

I Am American by Vera Jordan

Anthony. . .Anthony!” From his hiding place behind the tomato plants, Anthony could hear his mother calling out for him. He crouched down even lower, hoping that she would not find him. He knew why she was calling him. Today, he and his brother and his mama were going to go far away, to a place he could not even pronounce. His mama said it would be wonderful, but then why did she and his Nonna cry all the time, hugging each other as if they’d never let go. Why couldn’t they stay here with his aunts and cousins and grandparents.

“Anthony,” she said gently, picking him up and cradling him on her knee. “It’s going to be alright.” Taking his hand, she walked him to the truck. It seemed that every relative he had and all his friends from the village were there to see him and his brother off. For the rest of the day, he kept close to his mother, holding tightly to the fabric of her long skirts, and trying to disappear in its folds as she walked him up the gangway to the ship. The trip was long, the hold of the ship crowded, and babies cried all the time.

Eventually, they reached a small island in the middle of a harbor. As he stumbled off the ship, he saw a huge statue of a lady holding something up, but he couldn’t stand and look at it. Mama dragged him into a big building. There were lines and lines of people. He yawned, glad to be off the rocking ship. After what seemed like hours, they reached the front of their line. A man stood there with a funny thing around his neck. Telling Anthony to stand still, he took off the boy’s shirt, exposing a light rash on his upper back. Mama said something to the man about how he had had the rash since he was a baby, but the doctor did not speak Italian and did not respond. Anthony could sense her concern though he did not realize that this exam could kill the dreams of his family. If the doctor motioned to the stairs on the right, it meant that the family would be quarantined for a month, or worse yet, sent back immediately to the ship for return to Italy. If he motioned to the stairs on the left, they would enter the country and set out for a new life. Later my father would tell us that the man had the kindest eyes he had ever seen. He looked at Anthony for a few moments, smiled and sent them to the stairs on the left.

As a child and young adult, I never understood why my father chose not to return to his native village, even for a short visit. When questioned, he would respond: “I am American” as if that said it all.

Now, as I think back on that oft-told story, I picture myself standing outside of the door leading to their new life. It is November 11 and it is Anthony’s 5th birthday. The door opens, and my uncle and father and Nonna emerge into the sunlight. Leaning forward I whisper into Anthony’s ear, “Happy Birthday, Dad. Welcome home!”