The Crossing

A whip of salt spray sends Aunt Paola's silk scarf flying from my hair, but I catch it with both hands. What would I have told her if I had lost it? The sea is gray-green and choppy, splashed here and there with foamy white caps. I'm not sure how I found my way to this promenade deck, but I got here just in time to heave over the side. I feel better after ridding my stomach of the gruel they served for breakfast. I have to use a corner of the scarf to wipe my mouth. I find myself glancing around to make sure Aunt Paola can't see me, even though she's thousands of miles away.

I lean against the rail trying to appear casual, as though I belong. I have on my new coat concealing an old dress. I hope my aunt's rich scarf, the color of indigo and adorned with luxurious fringe at each end, makes me look like a first class passenger, or maybe at least second class. If one of the stewards realizes I'm steerage, he'll make me go back down. The outside deck for us is right under the smokestacks, so smelly and crowded it's as miserable as the inside.

It's cold out here on the Atlantic in October, but the salty wind stinging my face makes me feel alive. I close my eyes and daydream about the morning I got the news.

There were two thumps on the door. I was carrying dishes to the sink when we heard them. Aunt Paola went to answer it, and came bustling back to the kitchen waving a piece of paper in the air.

"Teresa," her voice rising, "You're going, you're going!" She said this in our native dialect of Sicily. In Palermo everyone spoke Sicilian, but those who could read also had some knowledge of *real* Italian. Most things were written in the Italian of the mainland, at least the important things.

"Going?" I blinked, not realizing what she was waving was a telegram.

"Here, read," she said, her dark eyes glowing.

"*Western Union*," I read. "*23 August,1920*." I looked at her.

"From your *Papà!* Go on, read, read."

"*To: Paola Firetto. Sending fare for Teresa, letter to come. Please book Giuseppe Verdi for 6 October to NY. Pietro*." I paused. "...Giuseppe Verdi?"

"The ship, Teresa," Aunt Paola smiled. "Not the opera composer, the ship!"

We both broke into laughter that only stopped when the tears drowned it.

The boat lurches and I almost slip on the slick floor, but grabbing the handrail saves me. I check to make sure my passport is still on me. I was told never to leave it in a bag, so I'm keeping it pinned inside my brassiere. So far no one has come to force me back downstairs. The longer I stay up here, the less I have to suffer that stench. It always smells like sweat, vomit or worse down there. Children cry and people moan of *infernale, mal de mare*, and other things I won't say for fear God will hear.

A woman bumps me as she walks by. She looks so much like Aunt Paola. Or maybe she doesn't, really. I just wish my aunt could be here with me instead of back in Palermo. Even among all these other passengers I feel alone. It helps to think about Mamma and Papà. I'm going to see them again in just a few days, but it's hard not to be afraid. Even though I'm a grown woman of 19, I feel like I'm 14 again, when fear found me the first time.

That was 1915, the year I was moved from Santo Stefano to Aunt Paola's home in Palermo. I say "was moved" because I had nothing to do with it. Mamma and Papà just announced one day they were going to America, and my older sister was going with

them. I was to live with my aunt until they sent for me. I had seen her only a few times since I was a baby. Papà said there was nothing left for him in Santo Stefano, with the war killing the economy, the farm sold and his money all gone to debts.

You think the fear and crushing sadness of being left behind will go away, but it never does. Funny. That's the one thing you wish *would* leave.

I remember sobbing "Why is Concetta going with you, and I have to stay here?"

"*Necessità,* Teresa. Your sister is almost 18," said Papà. "She can start working in America right away."

"It's only for a short time," Mamma said through tears. "And your aunt is a good woman...she said her house has been empty too long. She'll take good care of you until we can send for you."

Later my sister told me they had money for only three fares.

One night I whispered to her "Concetta, why couldn't you stay here with me?"

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

"Maybe we could stay here in Santo Stefano."

"Teresa, we have no way to live here–"

"What if you got married?"

"Married?"

"Yes, to that boy who works on that big farm. The one who wanted to marry you when you turn 18."

"Oh, Tommaso! So sweet...but so poor. And have you ever seen the *padrone* of that farm? *Dio mio,* he's fat and hideous. What if he claimed *prima notte?* I could lose my virginity to that horrible man on the wedding night!"

"Concetta, no!" I couldn't help but cringe. Could such a horror really happen?

I had little grasp of such things at 14, but that night it dawned on me that Papà was trying to protect us both.

Aunt Paola did turn out to be kind, like Mamma had said. She also valued literacy above all things, and sent me to school. She had taught herself to read after she married and moved to Palermo. She never talked about how my uncle died, or why they were childless. I was curious, but she kept her grief to herself.

