

Title: Lady Liberty

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CONTENTS

1. SALVATORE'S WOLF	1
2. FLEETING SHADOWS	8
3. ALONE	10
4. THE RED BANDANA	13
5. NO TURNING BACK	17
6. <i>LA MADONNA</i> TO AMERICA	25
7. THE STORM	34
8. THE LIE	40
9. ISLE OF HOPE	43



1 Salvatore's Wolf

I howl for all I'm worth. I thrust my head back, open my mouth, round the edges of my lips, and howl. My ears point backwards, eyes half-closed, chest proudly opened. My front legs, haunches, and tail all strongly earthed. My howls pierce the peaks of the surrounding hills and resound in the valleys below. This is what I do at night. It makes me feel strong and free. My name is Tina. I am covered in grey-brown fur. I am a wolf.

*

I am a boy. My name is Salvatore. I am short and round, with dark brown eyes and hair forever curling into ringlets around my ears and forehead and dipping into my eyes. I wear layers of worn clothes scrubbed in summer, but left to their own devices in winter. I wish I had a red bandana to wear around my neck like my big brother Domenico. But I must wait till I'm older and it's my turn to wear it. In winter I wear wooden clogs, otherwise I go barefoot and my feet are as tough as a mountain goat's.

My home is on land that is dry and weather-beaten. At night in winter the wolves howl in the hills and we shake with fear. The goats sleep inside to keep them safe from the wolves and to keep us warm. Rosa is my favourite goat. We sink onto the floor together cuddling-up to my brothers and sisters and the other goats. I always fall asleep last because this is the time I think about why the wolves howl. Tonight I think it makes them feel good. But last night I thought they do it when they're lonely. I never feel lonely, but never feel really good either. The closest I get to it is wandering the hills with Rosa by my side on a spring day when the cistus bushes bloom.

Sometimes I think about the time when me and Rosa were stuck outside on a much colder night than tonight, and nobody could hear us knocking. My family were fast asleep, worn out from working on our hard unyielding land. Rosa didn't come home with the other goats so I went to look for her, scared that a wolf had got her. Tired as I was I had to find her and when I did she smiled at me in gratitude. So the bolted door shocked us, and then we heard it. The howl was like a gory wind sweeping its way toward us. Then more howls encircled us and we both began to shake. Rosa's eyes got big and she butted the door with all her might. Suddenly it opened and my little sister, her nose red and dripping and her eyes like big round dishes, stood there. We tumbled into the room and I pushed the door closed with a bang.

I like thinking about that night when the wolves are sleeping and the door is jammed shut. But is Tina dreaming about us? Because no matter what my family says I know she was behind Rosa and me that night. I am sure that wolves tell stories about us too. Maybe Tina's favourite story is about the time she almost had a goat and a boy for supper! My favourite story about wolves is the one *mio nonno* tells every year on the darkest coldest night of winter about the great Tommaso. His low cracked voice making it even scarier. This is what he says:

When I was a young boy, I was very scared of wolves. When they howled I ran to hide under the table. But one day I was walking home from the hills with the goats. It was getting dark and my bare feet and hands were numb. My ears were wind-tossed and pain racked my face. I saw a lone tree ahead and knew that I was close to home. Suddenly I heard crunch, crunch, crunch ahead. I craned my neck to see what it was and looked straight into the coal black eyes of a huge wolf. I knew right away that it was Tommaso. I froze and the terrified goats formed a ragged line behind me. But why was Tommaso dragging his hind leg? Then I saw it. A trap hung from his leg and blood poured out from a big hole. Tommaso wanted to attack


me, but fell down instead. He couldn't move. I was so scared that all my bones rattled. But something made me move closer to him. I saw that his eyes were filled with pain. I knew I had to get the trap off. No wolf should die in such shame. I crept closer and the goats mutely followed. I picked up a big stick and whacked the trap with all my might. To my surprise, it slide down Tommaso's leg and hit the ground with a thud. Tommaso shuddered but his eyes were less clouded with pain. He got up and slowly limped towards me. Suddenly he turned towards the hills. When I could feel my feet were connected to my legs, I started to run. Something made me look back and I saw that Tommaso had stopped and was looking my way. Then he lifted his big head and gave a great howl. I knew he was thanking me for sparing his life. I am still afraid of wolves, but I never regretted being kind to Tommaso in his time of great pain and shame.



I wake up with a start. I had been dreaming about almost catching a boy and a goat. But now I smell something familiar in the air. I look left and right but nothing catches my eye. I stretch by body to the tips of my ears and let out a low growl as a warning. The smell becomes stronger and my tail starts to twitch. There is a rustling in the bushes a few metres from my den. To my horror I see the horned head of a female goat that looks remarkably like the one in my dream. But this is bad timing. I am satiated from my last meal of *chamois*. Truth be told though, I am not particularly fond of goat meat but often there is nothing else to eat. So I sink down to the ground and enjoy the spectacle of a goat coming to tea with a wolf.

*

I am Rosa the goat. I live with Salvatore and his large family. Goats enjoy the company of humans particularly in winter when the wolves are on the prowl. Salvatore and I are close. We have an affinity for wandering the hills together. But sometimes on my own I get confused and take the wrong turn. Like now. Tina the wolf of my nightmares is just metres away with a supercilious look on her face. I take small goat steps backwards. She inches her body forward. I continue backing-up, taking bigger steps. Tina hunches her shoulders about to pounce. I can't move. My butt is wedged between two cistus bushes. Tina approaches, opens her cavernous mouth, rounds her lips and whistles a tune I'm not familiar with. I wiggle my butt until it's free and hop sideways. Now she breaks into song, a tune I know well:



*Avanti o popolo, alla riscossa,
Bandiera rossa, Bandiera rossa.
Avanti o popolo, alla riscossa,
Bandiera rossa trionferà.* *of the*
WESTERN CAPE

Her voice is clear and sonorous. Tingling cascades down my spine. But this is nightmarish. I wish I could pinch myself to see if I'm dreaming. Dreaming or not, I'm in a predicament of huge proportions and need to make a plan.

*

Where is Rosa? I want to tell her my bad news. *Mio padre* says I go to school on Monday.

“What do I need school for,” I say. “To scratch the earth and take goats up and down the hills?”

He says, “It's the law” and walks away.

But what has the law got to do with us. We never pay attention to the law and they leave us alone, except when they make trouble. I can't leave Rosa to get lost and eaten by Tina. My brother says the other kids at school will pick a fight. Fight? I can't even hit a goat. My arm and hand never obey when I raise them to strike. Once picking fat ticks off Rosa I got covered in mud and went like that to my cousins. "Look, here comes Lucca's pig," they laughed, poking bits of mud that plopped to the ground. I was ashamed and cried all the way home. *Mia madre* scrubbed me with a brush until my tender bits burned. "Wretched kids want others to feel bad," she said. She hardly ever says things to make me feel good. Giuseppe named after *mio padre* with a face like an angel in heaven is her favourite. But sometimes a spark of love shoots out straight to my heart to warm me.

Monday morning I'm plopped in the tin tub. Hot water pours over me and I'm scrubbed with the bruising brush. The soap gropes and glides into my most shameful places. *Mia madre* wraps me in an itchy blanket and slaps me when I start to scratch. The clothes I wear are clean, but fit me twice over. She puts chunks of hard black bread and goat cheese in my pack and shoos me away. It's a two-kilometre walk to the school, and I'm sure to get lost. A wolf could catch me.

On the way, I think about Rosa coming home. She was sad and did not care about my misery. Cousin Feliciano sneaks up behind me pinching my bum. "Ow! I cry," but he laughs digging deeper with his claw-like fist. He is ugly with hair that slithers like snakes. Still, his big sister loves him. She beats anyone who teases him. Like the time *il padrone's* frog-faced son poked Feliciano with a stick. She grabbed the stick, wacked him with it, shouting that he was a scaly fatso. Later *il padrone* chased her with a gun, calling her a bitch and a whore. Her parents, scared of getting kicked off the land, beat all their children one-by-one.

The school's grey-white walls slant inward and are covered in damp dark splotches. Broken red roof tiles litter the ground. The narrow doorway has no door. Rickety chairs

attached to scarred desks are so wobbly I start to feel woozy. The teacher stands in front of a brown blackboard. She looks about my age and is covered from head-to-toe in black. She is shaking from the cold and the sight of so many raggedy children stiff with fear. I sit in the back row keeping my head down not looking up when she calls my name in a high-pitched squeak. If I don't say anything she won't notice me. I can sneak away to find Rosa. But my cousin Feliciano says, "There he is." I'm no longer invisible. My first day at school starts off badly and the rest follow likewise.

*

It's one thing getting eaten by a wolf. It's an entirely different matter to be humiliated by one. As I slink away, Tina's booming rendition of *Bandiera Rossa* echoes down the slopes. When I get home Salvatore hardly notices my distress, he is too immersed in his own travails. Something about being made a fool of at school. Ha! Let him be face-to face with a sarcastic wolf and see how he fares. I will miss him though and his musings about why wolves howl. The big-little stick he swings mightily when we goats play the fool but never reaches us. I hate change and getting used to another human will be tedious. Maybe I will follow him to school and wait all day until it's time to go home. Someone is sure to take pity and lay some soft hay to sooth my weary bones. No-one will laugh at him when they see what a fine friend he has. And Salvatore will love me all the more. Cuddling up to his warmth, breathing in his rustic odour he will slip me a tasty turnip to show his gratitude. Ah, a goat can have her dreams.

*

Well that was a lark. The goat almost croaked. I like a bit of fun, but have my serious side. It's getting dark and I need a few minutes to reflect. I am Tina, the wolf. I come from a long line of valiant wolves, like my grandfather Tommaso. They'll stop at nothing to destroy us. But we're still here howling in the hills. We don't want to eat their dry as dust goats. I prefer a diet of chamois or red deer, wild boar or hare. Maybe topped off with berries and herbs. But they steal our land. They spread lies about the "big bad wolf" down the generations. I'm not bad, not even big. I will howl and they will shake. But my howls are for me, nothing to do with them. My howls give me piece of mind. They ground me to the earth to which I belong. My howls mingle with the howls of all wolves that roam the earth for all time. I will never stop howling. I am a wolf. What more would you have me do?



