Photo Credit: Alessandra Capodacqua

‘I lift my lamp beside the golden door!’

The New Colossus, Emma Lazarus

1.

In May 1947, with Europe having been at peace for two years, Orsola packed her luggage. She locked up her house in Canaan, Connecticut and took the train to New York. After spending several days with her recently married daughter in Greenwich Village, she boarded the *SS Saturnia* for Genoa.

Finally, she was going home. Home to Italy, more than forty years since she and her husband, Giovanni, had arrived in America and been herded out of the steerage section of the *SS La Bretagne* into the vast reception hall of the Communipaw Terminal on Ellis Island.

Despite the years, Orsola still remembered that day. How she and Giovanni sat on wooden benches under the vaulted roof of the hall and waited. She with her trunk beside her; the trunk filled with the household linen and woollen blankets of her *dote*, the dowry her mother had carefully put together since her birth. And Giovanni, clutching the two canvas bags that held all their daily belongings.

They'd sat there, with the huddled mass of tired, poor and tempest-tossed folk from the other side of the Atlantic, shocked to see so many who were far poorer and more downtrodden than themselves. Orsola and Giovanni, neither of them known to be meek or lacking in enterprise, waited like everybody else. They waited meekly for hours to be called before immigration officials who would decide if they were physically and mentally fit to pass through the golden door and breathe free. They waited and were finally grateful to hear the thump of the official stamp on their papers, to be ushered out to the ferry, and to look back to the great lamp held aloft as they traversed the bay to Manhattan Island; then to step ashore in their new world.

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Once the war in Europe was won, Orsola began to think about going back to Italy. She imagined spending the summer with her sister Luigia and her brothers, Giulio and Felice and their families. Her mind lingered over the memory of annual summer treks up to the high mountain pastures with their cows. She dreamed about their stone hut or *baita*, there among the first row of other stone huts in the broad meadow that opened out above the tree line and swept upwards and upwards to saw-toothed peaks.

She had found the box with her father's letters in her Connecticut attic. He, who in his youth had spent several years in a seminary studying for the priesthood, had written her a letter every year until his death from the Spanish Influenza in 1919. After blowing the dust off the box lid, she opened it, untied the ribbon holding the letters together, unfolded and smoothed out the sheets and reread them all–still proud of her father's formal Italian and his fine hand.

My dearest daughter Orsola,

Today the 26 September 1913, I farewelled the last of our family returning from the summer pastures to our village. As usual, I'm staying on for a few extra days. Summer was very slow coming this year. Do you remember the year you and Giovanni left for America, ten years or more ago? We were up here in the first days of June. Well, this year, it snowed at the end of May, and there was still snow to mid-mountain in the second week of June. So, we had to postpone our trek up here until the first days of July. But we've done well, despite the late start. The grass was tall and juicy, the cows fattened quickly and each day, their udders almost burst with milk. And what milk! So creamy you felt like pouring it straight into the butter churn. Your favourite cows, Furba and Bunda were especially generous this year. We managed to make a dozen big cheeses. I'm hoping to sell most of them at the market next spring. Luckily, we've still got three of last year's cheeses for ourselves. God willing, we'll get a good price and I'll be able to buy a piglet, even two. I pray to God that you're prospering in America and that you'll be able to come home someday and that I'll see you again before I die.

Your beloved father, Pietro, son of Domenico.

After their father's death, Orsola's younger sister Luigia took over the role of family scribe. She wrote more often than their father, sometimes four times a year. Orsola always replied immediately. But Pearl Harbour stopped their correspondence. It was not until after V-E day had been celebrated with a delirium of ticker tape snowing down on New York's streets that Orsola mailed her first 'peace-time' letter to her sister. By then, the country still mourned Roosevelt's passing, two months earlier. And Orsola mourned her husband's death before that, in an explosion where he worked at the lime pits.

Luigia's reply arrived a few days before Thanksgiving.

'There's a good stash for you today,' the postmistress commented as she handed Orsola a wad of letters. 'Hope they're not all bills.'