We got a letter from America every month. Concetta would handwrite it because Mamma and Papà never learned how. They spoke of their new home in Florida, in a community of Italian and Spanish immigrants in Tampa. Papà stocked shelves and ran deliveries for his cousin Joe's grocery store, and Concetta was working in a cigar factory. I always danced with joy when one of their letters arrived, but then cried my eyes out from missing them.

The next day I would write back, putting in anything my aunt wanted to add. She always read them over before we mailed them. I remember one I wrote when I was 16. I mentioned that a young man had approached me at the market that day. He was polite and nothing came of it, but Aunt Paola was furious.

"*Oh Signore!* 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 a month short of five years when the telegram arrived. 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 more than four months' living expenses.

"So much for being upper class for a week," I laughed.

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

The streets of America were said to be *d'oro*, paved with gold. I always believed it as a child, conjuring up burnished curbs and gleaming highways. Were there gold nuggets you could pick up? Papà used to talk about how his cousins were doing so

great there. I wondered what could give them hope, so far from their families. I didn't know I would find out soon enough. It was the pledge to bring them over.

The promise made of gold.

And so Aunt Paola bought a third class ticket and arranged for a wagon to take me to the port. When it arrived, it was a large painted coach with a fine chestnut horse rather than a donkey.

Tears jumped to my eyes. "*Zia Paola,* you spent extra for this. That's 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 into the carriage, Aunt Paola said "Wait, I forgot something," and hurried back to the house. She came back with her prized scarf, the deep blue one.

"No, you've already given me too much–"

"I want you to have it, so you'll think of me when you wear it. Here, 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 the coach started to move. I looked back and waved until my aunt and the house shrank out of sight. I felt a sort of sad happiness on that ride. I hoped Aunt Paola would be all right by herself.

As I stare out at the ocean, I almost think I see land, but it's my eyes playing tricks, a mirage. It will be at least three more days. *More than halfway there*, I tell myself. Thank God for this fast new ship. The old boats sometimes took two or three weeks to cross.

I catch a whiff of the disinfectant we all bathed in at port. The biting smell brings to mind the smallpox vaccination, and I touch my left arm. A sharp pain startles me, so I

take my coat off to look. There's a huge blister on an angry red welt. Is this what it's supposed to look like? I throw the coat back on, in case someone should see it and think I'm contagious.

Four days ago when I walked into the Port of Palermo and marveled at the grand steamship *Giuseppe Verdi* with the Mediterranean glimmering behind it, excitement overtook my fear. I was really going to America.

Mamma and Papà had warned me that the crossing wasn't so easy, but five years had passed, so I thought things might be better. Or in my innocence, that I would be treated kindly. Lately strangers sometimes responded to my youthful prettiness, something Aunt Paola viewed with suspicion.

I do have nice hair, between the color of honey and taffy. My eyes are unusual. One is green and the other blue. I was always self-conscious about it, worrying that people would think I was born defective. When someone looks at me an extra moment I still flush and cast my eyes downward.

The port building was full of people, even more crowded than the ship. It took two hours to reach the desk where they asked a list of questions. Most of them were simple, but a few were confusing. I had no trouble with "Town of origin" or "Date of birth," but when it got to "Are you an anarchist," I just said "No" because I figured if I had never heard of it, I couldn't *be* it.

The medical inspection was nothing more than a doctor looking me over, asking if I was pregnant or ill. I was terrified of the eye examination, because I had heard they used hooks on your eyelids. I tried not to look straight at the doctor, hoping he wouldn't notice my odd eyes. But he didn't, or didn't care, because he passed me on to the vaccination and the antiseptic bath. I knew I had no lice or anything, but then, who could be sure about the other passengers?

The disinfectant smell lingers as I make my way to the dark stairway down to third class. I have to pee, so I have no choice but to go back inside. I try to hold my breath in the bathroom. Why, on such a big new ship like this, are the toilets so bad? I try to imagine what the first class facilities must be like. Probably sparkling clean white sinks and toilets, maybe even showers. When I get to Mamma and Papà's, the first place I'm going is the shower.

I can't find any soap at the sink, so I wash my hands the best I can without it. At least they have running water. It's salty, but maybe that helps kill germs. I'm still picturing those gleaming upper class toilets when it occurs to me that it's all just for *cacca.* Is first class shit different? A smile crosses my face, and the woman at the next sink smiles back.

