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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.”