

My Bones

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A broad and homesick, I once had an idea: to build a family tree using old forgotten photographs from my antique chest of drawers. The best picture is that of my grandparents. They sit side by side along a garden wall decorated with a single grapevine. Their outfits are black with a dash of white; their lips display fulfilled smiles. My Grandma Emília is wearing a long-sleeved black dress with a V-neck. The material on the left gathers to the waist giving her pose a touch of class. She wears a gold pin surrounded by small pearls. Grandpa Augusto wears a suit and tie, his suspenders hardly visible through the well-cut jacket. His right hand holds the mandolin he played all his life.

The photo unleashed treasured childhood memories. In particular I recalled the Sunday visits to my grandparents' third-floor apartment in Lisbon on São Bento Street: a long, steep, and winding *rua* on a busy trolley car route. My father led the way up the narrow, wooden stairway into a charming residence; it was cozy, ordered, and spotless. As we came in, my grandparents beamed with sheer delight. There was a sense of poise in the atmosphere. Grandma Emília always wanted me to sit close to her on the sofa. She enjoyed holding my hand and, once in a while, beatifically caressed my face.

Midway into the visit, grandma gave me something previously hidden in the ornate cabinet nearby. She asked me to close my eyes and then gently placed a round object in the center of my palm.

It was the now defunct five escudos coin!

Monday afternoons felt magical. After school, I exchanged the escudos into centavos and bought multicolored lollipops, one at a time, all weeklong. These were the so-called *chupa-chupas*. I was in no way a spoiled eight-year-old girl, so the five escudos were a fortune to me. With the candy, I more easily endured the nuns at school, the senseless homework, and my division tables—always eagerly awaiting my next visit to Rua de São Bento.

Decades later, in what seemed a tribute to those memories, my father left the family a burial chamber in the Lisbon Alto de São João Cemetery. The cemetery is dedicated to São João who is, like São Bento, a Catholic martyr. The documents relating to this bequeathed vault arrived in a black-leather folder that contained a key, the original drawings for the memorial, and various identifying papers. I thus discovered, to my surprise, that Grandma Emília had built the vault to honor her husband. The drawings, carefully folded, bore Grandpa Augusto's engraved name on top. They specified that the exquisite Vila Viçosa marble should be used as building material. Grandma had intended that her husband lie at rest with the same quiet dignity she herself had exuded all her life. The gift obviously showed that he was the love of her life for all eternity.

When property divisions took place in my generation, my relatives—without consulting me from afar and surely believing that the relic wasn't worth much—assigned the tomb to me.

Little did I know.

One blazing summer afternoon while vacationing in Portugal, many years after the bequest, I drove from Estoril to Lisbon to visit my burial chamber. Not that I was inclined to keep company with the deceased that day. I drove to the Alto de São João Cemetery for a far less noble reason: I needed cash. And I needed cash badly. The thought of selling the family crypt had therefore been in my mind for longer than I dare to confess. Somewhat horrified by my objective, I arrived at the cemetery oblivious to the airless, roasting afternoon heat.

This was the start of my adventures with Simplex, the national program in Portugal designed to simplify bureaucratic affairs for the average citizen.

At the cemetery's headquarters, I found a middle-aged public servant staring intently in my direction as I passed through the office's entrance. He seemed hungry for prey, as if the deceased buried around weren't enough to satisfy a vampire's lust. My first order of business was to locate the tomb. The task, I felt, meant appeasing the man behind the counter. I must speak in a low tone of voice, display a needy expression, and convey apprehension.

With a modest demeanor, I handed him the vault's ownership certificate. It was a copy of the old title, not the real thing.

After taking his time to examine the document that bore my grandparents' name, the number of the crypt, the cemetery's street location, and the name of the funerary agency that had handled the burials, the fellow turned it over. Slowly, he inspected its back. Gazing into my eyes, he asked for the original record.

