

*Sulfur was once considered one of the world's premier energy sources. The sulfur mining industry in Sicily lasted for hundreds of years until its demise in the 1980s.*

*Severe poverty and unenforced labor laws led countless Sicilian families to put their children (some as young as six years old) to work in the sulfur mines, where they experienced horrific working conditions. These children were known as the carusi.*



## *Sicily, 1948*

The miners draped a soiled loincloth over the face of old Misciu and continued to work. No one was allowed to move the body until the shift's end. Ntoni adjusted the heavy basket of ore between his shoulder blades as he passed Misciu's pit. If he peered close enough inside, he could make out the figure, half-concealed in the shadows. Others appeared indifferent as they clawed at the subterranean walls with their mattocks and picks. An unending clink and scrape echoed through the tunnels. Ntoni moved ahead, eager to return outside where the air was breathable, not thick with heat and dust. He crouched beneath low ceilings, once more imagining purgatory. Perhaps Misciu's ghost had gone the same way as Ntoni's father — trapped in the farthest reaches of the mine. Tonight, he'd try to discover them both.

He took his place in line with the other boys, who climbed a long staircase of earthen steps, formed in zig-zags to help balance the shouldered weight. An arched doorway stood at the top, emitting bright outside light. From there, they'd transport

the minerals to the *calcaroni*, the fat stone furnaces where the sulfur rocks were melted and refined. Underground, the stairs felt cool beneath his feet. His soles were thick and crusted over with dirt, numb to the pebbles and hard rocks that once pinched and scraped him. He bent his head further to accommodate the ore basket between shoulders. Its weight bowed him over, forcing his neck into a slight twist. There was no getting used to it, even after a month of transporting countless loads. His slow, dragging steps failed to match the steady, dogged pace of the other boys.

Together on the stairs, they formed a slow-moving cloud of shared, fleeting intimacies—the pungent whiff of body odors, the grunts and moans that escaped their lips between bits of passing conversation. Everyone had something to say about Misciu. Rumor was that he'd spent his entire life underground with no family in town to visit each Sunday, when the miners were allowed a day off. It was bound to happen here.

How long would it take to remove the body? Misciu's soul hung in purgatory like Ntoni's father's. Perhaps Saint Calogero might give some sign on his behalf too. Ntoni imagined Misciu's ghost watching them from the mine's ceiling, still trapped in his pit beneath the earth. Priests never visited the miners to administer last rites. The men worked too deep underground, some as far as six hundred feet, where the tunnels became hot like ovens, forcing them to wear loincloths and thin caps made of linen and soft canvas. Some wore nothing at all.

Another boy pushed Ntoni from behind.

“Wake up, *pazzu*. You’re too slow,” he said.

Crazy was the name they’d given him. He’d made the mistake of praying aloud, muttering to himself like the broken drifters who passed through Raccolto begging, displaced by the war. Someone might tear up his Saint Calogero prayer card for fun. The others worked with better efficiency. Why couldn’t he be more like them? He tried to move faster. Malpelo marched ahead of him in line, imitating Misciu’s choking.

“Eck, eck, eck,” he said.

Everyone tried to listen. He was a bit older than the other *carusi*, and knew a *grisù* poisoning when he heard one. If the gas seeped into Misciu’s pit, tainting the air around him, then it was possible that the rest of the mine was not only contaminated but on the verge of an explosion. It didn’t take much to ignite firedamp. Even smoking underground was forbidden. Still, someone would have to test Misciu’s pit to be sure, Malpelo explained. There was no doctor on site to examine the body, no way to sense the gas until it was too late. Perhaps they were already inhaling fresh poison.

Ntoni’s lungs ached as he tried not to breathe.

It’d been an accident with one of the acetone lamps that killed his father almost a year ago. He’d spent the entirety of his life mining, right through the Second World War, until that day the men arrived at their house in Raccolto with their mule-driven carts. Ntoni’s mother knew everything at first sight, even before they carried his father inside – delirious, the entirety of him covered in blood and soot.

"A pezzi," she'd said. They brought him back in pieces.

Ntoni still didn't understand all of the details surrounding the explosion, though he'd asked other miners about what they knew. He reimagined each detail like a montage of stills taken from a newsreel. His father appeared in each scene, working among the other miners until a fallen lamp splashed acetone into the fume-soaked air. Then the fires, the fallen ceiling and collapsed tunnels. Ntoni's father was pulled alive from the rubble, but not without having his legs crushed first.

Someone behind Ntoni pushed against him hard, impatient to reach the outside. He struggled to move faster and stumbled into Malpelo, knocking over both of their baskets. Panic brightened the eyes of the boys behind them, and they were quick to continue, sidestepping the fallen rubble and maneuvering up the steps, away from the scene.

"Idiota!" Malpelo yelled. He picked up his basket and hurried downstairs to tell the miner he assisted, no doubt. Sciavelli, Ntoni's own *picconiero*, would not be pleased if he found out. Mistakes were for the feeble-minded, the ones deserving of punishment. Ntoni crouched along the wall, his body sore. His eyes brimmed. Before him rested the small prayer card of Saint Calogero. He shot a hand over the Hunger Saint, then pushed himself up and made the sign of the cross. He brought the saint to his lips before fitting the card back into the folds of his loincloth. His sulfur rocks lay scattered in the surrounding pools of gray light. The thought of recovering them all was exhausting. But to do otherwise would mean a beating

from Sciavelli. Perhaps he'd even sing his legs with one of the lanterns. It happened to others. Ntoni retrieved the basket and began loading the rubble back, piece by piece, as *carusi* moved around him. Seven years. His mother had agreed to this bargain of time not long after his father's passing. She signed Ntoni over to the Miniera Cozzo Disi mines to work off the *soccorso morto*, a loan given to his family on the promise of his labor. The mine assigned him to assist Sciavelli. Ntoni had already turned twelve that spring. Legal enough to work.

When the basket was full, Ntoni lifted it a few inches off the ground before setting it down again. The throb in his arms was immediate, almost dizzying. His nose and brow dripped with sweat; his thoughts raced in circles. There was no escaping the toil. Even if he somehow managed to escape, his family would still be stuck paying off the loan. His younger brother would also be blacklisted from working in any Sicilian mine when he came of age. Only in death could the *soccorso morto* debt be forgiven. Ntoni breathed hard, stifling the impulse to moan. Then he reached for the basket and secured it between his shoulder blades, feeling again the bite of its rough bottom ridge as a white-hot pain shot down the length of his spine.

Through the arched doorway, Ntoni reached the surface. Dozens of workers passed before his eyes, some pushing half-ton carts full of rocks along the two-by-four tracks that wound around the camp and led to the *calcaroni*. The steady purr of machines strung together the drone of voices, punctured by an occasional, indecipherable shout. Charcoal veins of smoke filled