Orsola flicked through them. Her chest tightened at the sight of an aerogramme addressed in a spindly script. It was Luigia's handwriting.

Orsola tore open the aerogramme and glanced at the text. ‘From my sister in Italy,’ she explained to the postmistress, wiping away a tear. ‘It’s been at least four years since I’ve heard from her.’ She refolded the aerogramme, tucked it into her handbag and hurried to her car.

Once home, she made a strong coffee, laced it generously with grappa, then sat down and read Luigia’s letter slowly, savouring it in careful sips, as she did her coffee.

> *My dearest sister Orsola,*
>
> *How wonderful it was to get your letter. I cried so much I had to get our brother Felice to read it to me. It’s been a lifetime since I last saw you and hugged and kissed you. Do you remember how, as children, we used to sit in front of the hearth in winter, roasting chestnuts? And the double bed we shared? Every morning you complained to our mother about me kicking you, and I said it was because you snored. Please come and spend summer with us now poor Giovanni has passed away (May his soul rest in peace!). Your children are grown up, and all but the youngest married. As is the custom where you are, they’ve gone away to the big city to get rich. You deserve a holiday now, surely? You’ve always worked so hard. We can go up to our summer pastures and spend time in our baita, just like we used to do when we were growing up. There’ll be no semolina porridge for breakfast, I promise. You always cried when Nonna made you eat it, even though she knew you hated it. And your sleep won’t be interrupted by the crackle and prickle of the cornhusk-stuffed mattress at night as I toss and turn, either. You’ll have a bed all to yourself and I’ll make sure it has a soft, kapok mattress. Life isn’t easy here, even though the fighting and killing of the war has stopped. Everything is scarce. Food is very expensive. At least we still have our land where we grow maize, potatoes and other vegetables. And there are the vines. The cows continue to give us enough milk to make cheese for ourselves and we hope to have some to sell next year and be able to buy a piglet to fatten up and make sausages. Work is difficult to get for our young men. There isn’t enough land for them to make a decent living, so they have to look elsewhere. There’s talk of the government building a new dam for the electricity high in the mountains at Cancano. We’re praying our boys might get jobs there. We work hard, as our parents taught us, and hope peace will bring everyone the prosperity the government promises–eventually…*

What hardships the war had brought to Luigia and the rest of her family! And the hardship hadn’t

ended. Luigia was right. Now that poor Giovanni was gone, and only her youngest daughter was at home, there was nothing stopping her going to visit them all. Giovanni had invested in War Bonds to show the family's support for the country's struggle. Thanks to these, she had a comfortable income and could afford the trip.

When Orsola sat down for Thanksgiving dinner with children and grandchildren, she gave special thanks for Luigia's letter, which she read out before they started the meal. Her sadness at Giovanni's absence was made more bearable. Everyone tried hard to be pleasant and thoughtful because of that, even the youngest daughter-in-law, who this year took care to bring a home-made pumpkin pie for dessert.

Some days later, after sons and daughters, spouses and grandchildren had crowded into cars and driven off for New York, Orsola donned a smart dress, a warm coat, hat and gloves and drove Giovanni's Dodge eighteen miles to the travel agency in Great Barrington.

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Almost a year and a half later, Orsola stood on the deck of the *Saturnia* as it sailed into Genoa harbour. Her departure had been delayed by the engagement and marriage of her youngest daughter. She stared at the blackened ruins of bombed buildings beyond the port and was surprised at the slow pace of re-building. In the United States, she thought, the rubble and ruins of defeat surely would have been cleared away by now, replaced by new buildings rising resolutely against the skyline. She had been disappointed at having to post-pone her departure to organise the wedding, but was now grateful for the extra time she'd had to collect gifts for her siblings and their families.

These American gifts filled her trunk, the very one that had accompanied her to New York on *La Bretagne* so many years before. They were practical gifts of food, clothing and medicines. Food that would last, but could also be eaten and enjoyed straight away–packets of pasta, rice, tinned food, fruit preserves. Then there were sugar, tea, coffee, cocoa, chocolate, cigarettes, and sweetly perfumed factory-made soap—all staples for her. But for her relatives in Italy these were only to-be-dreamed-of luxuries. Of course she'd brought cash too, and a generous amount. She knew that a gift of American dollars, even only one or two, was like finding gold on the street.