As I lied stating that the original was in his hands, the man replied that it wasn't. Did I detect, momentarily, a note of enthusiasm in his voice? The clerk proceeded to ask who had erected the vault. When I replied that my grandmother had, the clerk displayed an unquestionably satisfied smile. He then slowly asserted that I could have stolen the certificate.

That statement I was unable to contradict.

"You've a problem on your hands," he added.

That much I had already figured out.

My inquisitor continued our exchange by stating that the only possible way to locate the vault was through proof of its tenure, which, obviously, I didn't seem to possess. Thus, he couldn't help me. An unfortunate situation, he avowed. I seemed to have a vault that, for all practical purposes, I didn't own.

I acknowledged that the original title might have been lost in the labyrinth of time. He nodded.

Suddenly remembering the rusty key in the leather folder, I placed the ancient trophy on the counter, loudly for effect. My tormentor didn't lose his composure. A bloodthirsty smile emerged from his mouth when he referred to the magnitude of my dilemma. He responded circumspectly. My key could,

indeed, open the tomb. But I must weigh my actions carefully, lest I end up in prison. I could be arrested for trying to open my crypt; the cemetery had spies on watch. Observing my utter bewilderment, he explained that the law forbade people without legal titles from opening burial chambers. I could be charged with infringement and summarily locked up. He compared the situation to a person trying to enter a house using someone else's key. Justice might follow in due course, not to mention the souls of those resting underground.

"Gosh," I replied.

Trying to get the fellow on my side, I asked if he was willing to look into the registrar's books that lined the wall behind him. The huge centenary tomes were covered with a white, dreary dust similar to the residue of decomposed bodies. I had noticed other clerks picking up the books periodically, but not without a major effort due to their size. Certainly, these volumes revealed significant details.

"Ah, the books," the clerk alleged, "Yes, we can look at them."

As he turned his back, I saw his gray face turn fleetingly yellow in the sunlight that streamed through the small window next to the bookshelf. With the dirty nail of his index finger, he searched the digits displayed on the spines. I marveled how the long row of books looked as gray as his face. A friend had once commented to me how people tended to become similar to the objects they touched every day. I was witnessing such a case.

Soon the man pulled out one of the books, having found the correct range of numbers. As he placed the book on the counter, he opened it right in front of my eyes.

The clerk's gestures were slow; time didn't seem to matter inside these walls. The pages had red lines from top to bottom and in the top areas formed a *quadrícula*, small squares. Licking his middle finger, which displayed a nail that had not been cleaned or trimmed in a long time, the official turned page after page. But that was of minor concern. I could see the public servant enjoyed feeling that he was in command, so once again I tried to win him over. As he leaned over the book, my eyes followed the digits indicated by the dirt under his nail.

As in a thriller, he didn't tell me what I was about to see.

And I didn't dare to ask.

After a prolonged silence, the official pointed out the names of my corpses, easily deciphering the old handwriting. Each name bore a number inscribed in a metal piece; and the metal piece, by the coffin, identified the cadaver by number. As I leaned over, the clerk volunteered the information that my bodies had been exhumed. Only bones, not flesh, remained in the crypt.

Entrances had been registered with the dates of birth and death carefully recorded. The chamber had five small coffins. The first entrant was Grandpa Augusto, followed by Grandma Emília; later, her two younger sisters had arrived, and, lastly, a distant cousin.

The reading aloud of my ancestor's names had the unexpected power of subduing me, as if I were hearing my grandma's voice again. I immediately recalled the day she had passionately recounted how she had met grandpa. Her father, a musician she remembered in adoring terms, had introduced her to a younger fellow instrumentalist. His name was Augusto. Great-grandpa had played music with sentiment all his life and in particular during the months preceding his death from tuberculosis. Fulfilling his dream, his eldest daughter, Emília, had married a musician. His mission in life, thus, had been accomplished.