I leave the bathroom and find my berth. I keep checking it for bugs the way Aunt Paola told me to, but haven't found any so far. I curl up on top of my scratchy blanket and pull out the letter Papà sent after the telegram. He 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 Concetta works. That didn't sound too great to me, but Concetta, who as usual did the writing, added a paragraph of her own:

Do not worry Teresa. It's not so bad at Cuesta Rey. The rooms are big and light with a lot of breezes. The lector reads to us every day from La Gaceta. Sometimes it's a book of stories or poems. I picked up enough Spanish I understand. No one talks during the readings. Not even the noisiest Cubans ha ha. And there are rows and rows of people in one room, but some are handsome! The galley is much nicer than the stripper job.

The stripper job, which sounded awful, only meant she worked with the tobacco leaves before passing them down to the galley where they rolled the cigars. If I start working there, maybe Concetta can help get me into the galley. Maybe I could use my reading skills, if they would allow a woman to be a lector. Of course I would have to read Spanish, but how hard could it be? If I can learn English, I can learn that.

I look up from the letter, wishing I were already in Tampa. I've nearly forgotten what privacy is like. There must be a hundred beds just in this room, many of them holding people too seasick or overcome by airlessness even to get up and move around. The ones who feel up to it sit at the tables and play cards, sing songs or talk. And talk they do, which makes it hard if you're trying to sleep your way across.

A few yards from my berth is a table where two men are playing poker. One of them is about forty and olive-skinned, the other older, with a full head of white hair.

"So you said you're *from* Palermo?" says the younger one.

"Yes."

"Kind of rare, no?"

"I suppose so...looks like most here are from the mountains."

"And you look like *prima classe*. Me, I left Alessandria della Rocca with 43 *lire* to my name. I hope that's enough in dollars they don't deport me on the spot," he chuckles. His face looks tired.

"*Prima classe!* Wouldn't that be pleasant. Five years ago I could have crossed in style, but my business in Florence–"

"*Ah, da Firenze! No Sicilianu.* I thought your accent was northern."

"You can tell?" He snorts. "I figured with five years on the island, my speech had deteriorated to where I sound like a native *Palermitano*."

"*Vedi*, you give yourself away, my friend. Even together here in the steerage deck, we are all the same, yet *not* all the same."

The white-haired man shrugs and lays down his hand. “Fold. Take the pot, it’s yours.”

“You are a generous man after all,” the younger man grins and scoops up what looks like about 3 *lire.* “No pot of gold, but my wife will be happy. A little more change in my pocket can’t hurt.”

“*Eh,* what are you doing gambling anyway? *Ritardato, Siciliano tipico!”* He laughs and slaps the other man on the back, getting up from his bench. He turns and catches my eye.

He winks and says “*Non tu, bellissima*,” and I feel my cheeks flush. Please, let this ship get to America soon.

Tomorrow morning we are to arrive in New York. The same two men have been playing cards since just after supper, and it must be close to 11:00. I’m grateful when they finally finish and rise from the table, because I’m longing for a decent night’s sleep. But the white-haired man walks toward me. I don’t want to talk to him, so I get up and head for the stairway. He’s following me. I don’t see any of the stewards around. I hurry to reach the stairs, but he catches up with me and corners me behind the stairway.

*“*I’ve noticed you are traveling alone, *mia cara?”*

*“*No, I’m with my father,” I lie. “He’s over in the next row of berths. *Papà!*”

My heart is beating in my throat.

“Looks like *Papà* is not coming,” he smiles. His breath smells of stale whiskey.

Just as I feel a rough hand on my thigh, an angel appears. He has dark hair and amber eyes. His cheeks are smooth and rosy like the *cherubini*.

“Don’t touch her. Get the hell out of here,” the angel says. “You bother my sister again, you’ll regret it.”

The man’s eyes darken. “Your sister? *Eh!”* He looks at me and raises both hands, then backs up and heads to the other end of the cabin.

I turn up my face to my defender, then look down. “Thank you…” I’m shaking and crying.

“Va bene. I’ll keep an eye out for that *testa di merda*. It’s only one more night, then we’ll be out of this hell hole.”

“Yes, thank God,” I want to fall into his arms.

“I take it your father is not in the next berth.”

“No, he’s already in America, I’m crossing by myself.”

“Ah, but now you have a brother!” He laughs like ginger ale. “Try to get some rest. I’m back in the aft compartment, but I’ll look for you in the morning, I promise.”

Who could dream that angels might reside in steerage?

Lying in my bed, I feel as though I’m floating. Strangely, the fear I felt earlier is gone. Not just of the white-haired man, but all the fear. Maybe it will grip me again later, but right now I can do nothing but fall into a grateful sleep.

