Who Was the Mysterious Woman Buried Alone at the Pet Cemetery?

At Hartsdale Pet Cemetery, Ed Martin III had become accustomed to unusual requests. Then came Patricia Chaarte.

Founded in 1896 just north of New York City, the Hartsdale Pet Cemetery was the first of its kind in the United States. Sarah Blesener for The New York Times

By Andrew Keh

Jan. 7, 2024 Updated 12:16 p.m. ET

Ed Martin III was 14 years old when he began working at his father's pet cemetery, and in the decades since he has tended to the graves of innumerable dogs, many cats, flocks of birds, a few monkeys, a lion cub, a Bengal tiger and countless other creatures from every corner of the animal kingdom.

In all that time, after all those burials, there was only ever one request, a few years ago, that gave him pause.

Calling that morning, on Jan. 29, 2020, was Bruce Johnson, a lawyer from New York, who had in his possession the cremated remains of a woman named Patricia Chaarte. Ms. Chaarte had died at her home in Mexico, at the age of 92. In her will, she had requested that her ashes be interred at Hartsdale Pet Cemetery, just north of New York City.

She had no next of kin. The executor of her estate was not a family member or friend, but merely another lawyer at the firm. There were no further instructions.

The thought of burying a human at a pet cemetery, for Mr. Martin, was not in itself particularly confounding. Alongside the 80,000 or so animals currently interred at his family's graveyard are approximately 900 people — including all four of his grandparents — who wished to rest eternally with their pets.

In dealing each day with the emotionally convoluted rigors of his job, Mr. Martin, now 57, had become attuned to the various human compulsions around the ritual of death. Prominent among them, for many, is the desire for a level of physical proximity to loved ones, animals included, even after one's soul has departed.

But this case felt different. Ms. Chaarte, in death, seemed so alone.

"Please let me know what is involved in purchasing a place of rest for the decedent, and then we will probably arrange to have the remains shipped directly to you," Mr. Johnson wrote, with lawyerly formality, in an email later that day. "There will be no funeral or burial ceremony."

Sitting at his desk, Mr. Martin felt both bewildered and sad. Who was this woman who had died more than 2,000 miles away? Why would she be laid to rest at a pet cemetery, all alone?

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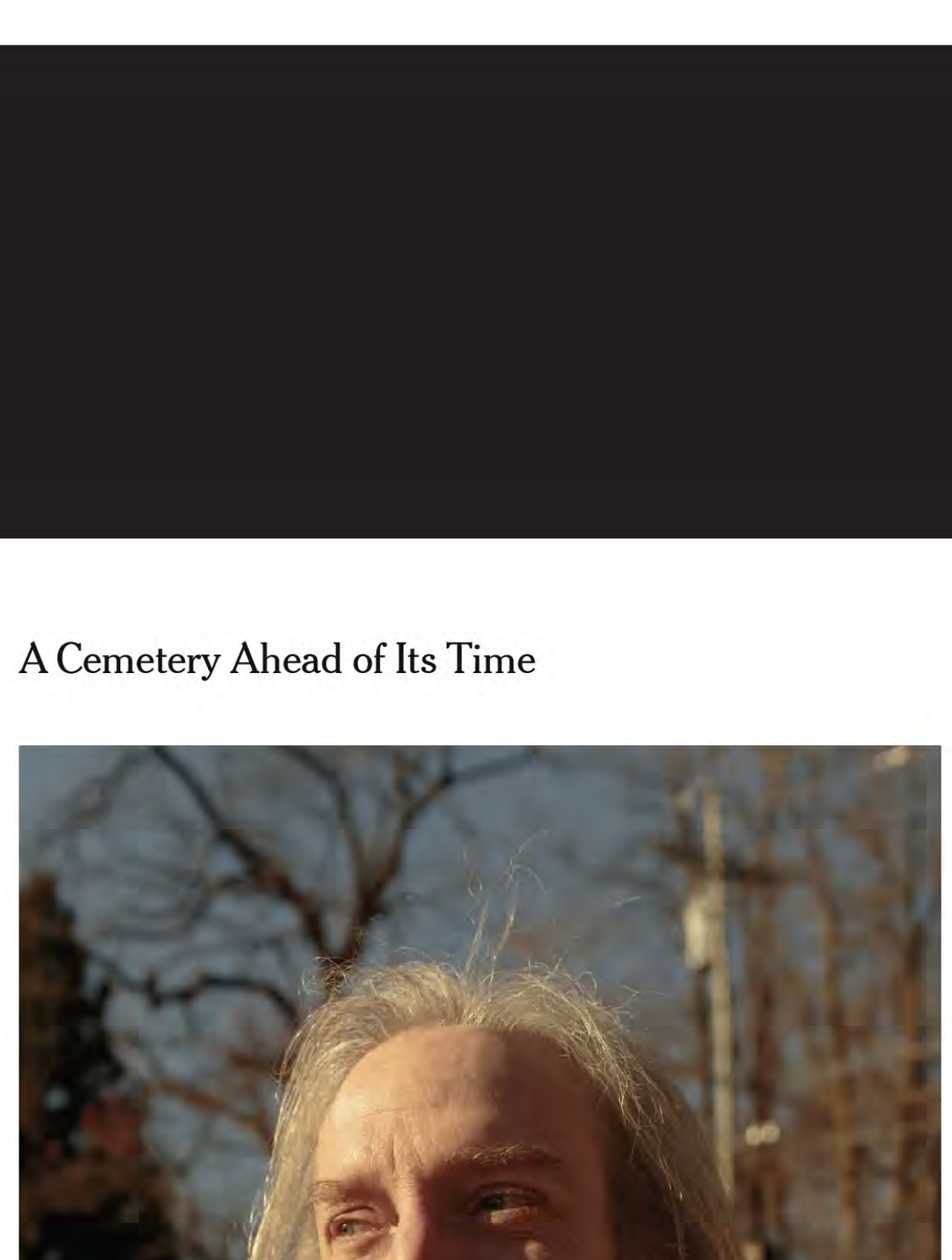
A Cemetery Ahead of Its Time



