

## "Serious Gratitude and Lighthearted Love"

Curtis St. Pierre

This story begins at the end. His name was Sabino Pacheco. On Sunday we got the call that he had died. At the age of 73, he had lost his battle with cancer. Now it was Tuesday, and so I went with my family to pay our respects at his wake. At the funeral home, my mom pointed out a couple of old pictures of her and siblings with Sabino. Seeing these pictures made me remember how I always thought the Pachecos were related to us. It was natural enough. For most of my childhood I saw Sabino and his family once every few months at my grandparents' house. I figured that they were our cousins somehow, like everyone else I saw there every so often.

You see, my mom's family and Sabino's both came from the island of São Miguel. It's the largest of the Portuguese Azorean Islands, but still just a tiny volcanic rock in the middle of the Atlantic. The same is true for many Azoreans in Massachusetts, including a few of our own dining hall staff. One street in my hometown has three Portuguese bakeries and a Portuguese restaurant. When many of the families around you lived on the same island for centuries before coming to the United States, you get used to having a lot of cousins.

Later in life I learned that Sabino actually wasn't my cousin, but rather something much different. Fifty years ago, when my grandparents came to America with virtually nothing, it was Sabino's parents who took them in. For months, my grandfather spent as many hours as he could working at Plymouth Rubber, forty miles away. My grandmother did whatever she could to earn

a little extra money, like babysitting. They lived in the Pachecos' home. Thanks to the help they received from the Pachecos, my grandparents could save enough money to establish themselves and send for their children, whom they'd had to leave behind in Portugal. It's a singular feeling to look at someone and realize that you wouldn't be standing there without his family's charity.

It was with the memory of that charity that I paid my respects to Sabino at his wake. I kept it in mind as I met his family in the receiving line. I thought about it that night when I went to bed and when I got up early the next morning for the funeral. From the funeral home I carried my gratitude to the church, the cemetery, and finally to the restaurant for the repast.

As we wrapped up the meal, Sabino's niece Margarida came to our table. She stood there some twenty minutes chatting about family matters. It was the sort of conversation I'd heard a hundred times before. The only difference was the context, which was probably why I noticed it: For the first time all day, Margarida smiled. It was a smile tinged with sadness, but it brought me back to all the visits at Vavó's house, with Margarida, Sabino, and others laughing around the kitchen table and having a good time.

Now, those who know me best can tell you that sometimes I take myself a little too seriously. When I started learning Portuguese, I respectfully referred to my grandmother as "Senhora" for weeks. One day she finally told me to knock it off and call her "Vavó," like "grandma." I can get wrapped up in formality and decorum to the point where I start to miss the bigger picture.

That's exactly what happened in this case, though I didn't realize it until Margarida came over to our table. That was when I realized that I was wrong, or rather that I had been right all

along. It's not that I used to think the Pachecos were our cousins because I didn't know any better. I thought they were our cousins because they're family. They had been our benefactors in the past, and I was right to be grateful for that. But thankfulness wasn't the root of the bond between us; it was love. It was the sort of love that ignores past debts; the sort that makes you rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep. We might not have been related, but we were certainly family. I had forgotten that because I was too busy seeing the Pachecos as benefactors. I was too caught up in the serious business of being grateful and forgot to loosen up enough to love and be loved.