

Nanna's Crossing

There, I blew out the candles, all of them! Can you believe your old Nanna still has that much breath left in her lungs? *Cento anni*—one hundred years today, the tenth of September. I never planned to live until the next century, but here it is 2001.

Should I take stock now? I suppose I'm happy to be here, but every day I miss my Andrea. You didn't know your great-grandpapà, but he surely would have loved to know you. He was always ready for noisy games, but you would sit still and quiet when he told a story of the Great War. He's gone now twenty-three years. Exactly how old he was when we met.

Funny, he was crossing on the same ship, but I never saw him until two days before we were to arrive in New York. He rescued my Aunt Paola's scarf from being swallowed by the ocean. I had run up to an outside deck for air, because my stomach did not like the gruel they served for breakfast. All of a sudden a gust of wind sent the scarf flying from my hair. Like an arm of the sea whipped up to grab it—*un tentaculo*,...you know, of an octopus. It sailed through the air, a blue kite—but just as it was about to be lost, this young man caught it. He slipped on the deck and nearly went overboard, but when he got his balance he just laughed. It was like ginger ale, that laugh.

What do you think happened next? Probably that I thanked him and put the scarf back on. No! I leaned against the rail and heaved over the side. Then I wiped my mouth with that beautiful scarf. Only one corner of it, though. *Then* I tied it back over my head.

I did say *grazie*. But Aunt Paola had warned me not to get friendly with strangers, so I lowered my eyes and pretended I had to go below. He smiled and walked on. But for one second, he looked like he wanted to stay.

It was cold out on the ocean in October, but I didn't feel like going back inside to that stale air. The salty wind stinging my face made me feel alive. The sea was frothed with white caps. It's no wonder my stomach was churning, because I was nervous and afraid too, even with all my excitement. I was going to see Papà and Mamma for the first time in six years. Your great-great-grandparents. But I was missing Aunt Paola. Back in 1915 they moved me to her house in Palermo. I was only fourteen then, just a little bit younger than you.

All so long ago. And yet I remember like it was yesterday.

I lived with Aunt Paola for six years, until 1921. Can you imagine if your parents left you for six years? Papà said he and Mamma had to go to America, because there was nothing more for us in Santo Stefano. The War was killing the economy, the farm sold, and Papà could barely cover his debts.

If you ever thought the fear and the burden of that sadness...of being left behind...will go away, you find out it never does.

My sister Concetta, the one who died of polio back in 1937—she went to America with my parents. I remember crying, “Why does Concetta get to go, and I have to stay here?”

Papà just said “*Necessità*. Your sister is almost eighteen. She can start working in America right away.”

Mamma cried with me and told me Aunt Paola would take good care of me. I finally stopped crying, but I couldn't stop the other things—the worry and the heaviness in my heart. I barely knew Aunt Paola. What would she be like? When would I see Mamma again? My life was upside down in one afternoon. It was a strange feeling, like being older and younger at the same time.

Later that night Concetta and I whispered together after we had gone to bed.

"Teresa," she said, "They only have money for three fares. Papà didn't want to tell us, but I heard them talking about it."

"Why can't you stay here with me?"

"I asked Papà, but he told me Aunt Paola can't keep two of us."

I said maybe we could live here in Santo Stefano, and she said how would we live, we don't have any money. Then I asked her to get married!

"Married?"

I told her who should be the groom. "That boy who works on that big farm south of town. The one who was so crazy about you."

"Oh," she said, "Tommaso! So sweet, but...so poor. And have you seen the *padrone* of that farm? *Dio mio*, he's fat and hideous. What if he claimed *prima notte*?"

I didn't know what that meant, but she told me it was bad. In Sicily in those days, a terrible thing could happen to a young bride on her wedding night. The *padrone*, who was head of the estate—he had special privileges...*basta*, later it dawned on me Papà was trying to protect us both, in a way.

If I had to stay behind in Sicily, I was lucky to have Aunt Paola because she was a kind woman. We didn't have luxuries like you do now, but I was always clothed and fed well. The *pasta 'ncasciata* she used to make! I never could get it quite the same.

I went to school in Palermo. That's why I read so well. Aunt Paola taught herself a little bit, but was always trying to do better. We got a letter from America every month. Concetta hand-wrote them, because Mamma and Papà never learned to write more than their names. They told us about their new home in Tampa, on 9th Avenue in Ybor. They had a shotgun house. You still see some if you drive down there. It was all Italians and Cubans back then. Papà ran deliveries for his cousin Joe's grocery store, and Concetta worked in one of the cigar factories.