Ed Martin III has worked for Hartsdale since he was 14, tending to the graves of innumerable dogs, many cats, flocks of birds, a few monkeys, a lion cub and a Bengal tiger. Sarah Blesener for The New York Times

Hartsdale Pet Cemetery was founded almost by chance in 1896, when a prominent Manhattan veterinarian named Samuel K. Johnson allowed a grieving client to bury her dog at his Westchester apple orchard.

It was not very long before pet owners began asking to be buried there, too, with records showing human burials in the cemetery as early as the 1920s.

The cemetery was the first of its kind in the United States, and in some sense it was ahead of its time. As Americans grew increasingly pet-obsessed, the pet burial industry took off. Today, two-thirds of households in the United States have pets, and Americans collectively spend more than $100 billion each year taking care of them. There are now hundreds of pet cemeteries nationwide.

But Hartsdale remains the most prominent one, with scores of famous pets, like Ming, the 400-pound tiger discovered in a Manhattan apartment in 2003, and a few pets of famous people, like Mariah Carey, whose beloved cat, Clarence, died in 1997.

"My eternal friend and guardian angel," Ms. Carey's inscription on her cat's gravestone reads. "You'll always be a part of me forever. Love M."

Human burials were carried out without issue until 2011, when the cemetery received a cease-and-desist order from the New York Division of Cemeteries, which had become aware of an increase in the practice.

The resulting backlash from pet owners, though, was swift, and the state quickly established new rules formally allowing human burials in pet cemeteries to continue, with a couple of stipulations: The cemeteries could not advertise them, nor charge a fee.

These days, Hartsdale buries about 300 animals and half a dozen humans per year.

Mr. Martin, who began working at the cemetery in 1980, was slow at first to embrace the family business.

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His father, Ed Martin Jr., purchased the graveyard with a friend in 1974, and back then, Ed Martin III found it all a bit embarrassing. The arrival in 1983 of Stephen King's "Pet Sematary" did not help.