‘What’s the delay with rebuilding?’ she asked, pointing to the half-destroyed buildings beyond the dock. She was standing outside Customs with Egidio and Raffaele, the two nephews who had been sent to meet her in Genoa and escort her home. From the top of the gangway, Orsola had recognised these nephews, standing awkwardly to one side on the dock, staring anxiously at each of the descending passengers. They were looking for an aunt known only from the small passport photo taken when she was nineteen and kept on the kitchen sideboard for as long as they could remember. To Orsola, their resemblance to the youthful brothers who had farewelled her four decades earlier was so strong she had to stop herself from calling out, ‘Giulio, Felice– it’s Orsola.’ She waved instead, but it wasn’t until she stepped on to the dock that the nephews’ faces lit up in sudden recognition.

In answer to Orsola’s question, Egidio shrugged. ‘No money for re-building, Zia. No money for anything, not for poor people anyway.’ Raffaele nodded and turned to signal to the dock porter to carry Orsola’s trunk over to them. The porter also offered to find them a taxi to take them to the station. Orsola accepted immediately, even though Egidio protested that it would cost too much and tried to prevent her from taking her purse out of her handbag.

On the train, Orsola was surprised at the shabbiness of the railway carriages. Although they had taken first class (she had insisted she always travelled in comfort in America), the compartment looked as if it hadn’t been repaired or even properly cleaned since before the war. The leather upholstery was worm and cracked, cigarette butts clogged the ashtrays and the broken window fittings rattled as the train picked up speed. Hanging above the seats were faded tourist photos of St Peter’s Basilica, the Colosseum and the Via Appia.

Orsola worried that she might not recognise her upland village after such a long absence. But she spotted it mid-mountain, as soon as the train slowed down for a level crossing at San Pietro station, well before Raffaele and Egidio pointed out the white belltower of its church rising towards the mountain peaks. In her mind, Orsola already pictured the long descent of stone steps from the church down to the cobbled street and the front door of her family home. It was as though she’d never been away and was just coming back from market day at Morbegno or Lecco.

2.

The train announced its approach to the station with a screech of metal on metal as it braked.

Gradually it came to a halt opposite the station waiting room. Orsola watched as an older woman clutched the handrail of the carriage, pulled herself up on to the steps and climbed into the compartment. Only when she stood before her with arms outstretched, crying, 'Orsola, my dear sister Orsola,' did she recognise Luigia, face flushed with happiness and exertion. For a long time they hugged and held tightly on to each other, crying and laughing.

It wasn't until they were on the platform, surrounded by Luigia's husband, her brothers Giulio and Felice and their smiling spouses, nieces and nephews and bright-eyed grandchildren that Orsola had a chance to look closely at Luigia. Her once golden hair was now wispy grey, pulled back from her face into a tight knot on top of her head. Her thin, straight nose seemed longer than she remembered and her cheekbones looked sharper. Luigia's plain black dress with long sleeves and a high, small collar and her black stockings with lace-up shoes made Orsola wish she hadn't worn pearls and high heels. And Luigia was so thin. Orsola was suddenly conscious of her own generous bust and ample hips beneath her brightly patterned dress.

'What's in this trunk, Zia?' Raffaele called out as he helped Egidio lower it from the carriage to the platform. 'It must be gold bars. It's so heavy.'

'Better than gold, my boy,' Orsola replied, pulling Luigia close and thinking she must make sure to feed her up before their trek to the summer pastures. 'Wholesome American food that will put some fat on Luigia's cheeks and hips. And on the rest of you, as well.'

'Careful you don't drop that trunk, you two,' Luigia cried. 'And hurry up. We have to get Zia Orsola home. She must be so tired after coming all the way from New York.'