2 Fleeting Shadows

They are leaving one-by-one for America, the Golden Land of Plenty. *I miei genitori* shrink after each leaving. Shoulders more rounded, chests more caved in. Their eyes more deaden, like olives without the pips. First to go is Domenico, Felicia and Luisa, then Giuseppe. On that day, *mia madre* lay on her bed and wouldn't get up. Tears silently escaped from the corners of her closed eyes creating pools of pain on the bed. There is nothing for them here except toil and hunger. And earthquakes. Bad ones and many lose all they own. Some hit harder than us wander into our village in dusty carts drawn by donkeys with drooping heads and raised ribs. We give them bread and goat cheese and they silently trudge away.

My school days ended after one year. Now I wander the hills again with Rosa. She's old and there is more pain than joy in her halting steps. Still she refuses to let me go alone. Afraid I'll meet up with Tina whose howls still encircle the hills.

Our days don't change that much, only get harder. We squabble more about who does what, and who does nothing. Our anger covers our heartache. Each one leaving promises to come back. But we know it's a lie. Presences dwell inside our home once filled by the missing. But it's only fleeting shadows gone in a twinkle. Domenico left me the red bandana I yearned for. It still smells like his sweet sweat. Francesco, older than me, said it was his by rights but Domenico wanted me to have it because I looked so sad. He tied it round my neck, shouting: "*Bello Salvatore, bello!*" Rosa nodded her head in agreement.

These days when the priest makes his rounds *mia madre* won't open the door. Before, his visits comforted her. Now she clings to whispers, sighs, and the laughter of her faraway children. He'll tell her to banish these thoughts and pray to the Virgin Mary. My cousins' families are getting smaller too and they visit more often. Our grandparents come from over

the hills and stroke our heads. Their dry rough hands and bent bodies whisper the story of our land. Nobody speaks about their pain, because nothing can be done. So the silence grows and grows until it bursts in my head and I flee to the hills to shake it away.

*

I'm an old goat now spending my days curled up in a bed of hay warmed by the sun. Like a pensioner that's served her time well. Salvatore is very gentle with me. He kneels by my side giving my head a good scratch, careful not to knock my tender horns. Sometimes he lies on his side sticking his nose into my belly breathing in my intoxicating smell just like the old days. He has grown everywhere, and his clothes always look too small. But his smile is still big and warm. I hope it's the last thing I see leaving this land. He doesn't reminisce much about Tina anymore. Her howls have lost much of their glamour. She's a wolf howling out of loneliness that echoes his own. The connection we three share still lives on, but in a more mellowed form.

*

The humans at the bottom of the hill are quieter. They still come at us with guns, but fewer bullets fly or hit their mark. The boy and his goat don't wander the hills as much anymore. Sometimes I see them from afar but leave them alone. I've never yearned for goat's meat, and old goat's meat is disgusting. And the thought of eating a human makes my flesh crawl. I sometimes feel lonely or disgruntled with all the changes in our land. The hair on my face is grey, and it is harder to hold up my head to howl. I rest more, and more often crawl into my den for a long deep sleep.

3 Alone

It's just after dawn, three days before I get on the ship to America. A cold early-spring wind rushes down rocky hill paths. I am surrounded by family and village folk, clutching their padded jackets to their chests and settling hats and kerchiefs on their heads to defeat the wind's tugging. They wish me safe travels, beg me not to forget them, and to come back home before they die. *Mia madre* stands in the doorway. She wears a long black heavy-cotton dress. Feet in brushed-clean clogs are unsteady on the doorstep. A starched white kerchief covers her grey-streaked hair pulled so tightly back that the hair roots bulge. Against the bright white of her kerchief, brown splotches covering her face from too much sun and toil stun me. I stare not to forget.

I am leaving this dry land that holds me in its withered arms not because I want to, but because it has to be. Rosa my goat is long gone. She was my best friend, my joy. Tina howls no more and the hills mourn their loss. I don't want to leave *i miei genitori*. They are goodhearted, long-suffering, and don't need more pain. Sometimes I hide and cry and my face feels strange to touch with tears pouring down.

The family in America sent money for my ticket, and letters that my sister Carmina reads to us. I'll go by train to *Napoli*, then by ship to New York. Another train will take me to Boston's *piccola Italia* where Giuseppe will meet me and take me to my sister Luisa's. I am 17 and have never gone further than the top of the hills, but will make this journey alone.

Weeks ago cousin Pasquale took me to town to get my passport. The clerk joked that they gave it to somebody else. He laughed when my face lit up. The passport is a little book with swirling black letters and red stamps that will get me into America. Pasquale tucks the ship's ticket into its inside pocket, telling me to carry it close to my skin always. Only God should know where I hide it.

For days now my family hover around me, watching me with sad eyes. Hunched over our bowls of *minestrone*, words of love escape from a mouth before its clamped shut again. Some nights, village folk join us bringing musty bottles of wine to tell stories about me. Talking all at once they shout that I was a fat little boy with big brown eyes in a round face dreaming the days away. The last stories, told with lowered voices and tears in wistful eyes, are always about Rosa the goat I loved. And about Tina the wolf whose howls I imitated. Throwing back my head and rounding my lips just like hers!

Now the sun is slowly rising. *Mio padre* and Francesco arrive with cousin Pasquale's donkey cart to take me to the train station in Crotone. *Mio padre* carefully steps down from the two-wheeled cart, holding onto the side rail to steady himself. He stands next to it holding his brimmed hat in his hands, not meeting my eyes, his crusty old pipe clamped in his tightened mouth. His baggy cotton trousers gently crinkle in the wind. Francesco jumps off the cart and stands next to him, wearing the red bandana that I gave him to ward off *spiriti cattivi* gathering to follow me to America. My bag and suitcase, packed with a few clothes but swollen by the food, packages, and letters for village relatives in Boston, are at my feet. Francesco grabs the bag and suitcase and hauls them over the rail at the back of the cart. The donkey shuffles her feet and bends her head even further down towards the ground.

As if in a dream I slowly walk around the gathered family and village folk. My back is patted, my hands and face touched over and over again. Carmina and Maria pull their kerchiefs down to cover their eyes and clasp me around the waist, whispering: "Come back, *mio fratello*, come back."

Vincenzo hands me a clump of hair tied up in a red rag he swears is from my Rosa that he hid all these years for this day. Holding my hand tightly in both of his, he murmurs: "Don't forget your blood *mio fratello*. Come back or Rosa will haunt you in America."

I turn away and head for *mia madre* still clutching the doorpost. Her hands shoot up to cover her face but don't hide the tears streaming down. "No, no, it's too much, it's too much. Holy Mary, Mother of God, help me," she whispers.

Her body slowly sinks downwards. I reach out to stop her from falling and her head drops heavily onto my chest. In between sighs, she whispers over and over: "*I miei bambini piccoli, I miei bambini piccoli.*" Through the thunder in my ears, I hear Francesco calling me. "I must go now, but I will come back when I have money," I tell her. She is silent. Her eyes tell a different story, but I must go.

The wind picks up as Pasquale's donkey guides the cart around the last bend and all I am leaving disappears. *Mio padre* sits upfront with Francesco who holds the reins. I sit in the back looking backwards towards the hills. Nobody speaks. Two other donkey carts creep along the rocky path ahead of us. It will be hours before we reach Crotone. I feel heavy and very tired thinking about what I am leaving and what is ahead of me. I rest my head on an old wrapped up coat and my eyes droop. Suddenly my head shoots up. Far off in the distance there is a bright shadow on the highest peak. The head bends back and a howl peels out bouncing off all the smaller peaks until it reaches me and I'm enclosed in its warm breath.

4 The Red Bandana

The sun is low in the sky as we reach the outskirts of Crotone. Few words are spoken as we trudge past purple-dotted hills, and low-roofed houses peering out behind silvery-leafed olive trees. Only the donkey's sad song of heaving breaths breaks the silence.

Bent-backed women, wearing wide black skirts that sway in the wind, scatter seeds in furrows of powdery-streaked earth. Slowly unbending, they reach up to straighten kerchiefs sliding backwards on their heads, tucking sweaty curls into the flaps. They stick thumbs into their waists, and gently press out back pains with calloused fingers. Looking our way, they break out in big grins, black holes where teeth once stood. My eyes lower. I feel ashamed seeing them work while I do nothing. *Mio padre* and Francesco lift their hands to wave and smile. For a brief moment, their faces look carefree.

Stretching out my hand to catch blessings floating on the wind helps me to forget how far away home is. My eyes close and *mia madre's* soft cheek touches mine. The softness surprised me when I kissed her goodbye. I had thought her face would be as rough as the splintery wood planks covering the bottom of the cart. I fall into a dream about the day I come back home to Italy wearing American clothes, green dollars fattening my pockets. The whole village comes to admire me, saying how fat I am, how *bella* my wife, how round my children, I must be rich!

I'm thrown against the side of the cart when it stops. Francesco leans over me, gently pinching my cheek. It's time to wake up, we have arrived. Opening my eyes to a darkened sky, fear squeezes my heart. *Mio padre* lightly touches my hand. Looking into his eyes, I dare to sit up. More people than I've ever seen before rush towards a roaring Devil as big as a mountain. I cover my ears to block the noise, but it seeps through my fingers. Francesco lifts

my suitcase out of the cart, points to the bag that I must carry. I loop my legs over the back of the cart, sliding down until my feet touch the ground. Looking down to escape the Devil's evil eye, I don't know which way to turn.

Mio padre and Francesco will go back to the light on the hills, the warmth of sun on their backs, the nudging of the goats, and the howls of the wolves. Something sharp rises in me to pierce my heart, to cry out to God: "Why do you send me away?" But God's head lies on a soft pillow high above the clouds. If you don't shout loud, He won't lift his head and open his eyes. We never shout loud enough, and God sleeps soundly.

The donkey raises her head telling me to come to her side. She lets me stroke her coarsely-soft brow down to her nostrils widening with pleasure. My mouth at her ear, I whisper: "Please take me home." *Mio padre's* hand is on my shoulder. His lips moving tell me that Francesco will take me to buy a ticket. He will stay with the cart. He swings the bag onto my shoulders and pats my cheek. His fingers soften to remember my face. Francesco says, "We must hurry." *Mio padre* and the donkey lower their heads and step back. They must let me go.

