

ENI FURTADO HAS NEVER STOPPED RUNNING

(novel excerpt)

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I started to look it over. Piece by piece.

There were just a few scraps of hair remaining. And it was still black. And still curly. What was missing, Alcirita, was the shine. How shiny that hair once was, girl, when he used to comb it with Brilliantine and go out to tango with Mama. And now all that was left of that hair was a lock of nothing, and it had all come loose. Because whatever it is that keeps hair sticking to the head was no longer there. The skin it grows from, the part that's attached to the bone, wasn't there anymore. And his skull was gray, and it was empty. It didn't seem like there was anything left in the mouth hole, I mean, any part of what we used to see when he laughed with us. And he laughed a lot, I'm telling you. A lot.

Just think: I'd never seen him dead. Like Kuki always says, we were very young then, and they didn't let us take part in anything so we wouldn't suffer. Not at the wake and not at the funeral. Nothing. So, that day when we cleaned out the graves was the first time I saw him after so many years.

His suit must have been black. Judging from what was left there in the coffin. It was the only one he had when he was alive. I remember. No one called it just "a suit." The thing was "Papa's suit." And now it was like a layer of dust with holes. Thick dust, somewhere between dark gray, light gray, and brown. And black. In some places there was nothing, and you could see through to the bone. Gray. White. Like chalk. And looking him up and down, from his feet to his head, I mean the other way around, from his head to his feet, I realized something: he wasn't so tall. My brothers and sisters and I, when we described him, always said he was tall and skinny. Skinny, yes. Well, that day he was skinnier than ever. And he'd been that way for a long time. But his height: do you think flesh makes people taller? I mean, the flesh on the bottom of our feet, for example? I don't know. And his shoes, which were black leather, still looked like they were in one piece, even though they seemed very old. With no shoelaces. The laces weren't there. Isn't that strange? And his hands were folded together on his chest. How was it possible for them to remain so still, without falling to his sides? I don't know. But there they were. That same gray color. And you should've seen his teeth. He had quite a few teeth, and some of them had silver fillings. And at that moment, suddenly, believe me, I remembered one time when he went to the dentist. You know, in those days it was different: people out in the country or in small towns didn't go to the dentist, not too often, let's say. And I'm telling you, I remember that day. He went with his face all swollen, and when he came back it was even more so. It was summer. I remember it was summer because I was playing on the sidewalk with my sister Kuki. Later I asked her about it, but no, she doesn't recall a thing, no way. The two of us were standing at the front door, and he walked out saying that we should brush our teeth every day so we wouldn't have to go to the dentist. And he told Kuki to pull her dress down, that it wasn't nice to let her panties show. We both started to laugh. And Kuki pulled her dress down. And he walked away. The dress was lavender, sleeveless. One of those silver fillings must have been the one they put on him that day.

There was a smell, too. Don't think it was a rotten smell. Just imagine, after so many years in there, I don't think there was anything rotten left. Everything was kind of dry. Not a

worm, nothing. Nothing left to keep the worms hanging around, either. They must've left ages ago. But it smelled very, very old. Like a basement, like . . . I don't know what. Don't think it's so easy to describe the kind of smell it was.

I racked my brains, trying to imagine my papa's skeleton all covered with flesh and skin again. I don't mean moving, or sleeping, or breathing. But – how can I explain? – newly dead, you know? I tried and tried. But I couldn't. Seeing him like that, all bones, I mean *nothing* but bones, was very powerful. So powerful that I couldn't fool myself; I couldn't pretend I was seeing anything else.

So I thought, he's the way he is. It is what it is. It's whatever is there. This is what I've got. I can't invent anything. The smell is a corpse smell, the smell of a corpse that's no longer there, because my papa isn't even a corpse anymore. For me a corpse needs to have flesh. Bodies aren't the same as bones, even though they both start with "b." It smells like years. Like time. And if there's no flesh or blood or intestines or skin, there's no sickness left, that's what I say. Not even the sickness that killed him. Just a skeleton dressed in clothes that were barely there, and no sickness, either: in other words, healthy. And what is that thing? What kind of thing can a person see like that, like what I'm describing to you? It's an ordinary thing. Not sick or anything. Ordinary. Clean, clean, and right there, very, very close. So then I gathered my courage. I worked up my nerve and stuck in my hand.