As they crossed the bridge to the village, Egidio proudly pointed to a few recently erected power lines and the transformer that would bring electricity to their houses by the end of the year. On the right, the spire and crumbling walls of the long abandoned church of San Martino marked the actual village entrance. Beyond was the fountain. Its tap emerged from the mouth of a satyr set into the wall and always trickled clear mountain water into the deep trough beneath. Two women with buckets stood waiting while a cow and several sheep drank from the trough. When the animals had finished drinking, a man, probably their owner, thrust cupped hands beneath the tap then brought them to his lips, quenching his thirst.

News of Orsola's trunk full of American stuff travelled fast. Gifts to family members were quickly distributed. It took a while for Orsola to stop being surprised at seeing nephews in her husband's coat and sweater, or nieces in her daughters' dresses, blouses or cardigans of a few seasons ago. Luigia insisted on keeping the new dress and coat, Orsola's special gifts to her, for 'good', which meant Sunday Mass and funerals. Distant cousins, neighbours, even Don Giuseppe, the village priest and the mayor visited, hoping for some beneficence. Soon Orsola's trunk was empty. Wishing she had been able to bring more gifts, she wondered if there was a special something she could leave for everyone in the village to enjoy after she returned to Canaan.

As if they'd read her mind, it wasn't long before Don Giuseppe and the mayor were making discreet suggestions about what she should do to be remembered permanently in the village for her generosity. But donating money to restore the frescos over the altar of the village church or building a memorial for village partisans killed in the struggle against the Germans and Fascists in the last year of the war was not the kind of gift Orsola was thinking of. She wanted something practical, down to earth, of everyday use.

At the beginning of the third week of Orsola's stay, they moved up to the summer pastures. In the preceding week, the men had driven up the herds of cows. Egidio and Raffaele had been sent back down to help the women, the elderly, children, and Lia, the village deaf-mute to carry what they needed to the summer pastures for their stay during the weeks ahead. This included bedding, pots and pans, washbasins, clothing and staple foods. Everyone was a porter, except Orsola, whose privileged burden was a small backpack containing a bottle of water, bread, cheese, salami and fruit for breakfast. Clutching the staff needed for leverage on the steeper paths, she walked behind Lia, who carried her kapok mattress tied to the conical basket on his back.

The dawn sky was beginning to blush pink behind the mountains when they left from the square outside the church. Almost an hour later, they reached a broad meadow known as *'l Ciaz dei Matt* or Madmen's Square. The sun was fully risen and they stopped for a rest and breakfast. From the edge of this upland clearing, there were breathtaking views of the valley floor, verdant with crops. While the others sat in small groups, eating with gusto, Orsola stood as close to the edge as she dared, bread and cheese in hand, devouring the landscape. The river, a bluish streak from this height, divided the valley floor in two. She knew that, close up, the Adda's water actually flowed milky green with melting ice and snow. Beyond were the dark flanks of the Southern Alps with villages wedged on the alluvial fans at their base.

From *'I Ciaz dei Matt* to the summer pastures, they walked in single file along a narrow track that zigzagged upwards, first through a larch forest. As the altitude increased, the larches gave way to a musky penumbra of fir. Orsola was amazed at Luigia, who despite her stringy frame, strode ahead with the energy and sure-footedness of a mountain goat. She herself felt unexpectedly hesitant, fearing the misplaced step that could lead to a fall. She pushed away her fears. Hadn't she made this trek countless times before leaving for America; and not just in summer, but also in autumn sleet and early snow? Surely she was stronger and healthier than the other adults in the group since she hadn't suffered food shortages or other privations of war. Yet, as the day became warmer, she found herself feeling breathless and often had to pause, rest against her staff, and sip from her water bottle to cool down. Finally she had to stop. She sat on a large stone at the edge of the track fanning herself, exhausted and unable to go on.

Egidio was the first to notice Orsola had stopped for a rest. He downed his pack and trotted back, followed by Luigia. The column ahead stopped too, everyone grateful for a moment of rest and the opportunity to take a swig or two of water.