Francesco holds my suitcase in one hand, the other grasps my elbow pushing me through the holes opening up as more people board the train. I don't know how he knows the way, but he rushes in a straight line to get us there. The ticket office is in front of us. People packed together push, edging closer to darkened windows. Francesco's eyes are wild. His top lip curls up showing pistachio-caked teeth. From around a dark corner, men in uniforms slide toward us in shiny black boots. Arms held behind their backs swing out, and batons are raised. The crowd stops pushing to stand quietly in rows, and the slats of the ticket windows open. I lean my head against Francesco's back, trying not to think about *mio padre* and the donkey silently waiting. Francesco turns around and sees the fear in my eyes. He puts the

suitcase down, unties the red bandana covering his neck and ties it around mine. We don't have to say anything. He knows that I need it more than he does. With its light touch on my shoulders, the heaviness in my heart lifts. I am ready to move on.

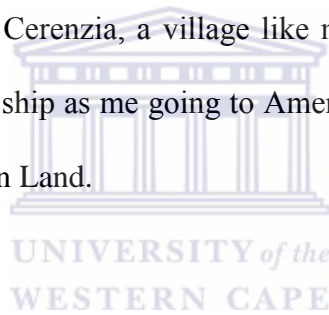
The train whistle blows as we stand tightly packed at the open windows. Leaning far out I try to grab Francesco's outstretched hand, but our fingers don't touch. Black smoke puffs up to the stars just beginning to twinkle. With a jolt, the train wheels start to turn making a loud clicking noise. Francesco shouts something I can't hear over the noise of the wheels and the shouting of the crowd. He starts to run, his right arm outstretched. I wave my bandana, shouting: "Tell *mia madre* and *mio padre* I love them. Tell them not to forget me." The clicking of the wheels gets louder and Francesco falls back until he's just a black dot like all the rest.

I sit next to a window looking out on darkness. I am less afraid but more sunken into sadness. Tears make pools of my eyes and spill over the edges. I press my bandana hard against my face but the tears soak through the cloth. I try to see my sister Luisa waiting for me in America. For a moment her face opens up like a spring flower but fades away again. I cried when they told me to go to America. But these tears feel like tumbling stones in a river. I am afraid to move, but can't sit still. Mumbling *scusassi* to the other passengers I get up and walk stiffly down the passage. In a dark corner, loneliness wraps her arms around me squeezing hard. Holding the rag with Rosa's hair to my nose breathing in her earthy goat smell, I pray for her kind heart's magic to stop my tears. My heart more steady I go back, sit down and stare out the window at the night filled with strange shapes passing by.

In the morning I open my eyes to light seeping around the edges of window curtains. I'm curled up like a baby, my head pushed up against the shuddering train wall. Clattering wheels

make their way down the passage. Coffee is put into people's hands. The conductor follows the trolley, announcing that we'll be in *Napoli* in two hours. The hot cup of coffee in my hand thaws my ice cold fingers, but I can't drink it. The sounds and smells of closely-packed people grown larger overnight stifle me. A light touch on my arm pulls me back. The boy sitting next to me offers a large slab of bread and goat cheese. His big brown eyes look to his mother. She nods her head and smiles.

The train whistle blows again. Windows are down and sea air blows across the passage, leaving salty traces mixed with train smoke behind. The conductor bangs doors along the corridor shouting that the train arrives in *Napoli* in thirty minutes. All around me people fidget. Tingles sharp as pins prick the tips of my fingers. Standing in the passage I meet Alfonso who tells me he's from Cerenzia, a village like my own not too far away from it. He's by himself and on the same ship as me going to America. We make a silent pact to stay together until we reach the Golden Land.



5 No Turning Back

The harbour is a short walk from the train station. People pack the sidewalks and donkey carts piled high with husks of corn hobble past on the road. Alfonzo and I sidestep sheets of pasta hung up to dry on poles that look ready to topple on our heads. Stalls packed with rosary beads, crucifixes, pictures of the Holy Mother, stories of the saints, block our way. It would all be a blur to me if Alfonso didn't point excitedly at everything we passed. When we reach the docks hundreds of people are sitting on suitcases, their bags in a jumble lying next to them. They look tired and angry.

The ships sit in their berths, their masts and big horns stretching up to the sky. Some ships are anchored in the bay. I start to feel a familiar dread from all the noise and confusion. We look for our ship *La Madonna* but it isn't in a berth.

A harbour *ufficiale* passing by points to a ship out in the bay. "You're looking for *La Madonna*? That's it," he says. "Looks like you'll be sleeping here tonight. Find yourself a place to wait. A cart with bread and soup will come before it gets dark. That will be your supper."

People move over to make room and we sit on our suitcases to wait like the rest. We are hungry but don't want to waste our food. Alfonso has bread in his bag and I take out a container of cold *cannellini* and we share it. People around us ask where we're from. Nobody is from our villages or anywhere near them.

"In America we will never starve," they tell us. "Food flows in the streets to your doorstep."

"Ha," snorts a woman behind me. "All those letters they send us are lies. We will suffer there as we do here. Nobody wants us. Nobody cares what happens to us."

Restless children run around in circles. Mothers shout at them to stay away from the wharf's edge. Some sleep on their mother's laps. Their little heads flopped to the side, their red noses dribbling *moccolo*. Men stand in groups smoking, waving their free hands to anchor their words. Wine is passed around to keep out the cold and to help time pass. The line of men pissing off the pier grows as the day deepens.

The sun pushes the clouds away and our stiff muscles soften. A girl no older than five stands in front of me wearing a white-frilled cap tied under her chin. Her dress flows outward, a ruffled hem at her calves. Long black socks are tucked into scuffed boots. She hands me a rag doll dressed a lot like her. Her father takes her hand telling her not to bother the *signor*, but she doesn't budge

"That's a *molto bene* doll," I say. "What's her name?"

"Rosa," she says. "We're going to America to ride horses with wings and to swing on the stars in the night sky."

The girl's father laughs. "Come let's take Rosa for a walk," he says. My head feels light. Is this a sign from my Rosa that she's still looking out for me?

A horn blares and people are called to their ship. We move from our place to rest our backs against the wall warmed by the sun. A shadow suddenly blocks the warmth. I look up into the eyes of Paolo.

Grabbing his hand in case he's a ghost, I shout "Paolo! What are you doing here?"

"The same thing you are," he laughs. "To go to America, make money and come back home to live like a Bishop!" He is from our village but left long ago to work in *Napoli*, I tell a confused-looking Alfonso.

"That's right *paisan*," Paolo says. "I broke my back working on the docks here. They never paid us on time and when they did it was always short. The bosses are thieves and owe

money to the *Camorra*. That's where our money goes. Me and some other men went on strike and the bosses chased us out. I live in a hovel with ten other men. There's always fights and misery. I saved some money and family in America sent more for a ticket to New York. From there I'll go to California to build the railroad. When I'm done I'll take the train back to New York! I found out from family you are going to America on the same ship and looked for you."

Like shy young girls, me and Alfonso can't speak. Paolo is not that much older than us but he's calm and strong. He wears a long black cape over tightly-fitted workman's pants tucked into boots with snaps almost up to his knees. His head is covered in a wide-brimmed hat slanted to one side. His wide smile shows off his square white teeth. A deep black moustache hangs over his top lip.

We make room for Paolo to sit with us. He takes a bottle of wine out of his bag and we drink to finding each other. I think about the little girl's doll Rosa and know that I was right. My Rosa brought Paolo to me to make my heart less sore about leaving my hills and her behind.

We tell Paolo that the ship is not leaving today. "*Si, bastardi,*" he says." It will leave tomorrow or the next day. If it's longer, they say they'll put us in hostels. I'll stay here with you until then. It's cleaner and smells better than the hole I live in."

The wine and sunshine make my head heavy and I drift off to sleep. Loud booms that hurt my ears wake me. A bolt of fear darts into my heart. I am alone. Their bags are here but Alfonso and Paolo are gone. I scramble to my feet. Waves of people around me look like a great monster ready to leap. Alfonso grabs my arm. They went to find the soup and bread carts and found some goat cheese too. The relief of seeing them calms me. The sun is lower but still warms our bodies. Paolo asks about our families in the village. He tells Alfonso that I loved a goat called Rosa.

“He told everybody that Tina the wolf chased him but he got away just in time,” he laughs. “Salvatore looked into her eyes and fell in love. He never stopped looking for her after that day!”

The sun is setting. A cold night is on its way. *La Madonna* stands where it has all day. It seems certain we'll spend the night on the wharf. Women gather their families, making circles with their suitcases and bags. Long heavy coats and blankets are draped over suitcases as beds for children. Older children hold the little ones close to them. They lay down in these makeshift beds and are soon asleep.

We're not ready to sleep. Paolo takes us to a tavern on the wharf's end. Small and dark inside, it's filled with familiar smells of strong wine, tobacco, and bone-tired men who haven't washed for a long time. We sit at a table sticky with spilt wine. Paolo talks to a man on his way to South America. He owes money to the *Camorra* and has to get it from his family in Argentina. The family are very angry with him. They work hard and have money but he's bringing them shame and danger. After the money is paid he'll go to New York where *paisan* from *Napoli* will take him in. If he can't get work in the docks he'll go to Chicago to work in the slaughter houses. “A lot of money can be made there but the work is gruesome,” he says.

His story scares me. Maybe the *n'drangheta* too could weave a spider's web from my village across the sea to America trapping us in its death tangles.

It's late, our wine finished long ago but the *barista* leaves us alone. Our new friend stays behind when we get up to go. His eyes reddened and bleary, he lifts his hand in a salute and turns back to stare at the wall. A cold wind is blowing on the street. It reaches behind my jacket collar and slides down my back. Little light guides our way in the pitch-black night.

Alfonso suddenly blurts out that we must run. He's afraid our baggage will be gone when we get back.

"Don't worry," Paolo says. "It will be there where we left it. Nobody wants our rags. They have too much of their own to carry on their backs. Slow down. When we get there you'll wish we'd never left the warm tavern."

Our suitcases are safe. Somebody even made a ring of them so nobody would take our space. I have an old coat of cousin Pasquale's in my suitcase and a thin blanket to lay down on the ground but not much else to keep the cold from my bones. Like from a treasure chest, Paolo takes out blankets and another long coat for us to share. We roll up our jackets for pillows and lay down. I am tired but too awake to sleep. I look up at the sky. The stars and a sliver of moon look down at us. This is the second night that I don't sleep at home. Are my family awake too praying for my safety as I cross the sea to America? They can't know that I'm still sleeping under the same sky as them.

But what if I don't go to America? What if I sneak away to hide in *Napoli*? I am strong and can find work on the docks. I can send for my brothers. We can live together and make enough money to build a house in the village for *i miei genitori*. They can sit in the sunshine in the summer and by the fire in winter and sleep in peace. Like cousin Pasquale did for his parents although he went to America to make his money. Now his parents are warm and don't break their backs anymore.

