rue Pierre de Coubertin, number four, through the gridded blocks with the five-story buildings resembling photographs he has seen of Paris. Uncle Pietro opens a door.

“Here we are.”

His barber shop is an art gallery. Four mirrors and four chairs are exhibited along each wall, where employees clip away at a spectrum of sideburns and mutton chops and walrus mustaches and pencil mustaches and pompadours and undercuts. One of the barbers pulls a lever, and his chair reclines for shaving. Antonio gasps. The washbasins are porcelain, and the water runs clear for the tap’s turning.

“You sit here, Antonio. I won’t be long,” Uncle Pietro points out an empty barber’s chair.

The leather cushion sinks a thumb deep when Antonio sits on it. He stares at himself in the mirror and sips his lemon soda, and afterwards his hand is wet from the cold beads on the bottle. Uncle Pietro’s two sons, Vince and Pete, sweep away the hair every time a customer leaves. White and yellow tiles checkerboard the floor, and the walls are painted the color of the sea.

They close up shop at five past noon. By then, Antonio’s head aches, and he is sleepy with hunger since he has not consumed anything save lemon soda and the pastry his father gave him that morning in Sicily. He says nothing to Uncle Pietro, who locks the door and takes them upstairs to the apartment. His daughter Giuseppa, younger even than her brothers, cooks for the five of them. She fills a pot with lamb

## One Last Lemon Soda in Tunis

and carrots; she reaches for what Antonio thinks is a jar of sand and pours it in; they swallow it with goat milk.

“What is it?” Antonio pokes his fork at the sandy, yellow grains. They taste of rice.

He eats only a small bowlful and goes to bed faint-headed. He does not ask for more.

For the next week, Antonio sweeps the floors with Vince and Pete. He learns the names of all the employees and asks them questions like “How much pomade do you think Giolitti uses?” to show them he knows what pomade is and who the Prime Minister is. He is a man, after all.

Each morning, he goes with Uncle Pietro to buy milk at the goat market on Rue de Protestant, in the square outside Sacre Couer church where the piss smell of fly-swarmed goats marries the smell of incense from the church. Sacre Couer casts its shadow over a busy intersection between two Muslim cemeteries, one Catholic cemetery, and one Jewish cemetery overgrown with eucalyptus trees. Workers are paving over the Muslim and Jewish cemeteries to plant a garden for the colonists, though the Catholic cemetery goes untouched.

“We should visit your mother,” Uncle Pietro says to Giuseppa.

They purchase a bouquet of white jasmine flowers in the souk market from a girl with coins tied in her hair. They follow the quay to the beaches north of the city, where they set the flowers at a mausoleum chiseled under the name “Palazzolo.” Uncle Pietro and Giuseppa each trace a cross on their forehead, chest, and shoulders; they stand and listen to the waves and the rustling palm leaves.

\*

When the Arabic calls to afternoon prayer echo from the various square towers comprising the skyline, Uncle Pietro closes the shop and climbs the stairs to the apartment, where they eat couscous and lamb and carrots until they cannot eat anymore.

“Serve your cousin, Giuseppa,” Uncle Pietro ushers his daughter over and has her ladle out a plate of food for Antonio, who smiles weakly. She is only nine.

By the summer of 1914, fighting breaks out in Europe, and soldiers march with bayonets down Rue de Paris. His uncle tells him not to stare at people, but it is difficult, for the hair styles are myriad. Men walk past in swishing robes, their heads wrapped, sporting the most delicate grey beards which they

## One Last Lemon Soda in Tunis

showcase beneath the shades of the outdoor cafes, chatting while smoking shisha and playing backgammon. Uncle Pietro says a few words to them in French, and he introduces Antonio, who finds himself speechless.

One day, Antonio squints at himself in the mirror to see a shadow on his upper lip that won't go away. He touches the ridge of skin between his nose and mouth, finding it feather-soft.

"Shaggy nephews are not good for business," Uncle Pietro says. "You should shave that."

"When I have time," Antonio says.

Uncle Pietro slides open a drawer and pulls out a razor that glints under the lightbulb.

"Here, *Mimmo*," and he reaches for Antonio's face.

"Oye!" he throws a hand over his lip and jumps from his chair. "I said I will do it when I have time. I am busy now." His voice is muffled behind his hand. He grabs a broom and starts sweeping.

"Did your father not teach you to shave, Antonio?"

"He was going to. Before I left. Just like he taught my brothers to shave when they were old enough."

"But I can teach you."

"No, no, no. I will shave myself when I am ready."

"But you do not know how. You will cut yourself."

"I have watched it enough times."

His uncle does not ask again after that.

Uncle Pietro's customers are all Sicilian men; the Sicilian women of Tunis have their hair styled at a French salon on the other end of Rue Pierre de Coubertin, but Uncle Pietro never allows his daughter near the premises.

