Essay

Papi

by Caroline Smadja

Coming second was all I ever knew. In spite of our near-insignificant age difference, I idolized my sister. In my eyes, she deserved the best. The fact our paternal grandparents played obvious favorites didn't bother me. Their marked preference for their first grand-kid disturbed my mother infinitely more. She fought tooth and nail to place me on an equal footing.

In hindsight, I felt thankful, even more so because my mother was never inclined to spare anyone in her entourage. In truth, I did not suffer coming second. That was the order of things.

What made me cringe was Papi's authoritarian disposition: the way he asserted his every word as if it were the only truth; his demeanor that alternated between stern and cajoling. How he coaxed us little girls into siding with his likes and dislikes. Most of his statements rang like commands in my ears. I knew better than to attempt to protest but quickly grew impervious to his declarations; his my-way-or-the-highway personality that even my father gave into.

My sister complied readily to Papi's pressures and slurped the Earl Grey tea he and Mami drank every afternoon as if they'd been raised in the land of her Majesty the Queen of England rather than as Jews in ancient Carthage. She also loved the waffles Papi ordered with gusto for the two of us at his favorite café in Nice.

"*Mange*!" he directed. "*C'est délicieux*! The best *gauffres* in town!"

Papi had suffered two strokes by the age of sixty. His diet, that Mami watched over like the most devoted nurse and that she abided by herself, consisted mostly of boiled vegetables and lean meat, with no salt, no sugar. If he longed for butter, sweets and all that's tasty but supposedly bad for your health, he had too much dignity to complain.

"*Mange*! Aren't you two lucky little girls?" With his long nimble fingers he had the ability to flex almost all the way to his wrist — a unique, fascinating talent — he would shove the lukewarm pastry right to our edge of the table. I could never stand the bitter taste of tea. As for sugar-coated waffles, I'd have preferred a *pain au chocolat* or a chubby melt-in your mouth *brioche au sucre.* That was what bothered me most, to be given no choice. Papi decided for us as he had for his wife — and later, his two children — ever since their arranged marriage in Tunis in the twenties.

After their engagement, Papi had declared that from that point on, they'd be each other's one and only, and cut her off from her previous life — her girlfriends, driving, dances etc. — I felt it was wrong, all the sacrifices he'd imposed upon his new bride. But Mami told that story with laughter and pride. Unlike so many women of her generation, she radiated happiness in her husband's presence. They formed an inseparable couple. We never saw them apart. They finished each other's sentences. She ensured his comfort and rest. He provided for her, bought her elegant hats, scarves, dresses, coats, and consulted her on every move. "Shall we go to the park, Eugénie? Do you like this V neck or should I wear the beige cashmere?"

In the presence of my grandparents, I neither rebelled nor conformed. I shook my head *no* to tea and preferred juice. I grew up a rake. Meals loomed like a three-time a day torture. My favorite strategy was to keep a bite tucked in my cheek for as long as possible to avoid chewing and swallowing.

"*Ce n'est pas normal,*" my grandfather would conclude with as much concern as exasperation. More than anything, Papi wanted everyone to march to the beat of the same drum, his own. I intuited before learning to speak that that man and I didn't see eye to eye. Since I had little power or say in matters that cast him, withdrawing seemed the wisest path. His rules; his imposing the length of our skirts and the color of our blazers didn't affect me overall. I resorted to a sort of passive resistance around him.

His disappointment in me may well have happened as soon as he heard his second grand-child was not the boy he'd hoped for. My grand-parents adored my sister, both because she came first but also because she turned out quick-minded, active, and voluble. Also, her head of black curls would have charmed anybody. Whenever we went to visit their bright, airy apartment Avenue Georges Clemenceau, whenever the four of us were together, they

focused on my sister for better and for worse. That suited me fine. They were too busy nagging her about keeping her hair short, “because that works best for your small face,” to get on my case.

My sister was an “A” student. For years, the bane of her existence, a Niçoise with long dark braids, sat in the first row, figuratively as well as literally. My sister loathed Martine Rofaste for beating her on the finish line as often as not. Grades seemed irrelevant to me, though I hated the French disciplinary system in which I grew up. Sitting still for hours while a teacher with no pedagogical inklings gargled about this or that, boring me to death. Again, my survival strategy was to withdraw, except during French literature classes, which made me feel alive. I spent the rest of the time looking out the window — I always chose the window seat — and let my mind float away even when my dreaming fabric was nothing but a sliver of blue sky, the sparkle and warmth of the sun reflected on the glass panes.