The next morning my body is stiff and cold like a piece of winter wood. The clouds above my throbbing head are dark and heavy with rain. Plans to hide in *Napoli* are gone. Alfonso sits, his head in his hands, moaning. Paolo is gone but he soon returns with coffee mugs in both hands. He drank more wine than us but isn't sick. He lifts a round bundle from his suitcase wrapped in paper. It's a *pitta 'mpigliata*! Light as air pastry curled around raisins and

nuts, it's only eaten on special days. I moan. How can I eat cake when my stomach whirls? I curse myself for drinking too much wine and swear never again.

We pack-up everything and go to the ship's office to find out when *La Madonna* departs. Everybody not still sleeping seems to be waiting outside its closed door. Finally the ship's agent opens the door announcing through a horn when ships will leave.

"*La Madonna* leaves at two o'clock tomorrow." He steps back and the door locks with a loud click.

A woman shouts, "This is an outrage!" But most people shake their heads and walk away.

Paolo goes up to an open window. "People here need your help," he shouts. "They don't have money and are running out of food. Old people and children can't sleep in the cold another night. Feed them and find shelter for them."

"Go away before I call *la polizia*," the agent shouts back, slamming the window shut.

"He won't call *la polizia*," Paolo says. "This is a scandal and the ships' owners will get into trouble if it gets out. They have to do something to help these people."

He refuses to budge from the door and keeps up his loud demands. After a long time two flat, four-wheeled, covered carts emerge, wheels loudly clanging over the cobbles. The agent opens the door telling Paolo to enter. A few minutes later Paolo comes out smiling but the agent looks grim. Walking together around the wharf, Paolo points out people that need food and blankets. Some come forward themselves. The drivers remove the covers. Bread, soup, goat cheese, blankets, and knitted scarfs and hats for children are spread across their planks.

Tonight we're in the same tavern after I swore never to touch wine again. I'm drinking with Alfonso and Paolo and some of the same men from last night. Paolo tells the story about getting the fat angry agent to surrender. I can see why the bosses got rid of him. He stands up to them and gets other people to side with him. That scares them. Like with the landowners in

my village the money must keep coming. Nothing must get in the way of that. People like Paolo get in the way and must be stopped.

There is still the long night ahead. I know I won't sneak away to *Napoli* and find work. That was just a story I told myself. Tonight it won't work but I am more resigned to my fate now. The ship will take me to America. I will be with my sisters and brothers there and they will be my family until I return to Italy. Alfonso and Paolo will help me survive the crossing. I am not so alone now. And I will come back one day to my family and my hills.

It's noon the next day and almost time to board *La Madonna*. But before they let us get on the ship a doctor must check us to see if we're sick. Men at the tavern told us about the doctor's tests and although I don't feel sick, I am sticky with sweat from fear. I follow Alfonso and Paolo into a black-stone low building with small windows covered in metal bars. The guard at the door points to a room on the right for men only. In the room the line moves so quickly I feel like I'll be knocked over and stepped on. When it's my turn, the doctor sitting at the table looks at a paper until he finds my name.

He asks me: "What hurts in your body?"

"Nothing hurts," I say.

He shines a light on my eyes and in my ears, puts a stick down my throat, and tells me to remove my jacket and open my shirt. Then he pokes my chest and back with his cold horn. My hair is checked and something that stings my eyes rubbed into it. A round needle that feels like a bee's sting is pressed on my arm. When we meet on the dock again, none of us is able to talk about the last hurtful five minutes with the doctor.

Now with great haste, dock *ufficiali* and guards with unsmiling faces surround us, and passengers and baggage are packed onto barges that will take us to *La Madonna* anchored in

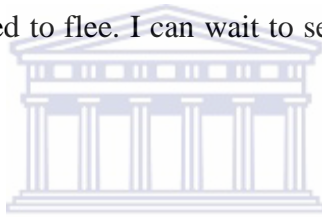
the bay. I hear a soft moan from Alfonso and see that his face is pale. It hit him that we're leaving for good. An *ufficiale* checks our tickets before we get on the barge. The barge rocks and already some people look green. As we move closer, *La Madonna* towers over us. Steps hanging over the ship's side seem to be the only way up. When it gets closer to my turn to go up, fear crowds me. I'm pushed from behind and have to move. Paulo goes first. His boots make a ringing noise on each step. I'm next. I grab the rail and go up slowly looking straight ahead. My heart is beating hard. At the top I look back to see Alfonso only half-way up, a sickly look on his face. I stop to wait but the guard at the entrance says to keep going. When a minute later Alfonso touches my shoulder, the knots in my stomach come loose.

On board the ship, men with hard faces usher us on to a narrow staircase ahead that looks easy to fall off. We go down and down nearly to the bottom of the sea stopping at a doorway hard to get through without bumping our bags against its sides. Our tickets are checked and we are pointed to the end of the passage. There's no turning back now.

We walk into a room and stop. Rows of beds one on top of the other attached to poles take up most of the space. Thin mattresses covered with tightly-fitted blankets lay side-by-side only separated by a pole running between them. Most of the beds are already taken by other men. We find three empty beds next to each other and quickly grab them to stay together. Paulo and Alfonso take two top beds. I take a bottom one underneath Alfonso. We push our baggage under my bed. There's just enough room not to squash anything inside.

6 *La Madonna to America*

La Madonna slowly moves away from the dock. Tears stream down the faces of people calling their final goodbyes. A sharp sadness enters my bones. The space between us grows and the waving handkerchiefs become a white blur. Alfonso clutches the railing. When he starts to slump, I pull him back from bending bodies. Babies squirm in mothers' arms, miserable in wet soiled *pannolini*. Bigger children clutch the backs of their skirts. Bury their faces in the folds. The mothers despair in the packed space. They strike out at them to stop their fussing. There's more room on the other side of the ship, but I won't go there. That's where the sea stretches away from the harbour. Seeing it for the first time in Crotone, its watery mouth roared, and I wanted to flee. I can wait to see it again. I will be its captive for many days.



The harbour is far behind us now. The small boats that pushed us on our way hoot and turn back. People wander restlessly around the deck. We bump together in the cramped space they give us. But nobody wants to go down to the *domitori* where families are separated. The women and children sleep together, the men with other men. The *domitori* are cramped too with only our beds to sit on. Sickening smells leak from rotting food in bags, tired dirty bodies, vomit, and the *bagno* buckets in the passages. The beds are so close together that I dread the night to come. We slept in a bundle at home but I know my family's smells and ways. These are strangers and I'm afraid of what they might do in the night.

Leaning against the ship's railing letting my eyelids fall I see my sisters and brothers sleeping snuggled up to the goats while the snow swirls and dances outside in the winter winds. *Mia madre* and *mio padre* are asleep in a tiny room at the back of the house on a rough-wood bed with all their clothes on. My sisters and brothers are scattered around me. I

can't tell one from the other under the piled-up clothes, their faces buried in the goats' bellies. The moon hides behind the clouds and the wolves howl. Rosa is afraid and creeps up to me laying her big horny head on my belly. But I don't mind. She is my best friend, my warmth. I love her body smell, the breathy odour from her opened mouth, her long soft silky ears.

Opening my eyes I see Alfonso who looks lost. We look for a space to be on our own and squeeze ourselves between a smokestack and curled-up rope. The weak sun is sinking fast and a cold wind is rising. *La Madonna* rocks slowly up and down. It doesn't bother me but many hold their heads or lean over the railing, the wind scattering their vomit. Alfonso and I sit not moving or talking. I wonder what's happened to Paolo, and wish he was with us. His stories always take my mind off my worries.

My chest is tight but it's too late now. The ship has us trapped. I am seventeen but feel old. *La Madonna* is taking us to a better place so that we can live and our families in Italy won't starve. I can't fight it. But my body isn't listening.

At dusk, a few lights twinkle far away from the land we're leaving behind. A bell rings and a voice comes from a horn on the deck. Everybody must go down to the *dormitori* and wait for the food. We drag ourselves to the stairs. Our *dormitorio* is as we left it. Men are rolled-up lumps on beds. Others sit and talk. Some stand in the passage looking out the round windows hoping for a last glance of home. Paolo is on his bed holding a picture in his hand. He shakes his head and passes it to us. A woman holds a child on her hip. Another holds her hand, hiding his face behind her skirt. She stares unsmiling at the camera, her eyebrows thick, almost touching. The baby on her hip sleeps, its round face with bursting cheeks snuggled into her side.

"My wife and children," says Paolo. "They had to leave *Napoli* after my troubles. They are in her village waiting for me to send for them. Her name is Isabella. The baby is

Fortunata, not yet one year old. The boy is Stefano, three years old. Maybe I will never see them again.”

His face is covered in pain. But I don't know what to say to comfort him. A loud bell breaks the silence. The box on the wall tells us to take our bowls to the mess for food.

Men who can eat try to make themselves look better. They take washbasins from under beds, fill them with cold water, splash their faces, wet their hair and smooth it down. Combs come out and hair is parted to one side. Some men don't move from their beds. They are sick or too mournful to move or want to eat.

Along the passage the round windows look out to a jagged darkness as *La Madonna* moves up and down and from side-to-side. Alfonso stops, turning around to get back to the room. I go with him stumbling into men surging forward. Alfonso flops down on my bed, not moving. He closes his eyes and moans. Paolo who like me doesn't get sick takes our bowls to get the food. I lie down on Alfonso's bed and start to drift off. Paolo shakes my shoulder, hands me a bowl of soup and a hunk of bread. The bread is dry and the soup too salty. Bits of spaghetti like fat worms float on top adding nothing to the taste. I think longingly about the food hidden away in my suitcase. How for days *mia madre* and village women bent over rough boards rolling out dough made from wheat flour, water, a pinch of salt. How with tender care they shaped it into squares, rectangles, bows, and squiggles. They baked cakes filled with almonds, raisins, walnuts, and dried figs, later smothering them in powdered sugar. Thick jars of black olives sashed and twinkled on the rickety outdoor table. But I can't touch any of it. The pasta, cake, and olives are for my American brothers and sisters to eat on holy days, births, christenings, weddings, and wakes.

After supper Alfonso is softy snoring. Paolo says if we go help the stewards clean-up they will let us sit and talk in their mess. On the way I need to use the passage *bagno*. Opening the

door I gag and back out. Seeing my discomfort Paolo smiles, "Better get used to it," he says. "There are many more days of hardship ahead."