"The French do not have a monopoly on style," he complains, glaring at the salon from his window. "Pretentious. It's not just good enough for him to be an honest barber. He has to be a *coiffeur*. I can cut a woman's hair just as well."

## One Last Lemon Soda in Tunis

One day, while Giuseppa is boiling the couscous, Antonio notices her hair is done up in a pompadour; it shines with a mysterious product smelling of lavender.

“You went to the coiffeur!” Uncle Pietro slams his fist on the table, making the dishes shake.

“He does a far better job than you,” she whispers.

He doesn't speak to her for an entire day, after which Antonio takes care to sit on Giuseppa's side of the table. She is right; a woman's hair was as foreign to Uncle Pietro as the streets of Paris. He brushes her hair rough as a horse's mane, like something to be reined in, and she winces as the brush scrapes and pulls. By the time they finish, the brush is tangled with dark tufts.

“Anna Maria Orlando wore perfect Marcel waves to church today. Her mother taught her to use a curling iron, you know.”

“Anna Maria's mother isn't a professional barber,” Uncle Pietro huffs.

“But some things only a mother can teach.”

“What Cinderella fairy tales are you peddling now? Hold your head straight,” and he tugs the brush, which is knotted to the nape of her neck.

Antonio imagines himself cutting her hair and failing, condemning Giuseppa to walk to the market and purchase milk with a single bald spot on her scalp, like a wheat field partway through the harvest. Poor girl.

Around Christmas, Antonio is riffling through the linen closet for a hat box, and he finds a book titled *Counsels on the Hygiene of the Feminine Function*. He does know if they belong to Giuseppa or Uncle Pietro, though he does not dare ask. Antonio keeps the hat box under his bed, only drawing it out for a weekly deposit of one franc to fund his eventual return to Sicily. He does not know when the return will happen, but eventually it must. He was born to work in his father's shop just like he was born to walk the beaches of Sicily; it was not his place to challenge what his family needed of him.

\*

“Have I ever told you the story of my wife?” Uncle Pietro asks him one day after lunch, when they are strolling along the quay and looking on the Mediterranean and wondering if they are seeing the green hills of Sicily or just clouds.

## One Last Lemon Soda in Tunis

“Her parents lived in a fortress at Castelmarre del Golfo. The Minores. Generations back, they were royalty—dukes and duchesses—but now they run the Black Hand and demand people pay them for protection. Soon you are wondering who the real protectors are. In 1904, I married Maria Minore, the daughter of Vincenzo Minore. They left a ring finger outside our door to frighten us, so we moved here, to Tunis. She died shortly after Giuseppa’s third birthday.”

They pass a column of French soldiers searching the pockets of an Arab man.

“Change and obligation are the engines of life, dear *Mimmo*. We have an obligation to take care of our families, and we show our love by doing what is best for them. Just like how your brothers moved to America, how they returned to marry their cousins, how they brought both their families to live in the States. Like them, you must be brave, *Mimmo*.”

He rests a hand on Antonio’s neck.

That night, Antonio rises from his bed and wakes his uncle, who sleeps on the floor beside an empty bed near a portrait of his wife.

“I am ready to shave, Uncle Pietro.”

In the wash closet, Uncle Pietro has a special straight razor that folds out of a walnut sheath. Raindrops *taptap* the window pane. Uncle Pietro shows him to run the tap water on the shaving soap, to scrub it with the brush until it lathers. He presses the brush into Antonio’s hand and has him lather his upper lip. Holding the razor with the perfect amount of firmness, they scrape the fuzz off Antonio’s lip, wiping the razor on each side with a cloth. The rain pours outside and down gutters; his lip-hair pours down the drain of the wash basin. That night, Antonio checks the hat box under his bed to find the coins accumulating steadily for the day when he will step foot on the gold shores of Sicily and work in his father’s shop once more.

Over the course of a spring, the hair on his lip grows back thicker, and soon he sports a consistent dark fuzz, thick enough for him to carefully etch out the thinnest sliver of a pencil mustache. On Good Friday, 1915, before mass, he parts his hair, molds it solid with two squirts of pomade, and squints at himself in the mirror. His younger cousins Vince and Pete watch him, jealous. Their hair is too faint for any sort of mustache. With only a few hours to go until church starts, Uncle Pietro calls Giuseppa down to style her hair, and she drops into the barber’s chair, arms crossed, pouting. Uncle Pietro observes his scissors. He pauses, knits his brow, and sighs.

## One Last Lemon Soda in Tunis

“Antonio, why don’t you style Giuseppa’s hair today. You know the Marcel style, yes?”

His cousins are hard at work sweeping, but when Uncle Pietro hands Antonio the scissors, they freeze.

“Me?” Antonio asks.