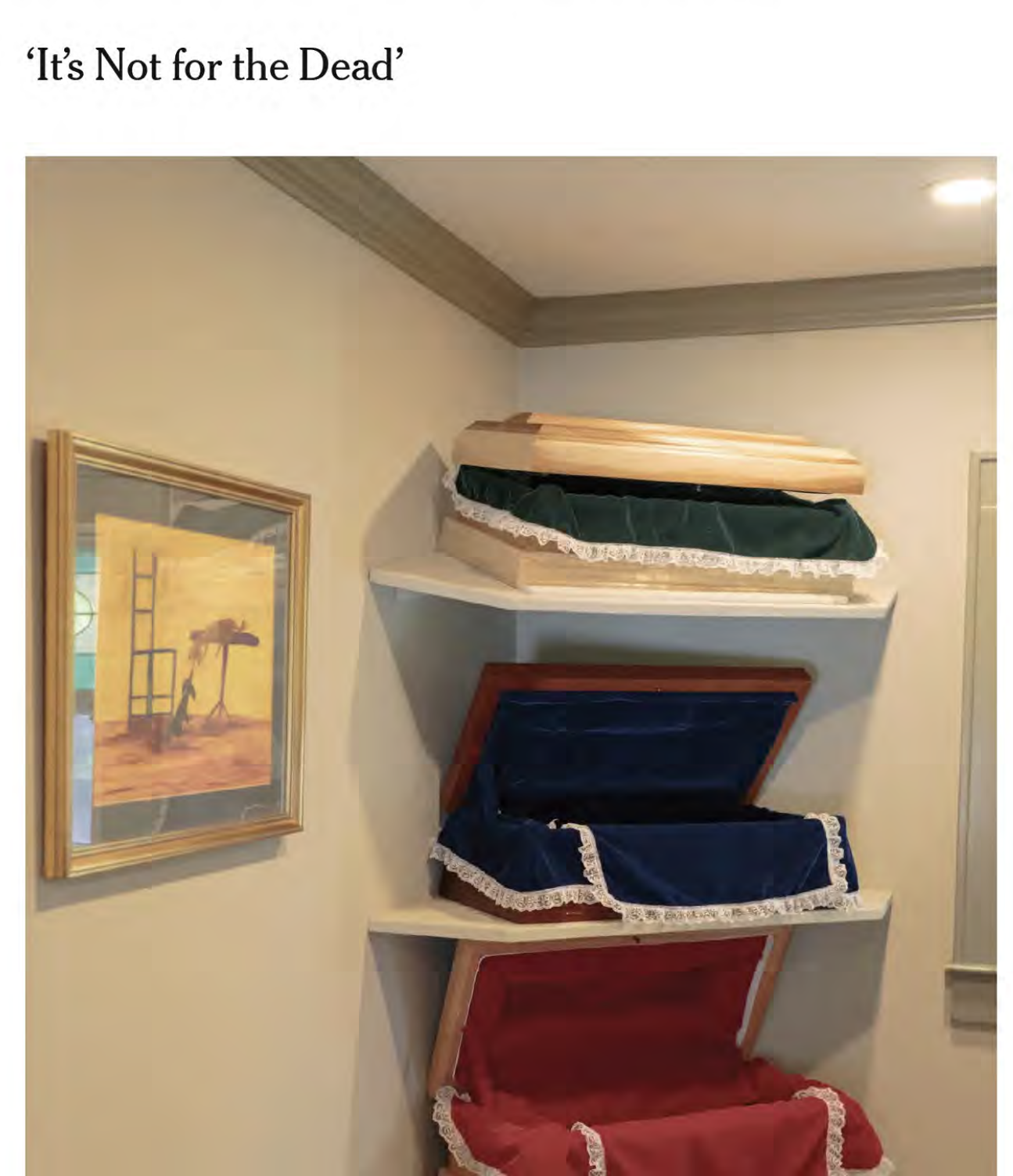
"All my friends' parents were doctors and lawyers and Wall Street people," Mr. Martin said.

He started working at the graveyard as a teenager, mowing the grass and digging graves. After college he dabbled in accounting, with two separate stints at PricewaterhouseCoopers. He went to law school and graduated with honors. But the corporate environment, cold and competitive, did not suit him. He returned to the cemetery in 2003 and has worked there ever since.

"I feel like it's my calling," Mr. Martin said. "I feel like I can help people."

It was with this sense of duty that he received the ashes of Ms. Chaarte — gathered in a wooden box, coarse and gravelly — which arrived on the afternoon of March 10, 2020, by FedEx.

'It's Not for the Dead'



In his years working at the pet cemetery, Mr. Martin has come to understand the particular ways people grieve for their pets. Sarah Blesener for The New York Times

Burials at Hartsdale Pet Cemetery tend to follow a similar routine.

Families have access to a private viewing area, where they can choose to display an open coffin. They bring flowers and memorabilia and ratty old toys. They read eulogies. Some funerals attract dozens of attendees. Often a clergyperson is on hand.

People process grief in complicated ways — not only with sadness, but often anger or confusion — and Mr. Martin over the years has become adept at gracefully traversing these oceans of feeling.

"What we do, the rituals, it's not for the dead, it's for us, it's to help us get through the grief," Mr. Martin said. "My dad would always say, 'We can sell you a plot, we can sell you a casket, but if we haven't made you feel better, we haven't done our job.'"

The job, Mr. Martin believes, contains elements of therapy. He has heard so many people over the years confess, with some guilt, that they struggled more with the deaths of their pets than with those of their parents.

He has a theory on this: Pets are lifelong creatures of routine. They never grow out of it. They are utterly reliant on their owners, and the owners, in turn, build their days around these recurring rhythms, their lives lovingly enmeshed. Losing that routine is jarring.

Mr. Martin himself experienced this sort of disorienting grief not long after Ms. Chaarte's ashes arrived at the cemetery, when his family's cocker spaniel, Violet, had to be put down. He held her as she died and struggled for weeks afterward with the loss.