We pass a set of steep stairs going down below the mess. "Where do those stairs go?" I ask Paolo.

"Down there at the bottom of the ship is the dungeon, Salvatore. Illegal and violent people get locked up there until we reach America. And then they get sent back to Italy. So you better watch your step," he laughs, grabbing my arm pretending to be *la polizia* who will haul me down the stairs and throw me in a cell.

In the mess, we join a group of men playing *briscola*, the cards worn but lovingly looked after. A few women sit knitting, sleeping children sprawled across their laps. It feels homely to me and my body softens. After many games and lots of laughing and swearing, we return to the *dormitori*. The only light in the room comes from the passage. Men are sprawled across beds barely big enough for a boy. Their snores burst out of their mouths like tumbling rocks. The fusty smells and closeness of sad and weary bodies give no warmth.

I put my head down on the hard mattress and pull the blanket up to my chin. The breath of the man next to me is sour from vomit and despair. Turning away I stroke Rosa's hair in my pocket and silently smile remembering how every day I took her and the other goats up the hills. When hungry I ate goat cheese on slabs of dark bread, sprinkled with dill or mouth-burning chilli. Walking home, I was drawn to fallen leaves, pebbles and twigs, dried out goats' *poppa* in my path. I put my head back and looked for birds circling the cloudless sky, stood still to feel the wind rustling my hair. Rosa copied me letting the wind ruffle her hair into uneven peaks. Our low-roofed house was ahead, smoke pouring out the chimney. Soon we would sit down to eat our spaghetti.

That life is hard. But this tearing away is worse. Our soft days of sunshine and secrets are traded for a big crate that rocks but doesn't calm. That travels across water afraid of a wind that holds no mercy.

The bell and box-voice wake us next morning when it's still dark. *La Madonna* is moving up and down and side-to-side again. Objects on the floor slide back and forth. Men with ghost-like faces tinged with green open their eyes. One look at the tilting air makes them close them again. Groans erupt and subside, only to erupt again. The man on my side wrestles himself free from his tangled-up blanket and clothes. I too am wrapped up like an ear of corn and peel myself free. But I'm still feeling strong and less tired after a deep sleep.

Alfonso's legs are hanging over the bed looking wobbly but at least he's sitting up.

"Can you get down," I ask.

"No, but I'm thirsty. Is there something to drink?"

"There is water to drink, wait here I will get you a cup."

He drinks it slowly and flops down again, pulling the blanket up to cover his head.

"*Grazie paisan*, you get something to eat. I will sleep some more", he whispers through the thin blanket.

The food is in big vats ready to be doled out. I'm not sure what it is. Maybe eggs hatched in hot water. Alfonso is sleeping when we get back with his food. We leave it on Paolo's bed. "I hope he sees it before it rolls and falls on someone's head," Paolo sighs.

The walk up to the deck goes slowly. Getting to the top, I see what's wrong. We are sunk in greyness. The sea has swallowed the sky. We are landless on all sides. I should have stayed in bed, never seen this fearful place. I want to hide myself before the wind takes me away to float forever across nothing. Paolo's eyes are huge in his face. He turns from the gloom and

sits down on the deck. “We are doomed,” he says. “Nothing can save us now. What have we done that brings us this pain?”

People swirl around us. They look to one another. Touch, cling. Encircle their children. Rosary beads slide through bent fingers. “Where are we,” they ask. “Why didn’t they tell us we pass through *Purgatorio* before we reach the Golden Land?”

A sharp wind slashes our faces. Collars are pushed up, kerchiefs pulled tighter under chins and double-knotted. Scarves are pulled up to dribbling noses. I wrap my bandana tighter around my neck. *La Madonna*’s heaving has quietened but the grey mist has deepened. Time crawls by. There is no more room but people still push into a thicket of bodies. Anything is better than gasping for breath down below.

Alfonso appears out of the mist looking like a ghost. His spark when I first met him turned to stone. He ate a bit of dry bread but couldn’t get anything else down. He is sickened by the *dormitorio*’s thick air-stink and the men’s groans, buckets stuck to their faces. He sinks down next to Paolo. The misery in their eyes chills me more than the cold wind and mist. I try hard to push aside the gloom with a dream of home.

We are all together. Mia madre sits next to the fire mending a shirt. Her soft brown eyes strain in the dim light to stitch in a straight line. Donatella her favourite goat is by her side. Felicia sits in the corner stroking the cat. Luisa brushes her long straight hair, Carmina at her feet not missing a stroke. Mio padre and my brothers rush in red in the face from the cold wind whipping outside. Domenico full of laughter greets each goat with a kiss. My Rosa rushes to my side not wanting to taste Domenico’s cold lips!

The sky starts to lift off the sea. Blue light peeks through layers of grey. A strange smell comes from the sea which has become flat as a rhubarb cake. If I don’t look too far out to the

nothingness it's almost peaceful. Sitting with my back to the railing looking up to the deck above me, I see men, women, and children slowly walking by. They don't look down. They wear soft warm coats and broad-brimmed hats; shoes shine, the buckles twinkly stars. Paolo says they don't live like us on this ship. "They sleep on soft beds with thick blankets, only four to a room. They eat the best spaghetti, drink *bello vino*. They rest on long chairs on decks we can't go to. The cold wind never reaches their bones. Their children are fat. They never cry with hunger or feel cold icy-fingers ripple along their spines."

A girl about my age pushes in and out of the people packed like *acciughe* on our deck. Her face is long with a pointy nose below black-olive eyes. Her kerchief covers her hair except for a black fringe on her forehead. A tight-fitting dark blue jacket covers her from her neck to her waist. Layered black and white skirts stop just above the tops of pull-on boots. She's after a young boy who darts out and trips over Alfonso's outstretched legs landing on my stomach. She grabs his arm pulling him up trying not to laugh at our open-mouthed faces. "*Mi scusi signori*," she says. "He always makes trouble. He's tired of being cooped up like a chicken. He runs and I have to catch him." The boy is trying to get away but she holds him tight.

"What is your name," Paolo asks the boy.

"Julio and this is Maria. She loves to chase me. That's why I run away."

"Oh you and your stories," she says giving him a soft pinch on the cheek. "You are just a bad boy who makes me tired."

But she can't hide her smile. Julio is about ten years old. His hair is long and straight, black as night. His eyes are brown ringed by long eyelashes.

"Where are your mother and father?" I ask.

"It's only my mother," Maria says. "My father is in New York waiting for us. My mother is very tired since my father left. She lies in her bed now and won't eat. We lived with *i genitori di mio padre*. They have little food and had to share with us. All my uncles have left

but Antonio. He is always angry. He hates us for making his parents starve. He used to sneak up on me to do evil things. I told no-one but Julio saw one day and stuck Antonio's leg with a pitchfork. He bellowed like a sick cow and his mother came running. Julio ran away until it got dark. I found him hiding behind the graveyard's low wall. The next day they wrote a letter to my father to come get us or we would be thrown to the wolves. They hated us even more and we crept around not making a peep. My mother cried every night. My father sent money to my uncle in Siracusa and he bought tickets for *La Madonna*."

The bell rings for the midday meal and everybody heads for the stairs. The ship rocks just a little and Alfonso comes with us. More men are getting up to get food from the vats. We eat our soup and bread. Paolo shares some of his sausage and I take pistachios from a tin in my bag. When we go back to the deck the sky has lifted and the sun is shining. White clouds bump in their rush to follow us as we skim across the blue-grey water. We squeeze past people sitting eating from food in baskets or heads held back letting the sun warm their faces. I look for Maria and Julio but don't see them. She is different from my cousin Giulietta who lives in my village. Not as round or as pretty. But her smile is big and her spirit strong. She talks to us with her head held high. Her voice is like a bird's song.

Lying on our beds later that night after a meal of mushy spaghetti with no sausage, I ask Paolo why Maria's family treated them badly when their father is far away. *I miei genitori* have little but they would never hurt us or throw us out.

"People are different," he says. "Their anger has turned into fear. They shouldn't hurt their families but they do it out of fear and *impotenza*. They know nothing will change because Italy has forgotten them. Some lash out against the wrong ones. It is bad. They should never do it. But they do because they are afraid."

We've been on *La Madonna* for two days but it feels like forever. My home is far, far away. There is no path that a donkey cart can follow from here to the hills that raised me. In this watery space they say there's a Golden Land of Plenty we're sailing to. But will it have hills with goats smiling at the sunshine warming their backs? My eyes close and I see a big mountain rising up. Tree-tops bend in the wind. Something small, brown and white sits on top. Its head nods, its lips part in a smile. My eyes open. There's just darkness here. Just the darkness of men's troubled dreams. My eyes close again.

The hills are full of morning light. Dew-drenched stella apina glisten. A soft breeze tickles the back of my neck. Rosa leads the way to the top of the hill. Her scruffy head rubs against my bare knee. "Come, she says. I know the way." I follow her on a path leading to a cave black as night inside. Out steps Tina the wolf, the sun glinting off her teeth and eyes. "Come stai, paisan" she says. "Follow me. I know a sunny place to sit." She leads us to a hilltop covered in soft mosses. We sit in a circle, little smiles on our faces, enjoying the sunshine on our backs. A song clear as a church bell rises out of the misty slopes. They walk towards us. Mouths wide open in song. Arms strain under the weight of baskets bursting with food. We eat, laugh, sing more songs, and lie down to sleep, the sun our warm blanket.

7 The Storm

Two days before *La Madonna* is to dock in New York, I lay flat on my back on the deck, my arms pinned to my sides, legs stretched out towards the railing. My eyes are wide open looking up to an uncaring sky. Two weeks' worth of grime has settled into my clothes and further into my heart. Dirtiness was always part of life in my village, especially in winter. But this grime is different. It sticks to everything on the ship, even the air we breathe. Yesterday the sky let loose rain the size of rotten potatoes. We had to stay in our *dormitori* where the stink and mess is piled up to the ceiling. The rain had cleared the decks of filth but the stink follows you everywhere you go.

I don't want to close my eyes because when I do I see the old woman sliding over the rail into the water during the storm last week. It plays behind my eyelids like the movies we watched back home on the church wall. During the storm *La Madonna* went *pazzo*, crashing up and down and side-to-side. The horns on deck barked like dogs telling the people packing the deck to go down to the *dormitori*. I saw a tiny old woman all in black fighting with the wind to get to the stairs. She reached out with both her hands to grab the rail but a huge wave burst upon the deck and dragged her away. Her kerchief flew off her head, her long grey braid tipped upwards, and she was gone. I screamed but couldn't move from the terror I felt and people pushing to escape the wind and the water.

