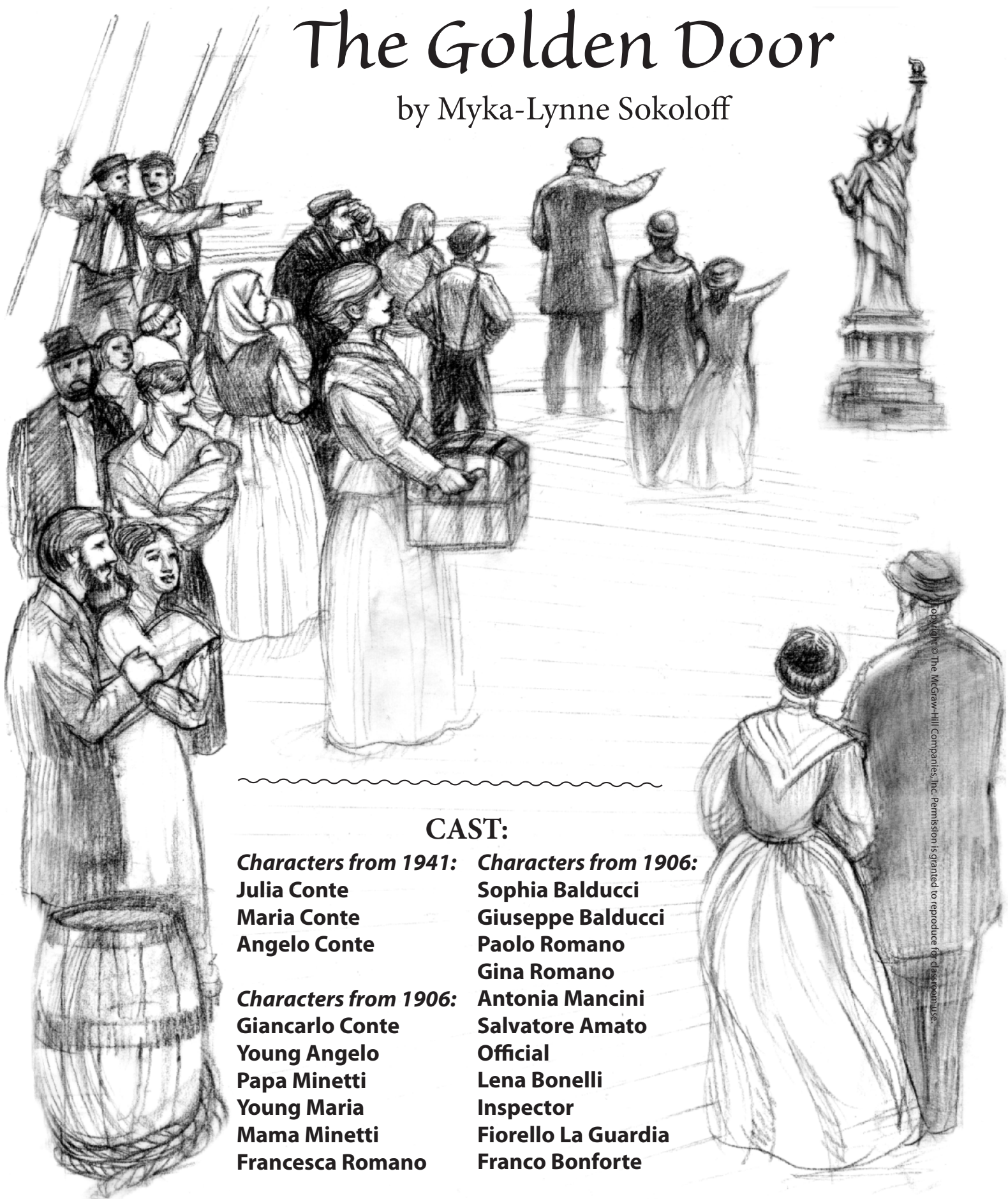


# The Golden Door

by Myka-Lynne Sokoloff



## CAST:

*Characters from 1941:* *Characters from 1906:*

Julia Conte

Sophia Balducci

Maria Conte

Giuseppe Balducci

Angelo Conte

Paolo Romano

Gina Romano

*Characters from 1906:*

Antonia Mancini

Giancarlo Conte

Salvatore Amato

Young Angelo

Official

Papa Minetti

Lena Bonelli

Young Maria

Inspector

Mama Minetti

Fiorello La Guardia

Francesca Romano

Franco Bonforte

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**Julia:** Mmmm! Grandma, the tomato sauce smells great!

**Maria:** Give it a stir, Julia, so it won't burn. My hands are covered with flour from the tortellini dough.

**Julia:** Sure, Grandma. Is there anything else I can do to help? Getting Thanksgiving dinner ready is a lot of work.

**Maria:** It is a lot of work, but having you here will help it go faster. Why don't you set the table? Use my good lace cloth; it's wrapped up in tissue paper in the second drawer of the sideboard.

