LISA M. SITA

At the Fosse Ardeatine

I watched the trees pass us by, swiftly marching sentinels, as our car moved along the via Ardeatina away from the lively energy of Rome. The bright February sun lit a clear path before us, glinting off the hood of the car and catching in the hair of my uncle as he drove. We had traveled here from New York—my uncle, aunt and their daughter—to visit my mother's side of our family. Ahead on this street lay our destination, the Fosse Ardeatine. I knew the site was a monument, a World War II memorial, a mausoleum. I knew also that it was the final resting place of my grandfather's brother, Antonio.

As our car entered through the gate, I recognized a great white sculpture of three male figures in distress tied to one another at the wrists. It was familiar; my mother had a black-and-white photo of it at home.

My uncle parked the car on the wide expanse of gravel that formed a kind of plaza inside the enclosure, and we got out into the cold sunshine. We did not walk towards what was directly in front of us—a façade of beige brick, sheer and plain with an open entryway built into the side of a hill —the entrance into the Ardeatine Caves. Instead, my uncle directed us to a rectangular concrete building that stretched large and unadorned to our left. He had been here before.

Once inside, the light of the outdoors was crushed. We stood beneath a low ceiling in a hushed, dimly lit space, a vast cool room of gray stone. Along the walls beneath the ceiling, narrow rectangular openings admitted an echo of natural light, showing before us, from one end of the chamber to the other, row after row of identical tombs. I was instantly struck with a simultaneous flooding of mixed

moods and images: the oppressive atmosphere of a cave, the solemn respect of a cemetery, the sanctified silence of a church.

The story of these tombs had been told to me long before this moment of standing before them; I knew who they belonged to. On March 24, 1944, 335 civilian men and boys were murdered by the Nazis in retaliation for a partisan bomb that had killed thirty-three men of the SS the previous day. Retribution was immediate, done in secrecy, the victims taken from prison, hauled to the caves in the via Ardeatina, and executed inside by systematic shooting, one man at a time.

Only the males had been taken. Some were the friends of prisoners left behind, men and women in the Resistance. Others were random individuals who had been rounded up for no apparent reason, seized unexpectedly and without explanation, taken from shops, their work interrupted, or pulled from the streets as they went about their daily business. Merchants and craftsmen, laborers and scholars, Christians and Jews, they had been picked up, thrown into cells, detained until further notice. In Rome, the "open city," the people never knew when they would hear the hard knock of a rifle butt upon their doors. They lived in angry dread of the roundups—deportation to death camps for the Jews, cheap labor in Germany for the rest.

I imagined what it must have been like for them, dragged to their deaths with no preparation, no understanding. Bits of history picked up from books I had read mingled with the language of family stories until scenes rose up before me in the quiet dimness of this crypt:

A view inside a prison, the prisoners sensing a change in atmosphere the way an animal sniffs at the sky and knows that a storm is coming—a deadening air like funeral crepe hanging in the dank cells and corridors, passing insidiously under the dim electric lights and peeling paint, onward in slow, vaporous motion into the stone yards and alleyways around the building. Sitting on their bunks, standing by the grating of their cell doors, waiting, hearing the sound of the iron doors opening, of gruff voices and heavy movements as guards pull men from cells into corridors and shove them forward and away. Then a commotion in the yard below, men being loaded onto meat trucks in the cool daylight, the sound of voices issuing orders in German mingling with frantic Italian seeking explanations. The systematic departure of the vehicles until the yard is quiet and the prison settles down once again.

And soon after, at the caves, the victims pulled roughly from the trucks, their feet bound, their wrists tied to one another. Men in German uniforms dragging them out of the sunshine into the earth, deeper into the dusty chambers where they are

forced to kneel. In the amber candlelight wavering against the cave walls, a gun points to the back of a head, a shot is fired, and a body falls forward.

For hours they kill them. In time the bodies strewn across the floor begin to pile up, and so the living, in that confined space, are forced to crawl upon the dead before being shot themselves. With the final victim lying face-down on a heap of fallen corpses, the executioners withdraw, leaving behind them the dead and the dying, and seal the caves' entrance with dynamite blasts.

After the Allies had liberated Rome, the site was discovered. A stream of grieving relatives began arriving to identify husbands, sons, and brothers. Decayed by time and mutilated by point-blank gunshots and dynamite, most of the bodies could only be identified by an item of clothing, a wallet, or a photo found in a pocket.

Standing now in this room of the dead, I looked at the unbroken pattern of textured stone caskets. On the surface of each was a photo encircled by a wreath, with a name, an age, an occupation—tokens to summarize who these people had been in life. Across several aisles my uncle motioned to me. He had found Antonio's tomb.

As I walked to him I was aware of the number of tombs I had to pass, the many aisles I had to navigate to reach him.

"Here," he said quietly, "this is your great-uncle."

I touched the rough gray stone. Antonio's photo showed a handsome man, dark-haired, strong. Beneath his name was his age of forty-three, and beneath that the word *falagname*, carpenter. Echoes of my mother's voice came back to me: this man, her father's brother, had gone out one day to run an errand for his wife—to get bread, milk, I could not seem to remember—and never came back. When it was time to identify the body, his wife only knew him by the ring he wore.

I wondered why the people who designed this place had envisioned it as they did. It was a public monument, I knew, but also a place where families of the victims came to pay their respects and to place flowers in the stone boxes at the foot of each tomb. Why remind them, in this dismal cave-like atmosphere, of the miserable way in which these men had been killed? I would have designed it differently, allowing the sunlight to reach down onto the faces in those photos instead of having them stare up into the low-lying gloom. I would have had light and fresh air and beds of flowers and trees as offerings to those who came to visit.

The photo of Antonio showed a stranger, a man I never knew, so I was surprised to feel a sorrow overcome me. I thought of my grandfather, his brother, who had passed away the previous year. I imagined him coming in from outside wearing his gray felt fedora, the unlit cigar that was perpetually in his mouth held lightly

between his teeth. He had just returned from Ozone Park where he always bought bizarre foods from an Italian grocer—snails, pigs' knuckles, a goat's head—strange items that no one else in my family would eat but that my grandmother, through the magic of her cooking, managed to transform into meals for him. There was always a treat for me in his grocery bag, as well: the chocolate hazelnut spread that I smeared over bread or ate straight from the jar with a spoon.

Suddenly I felt the lonely stab of missing him. I wondered what stories he and his brother had to tell one another in the afterlife, if there was wine there and a place for them to sit and enjoy themselves. I wondered where their attention was at that very moment, whether or not they were looking at us then from some vantage point—my uncle and aunt, my cousin and I—all standing around the tomb of Antonio in solidarity of our bloodline.

Lisa M. Sita is a writer and educator who has worked professionally in museums and higher education teaching anthropology and history. She has an MA in anthropology and has authored several nonfiction books for young readers on various topics. Currently, she works as a college administrator while pursuing an MFA in creative writing.