But there was no one around to grieve for Ms. Chaarte. So on an unseasonably warm March day, Mr. Martin walked her ashes himself to a vacant plot in the cemetery. He watched as the foreman and supervisor plunged their shovels into the hard ground. In half an hour they had a grave, no more than three feet deep.

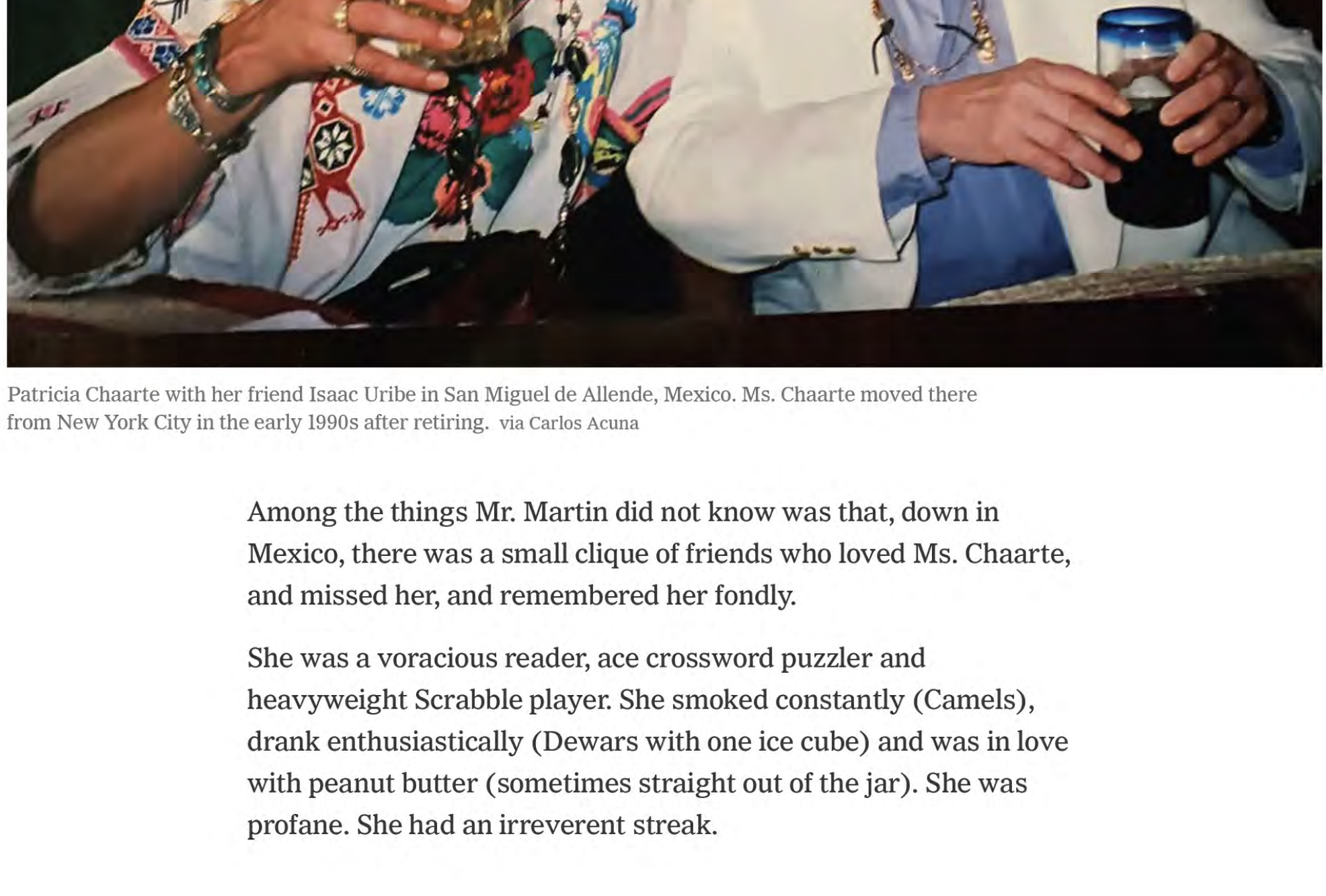
Mr. Martin had no idea who this woman was, but he grew emotional as her urn was lowered into the earth. The men stood in silence, and Mr. Martin, so accustomed to comforting others, whispered some words of comfort to himself. It was not quite a prayer, more like a meditation — on relationships, on companionship.

What if this were a member of my family? he thought. What if this were me?

The soil was restored. A small, gray headstone was installed. As a business matter, Ms. Chaarte's file was closed.

And yet his questions about her — about who she was, what she was doing there — still hung in the air.

'Why the Heck Am I Not Dead?'