**Julia:** Grandma, this cloth is beautiful! Is it old?

**Maria:** Old? I should say so! My oldest sister made that cloth for me as a wedding present when I married your grandpa thirty-five years ago. It was one of the few things I brought with me from Italy when we came to America.

**Julia:** Why didn't you bring everything you owned?

**Maria:** As a matter of fact, we did bring almost everything we owned—which wasn't much in those days, but even so it was almost more than we could carry! There were no porters in steerage, you know.

**Julia:** Steerage? What's steerage, Grandma?

**Maria:** What's steerage? Well, Julia, that's a long story.

**Julia:** Good, I love long stories, Grandma. Besides, it'll help to make up for the fact that I couldn't go to the parade with everyone else because of this stupid cold.

**Maria:** Very well, if you really want a lesson in family history, take a good look at the photo hanging above the sideboard.

**Julia:** You mean the picture with you and Grandpa in the middle?



**Maria:** Yes, it was taken in 1906 when your grandpa and I were first married. A traveling photographer came to the town where Grandpa and I grew up outside of Naples.

**Julia:** Grandpa looks so young!

**Maria:** He was young—just twenty years old! Standing beside him is his older brother, Giancarlo Conte.

**Julia:** Uncle Giancarlo. . . Isn't that who my brother Johnny was named after?

**Maria:** Yes, and he was the one who first put the idea of immigrating to America into Grandpa's head!

**SOUND EFFECT:** [clock ticking]

**Giancarlo:** I tell you, Angelo, it's getting harder to make a living every year. Now I can see it was a mistake to cut down so many olive and fruit trees to plant more grapevines. This grape disease is killing off our whole vineyard.

**Young Angelo:** It's true, Giancarlo, and to make things worse, the wine we made from last year's grapes isn't selling.

**Papa Minetti:** Buon giorno, Giancarlo and Angelo. How's my new son-in-law?

**Young Angelo:** Buon giorno, Papa Minetti. I was just telling Giancarlo that I can't understand why last year's wine isn't selling.

**Papa Minetti:** We're not the only ones who've been affected. I heard from my cousin in Bologna that everyone in Italy is having the same problem.

**Young Angelo:** Did your cousin say why?

**Papa Minetti:** Well, he said that a few years ago, the vineyards in France were hit with the same disease that's killing our vines now. When that happened, the French had no choice but to buy Italian wine. But now their vines are healthy again, and there's no longer a shortage of French wine. So they aren't buying Italian wine anymore.



**Young Angelo:** Wine isn't the only thing that isn't selling. Our fruit is rotting by the bushel.

**Giancarlo:** That's true enough! I read in a newspaper that the Americans have stopped buying from us because they've planted their own orange and lemon orchards. The Americans are also growing more grapes, apricots, and walnuts than we are!

**Papa Minetti:** Yes, and they have fast trains to take that fruit to places like New York City, where we used to sell our products. Our markets are disappearing.

**Young Angelo:** Just trying to get something to grow in this worn-out soil is hard enough. If it's not a disease killing the grapes, there's a drought to deal with.

**Giancarlo:** I've heard they don't have droughts in America like we have here.

**Papa Minetti:** A drought is a bad thing, but when the rains come, that means more mosquitoes, which makes the malaria worse!

**Giancarlo:** I've heard they don't have mosquitoes or malaria in America, either!

**Julia:** Malaria! Grandma, didn't that scare you?

**Maria:** Of course it did! We were all frightened by the mere thought of malaria, but the scared me even more.

**SOUND EFFECT:** [rumbling; dishes rattling]

**Giancarlo:** Another earthquake!





**Young Angelo:** It's just a little tremor. I usually sleep right through them, but Maria doesn't. Ever since the earthquake in Calabria killed all those people last year, she jumps whenever a cart rumbles by the house. Every time the ground shakes, she's sure Mount Vesuvius is going to erupt again. She thinks we'll all be buried in ashes, just like Pompeii.

**Giancarlo:** You know, Angelo, if I didn't have a wife, six children, and Mama and Papa living under my roof, I'd think about leaving.

**Young Angelo:** Leaving! Where would you go?

**Giancarlo:** Why, to America, the land of opportunity!

**Maria:** Shortly after that, our neighbor Luigi got a letter from his brother Franco, who had immigrated to America. Franco said there were plenty of jobs in America for people who were willing to work hard.

**SOUND EFFECT:** [clock ticking]

**Young Maria:** What is it, Angelo? You look so worried.

**Young Angelo:** Can you read my face so clearly? Well, since you asked, I'll tell you. I don't know what to do, Maria. Most of our vineyard has been wiped out; this farm can't support my parents, my brother's family, and the two of us.

**Young Maria:** Perhaps you could find work up north.

**Young Angelo:** There are no jobs up north. . . . I've asked. When we got married, I promised your parents that I would provide a good life for you. I meant that. When we have a family, I don't want to worry about how we're going to feed our children.

