

Sicily, Summer 1962

You leave your childhood home; you make a new one. You invent yourself, and, if need be, reinvent. But for most, emigration from the past to the future is not so simple, and for Fulvia Arcuri, the journey would be a perilous one.

The first time Fulvia ran away, she was eight. A stick-thin, scabby-kneed eight. Big almond-shaped eyes, a nimbus of brown curls, and, bracketed by gaps, two new, large front teeth.

She decided early one July morning. She had been awake for hours, lying on her bed, tingling mad. The air stank of smoke, a thick blanket pressing down on her face, into her throat, winding around and around her chest. She couldn't breathe. She had to get out, get away. Down the corridor, down the stairs, through the first door, the second, then the third. Was she strong enough to pull back the bolts? Her arms were as wobbly as overcooked pasta.

Because of Mamma, who had pounded her with a wooden spoon. Because Mamma and Papà blamed her and her brother for the fire. "*Deficienti*," imbeciles, which wasn't fair. And Davide insisted it was her fault, her idea. "Fulvia wanted flames."

"You're a big fat liar."

Papà told them he hated tattletales and harangued them some more about knowing better and about responsibility. And how everything could have burnt up, everything.

Papà pulled Davide into the next room. Papà used the belt and Mamma the spoon. Fulvia clamped her lips shut and didn't cry. She could hear Davide's yelps through the wall. Mamma pulled her this way and that, hitting whatever she could, arms, chest, and back, until the spoon broke. Mamma stopped. Papà kept on: *thwack*. Davide deserved it, he did, for the fire and all the other times he bothered her, punching, cursing. Once he shut her kitty-cat, Fedele, in a suitcase. What if Fulvia hadn't found her? Monster. Turdface. He needed to be punished. Why were her parents and grandmother always mad at her? *Filthy child*, stop climbing, stop jumping, stop answering back. Sit down, be quiet, don't squirm. Stay still, stay still, stay still. *Uffa!*

Thwack. They let Davide do anything he wanted, practically. *Thwack*. A ragged howl, and all the places Mamma had hit hurt worse. She covered her ears: enough. She felt queasy and her eyelids prickled. "No more," she said to Mamma, who was lounging in her favourite chair and smoking.

"You idiots have to learn."

Finally, the only sound was the murmur of Papà's voice.

"I didn't do anything. And Davide didn't mean to. He was showing me a trick."

"You knew you weren't supposed to go into your father's office, ever, let alone take something, and you did."

Davide had dared her. They did it all the time, when they weren't fighting, dared each other. Fulvia had won full marks for running the length of the stone walls in less than five minutes, for stealing a pack of Mamma's cigarettes, and short-sheeting Nonna's bed. To their surprise, Nonna didn't tell or even complain. Davide managed to smoke three cigarettes in a row without throwing up though he did look a bit green. He sat in the dust and let a lizard crawl up his arm without flinching, but he screamed when he jumped off one of the shed roofs into what looked

like a loose pile of hay and broke his arm. Last Wednesday, Davide had dared her to eat a live grasshopper, but she couldn't. So he was ahead one.

Yesterday morning, he caught her cross-legged under an oak tree, reading her favourite book of folk tales. "Hey, Beetlebrain, got a new dare for you." He'd come from the orchard, carrying a pear. He took a giant bite and tossed it at her. It bounced off her shoulder, leaving a mark on her dress.

She jumped up. "Creep."

"Papà's magnifying glass. From his desk. Bring it."

"Won't the door be locked?" She liked this challenge. Fulvia had never been in her father's study; Davide had, though not often. That wing of the house was for business, grown-up stuff. Papà's men went in and out. Nonna and Mamma stayed away. They had enough to do, Nonna said.

"Nah, not usually." Davide's smile was smug. "This one is easy, easy."

"Except I'm not allowed." A quiver of anxiety in her stomach. Forbidden. Still, she stepped out of her sandals and was off, as brave as any heroine in her book. Soferina or Lettucia or Bette would never hesitate, no matter what the quest. Fulvia ran down narrow passageways and through half-empty storerooms, up curving metal stairs, and across an outer office with a long table and many chairs. A pause to catch her breath, a turn of the knob, and she was in. A dim room, the shutters closed, a big wooden desk with nothing on top except a bronze statue of a blindfolded woman holding a scale, a leather-bound book and, yes, the magnifying glass. No one was about. She could have inspected whatever she wanted, but her instinct told her to hurry.

