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Pilgrimage

Jennifer Galvão
SUNY Geneseo

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Pilgrimage

The place where the miracles happened is totally paved over. Everything is clean and painted white—probably for viewing purposes. You couldn't miss a miracle, standing out against all the white. I try to imagine how it must have been in 1917, but all I have to go on are the pictures from the pamphlets, printed in fifteen different languages—*Welcome to Fatima*.

As a child, this was always my favorite religious story; the luminous lady who appeared on the thirteenth day of every month in the Cova da Iria fields. I liked that the Virgin Mary had appeared in Portugal, where my dad was from. I liked that she had appeared to children. I liked the smallness and dirtiness of the shepherd children, with their baleful orphan eyes and their musical names—*Jacinta, Francisco, Lucia*. I used to mouth their names and study their picture, printed on a laminated prayer card—two young girls and a boy in black and white, very young. I guess I thought it would mean more to me than it does.

Towering fifty feet above our heads is a modern, stylized crucifix made of red plastic. Lego Jesus on His Lego Cross (cross sold separately). We stand and look at it for a while. If it's meant to inspire something in me, it doesn't succeed.

Cutting through all the white concrete is a path of dark gray tile, very smooth. People travel along it on their knees in scattered, shuffling clumps. Some carry rosary beads. Others wear kneepads. You can follow their slow progress down the concrete slope, around the chapel, and up to the sanctuary. We watch them knee painfully past us, lips moving silently.

My brother doesn't believe me when I tell him that some of these people have walked here from their homes, hundreds of miles away, but my dad confirms my story.

"They come from all over Portugal," Dad says. "They walk and then when they reach Fatima, they go on their knees. Your grandmother came once when she was younger."

"Is that why Vóvó's knees are so messed up?"

"No," Dad says. "That's just because she's old."

After we pray in the chapel, we wait on a long line to buy waxy, overpriced candles. There's a woman begging amid the candles. Dad hands her a couple Euros. It's a good place to beg, he concedes. Prime real estate.

Another line, then, in front of an enormous pyre of open flame. We wait our turn to step forward, hold our hands above the heat, and touch our wicks to the candles already burning there. Then I find an open slot to wedge my candle in amid the others, leave it to melt stringy and white into the fire.

You are supposed to stop and say a prayer, but I am being crowded and my brother's candle won't light, so I have to help him, and then we are moving away from the pyre.

I wonder if they collect the melted wax and use it to make new candles, recycling people's offerings to the fire. I don't know if that's how wax works, and I don't ask. I like the idea, the circularity of it. It makes me feel filled up in a way the rest of this place doesn't.

We've come to Portugal because my grandparents can't come home.

Or maybe that's me being egocentric. Maybe their home is Portugal. My father was born there. When he was a baby, they moved to America without him. He followed later, once they were settled, and Portugal followed them, too. It lingered in the dim wood-paneled kitchen that always smelled like foreign food. The hanging glass lamp that rattled when low-flying airplanes from LaGuardia passed by overhead. The crinkly, plastic-covered couches. The heavy accents. The tilde over the *z* in our last name.

Probably, they missed it. That's something I've never thought about before. Once they retired, they started spending the summers in Portugal. Five years ago, they went to spend the summer and found that they couldn't come back. The doctors said it wasn't a good idea. My grandpa's Alzheimers is too heavy to carry across an ocean. So now we are coming to them.

Murtosa is a small town on the coast. The roads are twisty, storybook-narrow. Everything is tiled and patterned and bright. The last time we visited, my grandparents were only there for the summer. I was ten and terrorized by the huge number of stray dogs roaming the little farm town. I was scared to leave the gated yard. Now, I dread having to go inside.

I am afraid to see what's happened to my grandpa. Even before they left, before he got so bad, I didn't like to be around him. I felt embarrassed for him. It felt wrong to nod at his senseless, circular stories and feign interest—humoring him like a child. That was five years ago. I think we are all expecting the worst.

Dad calls it our Portuguese pessimism—expect the worst, and at least you're never disappointed. Mourn when the boats go out, in the event that they don't come back.

"It's the kind of trip you have to take sometimes," Mom tells us in the airport. "It will mean so much to your grandma."

Mom is always looking for moral lessons to deliver. She tackles the world like a scholar annotating a classic novel, pulling out major themes and underlining significant exchanges. Usually I understand it; I am always trying to make things mean more than they do. This time I quietly wish that she wouldn't voice her reluctance. I would prefer to pretend that this is a pleasure trip, sixteen days spent in the home my Dad grew up in. It's fifteen minutes from the beach. That's what I tell my friends. Not the rest of it.

As we sit on the beach, fifteen minutes from the house, Dad points to a buoy out in the water, near the horizon. If you drew a line straight across the ocean, he says, we'd hit the Jersey Shore. This is an ocean we know. We're just on the wrong side of it.

We watch an old, brightly-colored fishing boat come back to shore, dragging an enormous net behind it beneath the surf. That's something I like about Portugal—history is so physically present. We walk along the waterline to watch the boat come ashore because Dad says it's worth seeing.

The sea starts to sizzle with panicked life, silver bright, as a tractor wearies its way towards the dunes, pulling the boat up the beach. The tractor grumbles and lows like the fleets of oxen that used to pull these nets ashore.