**Young Maria:** What can we do, Angelo?

**Young Angelo:** Maria, what would you say if I told you I wanted us to go to America? You've heard Luigi tell about his brother's letters. If we work hard, we could have a future there. If we stay in Italy, we will always be poor.

**Young Maria:** Ai, Angelo, think what we'd be giving up if we did leave—your parents and mine, all of our relatives and friends! I don't know if I could bear that.

**Young Angelo:** I know it would be hard to leave everyone behind, but I think it's our only chance for a better life. What do you say, Maria?

**Young Maria:** I think you're right, Angelo; there is no future here. Maybe if we worked hard and saved our earnings, we could send passage money for our families to join us in America in a few years.

**Young Angelo:** Of course we could! That's what Luigi's brother is doing.

**Young Maria:** Then we'll do it. We'll go to America.

**Julia:** After you made the decision, did you just pack up and move to America, Grandma?

**Maria:** No, Julia, it was a little more complicated than that. Once we'd made our decision, we talked to everyone who knew anyone who'd already immigrated to America. We wrote to Luigi's brother, who agreed to help us find a home and a job in New York. . . . Here's the silverware, Julia. You finish setting the table while I baste the turkey. . . . Now, let's see, where was I? Oh, yes. We didn't have quite enough money, so we had to borrow from our families to pay for the steamer tickets. We didn't own many things, so we didn't have to worry too much about what to pack. Finally, the day came when our ship was scheduled to sail.

**SOUND EFFECT:** [boat whistle]

**Giancarlo:** Ciao, Maria. Ciao, Angelo!

**Papa Minetti:** We'll miss you, cara mia. Send us a letter as soon as you get to America.

**Mama Minetti:** Maria, take these sausages and cheese that Papa made. You never know what they'll feed you on the boat. I'll miss you so and I'll think of you every day.

**Young Maria:** Oh, Mama, Papa! I'll miss you, too—more than I can say. I'll write to you as soon as we find a place to live.

**Papa Minetti:** You're a brave girl, Maria. Have a safe voyage.

**Mama Minetti:** Arrivederci! Have a good trip, my daughter!

**Young Angelo:** Come, Maria, let's find our berths and stow our luggage. The steward said that steerage is down these steps.

**Young Maria:** It's so dark. I can hardly see where I'm going.

**Young Angelo:** I think this is the right place.

**Young Maria:** Is this where we're to sleep? There's one bunk on top of another on top of another! Angelo, it's so dark and the smells are so awful! I hope I don't get sick!

**Francesca:** Excuse me, signora, but you can't put that basket there. Someone is bound to trip over it.

**Young Maria:** Where am I to put it?

**Francesca:** I'm not sure. I've been searching for a cupboard or locker to put things in, but I don't think there are any in steerage. Maybe we're supposed to keep all our belongings on our bunks!

**Young Maria:** On our bunks? There won't be enough room to turn over!

**Julia:** Grandma, what was steerage? You never told me.



**Maria:** Steerage was the cheapest way to travel across the Atlantic Ocean in those days. Passengers with steerage tickets rode in the large compartments below the decks and near the steering mechanism. There was almost no fresh air to speak of, and we heard the pounding noise of the engines day and night. Since the tickets were inexpensive, the steamship companies packed people in as tight as could be. There were over one thousand steerage passengers on the ship that your grandpa and I took and larger steamships carried even more!

**Julia:** It sounds awful!

**Maria:** Actually, Grandpa and I were lucky. Because we were traveling on an Italian ship, there were lots of Italians on board to talk with. On a trip like that, there wasn't much to do except talk.

**Julia:** How long did the voyage take?

**Maria:** The trip from Naples to New York took two weeks. Here, Julia, drop the tortellini into the broth while I make the turkey gravy. Then taste it and tell me if it needs more seasoning.

**Julia:** Mmmm, perfect! This tortellini soup tastes wonderful. I'll bet you didn't eat like this on the ship.

**Maria:** Oh, the stories I could tell you about the food on that ship! People brought their own food from home and cooked it right there in that cramped room with those berths stacked to the ceiling. The smell of cabbage and fish was more than some people could bear.

**SOUND EFFECT:** [banging of pots and spoons]

**Sophia:** I don't feel very well.

**Young Maria:** Can't we get some air in here? Won't someone please try to get one of those windows open?





**Giuseppe:** Every time my wife feels sick, I open a window. But as soon as I do, someone from the ship's crew closes it.

**Young Angelo:** Why is that, Signore Balducci?

**Giuseppe:** Down here in steerage, we're so close to the level of the water that they're afraid the waves will rush in and drown us!

**Sophia:** Ohhh, can't somebody do something?

**Young Maria:** Here, I'll go to the washroom to wet a cloth to put on your forehead. Maybe that will make you feel better, Signora Balducci.

**Francesca:** Ah, Signora Conte, I hope you're not in a hurry. I've been waiting in this line for over an hour just to get to the sink.