"One for me," Fulvia said. She and Davide were sitting on their heels beside the tall prickly pear. "Watch," he said, pointing at the cracked, pale earth. The sun battered down on her head and neck. "Look." He pointed out a line of black scurrying dots, then held the magnifying glass over the ants. "Bam," he said, and the ray of light sizzled. The moving dot disappeared. "Killer rays," he said, moving on to the next and the next.

"Don't," she said.

Her brother laughed. "You're gonna care about ants now?"

"No." She'd been bitten too often by the red ones. But watching the specks of life vanish left her dizzy. Maybe it was the heat, pummelling her. Fulvia eased herself up. "Big deal."

"I got more." He looked over at the house and barns. Beppe, the odd-job man was carrying an obviously heavy box across the courtyard. "Come," he said, and she followed her brother to the pasture. "It's magic," he said. "Fire out of thin air." He aimed the glass at a patch of long, dried grass. Fulvia didn't see the spark, but the grass darkened, then there was a small tentative flame, and together they cried out and clapped their hands. Did Davide make a move to smother the growing fire? He told their parents he did. She was staring at those flames, sizzling yellow and orange, dividing and multiplying, flaring up and to the side. This was magic; they had conjured up a force, made from the earth and the air, that ate up the earth and the air.

Davide gave her a kick. "Fulvia, move!" She backed away. He kicked dirt and stomped. And stomped. Fulvia's heart was beating so fast. She should, she must help, but the heat. He was falling back, retreating. The fire jumped, sizzled. Fulvia turned and ran toward the house screaming. Beppe came, and Mamma, in her high heels, because she was about to go out. Toni streaked by, running into the pasture. And Nonna arrived in cloth slippers, her grey hair hanging loose.

"Call the fire department," Mamma said.

“Don’t be stupid,” Nonna said. “Call the Scammaccas,” referring to their closest neighbours. “And Antonio’s people.” (Papà’s brother had even more men than Papà.) Nonna raised her voice. The fire was loud. Crackles, grumbles, and bangs. “Lela, go and call. Beppe, don’t stand there—get the hoses.”

Toni was leading Sara the goat up the side path. Her eyes were rolling, showing the whites, and Toni was almost dragging Sara along. But what about the other animals? The rabbit hutch over by the fence? From the other side of the main barn, the chickens squawked, the dogs howled. They were not her pets, but she felt a link, a responsibility.

What if the fire kept spreading and spreading? From the pasture to the olive grove, to the garden and back around to the house? Uncontrollable, unstoppable. A hissing giant snake, swallowing everything in its path.

Fulvia felt as if she were freezing and burning at the same time, scared and exhilarated.

A scream, a cascade of screams, far-off, from the other side of the fire. Don’t think about it. “Hail Mary, full of grace,” Fulvia prayed, as she never had, “Pray for us sinners...” The words radiated from the centre of her brain out to the edge of her fingertips. More water, barrels full, in the back of a truck, and more men, many more, poured in, brandishing hoses and shovels, taking over. And Papà and Zio Antonio were suddenly there. Ordering the women and children away. Shouting. Cut off the air with water and earth. Smother the fire. Until after an hour or two, embers and finally a field of ash.

Fulvia lay in her bed, the smoky air stinging her nose and throat, scorching her lungs. She was sorry, even if it wasn’t her fault, sorry for the grass and the animals, especially the five rabbits trapped in the hutch. She hadn’t been allowed to see their remains. “You’ll be overwrought,” Nonna said. But Fulvia could imagine a pyramid of singed fur. And she still heard their far-off death screams.

She remembered staring at the first flames, unable to move. How long had she been spellbound? Too long. Still, they didn’t intend to burn down the pasture. Why wouldn’t Mamma and Papà believe them? For sure, the beatings weren’t the end: they were going to use the fire to boss her around even worse than before. Maybe forbid her from going to school. Another year of lessons with Nonna.

She had to get out, out into the fresh air.