Overhead, a spiraling cumulus of seagulls is forming. My brothers yell and duck and throw stones at them, but they part and come together again, hungry. The tractor pulls the boat and the boat pulls a net, wriggling with life, up the shore.

Dad says that this used to be an incredibly dangerous job. Portuguese wives would stand on the shore in their mourning clothes, weeping and tearing their clothes as they waved their husbands off to sea, a kind of pre-mourning ritual. I imagine they hoped that the tears they shed, the clothes they rent, would stave off death for another day. I imagine their tears as food for a hungry thing, salt water offerings to the sea.

The fish come slithering up the shore, caught.

My grandfather isn't as bad as I feared. Mostly he sits on a lawn chair in the open garage in his blue-striped pajamas, vacant but content. If you smile at him, he will smile back. It's probably just instinct, but he likes it if you nod along as he speaks incoherent Portuguese. The only phrase I recognize is *esta bien* over and over again—it's good.

I smile and nod and say, "Yeah. *Bien*." When a fly lands on his arm, I shoo it away.

We sit for hours, him watching the clothesline sway in the wind, me watching the patch of skin between his socks and his blue pajama pants. I am mourning him before he has gone.

My grandma hangs laundry and picks lemons in the backyard. She limps badly, up and down the stairs, as she takes my grandpa to the bathroom. At night, I sit in the kitchen with her and watch her rub medication onto the swollen rounds of her knees. Their little brown dog runs the length of the driveway, back and forth, yapping furiously as two olive-skinned boys lead a horse down the street.

I like to be here. I am not as sad as I thought I would be. It's only when I think about leaving that I feel sad, thinking about the two of them sitting side by side in their armchairs. Him, talking nonsense as she rubs her knees, her, cooking elaborate meals, then cutting the food into little bites for him, watching him eat in silence. He can't leave the house and she can't leave him alone, so they stay home now. I think she must be lonely.

My grandma's English is still very good. She asks questions about college and shows me funny videos on Facebook. She marvels at how tall my brother David has gotten. She protests when my mom tries to do the dishes.

"Susan, you don't come to do more work. This is your vacation."

My mom dismisses this and starts soaping up a pan. "You work too hard already, Lucinda," she says. "Relax for a couple minutes."

Vóvó doesn't put up a fight, which shows how much her legs must be hurting her. She peeks into the living room to make sure my grandfather is still in his armchair, watching a soccer game with my brothers. He mostly sits quietly, but when Ronaldo scores a goal and my brothers cheer, he does too. I wonder how much he is understanding, how much is muscle memory.

Mom is trying to convince Vóvó to get some help around the house. A neighbor already comes twice a week to do some cleaning and mind my grandfather while Vóvó runs to the grocery store, but Mom insists that she needs more help.

"What if you fall in the garden and can't get help?" she asks. "What if Dad falls on the stairs? He's too heavy for you to catch him. The doctor said you need to rest your knees or they won't get better. How will you ever get any rest when you're following him around all day? You can't even leave the house."

"I don't mind work. I like to take care of him," Vóvó says.

"You've got to take care of yourself, too," Mom protests.

"Is not forever," Vóvó says. "Then I will come home."

She says that a lot. It surprised me the first time I heard it, the bluntness of it. She doesn't say it sadly or hopefully. It's just a fact. Her Portuguese pessimism. Things are deteriorating quickly. That's the reason we're here, after all, after five years of baseball schedules and college orientations and being too swamped at work to take off so much time.

There's a noise from the living room. My little brother Eddie comes to the door. He's wearing the Portuguese soccer jersey he bought at the market. He's worn it every day since he bought it, despite our mockery.

"I think Vóvó needs to go to the bathroom," he says, only twelve, a little bit embarrassed.

Vóvó gets to her feet, knees bending unwillingly.

"Let me," Mom protests, but Vóvó shakes her head and limps to the door.

"Is not forever," she says again.

There's a little glass gazebo built on the site where the apparitions are said to have occurred. It houses a small altar and a fleet of benches made of light colored wood. We find a free space to fit our sweaty American bodies, and then we sit. Mom prays. Maybe the rest of my family does, too. I don't know for sure. To ask would be to betray myself. Surely, if I really believed, I wouldn't be asking at all. *Is this just muscle memory for you, too?*

I put my head down, play-acting at something I don't understand. I don't pray, though I wish I could. I think I would find it comforting. But I am distracted—first by my brother's fidgeting, then by the *shhh-shhh* sound of kneepads on the tile floor.

I crack my eyes and watch an old man round the altar on his knees, back bowed, lips moving above his rosary beads. He moves slowly and with obvious effort. I wonder if these last few meters, the last bit of his crawling pilgrimage, are the easiest or the hardest part. I try to imagine how fervently and wholly you must believe in something to walk so far, to crawl on your knees across the white pavement, but it's not something I can understand. So instead I think about how sore his knees must be.

When my brothers ask Vóvó about Fatima, her hand moves to her knee with a wince, like she's remembering.

"I went with my church," she says. "Your daddy was very sick when he was a baby. I prayed for him. I promised if he got well, I would make the trip to Fatima."

We all look at Dad, surprised. He didn't tell us that part. He grimaces.

"It worked," he jokes.

"It works," Vóvó agrees.