Maybe the low-level bureaucrat noticed me drifting away, for he now described hurriedly the steps I must take to legally possess the vault. Since there were countless departments scattered throughout the city, he jotted down the specific City Hall address I should go to. There, the clerk said, I must obtain a *segunda via*, an authenticated copy of the vault's title bearing my name as owner. I needed to get a *senha*, a ticket, upon entering the building and then wait patiently in line until my number was called. Public servants were busy in these offices, he warned. I should plan a few hours for my visit. He further advised me that it was imperative to bring along the informal credential in my possession.

The possibility of getting a title of ownership was small, the clerk continued. People in the tomb were a generation removed; they had died in the previous century. Maybe my father should claim the vault, he advised. Had the crypt ever been under his name? The reply that my father was deceased

and buried somewhere else was considered a major family oversight.

When I asked for a photocopy of the page we had examined, I didn't get an answer. Perhaps the Xerox machine was not working that day or the tomes were so ancient that photocopying might damage them.

My last question concerned how long it might take to get an original certificate. This time my tormenter reframed my question forcefully. If lucky, I would get a notarized second copy claiming ownership. The difference escaped me, but he explained. Because I didn't possess it, the one-and-only original couldn't be obtained; it no longer existed. Therefore, my City Hall visit was most important.

And how long might it take to get the *segunda via*? The answer was uncertain. Each case being unique, sometimes it took weeks, sometimes months, and in some cases years. Further along the way, he warned, I might be asked to establish legal blood ties with those resting in my crypt.

I fully understood now the task that lay ahead.

Following the interchange, I said good-bye in a hurry. And for a bit of relief, I took a handkerchief from my pocket and wiped my perspiring forehead. Exiting the building, I turned left, pretending I was leaving the cemetery grounds in case the clerk might be able to see me through the small window. Then I ran into the side alley bordered by the cemetery's black iron fence. I had visited the burial chamber with my father many years ago. Surely I could find it. In a frenzy, I followed the numbered tombs leading to my own.

I had the entrance key: thus, what could go wrong? What cemetery official in his or her right mind would be spying on me in such broiling heat? I passed hundreds of *gavetões*, drawers containing corpses; they formed an area called the *columbário*. The name evokes a space where doves, the symbol of peace, live together. My only company was the nauseating smell of cadavers combined with the odor of adorning fading flowers. As I sped along, large droplets of sweat streamed down my face.

A few burial chambers were worth admiring along the way. Some were miniature Portuguese houses just like those inhabited by the living, only smaller. One looked like a small country estate in Minho, the northern part of the country. It had organza-trimmed curtains on the windows, fresh flowers on the iron windowsills, and the vault's number displayed at the entrance

door. I peeped through the glass doors of a few vaults. Framed pictures and vases with plastic flowers were on display, as well as crucifixes, rosaries, and images of Jesus, the Virgin Mary, and patron saints.

Contradictory feelings flooded my heart as I walked along the fence. How utterly callous to want to exchange my grandparents' crypt for cash. No life event, however traumatic, could justify my actions; those bones contained my own DNA. I felt inclined to call the divine and say a prayer as an apology for my intentions.

For now, however, I needed to keep my thoughts on practical matters. If I had the right key, my family bequest would be open in a few minutes. I had to be careful while trying the lock in case one of the spies, emerging like a phantom from the scorching afternoon heat, asked for the vault's papers. Checking left and right, I confirmed that only the dead populated my environs.

Minutes later, there it was: the Vila Viçosa marble vault I still remembered from the earlier visit with my father. The opaque glass door was enclosed by thin brass trim. Grandpa Augusto's name was inscribed on the top of the tomb: Augusto Luís Góis e Sousa. I saw the lock on the right side of the door. Once again, my handkerchief came in handy, for I needed a steady hand to turn the rusty key. With delicacy, I inserted it into the lock and tried to turn it: once, twice, three times. I persisted: ten, fifteen, twenty times. Slowly—thirty, forty, fifty times. But the key inexorably refused to budge. If it bent or broke in my hand, I would have another challenge. Professional help might be necessary, and where would I find a willing accomplice? After all, I was breaking into my own estate.

"I should have brought oil, just in case," I reproached myself aloud.