**Paolo:** Mama, how come there's only one washroom for this whole compartment?

**Gina:** Si, Mama, and why does the tap have only cold saltwater?

**Francesca:** Ah, children, it would be different if we were first- or second-class passengers, but we couldn't have afforded the cost of those tickets in a million years! In steerage, we should count ourselves lucky to have this one tap to wash our pots, our laundry, and ourselves.

**Paolo:** Si, and if anyone gets seasick . . .

**Francesca:** Paolo, that's enough.

**Young Maria:** He's right, Signora Romano, we're packed in steerage like cattle! If only we didn't have to cook and eat in here, too. The smell is just too much for poor Signora Balducci. Our only hope is for good weather so that we can go up on deck and breathe!

**Julia:** Grandma! What a miserable way to travel! The whole trip must have been a nightmare!



**Maria:** There was no question about it, traveling across the Atlantic in steerage was an ordeal. Fortunately, we had a smooth crossing. Whenever we could, we went up on deck to dance and talk.

**SOUND EFFECT:** [violin or accordion music playing a tarantella]

**Francesca:** I hope you're feeling better now, Signora Balducci.

**Sophia:** Yes, I am, thank you. Even if it is a little chilly, at least the air is better up here on deck than below.

**Francesca:** That's certainly true. And as long as it's such a pleasant day, let's talk of pleasant things and forge about steerage for awhile. Where are you and your family going when you get to America, Signora Balducci?

**Sophia:** We're planning to take a train to a town called Chicago, where my brother and his family live. We'll stay with them until my husband finds work and we find a place to live. What about you, Signorina Mancini?

**Antonia:** I'm engaged to be married when I get to New York. The man I'm to wed came from a small village near mine back in Italy, but we've never met before.

**Young Maria:** How will you know him when we arrive?

**Antonia:** My papa sent him my photograph so he can recognize me, but I've no idea what he looks like. What if he didn't send me his photograph because he's pockmarked or has no teeth? I never dared tell my parents this, but I'm really very nervous about marrying someone I've never even seen before.

**Francesca:** Don't worry, signorina. I barely knew my husband when I married him. Now we have three children, and I can't wait to see him again. It's been two years since he went to America.

**Gina:** Papa has a job in a factory in Boston, but he's coming to New York to meet us.



**Paolo:** I've grown so much, Papa probably won't even recognize me!

**Francesca:** Don't worry, Paolo, he'll recognize you. You look just like him! Now, let's hear your plans, Signora Conte.

**Young Maria:** We're being met by a neighbor's brother who lives on Mulberry Street in New York City. He's a bricklayer, and he's promised to help my husband find a job. Then, once we get settled, I'll work, too, and at night, Angelo and I will go to school to learn English!

**Julia:** It must have been exciting to talk about all your plans and dreams.

**Maria:** Oh, yes, it was. We were all so young and so full of hope. For all of us, America was a vivid dream; it seemed to offer the promise of a bright future. But there were other discussions before we reached New York—discussions that were not as cheerful.

**SOUND EFFECT:** [wind; rain; water slapping against the ship]

**Salvatore:** When we get to America, our first stop will be Ellis Island. Now, before they'll give you a landing card, you have to pass an inspection. According to my cousin, you have to be very careful about what you tell the inspectors. They ask you lots of questions—bang, bang, bang—without giving you any time at all to think! And heaven help you if you give a wrong answer!

**Giuseppe:** And you'd better have enough money to show them, too. If they think you might not be able to support yourself, forget it! They'll put you on the next boat back to Italy!

**Salvatore:** My cousin says they try to trick you. If you say you've got a job, it's no good. If you say you don't know what you're gonna do, it's no good. You really have to be careful what you say.



**Young Angelo:** Well, what is the best way to answer?

**Salvatore:** Tell them you have a trade, you're strong, you're willing to work hard. That's the best

**Sophia:** My brother wrote telling me what to expect. He said they'll check you all over from head to foot. They'll look at your hands, they'll listen to you breathe, then they'll watch you walk. When they're all done with that, he said they'll poke you in the eye with a buttonhook!

**Gina:** Mama! I don't want to get poked in the eye with a hook!

**Francesca:** Don't worry, cara mia, they don't really poke you in the eye, they just look under your eyelid.

**Young Maria:** Why would they want to do that?

**Sophia:** They're looking for an eye disease that causes blindness. Last year, a woman from my village went over, and they discovered she had this disease. They sent her right back home on the next boat! They wouldn't even let her say good-bye to the rest of her family!

**Young Maria:** Oh, Angelo, how dreadful!

**Young Angelo:** Yes, it is, but there's nothing wrong with our eyes. I'm sure we'll be all right.

**Julia:** Grandma, you must have been so frightened. I can't imagine what it must have been like—going off to a strange land and hearing all those scary stories on the ship!