The birds began to sing before dawn. Fulvia put on a comfortable romper and her sturdiest sandals. She squished two 1,000L notes into a pocket. Fedele padded off his sleeping pillow and rubbed up against her legs. She scooped him up for a cuddle and scratch behind his ears. “If I had a leash, Fedele, I’d take you.” Together they walked softly, softly down corridors and stairs. She stopped in the kitchen to place a bottle of water and a cellophane-wrapped pack of cookies in a canvas bag. She poured a few inches of milk into a *caffellatte* cup and set it on the floor for Fedele. Nonna was going to yell when she found it: disgusting.

Fulvia’s arms proved strong enough to draw back the double bolts, turn the knobs, and pull open the three heavy doors. She squeezed sideways through the iron bars of the gate and started down the curving driveway. She could turn right at the road and, after the Inzerillos’, slip into the woods.

In the deep dark forest, the stories say, a child can always find shelter in the branches of a tree or a peasant’s hut. Someone who is not what they seem, a prince in the shape of a frog or a witch in the shape of a beggar, will appear to help or test her, or to eat her up. Fulvia was a big girl, and

she knew the stories were about a time long, long ago, not now, and there were no ogres or wolves hiding in the trees. Still, she took the other way, toward town.

Though her legs, like her arms, were bruised and stiff, she walked and walked. The grey light brightened, the sun climbed into the sky, Fulvia was sticky with sweat. And the air continued to stink of smoke. How far did she have to go? To Alcamo Marina, to the sea, that should do it. She would catch one of the buses in the big piazza. Come on, she told herself, Soferina wouldn't give up. When she heard a car coming, she turned away or crouched in the ditch. Some slowed down as they passed, but none stopped. Not until she was almost in Alcamo. She had allowed herself a short rest in the shade of a leafy bush when the Range Rover rolled to a stop.

Her father had found her. "Fulvieta," he said, his eyes two spots of light in his tanned face. Fulvia stumbled as she got up. He steadied her, then swooped her up into a short, fierce hug. She was buoyed by his familiar, reassuring smell, tobacco and bitter orange. Papà carried her to the car, as if she were still little. She was not fooled: she was in big trouble, bigger than yesterday even. He drove as if she weren't there, in the seat beside him.

"I was running away," she said. From the smoke, the burnt pasture, the dead rabbits.

Papà pulled into the driveway of someone else's villa. His face was expressionless, his voice calm and uninflected, but Fulvia could still feel the flame of his anger. "Such a foolish and thoughtless thing to do. Not that you could ever get very far."

"I might have. Could have taken the train or hitchhiked."

"You're talking like a two-year-old. You must promise me. Never again."

She shook her head. She wanted to cry out in protest, to list all her grievances.

"You swear? Say it."

"I promise." Tucked under her thighs, her fingers were crossed.

"I thought you had a head on your shoulders."

Her stomach flipped and flopped. "Papà, you won't, you won't stop me from going to school?"

"I don't go back on my word. But if you continue to act, to think so stupidly? Fulvieta, you must understand the dangers outside the walls of your home." He gestured at the windshield. "Animals, snakes, bad drivers. Hitchhiking, *Dio!* There are bad men, bad people, in the world."

"I know," Fulvia said, although she didn't. "But do they hurt little girls?"

"Especially little girls."

And Fulvia thought: they eat them up. They chop them into little pieces. "Like the ogres in the woods?" Fulvia was titillated.

"Just like them, metaphorically speaking."

"What?"

"The point is, all little girls need their families to protect them. And you even more so. Unfortunately. You must stay safe, stay where you can be protected."

"Me? More so?" In her mind's eye, she saw a lumpy, green-skinned ogre crouching behind the bush while she ate her cookies. "Why?"

"Because you are my daughter, and I have enemies. That's the way it is."

"Bad men want to hurt me because of you?" Not just ogres behind every bush, but giants behind every tree.

Papà opened his mouth to speak, then closed it. His left shoulder contracted up and forward, and he backed the car onto the road. "Just remember at Bagna Serena, with your family, you are always safe, protected from harm."

Fulvia was confined to her bedroom for a day, and to the house for an entire week. It was horrible being stuck inside in the hot, airless rooms and harder to escape her brother's sneers, taunts, and sneaky pinches. Or to evade Mamma's and Nonna's eyes and reproaches. Fulvia couldn't even hide out in her bedroom. One of them was always walking in without a thought to knocking, fiddling with her things, remaking the bed, reorganizing the drawers: talking, bossing her about.