I always danced with joy when one of their letters arrived...and then I cried from missing them. The next day I would write back. I put in whatever my aunt wanted too. I always read them to her before we mailed them. One time when I was 16, I wrote about a boy who had talked to me at the market that day. Aunt Paola, she was furious.

"Oh Signore!" she said. *"Your Papà will have my head if he hears that!"*

I had to tear up that letter and write a whole new one.

It was one month short of six years when the telegram came. I was carrying some dishes to the sink when *boomp-boomp*, two thumps on the door. Aunt Paola went to answer it, and then here she came running into the kitchen, waving a piece of paper.

"Teresa," she was all out of breath, *"from your Papà, a telegram!"* That was what people sent when they wanted the message to get there fast.

"Leggilo!" she said, read it! I had a feeling she knew what it said. Her eyes were dark like coffee beans, but they were shining with lights now.

"Western Union," I read. "23 August, 1921. To: Paola Firetto. Sending fare for Teresa, letter to come. Please book Giuseppe Verdi for 6 Oct to NY. Pietro"

"Giuseppe Verdi?" I was confused. He was a composer. You know his operas *La Traviata* and *Aida*? So beautiful.

My aunt looked at me for a second. Then a big smile crossed her face. "Teresa, I think *this* Giuseppe Verdi is a ship!"

"A ship..." I laughed and laughed until I cried. We both did.

Two weeks later the envelope came with my fare for the steamship to New York. Aunt Paola wanted to help buy me a first class ticket, but we found out even second class cost four months' living expenses.

I smiled and said "So much for being upper class for a week."

She threw her hands up in the air. "The roads here in Sicily, they're *non fatto d'oro*, just dirt and stone!"

They said the roads in America were *fatto d'oro*. Paved with gold. I always believed it as a child. I imagined them gleaming in the sun. Papà used to talk about how his cousins were doing so well in America. I wondered what gave them hope, so far from their families. I didn't know I would soon find out. It was the pledge to bring them over.

The promise made of gold.

And so Aunt Paola bought me a ticket for \$30. Third Class was what the ship line called it, but most called it steerage. You can't even buy a good pair of shoes for that now, but it was a lot of money to us.

She arranged for a wagon to take me to the port. When it arrived, it was a big painted coach with a horse. They were almost always donkeys, but here was this beautiful chestnut horse.

The tears jumped to my eyes. “*Zia Paola*,” I said, “You spent extra for this, you should not...”

“*Shh, va bene!* You should have *one* ride that is first class, no?”

I hugged her so hard we almost fell over. As the driver was loading my bags and helping me onto the wagon, Aunt Paola said “Wait, I forgot,” and hurried back to the house. She came back with her best scarf, the blue one that would almost end up in the sea.

I told her “No, you’ve already given me too much.”

But she made me take it, and I promised to think of her whenever I wore it.

“Here,” she said, “put it over your hair so it doesn’t get mussed on the ride. Write as soon as you get there. And be careful, Teresa, may God protect you.”

The driver jerked the reins and we started to move. I looked back and waved as my aunt and the house shrank smaller and smaller until they were out of sight. I felt a sort of sad happiness on that ride. I hoped Aunt Paola would be all right by herself.

It took nearly three hours to get to the Port of Palermo, because the driver had two other passengers to pick up. Finally I stepped off the wagon and faced the grand steamship *Giuseppe Verdi* with the Mediterranean glimmering behind it. Just then I forgot to be afraid. I was really going to America.

Mamma and Papà warned me, the crossing wasn’t so easy. But six years had passed, so I thought things must be better. Or that people would be kind to me because, *innocente*, I was twenty years old with rosy cheeks and long hair the color of taffy.

My eyes? You can see, this one is green and that one blue. I felt funny about them. I worried that people would think I was born defective. When someone stared at me an extra moment, I always looked down at the floor.

Then the port building. Oh, so full of people. It took two hours to reach the desk where they had a list of questions. Most of them were simple, but some confused me.

“Town of origin” or “Date of birth,” *bene*, that’s easy...but I remember one question “Are you an anarchist!” I just said “No” because if I never heard of it, how could I *be* it?

A doctor looked me over, asked about illnesses, or was I expecting a baby. No, no...I was terrified of an eye examination, because I heard they used hooks on your eyelids. I tried not to look straight at the doctor, hoping he wouldn’t notice my eyes. But he didn’t, or maybe he didn’t care, because he passed me on to the smallpox vaccination and the antiseptic bath. I had no lice or anything horrible like that. But then, who could be sure about the other passengers?