I didn't think about it, really, although I had been thinking about all the things I told you about before. But my hand went in on its own, how can I explain? My right hand. Because in my left hand I held the bag. And my purse was hanging from my left shoulder. So it was more comfortable to stick my right hand into the coffin. The first thing I touched was that part of the holes that are still there when someone's nose is gone. It's really just one hole. What's left is a single hole, I mean. And there's a sort of very delicate wall in between that divides it. But it's really just one hole, and it's very big. It's enormous, you know? You don't want to believe that the skeleton they showed us in school is exactly what your papa has inside his body. And your mama. And that in the end, it's all that's left of them. And of everybody. Of the body, I mean. Because the soul, the spirit, is something else. And I know that my papa's spirit is watching me now, and that day in the cemetery he was there, too, watching me stick my fingers in his nose. I bet it even made him laugh, because, I'm telling you, he loved to laugh. And how. You have no idea. Sometimes when something didn't strike other people funny, he laughed anyway. It was as if he knew how to see the other side, the funny side. It was as if he caught that side of things. He was nutty, my papa. Just like yours. Your father liked to laugh, too.

Well, okay. So I poked my finger in the hole. First on one side, then the other, because nothing moved and nobody complained, either. Nobody told me I couldn't do it and no one got angry. No one was there to tell me I was crazy. But just in case, you know what I did? I peeked out to see if the gravedigger was around or if my sisters were nearby. And they weren't. I didn't see anybody. The only thing I did see were gray tombs, the tombstones, I mean, and the sky, which was covered with clouds. Clouds that were grayer than the tombstones. But they weren't rain clouds; they were filled with cold. They're different, you see. Well, I'm not sure you know the difference. And you could see some little flowers, some fresh, others dried out. It was strange I hadn't seen them before, that I hadn't paid attention when we were walking toward the family tomb.

So I returned to the skeleton. And there was hardly any time left of the half hour they'd allowed us, let me tell you. Because, like I said, half an hour is nothing when it comes to a thing like that.

What puzzled me most was his clothing. The fabric. So I touched it, and guess what: it fell apart. It was practically dust, like I told you. There were scraps, but no whole pieces. Then I put my hand on that little bit of hair, and it moved: it scattered; it turned into dust. And what I'm about to say now – I'm telling you because – well, I don't know, really, why I'm telling you. But since we're on the subject, it's better not to lie or hide anything, Alcirita. Because no matter how much people may deny it, the thing is, hiding is the same as lying. Some people want you to think that hiding things isn't the same as lying, but nobody really believes that. The hand, I was saying. The hand. How tempting that was. In fact both hands caught my attention. Because they were together and looked like a single thing. Quickly I glanced out to see if the gravedigger was on his way over, but no, nothing, so I stuck my hand in the coffin again and placed it on my papa's hands. Slowly. Gently, gently. And then what was going to happen, happened: almost all the little pieces of his fingers, the little finger bones, scattered and fell off to both sides. A few remained on his chest, which was partly moth-eaten fabric and partly holes. And through those holes you could easily see his ribs. On top of the cloth, on the lower part of his lapels, was the little bone from his pinky finger. Let me think – the left one. I think. With something kind of strange that looked like a fingernail. I think it must have been something else, just because so many years had gone by. I said: this is mine. And I grabbed it. And the strange little thing fell off, leaving me with the pinky bone.

Holding a little bone from the fingertip of your father's hand in your own hand might not sound like a big deal. But not everything is the way it seems. Remember the old saying – appearances are deceiving? Well, I didn't have the strength to convince myself of something that wasn't so. It *was* a big deal to be holding my papa's little pinky bone. And even more of a big deal was having my papa altogether, right there in front of me.

I squeezed it a little with my fingers to see if it would fall apart, if it would crumble into dust, if it would break in two, but none of that happened. It was grayish white. And a little rough on one end, the end that had been connected to the other bone, the one that joins up with still another one. You see, those ends are sort of round. Well, this one was a little rougher.

The smell was still there. I thought it was coming from the bones, so I brought the little bone up to my nose and sniffed it. Once, twice. But no. No. That little bone didn't smell like anything. And it was nice and clean, really it was. So I thought: I'll take it.