Patricia Chaarte with her friend Isaac Uribe in San Miguel de Allende, Mexico. Ms. Chaarte moved there from New York City in the early 1990s after retiring. via Carlos Acuna

Among the things Mr. Martin did not know was that, down in Mexico, there was a small clique of friends who loved Ms. Chaarte, and missed her, and remembered her fondly.

She was a voracious reader, ace crossword puzzler and heavyweight Scrabble player. She smoked constantly (Camels), drank enthusiastically (Dewars with one ice cube) and was in love with peanut butter (sometimes straight out of the jar). She was profane. She had an irreverent streak.

A talented artist and illustrator, Ms. Chaarte was fired from a job with Hallmark, according to a friend, after designing a holiday card with a pop-up Jesus Christ inside, arms outstretched.

"He is risen," the card read.

She was born Patricia Lou Bassett in Kansas City, Mo., on Jan. 11, 1928. Her parents divorced when she was a baby, and she was raised by her mother and, later, a stepfather. After graduating from Paseo High School, in Kansas City, with the class of 1944, she moved to New York City, to cultivate her career in illustration.

The city provided her a platform to find herself. She only realized well into adulthood, for instance, that she was gay. Around that time, a friend named Wendy Johnson became a love interest, then a longtime girlfriend. The two also became business partners, opening a needlepoint shop on the Upper East Side called 2 Needles.

In the early 1990s, Ms. Chaarte and Ms. Johnson retired and moved to San Miguel de Allende, a picturesque city about 200 miles northwest of Mexico City that had long been a haven for expatriates.

Ms. Chaarte stayed busy in retirement. She became involved with a local animal shelter. She went dancing, with a soft spot for the Glenn Miller Orchestra. She dressed plainly, in slacks and big shirts, but sometimes donned a tuxedo for special events. She stayed engaged with American politics, diligently sending absentee ballots and keeping up with cable news. Once, while watching a segment on President Donald Trump, she threw a coffee mug at her television and shattered the screen.

"She was very spontaneous," said Isaac Uribe, a friend in Mexico.

As Ms. Chaarte grew older and her health declined, she became a begrudging, yet diligent, member of a local gym.

"Why the heck am I not dead yet, Janis?" she would say, in slightly more profane terms, as a sort of ritual greeting to her trainer and longtime friend, Janis McDonald.

Ms. McDonald described Ms. Chaarte, lovingly, as a curmudgeon. She had the hard shell of a New Yorker. But inside, there was something else, something only her closest friends glimpsed in those moments when she let herself become vulnerable.

It was a sadness born of something deep in her past.

A Picture and a Revelation

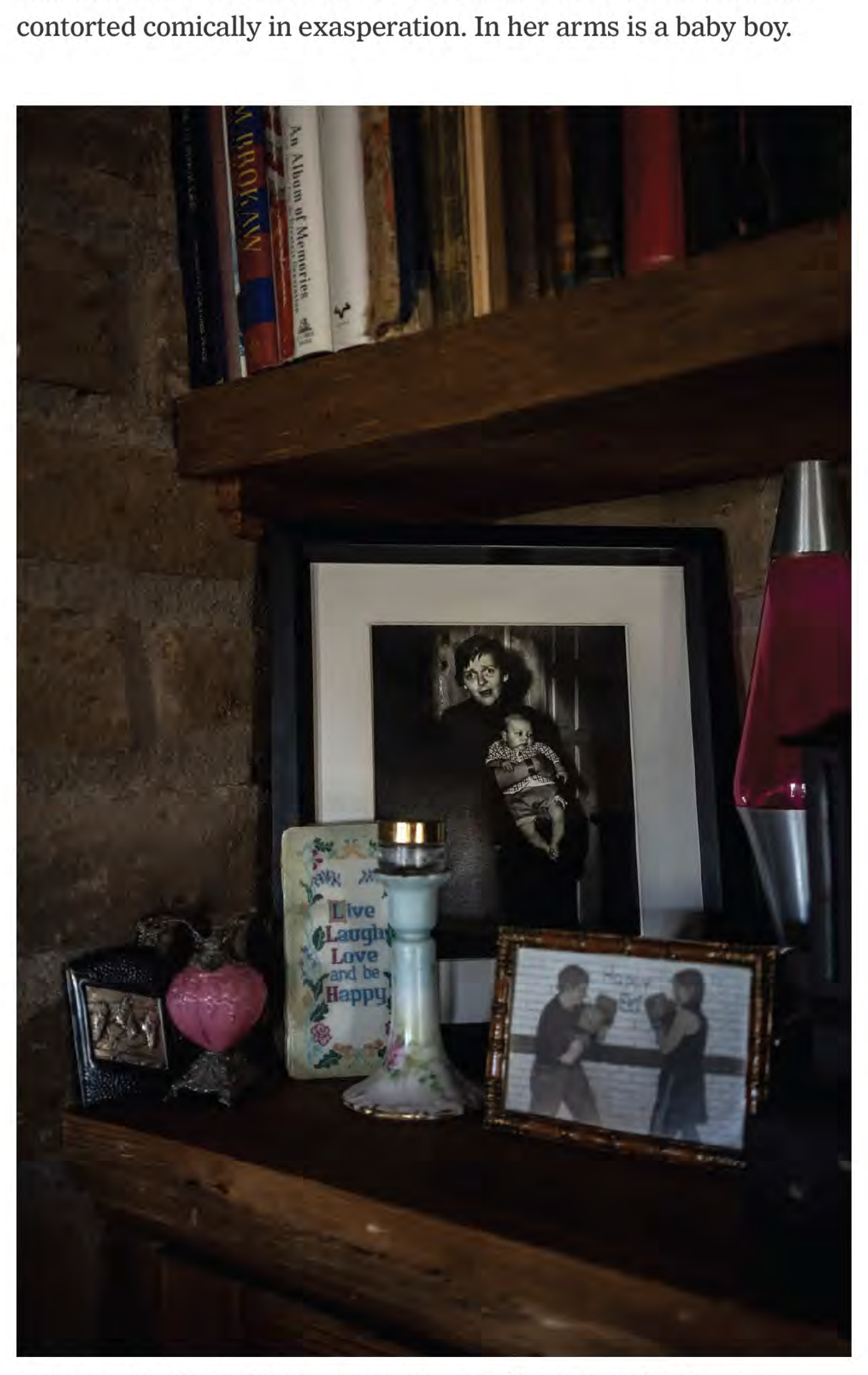
Janis McDonald, a longtime friend of Ms. Chaarte, helped to settle her estate. She did not realize she had the answer to a question plaguing people thousands of miles away. Sarah Blesener for The New York Times