I drove back to Estoril exhausted from the day's emotions. The moon was out that evening and I sat on my terrace admiring the twilight by the sea. It was one of those nights redolent of jasmine and flowering vines and shrubs, nights when nightingales and frogs are heard in distant ponds. Relaxing in my chair, I absorbed the sounds of the cosmos hearing, as one, the rhythm of my own heart. The universe contained both living and dead as if they were one single entity keeping me company in my distress.

Then I went to bed. And as often happens in Latin American novels of

magical realism, a vision appeared to me. It wasn't a dream; it was an apparition. Soon after a period of deep sleep—I'm under the impression I even snored—I suddenly awoke as if disturbed by someone entering my bedroom. In the penumbra, I distinctly saw a young man sitting on the corner of my bed. His face looked familiar, as if he were a relative I had allowed to enter my private quarters. He looked superb, dressed in an attractive black suit with a white shirt and gray silk tie. His features were elongated with dark eyes and a long nose. His skin seemed transparent.

The figure was staring at me, intently, a half smile on his face. I didn't get flustered perhaps because the veiled smile was a personal introduction. I didn't dare move; my lovely apparition might disappear into thin air. At first, I had concentrated on the young man's face, but now, pensive, I turned my attention to his chest. In amazement, I saw that he carried a mandolin like the one grandpa had in his picture. A string instrument with a body shaped like a half pear, the back rounded and made of strips of wood from which emerged a long fingerboard. I have sufficient musical knowledge to know this to be a Neapolitan mandolin. Staggered, I saw the arms and the hands of the young man adjusting the mandolin as if readying to play. Virtually unable to breathe, I saw him carefully adjust the pick between his thumb and the first finger of the eight-string fingerboard. He played a few chords as if tuning the instrument. Then, suddenly, he was playing a solo only for me, his eyes focused on the four pairs of strings grouped together.

Incredibly, the musician knew my taste for these were eighteenth-century tunes typical of the Enlightenment. The music was pleasing to the ear, light, airy, and graceful. My musician played excerpts from three or four sonatas. It was as if I sat in a concert hall, the only difference being that there was no applause, only a brief interval between the melodies. I felt suspended, half on earth, half in heaven. A kindred spirit had found me and the feeling of comfort was indescribable. When I fell asleep again, my musician was still playing.

I woke up rejuvenated as photos of Grandpa Augusto dashed through my mind. A feeling of pride was palpable in one of those: grandpa standing among a group of musicians in their twenties, each one holding a string instrument. The picture had been taken in the São Bento apartment.

In the following days I chatted with elder relatives and asked details of grandpa's musical background. Uncle Raul, already in his nineties, told me that Grandpa Augusto had practiced classical music with simplicity but great virtuosity. He detailed how the mandolin was a popular instrument in some Lisbon quarters in grandpa's youth. My uncle recalled grandpa acknowledging how his soul filled with joy when he played. I had discovered why.

I didn't share my night vision with Uncle Raul; he would think I was out of my mind.

Comforted by recollections, it was time once again to redirect my attention to the possibility of selling the vault. I, therefore, paid a visit to City Hall a few days later. Equipped with newfound wisdom, I chose a cool day for my trip; public buildings in old Lisbon don't usually have air conditioning. After sitting for more than an hour with a *senha* sticking in my hand, a young red-haired woman shouted my number. She handed me a sheet of paper that listed the *requerimentos*, the required paper work, which I needed in order to acquire legal ownership of the possession I risked losing.

I rolled my eyes reading the Herculean list of instructions. The clerk seemed amused by my reaction as she touched her reddish curls with her agile fingers. She told me that I wouldn't be exiting the building without a photocopy of the list. I replied that I lived abroad and wasn't used to so much red tape. Then I frowned while asking, "Tell me, how is Simplex working for the Portuguese public at large?" My query amused the woman further. She said that the part of the program dealing with the dead was naturally taking forever to implement. As I left the building, my only hope was that God's mercy would grant me the pleasure of hearing my young musician play the mandolin again. Only for me, by my bedside.