**Maria:** Yes, Julia, after fourteen days of that kind of talk, all of us were terrified about what lay ahead on the Island of Tears. That's what Ellis Island was sometimes called. Some of the stories told aboard the ship were exaggerated, but many of them were true.



**Julia:** Tell me what happened when you finally got to New York, Grandma.

**Maria:** Well, before we left Italy, we believed that America was the land of the free. But when we reached its gates, we learned that you were free only if you'd purchased a first- or second-class steamship ticket.

**SOUND EFFECT:** [boat whistle]

**Official:** Attention, Attenzione, Achtung! Passengers should prepare to disembark. All passengers must carry their own papers. Steerage passengers should carry their belongings to the gangplank. Make sure the number cards you were given are securely pinned to your chest.

**Young Angelo:** Say, Salvatore, do you understand what's going on? What are these numbers for?

**Salvatore:** According to what my brother told me, one is our ship number and the other is a code for the passenger lists. That way, the inspectors can ask us questions and check to see that our answers match those we gave to the ticket agents back in Naples.

**Young Maria:** Look, the first-class passengers are leaving already. Why is that?

**Francesca:** Their first-class tickets permit them to leave the ship without an examination.

**Salvatore:** That's right. The inspectors assume that those who can afford first-class tickets will be able to support themselves in America.

**Young Angelo:** What about the second-class passengers? What happens to them?

**Salvatore:** Oh, they get examined on the ship, and then they're free to go. Once the first- and second-class passengers have gone ashore, they'll take the rest of us over to Ellis Island on a ferry.



**Official:** All second-class passengers who have been examined may go ashore. Steerage passengers, collect your belongings and line up to board the ferry.

**Julia:** Grandma, they really discriminated against steerage passengers! Why didn't they treat everyone the same?

**Maria:** That's a good question, Julia. You have to keep in mind that most of the people who traveled steerage class in those days were very poor. The authorities were afraid that those who were physically or mentally ill, or without any resources at all, wouldn't be able to take care of themselves.

**Julia:** I guess there were a lot of people coming into this country then.

**Maria:** There certainly were. Remember, on our ship alone, there were over a thousand of us in steerage! The United States government wanted to avoid the expense of caring for immigrants who couldn't take care of themselves, so we had to endure those terrifying inspections.

**Julia:** Well, it doesn't seem fair to me. I thought everyone was supposed to be welcome. That's why the Statue of Liberty is in the harbor. Oh, Grandma, tell me about the first time you saw the Statue of Liberty.

**Maria:** Ai! I'll never forget the first time I saw her. It was a rainy day when our ship steamed into New York harbor, and we could see very little because of the fog. Despite the rain, all of us were on deck, straining to catch a glimpse of land and Lady Liberty. For a long time, there was nothing but the fog and the sound of water against the hull. Then suddenly, she seemed to rise up out of the mist, holding her torch like a beacon to us.

**Julia:** It sounds like something from a wonderful dream.



**Maria:** It was like a dream. Some people cheered; others fell to their knees and wept. You know the poem that Emma Lazarus wrote about her? The part that goes . . .

Give me your tired, your poor,  
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,  
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.

**Julia:** Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost, to me. I lift my lamp beside the golden door!

**Maria:** Yes, that's it. The poem described us perfectly. After two weeks in that dreadful steerage compartment, we were wretched, homeless, and tempest-tost, believe me. But even so, we were overjoyed when we first caught sight of Lady Liberty. She reminded us of the promise of America. But we still had to get through the Island of Tears.

**SOUND EFFECT:** [foghorn; rain]

**Young Angelo:** Are you cold, Maria?

**Young Maria:** Yes, I'm soaked to the skin, and that wind is so cold. If only we didn't have to stand here in the rain! It's not so bad for us, but I worry about the children and the old people. They shouldn't be out in weather like this.

**Young Angelo:** I wish I knew what was happening. We've been waiting on this ferry with no food or water for hours.

**Giuseppe:** There are so many people coming to America that they can't examine us fast enough. And they won't let us off this ferry until there's room for us on the island.

**Young Angelo:** Do you know just how many immigrants we're talking about?

**Paolo:** My father wrote that over 12,000 people went through Ellis Island in just one day a few months ago!



**Salvatore:** Ah, we're beginning to move at last. Listen, my advice to you is to keep all your belongings with you when you get off. My cousin said that his baggage was stolen from the luggage area while he went through the inspections. If they don't steal your bags outright, they may charge you several months' wages just to get them back!

**Young Angelo:** Did you hear that, Maria? I think you'd better carry the basket and the bundle, and I'll manage the trunk. We'll keep everything with us—just to be safe.

**Young Maria:** I'll wrap the remaining sausages and cheese in my shawl; they don't fit in the basket.

**Julia:** Grandma, what were you and Grandpa carrying in your luggage?

**Maria:** Well, if I remember correctly, I had the tablecloth my sister made for me, this candelabra, which was my mother's. . . . You should put it in the center of the table. That's a good girl. Let's see . . . we also had a jug of olive oil from my father's olives, a couple of photographs, two comforters, and feather pillows.