On a summer night about a year and a half after Ms. Chaarte's death, Ms. McDonald was looking at a photograph of her friend on her mantel — beside a small jar holding three tablespoons of Ms. Chaarte's ashes — at her home in San Miguel de Allende.

For months, Ms. McDonald had been working with Mr. Johnson, the lawyer, to settle Ms. Chaarte's will. Her estate was not enormous, but she had divided it with care and generosity: She left thousands of dollars each to five of her friends, as well as to two former housekeepers and a former hairdresser.

Though Ms. McDonald and Mr. Johnson had never met, they had developed a warm rapport. Knowing that Mr. Johnson had never met Ms. Chaarte, either, Ms. McDonald decided spontaneously to snap a photograph of the frame on her mantel and email it to him.

Ms. McDonald loved the picture, which shows Ms. Chaarte's face contorted comically in exasperation. In her arms is a baby boy.



A picture at Ms. McDonald's home in San Miguel de Allende shows Ms. Chaarte in happier times. Sarah Blesener for The New York Times

"I thought you might get a kick out of a photo of Patricia and her son," Ms. McDonald wrote.

The next morning in New York, Mr. Johnson read the email, saw the picture and was dumbfounded.

"What, what, what?" he said to himself.

Soon, he and Ms. McDonald were on the phone. He asked her if Ms. Chaarte indeed had a son. She replied that Ms. Chaarte did. He told her that they needed to find him.

"He's dead," Ms. McDonald said.

She assumed Mr. Johnson had known all this — after all, she wondered: Hadn't Ms. Chaarte and her son been buried together?

The Tragedy of Her Life

Dana Bassett, was born in 1954 and raised in Manhattan, where his mother, Ms. Chaarte, fretted about keeping him out of trouble. via Carlos Acuna

Everyone said Dana Bassett looked just like his mother.

He was born in 1954, though his mother — Ms. Chaarte — had not planned on getting pregnant. She had no relationship with the father, and had decided to get an abortion. But when she arrived for her appointment, she found that she could not go through with it.

"So she fled, literally," said Melanie Nance, a longtime friend. "She decided, Well, I'm just going to have this baby."

Ms. Chaarte raised Dana alone in downtown Manhattan, worrying always about whether she could keep him out of trouble. She showered him with love. It never felt like enough.

That anxiety, in part, led her to marry a friend, Abner Chaarte, when Dana was young. She thought, according to friends, that her son needed a father figure in his life. The marriage did not last very long. But the friendship endured, and she kept his last name.

Despite her efforts, Ms. Chaarte's fears were realized: Dana, who kept his mother's maiden name, succumbed to the worst influences around him. He was 14 when heroin entered his life. Slowly he slipped away. His mother tried sending him to rehab, but to no avail. A few years later, he died of an overdose.