And just then I felt a huge – how can I say it? – wave of tenderness, a desire to hug my papa, but if I had hugged what was left of him, it would've gotten all stirred up and scattered everywhere. Of course that's what was going to happen when we put him in the bag. But while he was still there, it was better to leave him alone. So I said: I'm going to give the little bone a kiss. And I kissed it. But before I did, I ran the piece of his finger along both my cheeks. And against both my eyelids. And my forehead. And my neck. And then I kissed it. And since there were already tears in my eyes, the bone got a little bit wet. When I saw that it didn't fall apart even though it was wet and all, I decided to suck on it. And when I was sucking part of the tip, can you imagine? In walked the gravedigger. I was so frightened he might see me sucking on my papa's finger, or rather my papa's finger bone, I stuck the whole thing in my mouth. Ay, Alcirita, you don't know. You just don't know. The guy looks at me and says, "Ready, señora?" Yes, I told him with my mouth full. Not very full, because the bone fit on one side, like where you'd put a hard candy. But the guy must've realized I was eating something. He looked at me, and I played dumb. He probably thought it was a piece of gum. Or a candy. And I told him, Yes, all done. The gravedigger had brought a kind of big metal spoon, with a thick metal pole; you could see it was heavy, and he rested both of them on the ground, leaning against the wall. He turned

around to grab them, and I took advantage of that to steal another little bit of finger, slightly bigger, that had fallen off to one side. And in a split second I popped it into my boot. Since I was wearing a skirt that day, it was easy. Hold the bag open, he said to me. And I held it with both hands, and you'll never guess what he started to do: he broke up the longer bones with the metal pole, I swear to God. And he filled the shovel and began to toss in everything that was inside the coffin. And there went my papa's head, all broken. And his spine. And his arms. And his legs, after being chopped up, and his feet, shoes and all.

I don't know what he did afterwards with the coffin. But it was empty. He, the gravedigger I mean, also had a thick cord, and he tied up the bag, which, like I think I've already said, was made of black plastic. When I saw that he was about to close it up, I thought: Should I spit the little bone into the bag? But I couldn't. He was watching me, and it was better if he thought it was a candy. Besides, I don't know why I asked myself that question, because, really, I wanted to keep the bone. He said: Señora, as you well know, we all lose our parents. Some people lose their children ahead of their parents. But in the majority of cases the parents die first. You've lost your parents. It's better if you think that you're the lucky ones, because you didn't lose your children. Well, I don't know, maybe you did. Maybe I'm talking too much. Well, look, this bag will go down to the bottom, together with the lady's remains that fell down there. Is that all right with you, señora? Yes, I told him, they should remain together. Him in the bag, and her on her own. You see, Alcirita, we women are always on our own. If not for one reason, then for another. But that's always the way it is, you know? Always scattered.

I watched him lower the bag down into the hole and thanked him for his help, and while I was thanking him he was already closing the doors of the family tomb. So I walked away slowly, and I didn't even think of looking back, girl, because I was busy sucking. Sucking my father's finger. Hah, who would've ever guessed? I walked a little bit ahead and saw my two sisters standing at the entrance to the cemetery, freezing, with their hands still in their jacket pockets, looking at me. I kept walking until I realized I was limping. Because the bone I had tucked inside my boot had slipped down toward my ankle and gotten stuck there, at the anklebone. Bone against bone. When I started to focus on my limp, I stopped moving the little bone around in my mouth. And before I reached the gate, I turned around, pretending to say goodbye to the family tomb, and I took the bone out of my mouth and tossed it into one section of my purse. Quick as a flash. As I approached the entry gate, Kuki and Tati were still looking at me, staring at my leg. What happened to you? Did you twist your ankle? Kuki asked me. And you know, Alcirita, sometimes we have the strength to discuss certain things, and at other times we can discuss others. And sometimes we don't have the strength to discuss anything. So I told them I'd explain later. They were very quiet. Maybe they felt bad about having left me alone, but that was what I'd wanted. And Tati did what she wanted, and so did Kuki. Each one of us did what she wanted to do. But who knows, who knows. Really.

And, well, then we were finished. It was all done. All that was left for us to do was get out of there. And so we started walking.