By afternoon I finally boarded. There were two thousand passengers, all looking for their cabins. Or the ones like me in steerage, for the berth in the lower deck. If you ever wanted to see which people were upper or lower class, it was right in front of you on the ship.

The vaccination made a big ugly sore on my arm. You’re lucky you don’t need one today. And the antiseptic! Such an awful biting smell, it stuck to everybody for days. But smelling that was better than those bathrooms. I held my breath when I went in there, and wondered why on this big new ship, were the toilets so bad? I imagined what the *first* class ones must be like—sparkling clean white sinks and toilets, maybe even showers.

That day after your great-grandpapà saved my scarf, I went back down to the bathroom to wash my face. There was never any soap at the sink, so I washed up the best I could without it. At least they had running water. I was still daydreaming about those fancy upper class toilets when it occurred to me, it’s all just for *cacca!* I smiled, and this woman at the next sink smiled back.

My berth was a bunk bed in a big room full of beds. No privacy at all! There were some tables and chairs too, and people who were not too seasick talked, played cards, or sang songs. You heard all sorts of dialects, many Italian, some English.

I sat on top of my scratchy blanket and pulled out Papà’s last letter. I still have it. I kept all the letters. That one was special. Papà explained how to find the train station in

New York, and to be sure to get on the right line, or who knows where I might end up. He also said once I got to Tampa I could apply at the *Cuesta Rey* cigar factory where my sister worked. Concetta did the writing, so she added in some things.

“I know you always hate to be bored, Teresa,” she said. “You think you do not want to work in a factory.” She was right! She went on to say how *Cuesta Rey* was not so bad. The galley, where she rolled cigars, was a big airy room with lots of breezes. The lector sat up on a high chair and read every day in Spanish from *La Gaceta*. Sometimes it was a book of stories or poems. There were rows and rows of cigar makers in one room, but no one talked during the readings.

I secretly wanted to get a job as a lector. Would they even allow a woman to apply for that? I could read well, and if I was going to learn English, why not Spanish?

I folded up Papà’s letter, and looked up to see two men playing cards at one of the tables. They were speaking English, so I couldn’t tell much of what they were saying. I only knew *un pochino* English. One of them, a man with a head of thick white hair, kept looking at me. When he got up from the table he walked by me and winked. I just turned my eyes down and prayed for the ship to get to America soon.

The day was almost there, that wonderful day the ship would arrive in New York. The night before was the worst moment of the crossing, but also the best. It must have been almost 11:00, and those two men were playing cards again. I was so glad when they finally finished and got up from the table, because *oh mio*, I wanted a decent night’s sleep.

But the white-haired one walked toward me and spoke.

“You’re traveling alone, aren’t you, honey?”

“*No Inglese*,” I said. I knew a little, but I didn’t want to talk to him.

“Do you want some company tonight?” He came so close, I could smell the whiskey and tobacco on his breath. “I bet you haven’t even met any Americans yet,” he said.

The Americans were mostly in the upper class cabins. And Aunt Paola had warned me. I started to walk away.

But he grabbed my arm by the elbow.

And then who appeared but an angel! It was the young man who caught my scarf. Now I looked more closely and noticed his curly brown hair. He had eyes the color of amber and round cheeks like the *cherubini*.

"Don't touch her. Get out of here," he said. "You bother my sister again, you gonna regret it." He could speak some English, this angel.

The man's eyes got cloudy. "Your sister? Huh!" He looked at me and raised both hands, then backed up and headed to the other end of the cabin.

I could feel my heart pounding. "Thank you," I told him, "Again."

"*Va bene*. It's all right. I'll keep an eye out for that *testa di merda*. It's only one more night, then we're out of this hell hole."

I nodded. I wanted to fall into his arms.

"So you have no family with you?" He had a gentle voice.

"No, my parents and sister are already in America, I'm crossing by myself."

"Ah, but now you have a brother! Try to get some rest. I'm back in the aft compartment, but I'll look for you tomorrow. Wear that blue scarf!"

Who could dream that angels might reside in steerage?

I lay in my bed, feeling like I was floating. The fear I felt earlier was gone. Not just of the white-haired American, but all the fear. I thought, *it will grip me again later*, but then I just fell into a deep sleep.