"She never got over it," Ms. Nance said. "It was the tragedy of her life."

Dana's life was cut agonizingly short. Ms. Chaarte's crawled on, shattered. In her 60s, she prepared finally to leave New York, the place she had called home for most her life. She would leave her son behind, yet she did not want him to be alone.

So on Jan. 23, 1989, she buried his ashes at Hartsdale Pet Cemetery. He would rest there with two beloved, deceased pets as his companions. Ms. Chaarte's partner, Ms. Johnson, later purchased a plot there, too.

In Mexico, far from the locus of her imperishable pain, Ms. Chaarte found moments of peace. But friends witnessed spells — whether over drinks or around certain holidays — when the delightfully rough edges of her persona would momentarily smooth over, her demeanor would quiet and her mind would drift to the past.

"She hated Christmas," Mr. Uribe said, "because it reminded her of him."

Ms. Chaarte suffered a stroke when she was almost 80. She lost the right side vision in both eyes. A few years after that, she experienced complications from a pulmonary embolism. Her health was failing. She relied more and more on her friends.

They took care of her after she was moved to an assisted living facility, shuttling groceries to her house. They would play Skip-Bo, a children's card game, which Ms. Chaarte would punctuate with bursts of profanity, making everyone laugh.

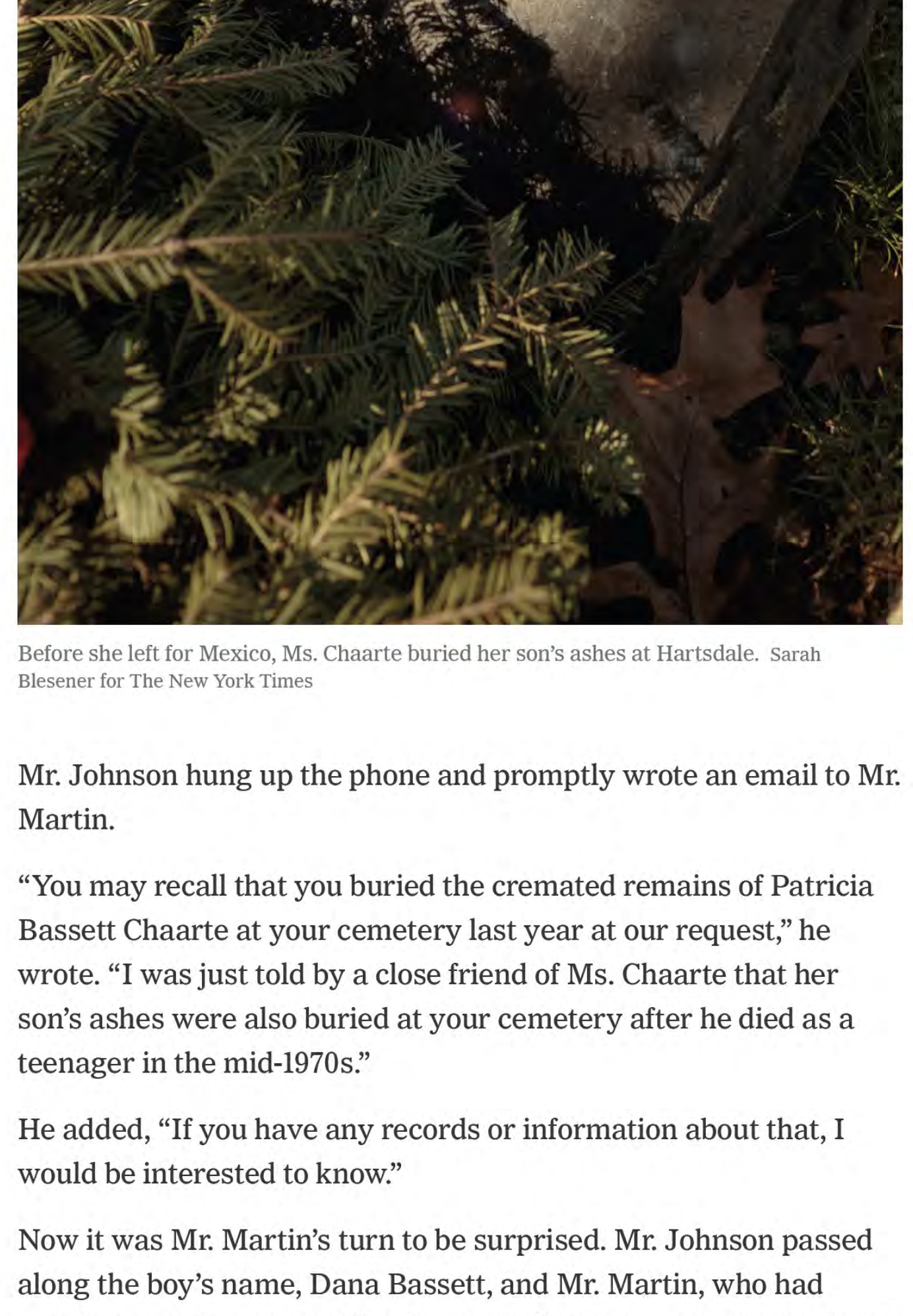
In her final years, she was diagnosed with cancer. She contemplated doctor-assisted suicide — going as far as securing the necessary paperwork, according to Mr. Uribe — but did not follow through.

