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TRANSLATOR'S NOTE TO ADELAIDE FREITAS'S NOVEL SMILING IN THE DARKNESS

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ADELAIDE FREITAS

“Call me Isabel.”

Had she wished, Adelaide Freitas could have opened her novel *Smiling in the Darkness* with this sentence in English, because as a scholar of Herman Melville's epic *Moby-Dick* she knew the famous line “Call me Ishmael” that opens its first chapter.

And just as Melville's mysterious survivor Ishmael relates his account of Captain Ahab's obsessive pursuit of the whale that had severed his leg, so too Isabel narrates *Smiling in the Darkness* about her mother's struggles to avenge the amputation by her own father of her dreams and of the only family lifestyle she'd known.

Notably, both narrators' names share most of the same letters – I-S-A-E-L – and in the same order. Further, in *Smiling in the Darkness*, Isabel's aptly-named emigrant grandfather Fontes was the font of his family's tribulations for decades to come, starting in the 1920s after a visit to his native Azores to find a bride to marry and take back to Massachusetts.

As a self-made man, Manuel Fontes prospered and advanced in New Bedford, while his uneducated wife kept their home, bore his children, and turned a blind eye to his adulteries in return for an increasingly wealthy life and the respectability of their marriage's false façade.

Then disaster struck when one of Fontes' mistresses insisted he evict his wife and children from his mansion, and install her there; his family returned to their native village on northeastern São Miguel. This parallels Hagar and Ishmael's being expelled by Abraham except that, unlike in the Bible, exile was to the middle of an ocean rather than a desert. Over the decades this expulsion precipitated one family member's career-ending literal near-amputation as well as a succession of emotional ones – Freitas even had Isabel use the term “amputate.”

However, unlike the whale's victim, the wounded Mrs. Fontes was no obsessed Captain Ahab. Although illiterate, she had learned of a wider modern world, progress and humanism in America, where women enjoyed greater legal and cultural rights than in Portugal.

Thus, upon returning home she would lead a more independent life than the village women who had never left, she would think more rationally and less superstitiously about natural and physical phenomena (including frequent major seismic activity), and behave more pragmatically in relation to societal rules.

She went unchaperoned about town and occasionally to the island's main city, refused to wear the widow's weeds expected of divorcées, capably husbanded her own money, refused to be cowed as others were by authority figures like the schoolmaster or village priest, and dared to teach her grandchildren that God lies within each person – a deity of tolerance and joy, not hellfire and damnation.

It was instead her daughter who – upon being suddenly stripped of her dreams of studying to become a teacher, of having her own piano, pursuing her various artistic inclinations, and generally living the wealthy lifestyle she'd known in New Bedford – most keenly felt the consequences of the figurative amputation, becoming as obsessed with her lost money and materialism as Ahab had been with the whale that took his leg.

After marrying a local man and giving birth to five daughters (one of whom, the frail tot Serafina, soon joined the seraphs) and a son, she found herself pregnant again late in life, suffering complications and illness that necessitated medical treatment as well as money to pay for it.

However, in a society still largely based on subsistence agriculture, hunting and fishing, cash was scarce, so following daughter Xana's difficult birth in late October 1949 – only days after an airliner had slammed into massive nearby Pico da Vara, killing all on board – and postpartum complications, the following April (“the cruellest month”) she decided to return to her native America long enough to earn sufficient money from factory work to put her family on sounder financial footing, leaving her children's upbringing to their Papá and both grandmothers.

However, six months later her husband joined her in New England to earn even more money for the family – and over the years she would successively force their two eldest daughters to come work in American factories upon completing their basic schooling on São Miguel (while their only son came to find a job for himself, and obtain a visa card for his fiancée, since employment opportunities for both in Azores had worsened).

Esta é uma edição que me toca profundamente. Falar do romance da minha amiga Adelaide Freitas é sempre especial. E eis que o mesmo, finalmente, vê a luz do dia em inglês, para os aços-descendentes e para o mundo da língua inglesa em geral. Um abraço para a tradutora Katharine Baker, com quem já tive o prazer de trabalhar em vários projetos de tradução, e cujo texto sobre a tradução de *Sorriso por Dentro da Noite*, de Adelaide Freitas.

Com o título de *Smiling in the Darkness*, este livro que que sai na série *Bellis Azorica* da Tagus Press dirigida pelos Professores Mário Pereira e Onésimo Almeida, aqui está o romance da Adelaide Freitas que merece ser lido pelos vossos filhos e netos.

Abraços, redobrados para o meu amigo de sempre Vamberto Freitas.

Diniz

The three youngest daughters were raised by their grandmothers, especially their maternal *Vovó*. Many years passed before their parents felt financially able to return home, *Mamã* believing she had at last vanquished her whale of money and materialism.

But while still in America she'd begun planning grandiose renovations to their house in the Azores, and aspired to a status comparable to the birthright she'd long ago enjoyed in Massachusetts. She insisted on outdoing any neighbor's challenge to her economic supremacy; she wanted her family to be the Joneses with whom no other villager could keep up, let alone surpass, an obsession leading inevitably to further familial “amputations.”

Like *Moby-Dick*'s Ishmael, the cipher Isabel lived to tell the tale. However, by her allusion in English on the first page of the original Portuguese edition of *Smiling in the Darkness* to the opening line “April is the cruellest month” from T.S. Eliot's classic poem “The Wasteland,” Isabel signaled that she had survived to become erudite, even if the other relatives lived in a familial and cultural wasteland, damaged by the latest amputation for at least another generation. ■