**Julia:** What about extra clothes?

**Maria:** Each of us had one change of clothing, and besides that, we still had a bit of food from the boat. That was it. I know it doesn't sound like much, but it all got very heavy before the end of that long day!

**Julia:** What happened when you finally got to Ellis Island?

**Maria:** First, we lined up under a long canopy at the entrance to the main building. Then, ever so slowly, we moved toward the heavy doors that opened into this huge room called the Great Hall. As soon as we entered, I dropped my bundles and covered up both ears! The sound was unbelievable—thousands of people laughing and crying, talking, shouting, and even screaming, all at the same time. It was so loud you cannot imagine it! Directly ahead of us was a staircase that rose more than fifty feet up to the second floor.



**SOUND EFFECT:** [roar of many voices]

**Young Angelo:** Why is it taking so long just to “climb the stairs to the second floor?”

**Salvatore:** See those inspectors standing at the top of the stairs? Well, my cousin told me that they stand there watching to see who has problems. If they see you have trouble breathing or if you limp, they’ll put a chalk mark on your coat.

**Young Angelo:** A chalk mark? Whatever for?

**Salvatore:** They have different letter codes to show who needs to be looked at more carefully by the doctors. Some of the people who get chalk marks will be sent back.

**Young Maria:** Did you see that woman in the long, silk coat? The inspector chalked an H on her coat. She just turned her coat inside out!

**Giuseppe:** Clever woman! That way, the next inspector won’t see the chalk mark, and she won’t be sent home.

**Young Angelo:** Maria, look at that man. They put a different mark on his back. Watch him brush against the wall. I think they’re going to miss the mark. It’s all smudged now. What a bold fellow he is!

**Julia:** Did they put any chalk marks on you or Grandpa?

**Maria:** No, child, both of us were young and healthy. When we got to the top of the stairs, we passed the medical inspectors in a matter of seconds. Then we saw that the second floor was divided by iron bars into passageways to keep us in line. We moved slowly up and down each row. At the end of the last row was the dreaded eye inspection! A medical officer placed a buttonhook under my upper eyelid. Then he folded my eyelid over so that he could get a good look at my eyeball to check for signs of trachoma. Although the examination was painful, it was over in a minute, and the doctor waved me on. I was so relieved.



**Julia:** Then were you free to leave?

**Maria:** Oh, no! We had only passed the physical part of the inspection. There we were in a huge room with a high ceiling that magnified every sound even more. People were speaking at least a dozen different languages, children were crying, there was the shuffling of thousands of feet—I tell you, the noise from the engines in steerage was nothing compared to the noise in that room!

**Julia:** Could you at least sit down and rest?

**Maria:** Yes, we were told to sit on some wooden benches with other passengers from our ship. As the bench in front emptied, we had to pick up our belonging and move up. At that point, I was so tired I think I fell asleep holding onto my basket and bundle, with my papers clutched between my teeth.

**SOUND EFFECT:** [roar of many voices]

**Young Angelo:** Maria, Maria, wake up. We have to move up to the front bench. Here's something to eat. All the vendor had left was prune sandwiches.

**Young Maria:** At least it's a change from the boiled potatoes, sausage, and cheese we've been eating for the last two weeks.

**Young Angelo:** I think they're almost ready for us at the interrogation desk. Try to eat something before they call our names.

**Lena:** Buon giorno. I see your number tags are different from mine. You must have come on another ship. Where are you from?

**Young Maria:** We're from Capua, near Naples, in Italy.

**Lena:** So, you went through the inspection all right?

**Young Maria:** Yes, so far.



**Lena:** You see that family over there? Such a pity. They took the little girl away to see if she has tuberculosis. The whole family must sleep here in the dormitory until the doctors decide what to do with the child. If she is consumptive, they'll send her back, that's for certain.

**Young Maria:** And you, are you well? You look so very tired.

**Lena:** I stayed here all night waiting for my husband to come. He left Italy two years ago. They won't release me until he, or another man in my family, comes to get me.

**Young Maria:** Angelo! I feel so sorry for these people.

**Young Angelo:** I know how you feel. . . . Come, Maria, that inspector is pointing at us. It's our turn to go.

**Inspector:** You! You're next. Do you speak English?

**Young Angelo:** Signore?

**Inspector:** Parla Italiano?

**Young Angelo:** Si.

**Inspector:** Italian interpreter—over here please!

**La Guardia:** Your names, please.

**Young Angelo:** Angelo and Maria Conte.

**La Guardia:** What boat did you come on, Signore Conte?

**Young Angelo:** Citta di Napoli.

**La Guardia:** Where were you born?

**Young Angelo:** Capua, in Italy.

**La Guardia:** Who paid for your passage?

**Young Angelo:** My wife and I saved our money.

**La Guardia:** How much money did you bring with you?

**Young Angelo:** Many lire.



**La Guardia:** Let me see it, please.

**Young Angelo:** But it's all I have left.

**La Guardia:** Don't worry, Signore Conte. We don't keep it. We just need to know that you've enough money to live on until you find a job. Signore, you have almost thirty-eight dollars here. It's not quite the twenty-five dollars apiece that you're supposed to have, but you look honest and hardworking to me.