It is hard to describe what made me pursue my quest in the following months. Above all loomed my desperate need for cash. As the weeks went by, various matters required my attention. I must figure out what to do with my bones if indeed I could sell and must empty the tomb. Once I returned to the cemetery grounds for advice. The public servant on duty told me that in her official capacity she must abstain from counseling *municipes*, the citizens of the municipality, on how to dispose of remains. The woman's perfume stayed with me all day long; it reminded me of the depths of *inferno*. When I

insisted on my quest, she told me to leave her alone.

Little by little, firsthand knowledge about the business of dying came to dominate my life. Stores catering to death proliferated near the cemetery and grabbed my attention. A few shops sold fresh flowers and elaborately shaped crowns to embellish funerals. Fair enough. Other shops displayed mortuary items on shelves along the walls: miniature coffins in various types of wood, ceramic pots for ashes, crosses big and small, and ribbons in shades of purple. For sale there were also *santinhos*, petite pictures of Jesus, *terços*, rosaries, and *medalhinhas*, small medals bearing the effigy of a martyr. A shop owner confided that it would have been lucrative to engage in the traffic of souls—as if trafficking in drugs—but he feared offending the dead.

“I need to ponder these words,” I heard myself saying.

Cremation had become a big deal and the choice of containers was plentiful. Some cremation pots didn’t disintegrate; they remained intact as if brand-new. There was something for everyone: pots decorated in the deceased’s favorite colors; pots shaped like elves; disposable pots that could be thrown in the sea for the fish to eat. For people who enjoyed displaying loved ones on the mantelpiece, there were pots designed to adorn a living room.

I got to know other professionals besides the shopkeepers. The ones in charge of the *crematório* confided they had to get used to the smell of burned flesh while cremation was under way. I met *coveiros*, the gravediggers, who buried and unburied bodies. During exhumations, these specialists separated decomposed brain from hair and muscle from bone. Talking once to one of these fellows, I noticed that one of his eyes was green and the other brown. Not only that, the eyes looked in opposite directions. How could one live like that, let alone handle such a job, I wondered. Assuming this man had an idea on how I could dispose of my bones, I called him later. To my amazement, his voice mail played *The Godfather* soundtrack. In an accent mimicking Italian, the message stated that he, the local mafia leader, was currently unavailable. Sharp, hoarse, guffaws could be heard in the background. Then came the end of the message: “I’ll return your call; if alive I’m sure you will answer.”

“I’ll never contact this guy again,” I murmured, alarmed.

I met the construction workers, a long list of authorized dealers in charge

of building, repairing, and cleaning the burial chambers. They built crypts and sepulchers, carved angels, and sculpted saints according to a client's taste. They used so-called precious stones such as *granito*, granite, in gorgeous dark tones, and milky marble in off-white and pale pink. Many of these builders made good money as intermediaries in the sale of vaults. The bribes they undoubtedly had to pay city officials in order to get or renew their licenses must have been high. In reality, these were the cemetery's real estate agents; they not only gave advice on best plots and prices but also on good deals in carving stone.

There were also bus drivers in charge of transporting people back and forth from the main entrance to the gravesites. Gardeners and street sweepers used witches' brooms to clean the grounds while security guards kept the cemetery under surveillance after the gates closed for the night. These groups joked together all the time, turning somber only when another funeral car entered the gates carrying a fresh corpse. Apparently, there had been quite a bit of vandalism at night in previous years. Hooligans enjoyed breaking into the cemetery and stealing keys from the headquarters. They opened crypts and removed corpses; only God knew their macabre intentions.

I couldn't help but notice that the business of dying was modernizing. Some of the up-to-date practices included placing cadavers in large drawers with open holes allowing air to circulate. Apparently fresh air facilitates decomposition. Notwithstanding the horrible smell involved, I liked the idea. It was more hygienic than a cadaver closed in a container for posterity. At one point, the state bureaucracy was so inefficient, the municipal government was thinking of turning cemeteries into private-public enterprises. However, progress in that direction was impeded by the fear of widespread corruption, including an array of new bribes.