The day of the storm had started as usual with bad food and the rush to escape the *dormitori*. Up on the deck, we headed for our usual spot behind the horn and bundles of rope. The main thing talked about these last days on the ship is what to say to the American doctors and *ispettori* who will put us through many tests when we reach the Isle of Hope. And every day now the crowded deck erupts with strange funny words from people trying to speak

American. Our families in America wrote letters to tell us what to do and say. They said that those who failed the tests passed through the Isle of Tears. They are kept in cold, dark rooms, sometimes for weeks, before they are sent back to Italy.

At least the long boring days on *La Madonna* are shortened by practicing how to answer the questions they will ask us. Paolo always plays the part of the white-coated doctor or *ispettore*. Alfonso and me are the passengers. We can't help but laugh at Paolo's stinky face, but still we're scared we won't pass the tests. They'll take one look at us, smell us, and know we're too dirty to be let into the Golden Land. But Paolo says "The trick is to make them believe we're strong as a donkey and will work twice as hard."

La Madonna had been slipping along the water in a calm sea, the sky bright blue and happy. We hadn't noticed that the sky ahead of us was turning a deep grey, and the sea was choppy. Suddenly *La Madonna's* nose did a little twist, then a big jump up and loud thump down. We didn't move. No-one moved. Then her nose rose very high and came down like a thousand olive trees crashing to the ground all at once. People started to get to their feet some losing their balance and falling down again. Waves crashed against the ship and the sea came up to the rails and slipped over onto the deck. Faces turned white and some people lurched to the rails to vomit. Alfonso was one of them, returning with a face like a ghost and stinking like a dog that had rolled in shit. I got to my knees but stopped there, not feeling sick but getting scared when sea water splashed on my back. The twisting and rising of *La Madonna* got faster and the booming and shrieking of the wind and water louder. Still we were reluctant to be buried below in the filthy air. And some of the people were excited by the fight between *La Madonna*, the wind, and the sea. But the horns shouted at us to immediately go below. Paolo said, "Come *paisan*, this looks bad."

He got up to go down the nearest stairs. I got up to follow Paolo. The wind catching our clothes made the walking slow. Clutching the rail I turned around to see if Alfonso was behind. And that's when I saw her fighting the wind, reaching out to the rail, but not strong enough to escape its embrace and being swept away. "Help, help," I screamed, but people pushed and yelled at me to keep going. I was swept down the stairs and only able to speak about what I saw when I caught up with Paolo. He screamed at a crew member at the top of the stairs that a woman had been swept away. But he shouted for Paolo to shut up and keep moving. Back in the *domitorio* I shook with horror and started to cry. Paolo and other men surrounded me. They asked if I was sure a woman was taken by the sea or was it a dream. But I knew it was no dream and in a hoarse whisper I said "I saw her go into the sea. And her kerchief got tangled in the mast."

I couldn't stop shaking and they started to believe me. But nobody knew what to do. Paolo said he would tell the crew and left the *domitorio*. Sometime later he came back looking weary. He had told the steward about the woman swept into the sea but his face had stayed like a stone and he told Paolo to go back to bed. In the mess, he told Giuseppe and he said they would not do anything until the storm blew away. He said that maybe before then they would ask Salvatore what he saw. But nobody came. And her big eyes and wide open mouth as the wind and water took her away won't leave me alone.

The ship continued to crash and thud and it was very dark in the *domitorio*. All kinds of things slid off the beds and shelves, crashed to the floor and slid back and forth. We could hear the *bagno* buckets falling over and the stink coming from the passage was horrible. Men got into their bunks; some roped their blankets around their waists and the poles to lessen the rolling from side to side. I got my bag from under the bed and put it against my side so I wouldn't tumble from the bed and Alfonso did the same. I clung to my bag like it was Rosa

my goat. I needed her to feel less alone and afraid. For some reason my head filled with thoughts of the times when women had come into the dormitory to sleep with the men. I understood the noises they made and felt a mixture of excitement and disgust. Fighting amongst the men also broke out, but I never joined in and didn't understand how men who had little energy in their bodies wasted it by shouting and punching, their fists landing blows on each other's faces and backs. During those times, I pulled my blanket over my head and prayed that the fighting men stayed away from my bed.

The ship's swirling and rocking didn't stop but my stiff body grew soft and I finally closed my eyes. "If I am to die in this big box and end up in a watery grave," I told myself, "there's nothing I can do." I made a picture in my mind of my family and my hills and drifted off into a deep place of homecoming.



But the next morning *La Madonna* was standing upright again and the sea and sky were still. Even the sun shone warmly when we climbed the stairs to the cleanly swept deck.

WESTERN CAPE

Later that day a familiar voice brought me to my feet. It was Maria who I'd seen a few times on the ship but we hadn't had much to say. It felt good to hear her sing-song voice and see her smiling face again. Word had got around about what I had seen and she had looked for me. She hoped I was okay and it slipped out that now she was here, I felt better. Paolo's face lit up with a half-grin. He said he'd be back soon and walked away. My fear stayed with me telling her what I had seen, but her soft smile and eyes that never left my face made my arms held stiffly by my side loosen and my legs stopped shaking.

She took my hand in hers and said "I have to get back to my mother. She is very ill, eats almost nothing and can hardly walk. I hope I see you again before we get to New York."

And she left, turning back once to wave goodbye. I sank down to the deck again, pulled my knees up and lay my head on them, feeling calmer. But I wondered how Maria's mother

would get past the doctors without being told she's too sick and sent back to Italy. There's nobody there to take care of her, only her husband's family who hate her. What would happen to Maria and her brother Julio? Would they be sent back too or stay with their father who is waiting for them to arrive in New York? I felt very afraid for them but couldn't think of a way to help them.

Now there's only one more day until *La Madonna* will reach the Isle of Hope. Alfonso and I sit on our beds trying to figure out how we'll impress the Americans who'll ask us questions when we smell worse than twenty pigs. The little water they give us to wash is also for drinking and we use it a little at a time. We try to get some of the dirt off by scouring our faces and hands with cold water and a stiff brush used to scrub out huge cooking pots. We take off our shirts and are horrified by the dirty streaks that cover our chests and backs. Our greasy hair hangs into our eyes and when our noses drip we have only our sleeves already caked with snot to wipe it away.

Alfonso still spends most of the day in bed, only getting out when the sea is flat. His cheeks are sunk in making his nose stick out more and his eyes look bigger and lost. I thank God that as miserable as I have been on this floating hell I've never been sick with the heaves wracking my body until it looks like it will split in two. But I still need to get past the doctors and *ispettori* who'll decide if I'm good enough to enter America or not. And I'm still torn about whether I want to be sent back. But then how would I hold up my head back home? They're counting on me to make money to help them survive. Would my family make me go again to America? I'd never survive another crossing being treated like so much shit on a shoe.

Suffering back home is deep but suffering on *La Madonna* is so stark. There are few times when we feel good, no festivities, no goats, and no stories about wolves to help us carry on.

No love to get us up in the morning to toil until we fall down to sleep only to repeat the same thing the next day. On this ship we have sunk to a place that offers us little dignity. If not for Alfonso and Paolo, I don't know how I'd bear the pain. But, will this new world I'm about to enter be more of the same? What does my American family really have to show for their years in America? Are their houses big and warm, their clothes soft and clean? Do they drive shiny black cars and eat lots of spaghetti and are fat from it? Do they still hold their dignity? Maybe the woman swept overboard was really the lucky one.



8 The Lie

This morning we awake to a flurry of activity. Everyone is scrambling to find their suitcases. We have to look our best for the *ispettori*'s eyes. I open my suitcase with difficulty to drag out an old brimmed hat that was *mio padre*'s, and a jacket and pants my cousin Pasquale gave me which are two sizes too big but all I have. My underclothes stick to the dirt and sweat covering my body. After a breakfast of cold soup, we make our way up to the deck to wait. The sky is clear and blue, the sun warms us and we're almost happy because this nightmare is about to end. *La Madonna* seems tired too, moving slowly and with caution towards the land jutting out at us. Everybody pushes to be at the rails to see the Great Lady who will be the first to greet us as we enter the new world. Paolo says that the Statue of Liberty is a special Goddess and she especially loves all the new people who come to her shores,

Squashed up against the rails, my hat slipping to one side, there's a great shouting and people point with fingernails puffy with dirt: "There she is, there she is! She is *bella, bella!* Look, look she is holding up a light to show us the way. She is happy to see us. How she smiles!"

People laugh while tears flow down their faces. Handkerchiefs torn from men's pockets and kerchiefs off women's heads wave in wonder at the sight of something so grand welcoming us. I stare, trying to make sense of this Goddess who makes us laugh and cry. We who are dirty and afraid are thought worthy by one so magnificent and kind. Surely this America will be kind to us too, like this saintly lady is to us today.

La Madonna takes us up close and then sails past the Goddess. But we don't want to take our eyes off her even as she becomes smaller and smaller and then disappears. We are getting closer to the Isle of Hope and people become quiet again. The hope that Lady Liberty had given us left behind as our heads once again fill with fear. Pushing my hat down hard on my

head, I turn to look ahead and catch a glimpse of towering buildings ten times bigger than the church I was baptized in.

“Look, look Alfonso. Look Paolo, there is something floating in the water there. Is that where we will go?”

People all around point again, but nobody shouts with joy. They stare with gloomy eyes knowing that now is the time to beg God to let them cross into the Golden Land. I am confused. I don't know what to do with my body parts so I just stand still like the Great Lady we have just passed.

La Madonna slowly sails towards the huge buildings and stops. Small boats come up to her side and men in white coats climb aboard. They go up to the high deck and into the big dining room. They are American doctors come to check the rich passengers. We're quiet, not sure what to do next. The crew shouts at us to get ready. We will get off the ship soon. Mothers carry babies who can't walk. Older children cling to their long skirts. Some are weighed down by bags twice their size. The crew push us out of the way of the doctors and the rich passengers who get off first. They are clean and smartly dressed. They never once look at us. After they leave and sail away on the doctors' boats, we're shoved into line and told to get on the flat open barges waiting for us below. Panic arises as everyone tries to carry as much as they can yet still have a hand free to clutch the rail so they won't fall into the flapping water between the ship and the barges. It's a miracle nobody falls into the water and drowns but the crew doesn't seem to care.