**Julia:** Grandma, did he mark you with chalk since you didn't have enough money?

**Maria:** No, bambina, he was a good man. He told us that his own parents were emigrants from Italy, like us. Since he spoke seven languages, he was in great demand as an interpreter. He told us he worked at Ellis Island to pay his way through law school.

**SOUND EFFECT:** [roar of many voices; commotion]

**Inspector:** Interpreter, you speak Hungarian don't you? You're needed over there. I'll ask the last of these questions.

**La Guardia:** Excuse me, Signore Conte, I'm needed elsewhere. There are only a few simple questions left that the immigration inspector should be able to ask you.

**Inspector:** Who is meeting you here?

**Young Angelo:** Signore?

**Inspector:** WHO MEET YOU HERE?

**Young Angelo:** Oh. My friend brother.

**Inspector:** What is your brother's name?

**Young Angelo:** Giancarlo Conte.

**Inspector:** Do you have a job?

**Young Angelo:** No, no job, yet. Work hard.

**Inspector:** Well, you look strong enough. I guess you'll do fine. Now, how much is two plus two?

**Young Angelo:** Signore?

**Inspector:** TWO PLUS TWO. Oh, never mind. Interpreter, I need you back over here.

**La Guardia:** What's left to ask? Let's see. . . . How much is two plus two?

**Young Angelo:** Are you joking?

**La Guardia:** No, signore, I'm sorry, but I have to ask.

**Young Angelo:** Four.

**La Guardia:** Have you ever been in jail?

**Young Angelo:** No!

**La Guardia:** All right, that's all the questions you need to answer. Please go to that bench over there and wait until your names are called.

**Julia:** So you and Grandpa came through the interrogation with no problem?

**Maria:** We'd gotten through the interrogation, all right, but we were not yet free to go. We still had to wait for Luigi's brother, who was to come to meet us. We were a little nervous about identifying him, because we had never met him before. All we had to go by was his photograph!

**SOUND EFFECT:** [roar of many voices]

**Inspector:** Signore and Signora Angelo Conte, step forward! All right, point out the man who is meeting you. Look over there through the fence.

**Young Angelo:** There he is—the man wearing the gray cap. He looks like the man in the photograph I have.

**Inspector:** You, in the gray cap—what's your name?

**Bonforte:** Franco Bonforte.

**Inspector:** Bonforte. Your name isn't Conte? How are you related to this man?

**Bonforte:** Me? I'm not related to him.

**Inspector:** You, Conte—come here! What do you mean telling me your brother was meeting you? This man isn't related to you. He doesn't even know you. How dare you try to sneak into this country under false pretenses! Did you think you could fool the American government? I'm of a mind to put you on the very next boat back to Naples.

**Young Maria:** Ai! Angelo! What's wrong? That man is so angry with you! What happened? I can't understand what he's saying.

**Young Angelo:** I can't understand him, either, Maria. But I know I haven't done anything wrong. At least, I don't think I have.

**Young Maria:** Look, there's that nice interpreter. Maybe he can help.

**Young Angelo:** Per favore, signore. Can you please help us?

**La Guardia:** Excuse me. Is there some sort of misunderstanding here?

**Inspector:** I'll say there is! See if you can figure it out. This fellow told me his brother Giancarlo Conte was meeting him. But the man he's pointed out insists that he's no relation. Find out what's going on.

**La Guardia:** Signore Conte, who did you say was meeting you here?

**Young Angelo:** I told the inspector that my friend's brother was to meet us. Then he asked me for the name of my brother. I thought it was just another question to see if my answers matched the ones I'd given when I was questioned in Italy. Anyway, my friend's brother is Franco Bonforte. See, I have his photograph right here.



**La Guardia:** He says his friend's brother is meeting them.

**Inspector:** Oh, I thought he said his brother.

**La Guardia:** Well, it certainly looks like the right man. What did you say your name was, sir?

**Bonforte:** Franco Bonforte. I'm supposed to meet Angelo Conte and his wife, Maria.

**La Guardia:** Here they are. Just a minor misunderstanding, but now it looks like everything is cleared up. Here are your landing cards, Signore and Signora Conte. You're free to go. Welcome to America, and may you have a long and prosperous life in your new country.

**Young Maria:** Grazie. Thank you so much for helping us!

**La Guardia:** It's just part of my job, signora. Good luck!

**Young Angelo:** Maria, look, it's Signora Romano and her children, and that must be her husband.

**Young Maria:** They look so happy! And she was right, Angelo, young Paolo looks just like his papa. Oh, and look over there, standing next to the priest. It's Signorina Mancini and a nice-looking young man. They must be getting married right here on Ellis Island! Let's go over and wish them well.