My mission was accomplished months later when I carried a suitcase—a suitcase not a bag—of documents to the City Hall. I had visited several archives and spent considerable sums for official seals. But a task started is a task that needs completion. Upon depositing the thick file, I inquired about the lapse of time to obtain my *averbamento*, my vault's registered ownership.

The answer was vague.

With luck, as well as with the support of those souls watching over me,

my papers wouldn't get lost on their way to the cemetery's department in charge of codifying the burial certificates. This procedure completed, the head of management would send out a signed final verdict. The decision was of a public nature because, although the vault was private, it was located in a public space. Once released, the verdict needed to be published in the *Buletim Municipal*—a daily publication that all *municípes*, all citizens of the municipality, could read at leisure. Only after these steps would the verdict be final.

I decided to take it easy after the long ordeal. In fact, there was plenty of time to figure out what to do with my bones.

A handful of possibilities were emerging. One was to have the bones cremated and the ashes spread in the cemetery's designated location, *O Jardim das Cinzas*, the Ash Garden. But since I was dealing with the bones of people deceased long ago, the waiting list for cremation was not months but years. I had the option of immediately removing the bones to a less expensive cemetery where they would be placed in rented drawers. Burial drawers are public, not private dwellings, with the fees requiring only the renewal of state licenses at specific intervals. The transportation procedure, however, was comparable to a second funeral for each set of bones and required the use of several funeral cars that would cost a small fortune.

As I debated these options, I had succeeded in opening my tomb. One day, as if by miracle, the oil I had carefully brought along in a tiny green jar did its work. I stood at the vault's threshold as if entering the São Bento apartment. Grandma Emília's mark was at once noticeable. Each coffin was covered with a white embroidered linen cloth, still impeccably ironed after decades. Each had a mother-of-pearl rosary lying on its lid. The light of day breaking through the entrance conjured up Dante's *The Divine Comedy*. Circle 4, Canto 7 of *The Inferno* refers to the differences between avarice, prodigality, and the goddess Fortuna—she who delights in changing man's circumstances.

My last undertaking was a stop at the building for burial codification. It was located in Alcântara, near the Tejo River. Since I was leaving the country for a few months once again—my chilling quests and cemetery's digressions would soon become a distant recollection—I must be sure my dossier had arrived. After a few minutes' discussion, the head of the department went inside to look for the file. Later, he emerged to say that my records were judi-

ciously stacked together with hundreds of others. No, there was no chance the procedure could be sped up in the next week. But the size of my dossier suggested that the formalities had been met. One day, he was certain, I was going to receive a registered letter with the much sought-after signature and stamp.

Near the stairway I noticed a few armchairs in a circle, perhaps placed there for people in my circumstances. I plunked down in one of the chairs to rest for a while. "The unbearable summer heat is getting to me again," I whispered while sipping some water.

Looking around, I noticed hanging on the walls several huge black-and-white photographs of angels carved in stone. The colossal figures gazed towards the heavens with nurturing smiles and wings opened like protective cloaks. A few captions were under the pictures. One of them suggested that cremation had been reintroduced in Portugal after the 1974 Carnation Revolution. Cremation was promoted as practical since space in the nation's cemeteries had become scarce. A string of zeroes flashed through my head: if terrain was limited, then the current value of vaults, including mine, must be high. Grandma's tenderness came to mind, and like a supplicant, I asked for insight in my hour of trouble.

That afternoon I decided to cremate my bones, regardless of the number of years my name might linger in the maze of the cemetery's waiting list.

Back home in Estoril for the evening, I once again sat admiring the twilight from my terrace. As night drew over the sky a few constellations emerged, compelling me to match their forms with names I had memorized in school. It was enthralling to look up and see bright light in organized forms, showing me that the world made sense after all.