Despite Orsola protesting that she was absolutely fine, just needed to catch her breath, Luigia and Egidio decided to join her at the back of the troop to keep an eye on her.

'I will walk in front and Egidio behind,' Luigia insisted. 'And you can stop as often as you need, Orsola. Now, don't be pig-headed,' she said before Orsola could protest. 'You're not twenty any more. We don't want you having a turn or something up here.'

Thus it was that Orsola and her support group of two arrived at the tree-line a good half hour after the rest of the group. Ahead was an expanse of tussocky grasses strewn with boulders. The line of stone huts, *baite,* rose out of the mountainside like so many dormer windows perched on a steep roof. Orsola and her companions rested awhile against warm boulders and listened to voices of the others who had arrived earlier blown down to them by the wind.

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The kapok mattress on her *baita* bed was certainly a blessing. Without it Orsola might not have lasted the next two weeks at the summer pastures. She couldn't believe how tired she felt the day after

arriving, even though she'd gone to bed not long after sunset. She'd also forgotten how primitive the *baite* were: just one large room, with the cooking and eating taking place at one end, near the open hearth and the beds located at the other end. Orsola and Luigia shared their *baita* with Luigia's four grandchildren, a cosy arrangement when everyone was sleeping, but crowded at other times. There wasn't a proper chimney, which made cooking difficult and the *baita* smoky, especially if the wood didn't burn properly.

Orsola enjoyed rounding up the cows for milking early in the morning and at night. She liked being with the men in the long barn above the *baite* when they heated the milk in large copper vats, the first step in cheese making. She did not relish the childminding, which took up most of the other women's time. Fortunately she was not supervising the children when Luigia's oldest grandchild, a restless nine-year-old, cut a deep gash in his palm while trying to whittle wood with a crescent-shaped pruning knife. The wound was deep and would need stitches, so the boy had to be taken back down to the village to see a doctor. Orsola quickly volunteered to make the journey with Egidio and the boy. By the time they set out, the boy had recovered from the shock of his injury. Basking in the attention brought by his bandage-swathed hand, he grinned and held it to his chest like trophy. Egidio returned to the summer pastures the next day. Orsola decided she would not.

The idea of gifting some drinking ladles for the village fountain came to Orsola one afternoon before the others had returned from the summer pastures. Orsola's best school friend, Letizia, had arrived from Milan to spend the summer in the cool of her mountain home village. Orsola had arranged a visit with her early in the afternoon because she knew that was when the village mayor liked to take his siesta. She didn't want to meet him on the street and have to listen to him telling her, yet again, how important it was to have a memorial for the local partisan heroes erected in the village. Letizia had wanted to invite Don Giuseppe to their afternoon get-together, imagining Orsola would consider it an honour. Knowing that Don Giuseppe would find a way of bringing up the altar fresco in Letizia's presence, Orsola's response was prompt.

'I know I'm being selfish,' she had replied, 'but I don't want to share your company with Don Giuseppe. Or any priest. For who knows when we'll meet again, my dear friend, Letizia?'

The street that led to Letizia's house passed by the fountain. That afternoon, Orsola reached it at the same time as one of the workers from the fields. She watched him splash water from the trough over

his face, then stretch awkwardly across and drink directly from under the tap. Drinking ladles! That's what was needed—a couple of drinking ladles at either side of the tap. She would ask Letizia what she thought of this as her farewell gift to the village.

3.

At dinner, the night before docking into New York, the steward announced that they were expected to cross 'The Narrows', the strait between Brooklyn and Staten Island, around 5.00am. Anyone who wanted to witness the ship's entrance into New York Bay should be on deck by no later than 4.45am. It was well worth the effort, the steward added, noticing the negative expressions at the mention of the early hour. Once in the bay there would be the not-to-be-missed sight of the Statue of Liberty, her great torch illuminated, welcoming them all and pointing the way to Manhattan.

'The New York City authorities have been promising to build a bridge across that bit of water for the last thirty years,' the man on Orsola's left announced. 'And now they're actually gonna do it. Read it in the *New York Times*.'

