“Call me Isabel.”

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 divortees, 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 ditty 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 figuration of 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 Serafinha, 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 Xaiana’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 post-partum 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 grandparents.

The three youngest daughters were raised by their maternal grandmothers, especially their maternal Joana. Many years passed before their parents felt financially able to return home, Mamãe 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.■