This was the night my apparition took hold of me for the second time. Again, the young man appeared at the end of my bed. Once more, breathless, I woke up with the sensation of a relative entering my bedroom. As before, I wasn't frightened by the supernatural intrusion. I had lived through the previous marvel; I only wished for the music to be as thrilling as before. Moving my eyes from the young face to the mandolin, I noticed that my musician wore suspenders. He delicately positioned the instrument against his chest, away from his neck. Then he placed the pick between his right fingers and

strummed a few chords to check the tuning.

The compositions I heard that night were, again, deliriously enjoyable, radiant, and playful. Scarlatti had created them for string instruments, which displayed his Iberian magnificence. He was called *Escarlate* in Portuguese, Scarlet, the most flaming of reds. Very appropriate. Lying in bed and enjoying the music, I observed my young man vigorously stirring his fingers backward and forward. The fingers were as palpable as this page, moving fast between the four pairs of strings and changing constantly to alter the pitch of the notes. The tremolos were bright and affirmative, as if from another planet. It was the realm of the divine, of contemplation, of reassurance.

As happened the first time, my instrumentalist took a brief pause between pieces, and then he started playing again. He serenaded me for quite a while, and just before I fell asleep, I heard a few compositions that had a different tone. They were more melancholic, lyrical, and even sad. My musician was playing Carlos Seixas, the eighteen-century Portuguese composer. During his years in Lisbon, Scarlatti had met the Portuguese virtuoso, the latter being credited with introducing the great master to his characteristic southern European style.

Transfixed by the Carlos Seixas' compositions, I was forced to accept the presence of death in my own life.

Eventually, I did receive the title to my burial chamber by mail. By sheer coincidence I was back in Estoril. From start to finish the process had taken several years, and I had worked hard to earn the deed. I read the letter with a modicum of anxiety. The text was as terrifying as the whole business itself. The first line read in a characteristically archaic language: *Bearing in mind the resolution dated of August...engraved in procedure number nineteen thousand and twenty-three, slash....* The text continued in this vein for half a page. But, at the end, there it was: the petitioner was entitled to the crypt's property.

"This is a moment worth recalling," I said.

After the event, I went back to headquarters and placed my bones on the cemetery's waiting list for cremation. I bought white cloth bags for the bones' transportation and chose urns for the ashes.

The clerk whom I had originally talked to informed me that, as he had suspected all along but didn't disclose, I needed to get the so-called *certidão de*

teor, or Parentage Certificate, from City Hall. If I wanted to sell the tomb and remove the ashes from the cemetery's grounds after cremation, it was mandatory that I establish blood lineage with my deceased relatives. A fresh Ariadne thread complicated my progress. If the voluminous, dusty books stated that the corpses had been placed in *perpétuo lugar*, perpetual residence, then the ashes couldn't be removed from their grounds. Therefore, their everlasting residence couldn't be altered at my whim.

Home or abroad, my ancestors and I are thus joined in unexpected ways. The tie is permanent; it will endure for all my days on earth. I can either accept this fact or prepare for annihilation. No doubt, I must exercise a certain degree of temperance. "Such solitude!" I'm starting to whisper once in a while.

But will my nocturnal apparition continue to keep me company? If unable to sell the vault, at least I can have my nights brightened by music. Instead of classical melodies, I'm ready for Neapolitan songs, tunes traditionally played in the streets of southern Italy in times of celebration. I cannot say, for sure, that I will be able to recognize the young face of my visions. Grandpa Augusto was already over sixty when I was born. But this musician is someone who loves me despite my frailties. How sublime! A spirit appearing in my sleep to play enchanting music for me alone when I need it most.

I often think how I wish I had heard Grandpa Augusto playing the mandolin during his lifetime. If only once. I regret not knowing that side of him. I often contemplate the smiles in my grandparents' photograph and sense their depth of feeling for each other. The smile is the same on both lips, and those lips show a form of intimacy I need to discover. But I am certain of one thing: Grandma Emilia heard Grandpa Augusto practice the mandolin. And those were melodies of love, submission, and admiration.

I need to settle down with those memories.