"Getting old is not for cowards," she told her friends.

Near the end, she thought increasingly about her son. And though she was a vehement atheist, she often found herself openly pondering the afterlife.

"If I die, one of my dreams would be to be with my son," she told Mr. Uribe.

Where She Was Meant to Be



Before she left for Mexico, Ms. Chaarte buried her son's ashes at Hartsdale. Sarah Blesener for The New York Times

Mr. Johnson hung up the phone and promptly wrote an email to Mr. Martin.

"You may recall that you buried the cremated remains of Patricia Bassett Chaarte at your cemetery last year at our request," he wrote. "I was just told by a close friend of Ms. Chaarte that her son's ashes were also buried at your cemetery after he died as a teenager in the mid-1970s."

He added, "If you have any records or information about that, I would be interested to know."

Now it was Mr. Martin's turn to be surprised. Mr. Johnson passed along the boy's name, Dana Bassett, and Mr. Martin, who had previously only searched for the name Chaarte, went digging in the cemetery's records, eventually discovering that Mr. Bassett had been buried three decades ago.

Mr. Martin left his office, made the short walk downhill to the gravesite, Plot L832, and placed his hand on his chest.

There on the grass was a small, granite headstone. It was jet black. It displayed the names of a dog, Jackie Paper, and a cat, Puff the Magic Dragon. Above those was the name of the boy, Dana Brooks Bassett. And engraved below that was the name Patricia — Ms. Chaarte's first name — in block letters. She was meant to be there. She had been there, in a way, all along.

Mr. Martin felt a fluttering in his stomach. He felt heavy and light at the same time.

He knew nothing, still, of the circumstances of Ms. Chaarte's bittersweet life — the pain and the pleasure, the love and the loss. But the mystery that had shadowed him for nearly two years was finally resolved.

Amid these new revelations, Mr. Johnson laid out a few options, including leaving the graves as they were. They had, after all, fulfilled the request laid out in the will. But for Mr. Martin, there was only one thing to do.

So on Aug. 19, 2021, 569 days after that first confounding phone call, he walked out of his office to finish, finally, what he had come to see as his solemn duty.

On that overcast morning, Mr. Martin and two employees extracted Ms. Chaarte's remains from the plot where they had been buried the year before. Together they walked the ashes some 50 yards along an uphill path to the grave where her son had been waiting for more than 30 years, and consigned them again to the earth.

Mr. Martin did not know who Ms. Chaarte and Mr. Bassett were. He did not know the particulars of their lives. But he knew they should be together. And now they were.

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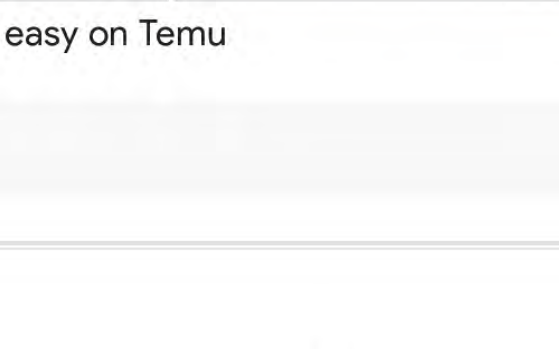

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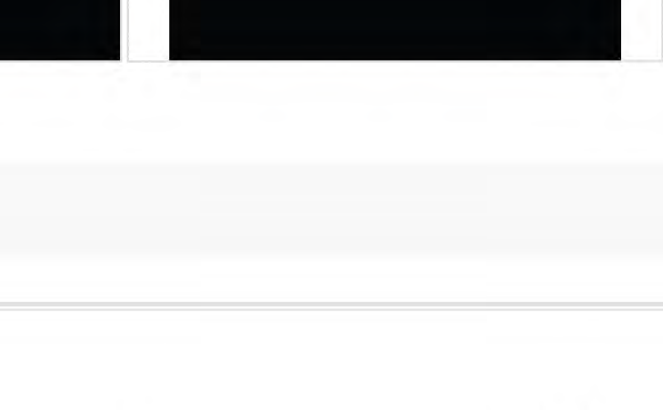

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