It’s morning, and soon we are to arrive in New York. I awake to a buzz of excitement, everyone talking about who’s meeting them in the city, or what train they’ll take to their new home town. Some are planning to stay in New York, but many have tickets to New Orleans, Chicago, and other cities I haven’t heard of.

I skip breakfast and do my best to wash up. I glance into the tiny mirror I brought with me. My eyes are bright and my face is flushed, almost radiant, as though I might have been luxuriating in a featherbed all night. I recall the incident last night and brace for the sick feeling, but it never comes. What pops into my head is a vision of amber eyes and rosy cheeks.

I throw on Aunt Paola’s scarf and join the crowd on the outside deck as we approach New York Harbor, holding our breath, this time not to avoid the stink, but

because we can't wait for the Statue of Liberty to come into view. I don't see my new "brother," but there are so many people here.

Lady Liberty finally appears. I can't hold back tears of joy, but also of grief, for the craggy mountains of Santo Stefano and the sapphire Mediterranean. Soon we're almost in the shadow of the colossal statue with her flowing robes. I can't stop staring up at her strong arms and gentle face. She holds her torch proudly and gazes down at us. My heart is racing again, this time along with a thousand others.

I touch the scarf's soft fringe and think of Aunt Paola. I'm struck by the thought that I left her just as my family left me five years before. *Necessità*, that was what Papà had said.

That old saying about necessity being the mother of invention...I pray it's the mother of forgiveness too.

The Giuseppe Verdi makes its way slowly to the dock in Manhattan. There is such loud cheering as they announce our arrival, I can't make out the instructions that follow. I finally hear the word *sbarcare,* then the English *disembark*. I'm nearly carried along as throngs crowd the gangplank to shore. We are told to wait for the barge to Ellis Island.

Once we get to the island and enter the huge immigration building, the wait starts all over again. Endless lines for the medical inspection, more disinfectant, and more questions. Oh, where is my angel brother? Some exhausted passengers are being short with the interpreters–*I already answered that; no, can't you see I'm not crippled?*–But then they submit, because why make it harder on themselves?

The last inspection is a strange test. I ask the interpreter what it's for, and she says "feeble-mindedness."

"What? Sorry, no *Inglese*..."

But she just reads me the questions, and says to point to the answers. There are some with pictures, but I'm not sure what I'm supposed to be looking for. She scans my test and writes something on the top. Then a doctor with a kindly face and a big piece of white chalk looks me over, smiles and motions for me to pass. What a relief. I see a group of people with chalk X-marks on their clothing being led to another room.

As I hurry to board the barge back to Manhattan, I accidentally step on someone's heel. He swings around to see who nearly tripped him up, and his arm knocks my bag out of my hand. His flash of annoyance turns to a wide grin. His cheeks flush and his amber eyes catch the light.

"Sister!"

"Brother? I mean...*Scusami...*" I manage to smile back.

"No, no, excuse *me!*" He picks up my dropped bag. "I looked everywhere for you but it was hopeless. It's like...*uno zoo!* Are you doing okay?"

"Oh," I breathe out. "I'm fine...I was afraid–"

"No more afraid, look where we are!" The ginger ale laugh. "Come on, I'll help you onto the ferry."

"Do you have family meeting you here?"

"No, my uncle's in Tampa. I still have a long train trip ahead."

"Tampa?" I must look confused.

"*Sì,* in Florida, down south–"

"I know! That's where I'm going. My parents live there, and my sister Concetta."

"*Che coincidenza*! What if we're on the same train?" His eyes are dancing. "So your sister's name is Concetta. Think you could tell me yours?"

I can almost see Aunt Paola's disapproving face as I reply "Teresa."

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

I giggle "And you're certainly not a girl," before I can stop myself.

“You’re so perceptive,” he laughs again. “You must have done well on that test.”

“Oh, that last one. What was that, anyway? *Feeb-ble–*”

“Feeble-minded.” He points 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! Now I remember, I think mine was marked...‘m-o-r-o-...?’”

“Ah, ‘moron!’ Pretty sure that’s in the genius category.”

He keeps smiling at me as we ride the barge across New York Harbor. I know he’s looking at my eyes.

I look down like I always do.

“No, don’t lower your eyes, look up,” he murmurs. “*Non posso decidere*…”

“Can’t decide what?”

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

As it happens, we do have tickets on the same train. We sit together all the way to Tampa, telling our stories, looking out the window at the countryside and the city streets. Every so often we catch a glimmer of gold.