The next morning we were to arrive in New York. I woke up to a buzz, everybody talking about who's meeting them in the city, or what train they will take to their new

home town. Some were planning to stay in the city, but many had tickets to New Orleans, Chicago, and all kinds of other places.

I threw on my coat and Aunt Paola's scarf and joined the crowd on the outside deck as we approached New York Harbor, holding our breath for the Statue of Liberty to come into view. When she finally appeared I couldn't keep back tears of joy, but also of grief, for the mountains of Santo Stefano and the cobblestone streets of Palermo. Soon we were in the shadow of the colossal statue with her flowing robes. I looked up at her strong arms and gentle face. I felt myself drawing strength and comfort from her. She held her torch proudly and gazed down at us. My heart was racing, this time with a thousand others.

I touched the scarf and thought of Aunt Paola. At that moment I realized that I left her just as my family left me six years before. "*Necessità*," said my Papà. So much pain and tears in that word. You know that old saying "Necessity is the mother of invention?" I prayed it was the mother of forgiveness. For Mamma and Papà, and for myself.

And so the Giuseppe Verdi made its way slowly to the dock in Manhattan. There was such loud cheering as they announced our arrival, I couldn't make out the instructions. I finally heard the word *sbarcare*, then the English *disembark*. I was nearly carried along off my feet as people crowded the gangplank to shore. We were told to wait for the barge to Ellis Island.

You wonder what Ellis Island was like. Once we got there, we went into the huge immigration building, where it was wait, wait, wait, all over again. Lines with no end for the medical inspection, more disinfectant, and more questions.

The last inspection was a strange test. I remember asking the woman what it was for, and she said this long English word, *fee-something*—I had no idea what it was.

"*Scusami?*" I said. Pardon, my *Inglese*..."

But she just read the questions, and said to point to the answers. There were pictures, but I was not sure what I was to look for. She scanned my test and wrote a word

at the top, and a red question mark. I remember that bright red. She showed it to a bald man with a tired, kind face. He held a big piece of chalk, and was marking people's clothing with it. I saw one group with X-marks on their clothes being led to another room. He looked at my test paper, then motioned for me to pass. What a relief!

I got out of the building to see the barge about to leave for the mainland. I had a huge duffel bag with me, but I ran as fast as I could and just made it.

Finding my train was the next thing. I kept waving my ticket and saying "Tampa, Tampa," and it worked. You hear New York is unfriendly these days, but I will always thank those kind strangers who showed me where to go.

I was on the train trying to fit my bag into a storage bin when I heard that ginger ale laugh behind me.

"A big bag for someone so small!"

I turned around.

"Sister," he smiled.

"Brother?" I smiled back. His face, *bello*, almost pretty with those round cheeks.

"I looked for you this morning," he said, "but such a zoo, all the people...thousands of them—you were invisible." He grabbed my bag. "Here, this is your last rescue." He finished stuffing it into the compartment. "What have you got in there, clothes for the whole town?"

"So...you're on this train too?"

"Looks like it, no?"

I felt my face flush, but when he laughed again, I had to laugh too.

"My uncle's in Tampa," he said. "I'm moving in with him until I get steady work."

"My Mamma and Papà and my sister Concetta live there too."

"*Che coincidenza!*" His amber eyes danced. "So your sister's name is Concetta. You think you could tell me yours?"

I could almost see Aunt Paola's stern face as I said "Teresa."

"Teresa," he said. "I'm Andrea. *Bene*, over here it will be Andrew, because I'm told Andrea is a girl's name."

I said "And you're certainly not a girl," before I could stop myself.

"You're clever," he smiled. "I'll bet you did well on that last test."

"Oh, what was that, anyway? The inspector said something—*feeb-ble*—"

"Feeble-minded." He pointed to his head. "*Deficiente*. My uncle warned me, they test everybody who comes in. For certain I came out *imbecille*, but somehow they let me through anyway."

"*Imbecille!* No! My test, she put a big question mark and a word...M-O-R-...?"

"Ah, 'moron!' That's close to the genius category."

He kept smiling at me as we found two seats together and settled in. I knew he was looking at my eyes.

I looked down like I always did.

"No, don't lower your eyes, look up," he said. "*Non posso decidere...*"

"Can't decide what?"

"Which of them is more beautiful, the blue or the green."

Andrea and I, we sat together all the way to Tampa, telling our stories, looking out the window at the countryside and the city streets. They were made of dirt and stone, but do you know? Every so often we caught a glimmer of gold.

