

Going to America in 1901



Ours was a terrible twenty-four-day journey to *la Merica*, made unbearable by spoiled food, tainted¹ water, and rolling seas. A broken propeller delayed us off the coast of Portugal for three extra days and nights of hell. Worst of all was the darkness and stink of life below, inside the belly of the big ship. Where there is sun and fresh air, there is hope, but here the sun did not shine and the air we breathed was stale and fetid. Aboveboard, bands played and the filthy rich dined off china and drank from fancy glasses. We in steerage² lived like rats. Women and children sobbed, men fought each other over trifles, and everyone suffered the stench of vomit and excrement. There was a stabbing³ en route, and the birth of a baby, and the death of the child's mother two days later. That crying *bambino* was passed from breast to breast after that, and we prayed for its fate. All our fates. That baby cried for us all!

There were rats, too, plenty of them; nighttime was when those goddamned creatures prowled⁴. One night I woke to find one sitting on my neck, sniffing at my mustache. I screamed out, waking even my brother Pasquale, who always slept like a dead man. After that night, I took no chances, napping⁵ as best I could while sitting or leaning against beams and walls. Day and night fell together on that hellish journey across the sea, and my mind existed in a place between sleep and vigilance.

During the voyage, my brother Vincenzo was as shamefully behaved as always – pinching women's behinds, boasting about his mischief, cheating at cards against men with bad and worsening tempers. Vincenzo was forever wandering away from Pasquale and me and getting himself in trouble, then calling for me to settle some dispute he had provoked. It is the firstborn's burden to unravel the knots that younger brothers make.

Throughout that endless and terrible journey across the ocean, I was afflicted with lice and worry – scratching and haunting myself with the cold fear of what would come

to pass once we landed in this place I had risked everything to reach. For a Sicilian, home is everything. How could I have done this? Had I been bewitched into thinking that the unknown would be preferable to putting up with the petty nuisances of a stonemason who would die off in time anyway? The rumbling every few years of a distant volcano? As much as I hated Etna for the damage it had visited upon my *famiglia*, the lives it had claimed, at least it was an enemy I could watch. What enemies awaited me in this *Mundo Novo* toward which we sailed? My heart was sick from thinking and worrying and pinching those goddamned lice between my fingernails!

The little rest I stole came to me in short, interrupted naps made terrible with nightmares. In my dreams, I saw flowing lava, cracking earth, screaming women stuck in fiery trees. Somewhere in the middle of one of those desperate nights, I promised myself that I would never again put myself through such a hellish journey - that I would never return home. That night I said farewell to Sicily forever. Whatever *la Merica* held in store for me, it was where I would stay for the rest of my days. The vow was small comfort, but comfort nonetheless.

Sometimes as the other steerage travelers slept, I crept amongst them and over them and did what was forbidden: climbed the narrow stairs to the ship's deck where the wealthier travelers strolled and where I might take into my lungs the clean salt air or watch the moon's rippling reflection against that endless sea. In the school run by the good Sisters of Humility, I had envied the rich boys their supplies of India ink. Now, here in the moonlight, was an ocean full of it through which we traveled - enough *inchostro di china* in which to drown the whole world, let alone Domenico Tempesta. But I would not give those haughty boys at the convent school the satisfaction of dying! I was not weak. I had been the best of them - the student most loved by the good sisters - and I would prevail!

On one such night of watching the endless ocean, the moon shone brighter than usual, illuminating a small school of dolphins that jumped and swam alongside the *SS Napolitano*. I have always been a modern man who leaves superstition to ignorant old women, but the sight of those *delfini* that night - their bodies arcing toward the sky, their taut⁶ skin glistening in the moonlight - it seemed to me a powerful omen⁷. That night, I stood smiling through my tears and was comforted. I knelt on the ship's deck to pray and, in that position, fell into the only sweet, deep sleep I enjoyed during that long and horrible journey.

I awakened next morning to the blinding sun, a mocking voice, and a kick in the ribs! When I squinted⁸ and looked up, I was peering into the arrogant face of a ship's waiter. Nearby, a well-dressed couple stood staring at me with looks of disdain. "Get back down where you belong," the haughty waiter ordered - commanding me, the son of a hero! The grandson of landowners! A man who had once been singled out by the Blessed Virgin herself!

The rich woman shook her head and chattered like a squirrel. "*Poveri si, sporchi no*," she told the rich man.

Still half-asleep, I rose and stumbled toward the ship's hold¹⁰, and the waiter and the well-dressed couple moved on. My dignity returned along with my consciousness. Boldly, I turned back, shouting to the three of them, "*Il mondo e fatto a scale, chi le scende e chi le sale!*"¹¹

One day, I vowed, I would have power and money enough to spit in the faces of those who had humiliated me! In America, my destiny would be realized and I would be avenged!