

## Transatlantic Voyage Narrative

Try to imagine the things you will hear me describing. Sit comfortably. Close your eyes. Relax. Imagine what I am describing.

*You are sitting on a wooden box on the deck of a sailing ship. Overhead, a pleasantly warm sun is shining. It feels good on your face. A gentle breeze blows through your hair. The ship rolls on the swells that lift it and carry it forward. Waves lap gently against the hull far below, splashing quietly. Overhead, gulls scream as they wheel and dive above the sunlit water. It feels so good to be up on deck, to sit in the sun, to hear the gulls. You know land and the end of this voyage are near.*

*You lick your lips. Your mouth is dry again. You remember how thirsty you are. You take your mug to the water cask to be filled. A sailor grins at you as he opens the spigot on the cask. A filthy brown liquid pours out of the spout into your mug. This can't be water! You sniff the horrible brown fluid. A smell more disgusting than the colour turns your stomach. You dump the filthy stuff over the ship's rail into the sparkling sea. Your thirst continues to torment you. You lick your parched lips again.*

*You decide to go below deck. You climb down a ladder into the darkness. In a moment your eyes adjust to the dimness, broken only by the light from a few small open portholes. Your eyes slowly move around the space – "steerage," it is called.*

*What kind of place is this? Hundreds of people are crowded together. You have to duck your head to avoid bashing it on the low beams of the ceiling. All around the floors are piles of wooden boxes, tin trunks and cases, cloth bags, stacks of pots and small barrels. You cannot walk across the room without bumping into dozens of people. Babies cry; children are stumbling around playing tag; a small group of men is playing cards. On a filthy mattress beside your head, a boy is moaning, groaning and vomiting. You can remember the splash yesterday as the body of a dead child hit the water, tipped into the sea for burial, another victim of the diseases that seem to have settled over the ship like a foul blanket. All around, this "bedroom" for 300 passengers is a mess – crowded with people and belongings, smelling as if nobody has washed for three weeks, filled with nightmarish sounds.*

*The midday meal is finished. You remember the line-ups of jostling people as they tried to get their rations of salt beef and oatmeal. The patient faces of the women, lined with fatigue, their shoulders drooping with weariness, are still vivid in your memory. It is the same scene each day – dozens of women lining up to get food from the captain's barrels, then lining up to use the ship's stoves to cook a meal for their families. Always, as an undercurrent, are the sounds of the ship – the creaking planks, the slapping of the waves, the wind in the rigging. Above these sounds, the crowd noises rise and fall night and day, for even after dark the people are restless or sick or terrified. Few can find rest, peace or quiet in this place called steerage.*

*But look again at the people. Despite the dreadful smells, the noise and the crowding, despite the rotten water and the foul food, despite it all, they are mostly cheerful. They've heard the gulls, too. They know that soon they will leave this moving nightmare of a ship. They, and you, will have arrived at their destination.*

*You climb carefully up the wooden ladder to the deck. You squint in the brightness. In the distance is a green blur – land! The almost blinding sun warms your face. The breeze carries away the terrible stench from below. You close your eyes again, ready to dream of your life in this new land you are coming to – Canada.*

Now come back to the classroom. Bring your senses back.

Take a few minutes to recreate in your minds the images you have of the ship, the steerage, the sights and sounds and smells.

Now open your eyes.