


Ashes of Roses



MARY JANE AUCH

I

 *There was no sense tryin' to sleep.* This was the last night we'd be tossed by the waves in our narrow bunks. We were due to pull into New York Harbor at dawn, puttin' an end to the most unbearable two weeks of my life.

I shifted in my cot, tryin' to nudge my little sister, Bridget, over. She was barely four, and small for her age, but she took up more than her share of the narrow shelf we were supposed to call a bed. Ma had staked out a claim to four bunks in a row on the lower level when we first boarded the ship, but Bridget whimpered that she was lonely and moved into my bunk the first night. Next to us was Maureen, the middle sister, who made it clear from the beginnin' that she wasn't sharin' a bunk with anyone. I don't remember bein' that stubborn at twelve.

I heard poor little Joseph begin to whimper. He slept with Ma, although for the amount of sleepin' he did he

might as well have kept his eyes wide open. The last few days especially, he was fussin' more time than he was quiet. I'd be glad to get off the ship so I wouldn't have to endure the comments of our fellow passengers, who were gettin' less patient with Joseph by the day. I loved my baby brother, but I wasn't so anxious to be around him myself.

I nudged Bridget over again, but the motion of the boat sent her rollin' right back to me. Finally, I gave up and fished for my shoes and shawl under my bunk. I decided to go up on the deck and see if any land was in sight. I tucked Bridget in with Maureen and climbed the ladder to the deck. A soft gray light filled the sky, and the wind made me pull my coat tighter around me. I wished we could have made this trip in the summer instead of February. We'd seen so little of sunshine, I'd almost forgotten what it looked like.

It had been two weeks ago that we set sail from Cork. As long as I could remember, Da had talked about comin' to America for a better life. So many people had left before us, it seemed the natural thing to do. As we pulled out of port, one man had shouted, "Will the last man out of Ireland please lock the door?" That brought a round of laughter from his friends, but we weren't more than an hour at sea before they were gulpin' pints of ale and singin' about wantin' to go back to dear old Ireland. Grandma Nolan had told Da that, no matter how much you wanted to leave, Ireland would tug on your heart until you returned. I thought she

was just sayin' that to make him stay with her in Limerick, but maybe there was somethin' to it.

The deck was empty this last mornin' except for an old man who always seemed to be there, as if watchin' for land would bring it on sooner. He was leanin' on the rail, squintin' into the wind. "See that?" he asked.

I looked around to make sure he was talkin' to me. "See what?" I said.

"That dark shape over there? And another to the left of it? That's the Narrows. When we go through there, we'll be in New York Harbor."

"Ye mean it's land?" I asked. "I can't see anything at all."

As we moved closer, I could gradually make out what the man was talkin' about. There were other ships, too, but I couldn't tell if they were comin' or goin'. Other passengers were startin' to appear on deck now.

My heart beat fast as I crashed down the ladder to the steerage quarters. "Ma! Maureen! Get up! We can see New York. Come up on the deck."

Ma sat up and went into action. "Help me get shoes on the girls, Margaret Rose. And make sure all our things are packed into the two suitcases. Yer father has the trunk over in the men's quarters."

"But can't all this wait, Ma? I just want to see the city. I'll come right back to help ye."

All the talkin' had wakened other passengers. As they climbed out of their bunks, every inch of floor space filled

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Sixteen-year-old Rose Nolan and her family are grateful to have finally reached America, the land of opportunity. But their happiness is shattered when part of their family is forced to return to Ireland. Rose wants to succeed and stays in New York with her younger sister Maureen. The sisters struggle to survive and barely do so by working at the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory. Then, just as Rose is forming friendships and settling in, a devastating fire forces her, Maureen, and their friends to fight for their lives. Surrounded by pain, tragedy, and ashes, Rose wonders if there is anything left for her in this great land of America.

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