**Julia:** So then they let you into the country?

**Maria:** Yes, we went to the money changer to exchange our lire for American dollars. Then we took the ferry to Manhattan, and from the ferryboat dock, made the quick trip to Mulberry Street. We lived there in a tiny two-room apartment above a grocery store until your father was born. Then we moved here to Brooklyn. . . . Oh, my! Look at the clock. Everyone will be home from the parade soon, and we still have a few things to do to get ready.



**Julia:** Did you ever have any regrets about coming here, Grandma?

**Maria:** No, never, at least not after that day on Ellis Island. We were all so fearful of being sent home every step of the way that the stories were harsher than the reality. Actually, only two people in a hundred were turned away. For those few, it was indeed an Island of Tears. But, for your grandpa and me, as for most others, it was a golden door—like in the poem—a golden door to the land of opportunity.

**SOUND EFFECT:** [door bell]

**Julia:** I'll get it, Grandma. . . . Hi, everybody, dinner's almost ready! How was the parade, Grandpa?

**Angelo:** The balloons and floats were even better than last year, Julia. I'm just sorry that you had to miss it.

**Julia:** I was, too, until Grandma started telling me all about your trip to America. What an exciting story! The time just flew by.

**Angelo:** That's a funny coincidence. Something happened at the parade that reminded me of our trip to America, too. In fact, I can hardly wait to tell your grandmother.

**Maria:** Tell me what, Angelo? Did you enjoy the parade? Did you hear the mayor's speech?

**Angelo:** Yes, we did. But, Maria, I had the most unbelievable surprise. Do you remember that terrible mix-up with the inspector at Ellis Island when we were afraid we would be sent back on the next boat?





**Maria:** Of course I do! How could I forget that? Why do you ask?

**Angelo:** Well, Maria, do you also happen to recall that kind young interpreter who helped us out? The one who made sense of the whole misunderstanding and stamped our papers for us?

**Maria:** I'll never forget him. He was a good man.

**Angelo:** Well, I saw him again today—more than thirty years later!

**Maria:** Was he at the parade?

**Angelo:** Yes, indeed, and you'll never guess who he is! It wasn't until I saw the mayor today and heard him speak that I realized that the interpreter who helped us get into this country was none other than Fiorello La Guardia!

**Julia:** Fiorello La Guardia! Why, he's the mayor of New York City!

**Maria:** Ai! What a wonderful country this is! The child of immigrants can become the mayor of the largest city in the nation. Now everybody come to the table! We have so much to be thankful for!



# ★ Activities

## DRAMA ACTIVITIES:

# The Golden Door



### How to Communicate

In *The Golden Door*, the Contes move to the United States to build a better life. When they get to Ellis Island, they run into trouble. An immigration inspector does not understand what Angelo tells him. As a result, the inspector almost sends the Contes back to Italy.

- The inspector speaks only English, and the Contes speak only Italian. Think about how you would perform this scene. How would you show that the Contes and the inspector do not understand each other? What movements and gestures could the characters make?
- Talk with a partner about possible ways to act out this scene. Work together to practice saying the lines. Move, make gestures, and use facial expressions to show that there is a lack of understanding.

### Compare and Contrast

*The Golden Door* tells a fictional story, but it is based on the experiences of immigrants who have come to the United States. Find a story about another immigrant or group of immigrants who came to the United States in the early 1900s. Read the story with a partner.

Talk with your partner about the similarities and differences between the plot, setting, and characters in the play and the story. Work together to fill in your chart as you discuss the following questions.

1. How are the plots of the two texts similar, and how are they different?
2. How are the settings and characters similar, and how are they different?
3. What do you learn from the play that you do not learn from the story?
4. What do you learn from the story that you do not learn from the play?

## DRAMA ACTIVITIES:

# The Golden Door



### Think About the Characters

This play tells about the bravery of people who came to the United States from far away. These travelers were willing to face many hardships to make a better life. In a small group, discuss these questions:

1. What makes the voyage hard for the Contes?  
Why do they have to stay in steerage?
2. What difficulties do the Contes have when they arrive at Ellis Island? Who helps them, and how?
3. How did the Contes handle their difficulties at Ellis Island?  
What does this show about their characters?
4. Why is the play entitled *The Golden Door*?

### Performance Activity: Open Scenes

With a partner, imagine a scene for one of the dialogues below. For example, in the first dialogue, Character A might be trapped beneath a fallen tree, and Character B might not be strong enough to lift the tree. The object is for actors to use the body, voice, and imagination to help the audience figure out what the conflict or situation is. Character A will start. Each student pair will change the scene by repeating the dialogue to create different situations.

- 1.A: Help me.  
B: I can't.
2. A: I'm sorry.  
B: It's all your fault.

After every pair has tried one of the dialogues, discuss how the voice, body, and imagination help tell a story that the words alone do not convey.