We stand on the barge but it doesn't move. The sun is beating down on our heads and sweat is running down my face and back. But there's nowhere to put my suitcase down to wipe it away. And the itching that never stopped on *La Madonna* and left parts of my skin raw starts up again, but I can't scratch. Another barge pulls up and some of us are pointed at

and told to get on. Alfonso, Paolo and I stumble aboard and there's more room for all of us. We put our suitcases down and sit on them. Others join us but nobody speaks. Even Paolo who always has a lot to say is sunk in thoughts of what is to come. "Our dignity stepped on again," he says.

Hundreds of barges fill the harbour, inching along like snakes in long grass. We're hungry and thirsty but there's nothing to eat and no water to drink. Our heavy jackets make us sweat but we're afraid to take them off in case we have to jump onto the docks and leave them behind. After a long time, we have moved only a few feet. The wind picks up a bit drying the sweat on our faces. As the sun dips, some say we'll have to sleep on the barge. Others say no they'll take us back to *La Madonna* to sleep in the *domitori*.

I am tired and sad, and not hungry any more. Children are crying with hunger. But their mothers' eyes are empty and they do not hear. The few buckets on the barge overflow, and we are forced to the edges to relieve ourselves. Now it's getting dark and smaller boats with men and lights come up to the barges, handing out smelly blankets and milk for the babies, water to drink, and bread with something soft and runny spread on it for the rest. We will spend the night on the barge. Warily we look for a place to lie down and sleep.

I look at the moon swaying softly in the sky, the same moon that had caressed my eyes sleeping on the docks in Naples. I think about that Great Lady, that Goddess, who with a gentle smile beckoned us in. If only I could get to her again. I would tell her that she had told us a lie.

9 Isle of Hope

I wake up to a light-grey dawn. The smell of sweaty bodies, full buckets, screaming babies, and whining children, mixed with rancid harbour smells, and the shouts of harbour crew greet me. Our barge has moved while we were sleeping, and dock workers stand on the wharf ready with tying up rope to throw out to us. We dock with stomach lurching bumps and a final bone rattling thump. The red brick buildings of the Isle of Hope are even more frightening from close up. I grab my bag and suitcase and my unbelieving feet step onto the Golden Land of Plenty for the first time. Thousands of people just off other barges shout in words I don't understand. Many are weighed down by feather beds, pillows, wicker baskets, and small trunks. They form a solid block from where we stand to the big buildings ahead. I stare in wonder at men wearing long white flowing robes or short white pleated skirts with knee high leather tie boots. Knobbly knees jut out under khaki shorts worn by tall men with round red faces, blond hair, and blue eyes. Most of the women are covered from head to toe in dark clothes, and the children are dressed like little women and men.

A man in a grey wool jacket with leather on the collar and pockets and a white shirt with a high stiff collar stands in front of us. He is our first American. But except for the clothes he wears, he could be *il padrone* back home or an *ufficiale* who works in the town hall. I am surprised when he speaks to us in our dialect, counting off about thirty of us and telling us to stand in rows of three and to be quiet. He removes papers with numbers on them from the satchel he wears over his chest and quickly goes from one to the other asking our names. Then he pins a paper onto our clothes. "This number will stay with you all the time you're at Ellis Island. It will be taken away if you are cleared to land," he says.

We are quiet as the line creeps along. It seems we'll never reach the red building with the tall steeple towering over it. We finally get close enough to see the big glass doors we will

enter. A glass roof standing on pillars stretches from the doors to the people standing in the front row. My heart beats fast knowing that once inside there's no going back unless they find something wrong with me. When we get close to the doors our *interprete* tells us to get into a single line and follow him inside the middle door. He points to a wide staircase filled with hundreds of people going up and up: "You will go up those stairs to the doctors. But first leave your baggage here. It will be put in the Baggage Room until you're ready to leave."

I'm afraid to have my only possessions taken away by a stranger and mixed up with all the others leaving theirs behind. But what else can I do?

As we climb up the stairs right behind our *interprete*, we can see the doctors in their long white coats staring down at us. They have pieces of chalk in their hands. A woman who is breathing hard and has pulled off her kerchief to wipe her red face is stopped by a doctor. He turns her around and marks her back with a big H. Then Alfonso who is in front of me stops. He looks back at me with a look of panic on his face. His hands are shaking. He shoves them into his pockets but our *interprete* tells him to take them out. His fingernails are broken and bleeding from biting them so much on *La Madonna*. The doctor stops him and marks an X high on his right shoulder.

Paolo shakes his head. "What does that mean?" he asks our *interprete*.

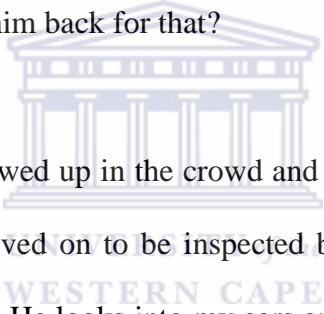
"Don't worry," he says. "The doctor thinks he suffers from nerves. He will be sent to a special room for more tests. If the doctor drew a circle around the X it would mean deportation. But he'll be back, you'll see."

Alfonso's pale face gets even whiter, and his shaking gets worse. He looks like he's going to cry. Putting my arm around his shoulders, I say: "*Paisan*, don't be afraid. We will be here waiting for you when you come back."

Grabbing my hand, he moans: “What are they going to do to me Salvatore? Will they lock me up? Will they hurt me? I’m not *pazzo* just weak from being sick every day on *La Madonna*.”

“Come now,” our *interprete* replies. “You will not be locked up. They’ll ask you questions and make you do some puzzles, and they’ll see that you’re okay.”

When we reach the wide landing at the top of the stairs, our *interprete* calls an *ufficiale* over to take Alfonso to the room where they’ll test him. Looking over my shoulder I see Alfonso joining a group of people marked with chalk. With a terrible shock I see a man who had been on the ship with us marked with an X in a circle on his shoulder. On *La Madonna* he didn’t seem to have family or friends, was very quiet, and hardly got out of bed. But will they really lock him up and send him back for that?



Alfonso and the others get swallowed up in the crowd and disappear. I have no more time to worry because our group has moved on to be inspected by more doctors. One doctor gets close to me and searches my face. He looks into my ears and rubs my neck. Is he looking for bumps? I’m told to remove my hat and the doctor uses a stick that he pushes up and down in my hair looking for lice. He must find plenty, and in Paolo’s hair too but doesn’t mark our backs with a big L. He just says something to our *interprete* who makes some marks on his paper and we move on.

The line slows down, and then we can see why. The people ahead of us are wriggling and groaning. The doctor is doing something to their eyes. These must be the dreaded eye tests. Everyone knows that this is the worse test of them all. It not only hurts the most, if they find that your eyelids are red, they give you some ointment and put you on the next ship sailing back to Italy.

The eye doctor has a buttonhook to lift up the eyelid. I go first and he flips back my eyelids with the hook not saying a word. But the hook is sharp and the doctor is in a hurry and the pain is bad. I clench my fists as my eyes fill with tears. At last he lets go and gestures for me to move on but I can hardly see where I'm going. We aren't given time to recover and I only have my bunched up sleeve to wipe away the tears. Paolo is next and before I can worry if he passes the test, I hear him whispering at my shoulder: "That *bastardo*. He likes hurting us. I'd like to stick that hook up his arse and see how he likes it."

Our *interprete* gathers our group together to take us to the bathing rooms down another passage. "To get washed and get rid of the lice in your hair," he says. "Women and children go with this lady, men follow me."

We are led into a long room with smooth grey cement walls, high ceilings and windows that let in bruised light. There are wooden cubicles with no doors big enough for two men to undress and leave their clothes. Clean dry towels hang from a hook on the wall. It takes me a while to get off all the clothes I have on but at least they don't smell too bad, except for the underclothes. I hide these under my other clothes piled on the bench. Paolo has to remind me to take off my socks and shoes. Wrapping the towels around our waists, we wait to be told what to do. Our *interprete* points to separate cement cubicles with a tap high up on the wall and small holes in the cement floor. The cubicles also have no doors. Bars of soap and scrub brushes sit in buckets on the floor. Small cups of greenish liquid are on a little shelf.

"Stand in the cubicle, turn on the tap and soak your hair. Pour the liquid in the cup on your head and rub it in. Don't get any in your eyes. Keep rubbing and scratching your head with your nails. Turn on the tap to rinse off the dirt and the lice. Take the soap and brush and scrub everywhere on your body, including your fingernails and toe nails, until there's no more dirt.

Rinse it all off. Turn off the tap. Dry yourselves with the towels, and go back to your cubicles to put your clothes on.”

I have never washed this way before, but Paolo has: “Its good *paisan*, but not if the water’s too cold.”

The water is not cold but not hot either. The liquid in the cup is thin and smells like a pig’s fart. I pour a little in my hair and rub it in. The smell makes me want to retch and my scalp feels hot. I rub and scratch a bit then let the water run over my head to wash it away, remembering to keep my eyes closed. When no one is looking, I pour the rest of the liquid down the drain. The soap is rough but I liked its bite. It reminds of my mother’s soap back home. I use the brush to scrub off my body sweat and dirt. The water pouring off me is dark brown. But I don’t feel shy amongst all the strangers. Brown water is also pouring down their drains. And I’m not sorry to see the dirt from *La Madonna* being washed away.

Back in my cubicle I am surprised to see two piles of clean underclothes on the bench. Peeking under my clothes I see that my old ones have been taken away. The bottoms and sleeves of my new underclothes are too long so I roll them up. Feeling the softness of the cloth on my skin, I lift my arms to sniff their sweet smell. My first gift from the Golden Land. When Paolo comes back to find me smiling like a goat, he winks and says: “Now you’re a real American!” But I can see that he is very happy to put his new underclothes on which, being taller than me, fit him just fine.

Following our *interprete* to the Great Hall’s Registry Room for our final test, I whisper to Paolo that I’m worried about Alfonso.

“If they say he’s *pazzo* like the other *paisan* it will be very bad for him.”

“Yes,” Paolo says. “But what can we do to help him? Everything is taking too much time but still happening too fast. If he doesn’t come back, let’s see then what we can do.” But he doesn’t sound very hopeful.

The Registry Room is huge, almost as big as our whole village back home. It has many open passageways separated by metal railings dividing up the whole floor. At the far end of each passage an *ispettore* stands behind a tall desk piled high with papers, with an *interprete* at his side. The lines are long and move slowly but each person only stays with the *ispettore* a few minutes. All of us can hear the people in the different lines shouting out their names when they reach an *ispettore*. So many different names from different countries, my head begins to spin. Some so long I wonder how it fits in the person's mouth.

