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Online issues

BY HUGO DOS SANTOS

His flawless routine. The tea pot whistle: the slow pour: the towel draped over his head: his face over the bowl: the steam emanating. A home-remedy to soothe the pain. At some point in the night, me alone in my bed, his screaming started. Ai. Ai. Ai. Ai. Ai. Pause. Silence. The dark. Ai. I startled and the small of my nine-year-old back felt cold. Ai. I wondered if the neighbors could hear him.

Embarrassed. Ai. Ai. Ai. I remembered his tales at the athletic club in downtown Lisbon where we went to shower before we had our own tub at home. Past the Greco-Roman wrestlers, beyond a ring I was too small to peer over, posters of champions past and present. He'd point to the wall at the faded papers with the crumpled corners. *Neno won the title in '41. I was his sparring partner. Another one, In '32 I beat Amadeu. He was champion in '36.* A life in memories he'd forgotten, mostly, except for the highlights. After so many years the remembering was hard. He searched for dates.

Backtracked, corrected himself. We walked through and familiar faces said hello. He shook hands, his shoulders slumped. They didn't know his pain. At night again. Whistle: pour: towel: bowl: steam. Then later the screams, returned, echoes of punishment his face had absorbed from men who didn't remember his name. *I almost had a shot in '38. Eduardo broke his hand and a replacement was needed.* Pause. His mind shuffling through the past. *Money changed hands. They gave someone else the fight.*

All those years later I didn't know what hurt him more — never getting a shot or the nightly burning that stabbed at his face. Ai. Ai. Ai. Ai. I learned that the punch doesn't always hurt in the moment. I waited for the screaming to start again. Ai. Ai. I knew his hands were over his face. My grandmother in bed next to him all those years. Her devotion not enough to heal him. Ai. Ai. Ai. A few summers later, when I returned home for a family visit, my uncle drove on a highway outside Lisbon, pointed right and up at a hillside cemetery in the distance. *Your grandfather is buried there.*

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