'Allelulia!' the woman across the table intoned. 'I've got two daughters on Staten Island.'

'This might be your last chance to see the shores of Brooklyn and Staten Island facing each other off,' the man added, 'just like your countryman, Verrazzano, did more than four hundred years ago.'

'Wouldn't he have waited for dawn?' the woman opposite him responded. 'He was sailing into waters no white man or woman had ever seen, after all.'

'Quite likely,' the man said. 'That's why I'm not gonna miss it.'

Although Orsola wanted to be on deck for the 'Narrows' crossing, when she thought about how tiring disembarkation and customs was likely to be, she decided to sleep in and did not set her alarm for 4.30am. But at 4.00am she was wide-awake. So she dressed and joined the other passengers on deck.

As she watched the necklaces of light along the coastline move closer and closer across a dark sea, she thought about her visit to Luigia and her brothers. It had been all that she could have wished for. Except for the incident with the ladles. The sight of people and animals jostling at the fountain every day, just as they had done when she was a girl, had exasperated her. Even when there weren't any animals around, drinking from the fountain's small tap wasn't easy. Ladles were the obvious solution. Each person could slake their thirst with dignity. It was more hygienic, too. Why hadn't anyone thought of supplying them? That's what progress was. In America, anyway.

She had taken care, without worrying too much about the cost, to buy well-made ladles; ones the shopkeeper assured her would last. She'd cajoled the mayor to give his approval for her 'gift'. Watched by a clutch of old women and children, she and the mayor supervised Giovanni's cousin, a builder, as he'd attached three sturdy hooks either side of the tap. That done, Orsola handed the mayor a ladle for the first drink and hung the others on the hooks, amidst cries of, '*Brava Orsola! Bravissima!*'

Later, alone at the fountain, she couldn't help admiring the ladles and feeling satisfied at how 'right' three either side of the tap looked.

It had been a disappointment then, to discover on the day of her departure for Genoa, that all the ladles had disappeared from the fountain. She'd seen them there several days before, when she and Luigia had returned from their short rest cure at the thermal baths in nearby Bormio.

'They've been stolen, of course,' Luigia told her on the way to the station to catch the train for Genoa. 'Some people can't help themselves. Probably felt they could make better use of them. You know the attitude. No community spirit.'

'But if they needed ladles so badly, why didn't they tell me? I could have bought a couple more, just for them.'

'You're too generous, Orsola,' Luigia replied clicking her tongue with impatience. 'Too used to your American life of plenty. It's different here. You should remember that.'

'Well, Letizia agreed with me that the ladles were a good idea.'

'Letizia! All she knows is how to act high and mighty when she comes back to the village for her summer holidays. Just because her husband is a policeman and she lives like a lady down in Milan.'

My 'American life of plenty', Orsola thought. How hard she and Giovanni had worked to get their small share of it. Her thoughts were interrupted by the cheer went up from the passengers beside her on the deck. The ship was passing between Brooklyn and Staten Island. Lights from buildings close to the shore and the suburbs beyond winked at them. In the distance, mid-bay, was an aureole of light. The Statue of Liberty! Orsola realised, breathing free at last.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Rita Tognini was born in Lombardy, Italy. Aged six, she migrated to Western Australia with her parents. She writes poetry and short fiction. Her short fiction has been published in the collections *Crush: Stories About Love* (Midnight Sun Press, 2017) and *Charisma: A Multicultural Anthology* (Kulcha Multicultural Arts of Western Australia, Fremantle, 1997) and in *Voyages, Journal of Contemporary Humanism* (2017) and *Studio* (2018). In 2016 she won the Peter Cowan Writers' Centre, Trudy Graham-Julie Lewis Literary Award for Prose and gained second and third prizes in the OOTA Writers' Group, Spilt Ink Competition. Rita's poetry has been published in the collection,*Three in the Campagna*, and in journals such as *Australian Poetry Anthology, Creatrix, Fremantle Arts Review, Imago, Overland, Landscapes: the Journal of the International Centre for Landscape and*

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