He sees his reflection in the scissors—he looks like a lamb at the slaughter. Pinching the scissors, Antonio holds them to Giuseppa’s head. His hand quakes. Uncle Pietro looks on, arms crossed, judging his technique. *Snip*. The first curl feather-floats to the floor. *Snip. Snip. Snip*. Taking the spray bottle, he presses the rubber bladder and spritzes her dark hair until damp. A sheen settles on it. He cuts her hair shoulder-length, ties it at the nape of the neck, and pins it above her ear with a crystal hair pin. Uncle Pietro grumbles. When Antonio finishes with the scissors, he draws the curling iron from its holster; its heat rolls sweat beads down his arm. He curls the waves tight, clipping and unclipping the iron on the thick hair. After the right half of Giuseppa’s head is styled, Antonio takes a step back. He hasn’t done a terrible job. Giuseppa curls the smallest grin, either entertained with Antonio’s terror or happy with his results. He cracks his knuckles and dives back into his work, his hands stronger and steadier with each turn of the iron. After thirty minutes, he concludes with the final touch—the single curl that is left to bounce against her right temple.

“Mia Madonna,” Pete whispers from the corner and sets down his broom.

Giuseppa studies herself in the mirror from various angles. His uncle exhales roughly out his nostrils. For a second, Antonio fears his uncle will slam his fist on the counter, but then he gives a single nod and croaks, “You will cut her hair from now on,” walking out the front door of the shop, still wearing his apron, not returning for an hour.

\*

“Loyalty is at the root of our profession,” Uncle Pietro decides to preach one day from behind the head of a customer.

Antonio dusts stubble off a customer’s neck in the neighboring chair. He has graduated from floor-sweeping.

“Once a man chooses a barber, he must invest in them. The one who cuts hair is family. When you first came to Tunis, you would not trust me to hold a razor to your neck, and I did not learn how you like



## One Last Lemon Soda in Tunis

your hair groomed until the third attempt—a thumb’s length on the sides and parted at the left. Who among these men would ever think of seeing a different barber after investing all this time?” He gestures to the full shop and the three customers-in-waiting who leaf through Italian newspapers along the window. They swear at him and call him names, and he laughs. “Once, a French priest came in for a haircut, Francois Miquet, you know him? I do a good job, he pays well, we are friendly. And the next month? Nothing. I don’t see him again for four whole months,” he holds up four fingers. “I talk with the barber on Rue de Paris, and he says the same thing, that a certain Father Francois Miquet left him cold for six months. The Frenchman had been going to a different barber every month, in a rotation. The philanderer!”

To win and keep customers, Antonio learns, a barber must add a little extra to the experience. When Uncle Pietro cuts hair, he breaks out into Italian opera. His favorite is Enrico Caruso, a tenor of course. On Saturdays, when business peaks, he pays the goat herder Leonardo Ribaud to play the accordion on the stool by the window. He also imports lemon soda from a cousin in Partinico who grows the lemons himself. He keeps the bottles in an electrified ice box that attracts sweating customers in the summers and winters. Every night, Antonio checks the hat box under his bed to find the coins accumulating steadily for the day when he will step foot on the gold shores of Sicily and work in his father’s shop once more.

Giuseppa’s haircuts become more regular, and Uncle Pietro often leaves them alone together after-hours with the empty shop, and they know what to do. Antonio unfurls the cape about her. *Snip, snip*. Curls of hair float to the floor one by one until a pile accumulates on the tiles. One night he is cutting her hair, and the streets outside burn scarlet as the sun slump, slump, slumps over the Mediterranean, dipping under the sea until the coiled filaments of the lightbulbs are their sole light source, tinting the shop bronze. The windows are open, and a hot wind flaps the corners of the newspapers.

“Look at me,” Antonio touches his face in the mirror. “Look how shaggy I am; my hair covers my ears. Perhaps I am the one in need of a haircut.”

“I can arrange that,” Giuseppa says.

His stomach churns. He sits on the chair, and she throws the cape about him, fastening it at his neck.

“I have never actually cut hair before, you know. My father never let me. But now that I try it, I find it is far easier than you make it out to be, cousin Antonio.”

## One Last Lemon Soda in Tunis

While she snips, his hair falls away. For the first time in a month, he feels air on the back of his neck. He feels lighter, cooler.

Giuseppa walks to the electrified ice box in the corner and pulls out a lemon soda for herself.

“Do you want one?” she asks.

He nods.

She brings just the one bottle. She pops open the cap and sips, then hands it to Antonio. He presses his lips to it. The glass is beaded with frost, and the sour lemon makes his mouth pucker. The bubbles rush straight to his stomach. The drink is a relief from the hot wind blowing in from the empty boulevard.

“Was this your mother’s?” he points to the crystal pin in her hair.