The *ispettori* wear buttoned-up dark brown jackets, with pure white shirts underneath. Bright red ties stand out like blood stains against the shirts' starched high collars. Their high peaked caps, like the Italian *polizia*'s, are pulled down so that you can't see their eyes when they read the papers. Many have deep black moustaches of different shapes. Our *ispettore*'s moustache curls up at both ends like a hunched up *centopiedi*. He is scary when he lifts his head and stares through you with eyes the colour of a ghost's. But even worse is the big picture on the wall behind him of an old man with white flowing hair, his blue and gold coat with many brass buttons flapping open, sitting on a huge white horse with an arched head. The man holds a black furry triangle hat in one hand. In the other he points a long golden sword straight at me. Beside the picture is a flag of red and white stripes, with a blue box covered in white stars. I know from my family who passed this way before me that the man in the picture is George Washington, America's first president. And that the flag standing rigid like a giant soldier next to it is the American flag. But they didn't tell me that that both are so big that they'd leave me feeling small and unworthy.

The first question the *ispettore* asks me is my name, and I shout it out. He ticks the paper then looks up with an unsmiling face firing words at me. The *interprete* repeats them in my dialect:

“How old are you?”

“How tall are you? How much do you weigh?”

“Are you married?”

“Where are you from? Where are you going?”

“Do you have relatives here?”

“Do you have money?”

“What work will you do? Do you have a job?”

“Are you ill? Are you a simpleton?”

“Are you an anarchist?”

My voice trembles when I answer, and the *interprete* tells me to speak up and to hurry up with the answers. There is no time to think but I must have said the right things because the *ispettore* nods and looks down and the *interprete* tells me to move on.

I hope that Paolo doesn't say “Yes” to the anarchist question. I could tell from the way it was asked that the Americans think it's a bad thing. But Paolo is no fool, and I'm sure he'll lie. I feel a hand on my shoulder and turn around to Paolo's face split in two by a grin, and I know he has said no.

An *ufficiale* ushers us out of the Great Hall to a passage that leads to the Baggage Room. After getting our baggage and then our Landing Cards, we will be free to go on to the Money Exchange. It has taken more than six hours to go through these steps and we are very tired, but also stunned that it's almost done.

Stepping into the Baggage Room I am deafened by the noise, and the air seems to vibrate from the collective energy of people who have made it this far. The *ufficiale* points to a corner in the room where baggage from *La Madonna* is piled up to the ceiling against the walls and scattered across the floor. I can't believe my eyes when I see Alfonso leaning over

a suitcase. Me and Paolo run up to him and all three of us are laughing and shouting as we hug. The X chalked on his right shoulder is gone.

“They asked me questions about my health, and gave me tests to see if I knew my numbers. Then I had to work out how to do some puzzles. I was nervous and scared they would think I was *pazzo* but then they let me go back to do the other tests and I passed. And I got a good washing and new underclothes. Now I’m feeling much better. I saw both of you in line in the Registry Room and wanted to shout out to you but I was too shy. And I heard you Salvatore call out your name for all of America to hear!”

Overjoyed to be together again, we look for our baggage. Paolo finds his first, and then Alfonso shouts that’s his suitcase is over there sandwiched between two huge trunks. But I can’t see where mine is. Alfonso and Paolo help me look hauling their suitcases and bags with them as we go over every inch of the room. Then I spot my bag which is perched on top of a pile of bags all looking alike. But my suitcase is not there.

The *ufficiali* are looking at us with stern faces and one marches over to us to find out what the problem is. He doesn’t speak our dialect and goes out of the room to find someone who does, coming back a few minutes later with our *interprete*.

“There’s not much we can do if it’s gone,” he says. “Even if someone else took it by mistake they might keep it anyway or leave it somewhere hard to find until an *ufficiale* notices it and brings it back. This could take days.”

This is a nightmare I never wanted to dream. How and I going to face my American family with just the clothes on my back? All the hard work of my mother and father, my brothers and sisters who made gifts and wrote letters for my family. And the village folk who count on me to give letters to their families. All this will be lost and I will be to blame. And my money is gone too. How will I pay for my ferry and train fare from New York to Boston if I don’t have money?

Sitting on the floor, covering my face, I try hard not to cry. A little while ago I felt happy. Not just me but Alfonso and Paolo had passed all our tests and America was welcoming us. And I was going to Boston to be with my brothers and sisters after a very long time of not being with them. Now I feel a tightening in my throat and my head starts to pound.

Our *interprete* tells Paolo and Alfonso that they can't stay any longer, they must go and get their Landing Cards. "Salvatore, sit over there and don't move until I come back. Here, if anyone asks why you're sitting here, give them this paper that will explain why."

"We can't just leave him here alone," Alfonso protests.

"Come you two. Like I said you must move on. I'll see what I can do but it doesn't look good."

"*Paison*, we won't leave here without you. If you need money to get to your family, I can give you some," Paolo calls back.

I feel invisible as hundreds more excited people throng the Baggage Room, a sense of doom growing in the pit of my stomach. Is this happening to me because I didn't try hard enough to save the old woman who was swept overboard? Has she put a curse on me for forgetting about her? And now I too am one of the lost.

Our *interprete* hasn't come back and nobody pays any attention to me. I want to get up but can't move. Where can I go anyway? An American in military uniform walks up to me and speaks to me in English. I shake my head and hand him my paper. He gestures for me to get up and follow him. My feet feel like bricks are tied to them as I follow behind. I try hard to hold back my tears and an urge to vomit. But he moves so quickly that I'm practically running to keep up. For a minute or two I can't see which way he's turned down a passage. Maybe that's my punishment. To get lost in these passageways never to find my way out. But no, he's waiting for me down another passage with no end. This one has rows of closed doors

on both sides with words on them I can't read. I'm sure that this is the Isle of Tears that we spoke about so much. Suddenly he stops, and knocks at a door. Another American in uniform opens it and ushers us in. Breaking out in a sweat but feeling icy cold, I walk with leaden feet pass the door into the dimly lit room. And there in the middle of the room is my suitcase. I can't help it, I let out a cry: "*Grazie Dio, grazie!*" and sink to my knees laying my forehead on top of it. Even the *ufficiale* sitting behind a desk against the far wall can't hold back a smile:

"I take it this suitcase is yours," he says in Italian.

"Yes," I say. I'm so happy I dare to ask: "What happened to it?"

"Somehow it got put in the room where baggage for those being deported is kept. They put it with the rest on the cart for the Lombardia due to leave New York for *Napoli* tonight. You are very lucky that a ship's crew didn't see the deportee stamp on it and it got sent back."

Holding my suitcase in both arms up against my chest, like the way I held Rosa once when she hurt her leg, we make our way back to collect my Landing Card. I look out for Paolo and Alfonso but don't see them. The *ufficiale* indicates that I must wait in the line, but two minutes later comes back with our *interprete* who hands me my card.

"Congratulations Salvatore Vertuca," he says. "I will take you to the Money Exchange and then you are free to go on your way. Do you have relatives in New York?"

"No, my family is in Boston. I will go there by train. But, did you see my *paisan* anywhere? We never got a chance to say goodbye."

"Ah. After the Baggage Room everybody goes down a set of stairs they call the 'Stairs of Separation' where family and friends going different places say goodbye. You missed out on that when your suitcase was lost. I think they must be long gone."

We have arrived at the Money Exchange where our *interprete* shakes my hand and wishes me well. He explains where I go to get the ferry to the Grand Central Station before he

departs. In the Money Exchange line I'm in a daze, happy and sad at the same time. When I reach the clerk and hand him my Italian lira, he gives me dollars in an envelope in return. I lick the flap to seal my first American green dollars inside.

Now, I walk down the passage to the railroad ferry that will take me to Grand Central Station to board the train to Boston. Finding a seat on the ferry's deck, I look around and can hardly make sense of what I see. Huge ships, small boats, more ferries seem to be going around and around in circles aimed at nothing and nowhere. The sky is grey and the harbour water is black. I am sick of the sight of water and long to put my feet down for good on solid land. Resting my head on the back of the bench and closing my eyes, my thoughts jump back to the last day on *La Madonna*. The excitement and fear of the passengers left little time to say goodbye. I searched for Maria and her family to wish them well but could not find them anywhere. The storm and the woman who went overboard seemed long forgotten. Nobody spoke a word about it. Maybe it was a dream after all?

Letting my head drop and opening my eyes, a flash of pale skin, dark brown hair, and a thin wispy body passes by and goes up the stairs to the top deck. I jump up almost colliding with a passenger looking for a seat and race up the stairs.

"Alfonso, wait, wait, it's me, Salvatore," I shout. But he doesn't stop, and I'm out of breath so slow down. At the top of the stairs I see that he's heading for the front rail and I think he must feel sick. Catching up to him, and shouting his name again, he turns and his whole face lights up when he sees it's me.

"Salvatore, is it really you or am I seeing a ghost?"

"It's me. I'm no ghost. Are you okay?"

"*Paisan* now that I see you I feel much better. I thought I'd never see you again. Did you get your suitcase back?"

“Yes, but it almost went back to Italy without me. Come let’s sit down there where my baggage is and you can tell me why you’re on this ferry.”

Sitting down, he says: “My brother will meet me at Grand Central Station and we’ll take the trolley to the East End. As you know, I will stay with him and his family and that he has lined up some work for me at the rail yards where he’s working.”

“Yes, the same kind of work that Paolo will do in California. I’m very sad that I didn’t see him to say goodbye.”

“He was sure you and I would meet again and here we are! He said to tell you that he would see you when he came back this way after making lots of money. And he gave me some things to give to you. This is dollars for you to get to Boston. And, this is something else.”

“*Mio Dio*. Our Paolo always helps others in trouble. But I have my own money now. Maybe I can find out how to get it back to him in California?”

“I gave him my address and he said he would write. If he does I can tell you how to contact him.”

“Good. But what is this? Oh, I see. It’s a badge, something to do with the Italian anarchists he went on about. Oh, Paolo, always the joker. But maybe I should hide it away before I get kicked out on my first day in America!”

“Look, those big buildings. That must be Manhattan where my brother lives. *Grazie Dio* we’re almost there,” Alfonso says, crossing himself. “Salvatore, can you believe that we’re no longer on that stinking ship? That we’re really here in the Golden Land?”

“Yes Alfonso, we’re in the Golden Land and our new life is about to begin.”