“Maria Minore,” she nods. “Daughter of a duke. Her family runs the Black Hand in Sicily. You know her father, Vincenzo Minore, yes?”

“The name is familiar,” he passes her the bottle. “Your mother is certainly with the angels now.”

“Amen.”

She snips some more, a bottle in one hand.

“I wonder if I would have the courage to do what my mother did, to betray a family of mobsters, to abandon wealth for love, to flee Sicily for *this* place. My father teaches me that everything we do must be for the family, yet my mother so clearly spat in the face of her own family.”

“Do you believe that?” Antonio asks.

“What?”

“That everything we do must be for the family? Do you believe that, cousin Giuseppa?”

“I know what you are thinking,” she takes a swig.

Soon the bottle is empty, and they clean up after themselves.

\*

While Antonio is wiping off a razor one morning, an envelope slides through the mail slot on the shop door. He snatches the letter, finding his own name written on it—and what’s more—written in his

## One Last Lemon Soda in Tunis

brother's handwriting, pasted with stamps from America. Antonio leaves his half-shaven customer sitting on the chair and reads the letter, frowning at the final paragraph.

*One by one, we are saving up our money, taking boats to America, and working a few years until attaining citizenship. With our new citizenship, we travel back to Sicily and marry a cousin so that their family can cross the ocean as well. In this way, our family has transplanted itself. Our home in Partinico is boarded up, and there is nothing for you to return to.*

He is quiet during his next appointment with Giuseppa.

"If you follow your brothers to America," Giuseppa says, "you will never see Sicily again."

If he follows his brothers, he will have to sit on a boat for three weeks. He will have to learn English and prepare a home for himself and Giuseppa.

"Perhaps I could go back to Sicily and reopen my father's shop. I do not have to cross the ocean."

"No one will stop you."

They close the shop for three hours at lunch time, so Antonio takes the time to be alone. He walks along the quay by the seashore, thinking that he has always lived near the sea and that he always must return to it. The day is August 28<sup>th</sup>, a Tuesday, the feast day of Saint Augustine. While the Muslims are kneeling on their prayer rugs, he walks to the empty Sacre Couer Church, takes off his hat, crosses himself with holy water, drops two francs in the collection box, and lights a candle for the aunt he has never met—Maria Minore. While Antonio prays, he thinks that the line separating duty from selfishness is as thin as the wrinkles circling Uncle Pietro's mouth that show the places he used to laugh. Somewhere in heaven, he reasons, Maria Minore knows this, bless her soul. Antonio is kneeling in the pews when Father Francois Miquet walks into the empty church carrying a bouquet of roses on some errand and notices him.

"What are you doing here, Antonio? It is Tuesday."

"Today is the Feast Day of Saint Augustine."

"I am aware."

"Augustine is my confirmation name."

"Oh, I see. You pray for his intercession?"

## One Last Lemon Soda in Tunis

“Only when I have a lot on my mind.”

Antonio is holding the photograph his brothers sent him, in which they are standing outside their new house in America.

“Saint Augustine was from Tunisia, you know,” Father Francois says. “He probably walked these same streets. Of course, that was before he moved to Italy. Did you know that Saint Augustine sailed away from Tunisia when he was a young man? He said goodbye to it.”

Antonio pictures his house in Partinico as he knew it, before they boarded up the windows, before the thistles sprang up in the rose garden. He will hoard this memory; he foresees himself becoming drunk off it in the coming weeks when the peals of the transatlantic ship-whistles wear thin and the towers of New York City break over the water. And long after he follows his brothers, long after he takes Giuseppa as his bride and cuts the hair of trigger-happy American cowboys, he will pray to Saint Augustine and know it to be true, that change and obligation are the engines of life as Uncle Pietro decreed. And what of it if he cuts hair on this side of the ocean or some other side, if he is a citizen of this country of some other country—he is the son of a barber just the same, snipping, shaving, styling to the same end. He sees it coming.

Antonio empties the coins from his hat-box-savings-account, walks to the post office on Avenue de France, and tells the clerk behind the bronze grating that he would like to register for a passport.

“What is your nationality?”

“I am a proud Italian! What do you think?”

Antonio fills out some forms and returns them to the clerk, who studies them. For his payment, he hands over the fistful of francs, the collective tips from a dozen haircuts.

“It says here you are eighteen,” the clerk reads.

“You’re never too young to move to America.”

The clerk sighs and crumples the papers into a ball.

“This is the correct form for you,” and he hands Antonio a new paper down from the heights of his desk.

*Order of Induction into Military Service of the Kingdom of Italy.*

## One Last Lemon Soda in Tunis

“I am to fight in the war?” he looks up at the clerk.

“You are a proud Italian, are you not? They will be expecting you on the frontline.”

Antonio rushes back to the barber shop on Rue Pierre de Coubertin, piecing together a story to tell his family.