I scored well above average in verbal and reading skills. At the lycée, the class meanies turned goo-goo-eyed on me whenever came time to be called to the board to recite one of the dreaded, interminable poems by Victor Hugo.

“Please, Smadja, will you *please* volunteer?” their chieftain would beg. I knew all too well that wouldn’t win me her favors or those of her clique. But fables, poems, and all story forms drew me in, so I raised my hand on recitation day and stood undaunted in front of the board, retelling from memory four pages worth of Napoleon’s defeat at Waterloo or the fratricidal struggle between Abel and Cain.

If Papi knew anything of that prowess, he dismissed it as unessential. From middle school on, math became my nemesis. My GPA plummeted after each test involving the speed of trains or the volume of water filling a bathtub. When they began to throw calculus at us, panic took over. My shining compositions and affinity for English and history could not outweigh the string of zeros collected in math. Through 9th grade, I could barely manage a C average.

Based on results, my all too pragmatic grandfather regarded me as mediocre. I could tell without his uttering a word that he disapproved of my artistic leanings. My gift for drawing and singing drew no pride from him, only suspicion. He, and Mami, who never failed to side with him on every issue, pushed the career of either librarian or pharmacist upon my sister.

They never bothered to discuss which profession I could pursue. Clearly, a girl who won prizes drawing elves, fairies and giant flowers would amount to no good.

Add to the picture my propensity to forget everything in every place imaginable: all the ink pens ever bestowed upon me, all the umbrellas ever owned (to this day, they figure on my ban list, the only way to make sure I don't lose yet another one).

"Elle a la tête dans les nuages," she's got her head up in the clouds, my mother often laughed. Papi took that as yet another sign of my belonging to the mentally-challenged. He never ever mistreated me. I can't recall even one shouting incident. He just treated me as the airhead of the Smadja clan.

Thankfully, his reservations about my I.Q. didn't make a dent. My parents had the foresight to foster my creativity instead of trying to curb it. I was four when my mother first took me to an exhibit. Paintings by Soutine hang in the grandiose gallery of the Negresco, the most famous and luxurious hotel of Nice.

"Look, Maman, red is on every single canvas." And after closer examination: "It stands for blood." My mother joined in with obvious pride.

Both she and my father reveled in my story-telling, my talents for singing and the visual arts. While they scolded me for losing a fifth pen in five months, for dropping yet another cup that unfailingly smashed on the floor, they saw me as anything but a dummy. In our household, I didn't play second fiddle. My parents loved me for who I was, a girl who lived more fully in her head than in the material world. That was all I needed to grow confident in my abilities.

Once the family left Nice for Jerusalem — another story for another story — any influence my grandparents might have held over my life ceased overnight. They visited us only once in the two years we lived there. I exchanged very few letters or phone calls with either of them. Up until her husband's death, Mami was content to follow his every move, habit and thought, which made it hard to tell them apart, let alone establish separate rapport with her. I knew her no better than I knew Papi.

Even after we'd moved back to France, settling in Paris this time, in accordance with my mother's wishes, a quarrel that had been festering between the three of them barred us girls

from resuming any contact. This represented no hardship on me, though I felt it unfair to be dragged into their adult bullshit. I'd long passed the dreaded baccalauréat *cum laude* and entered university when the ban was lifted. By then, I'd set my own path and discovered, to my own surprise, that teaching called out to me. The irony of going back to school by choice wasn't lost on me. Yet from the start, circumstances geared me toward adult learning, a profession that brings me joy and rewards to this day.

Papi had become an old man mostly confined to his apartment Avenue Paul Doumer, clad in a burgundy silk robe and slippers. He'd mellowed out, acting silly around us sometimes, though his mind remained as sharp as ever. I vividly remember a photo from his last year: him seated on their sofa grinning away, a daffodil tucked behind his right ear.

I no longer found him foreboding or forbidding. I'd grown into an independent, mature young woman on her way to earning a Master's degree in ESL. After months of red tape, interviews, and jumping through one hoop after another, I'd been selected to spend a year at UC Davis as an exchange student. *L'Amérique* had been on my radar since the age of twelve. On my application, I'd checked California as my first, second and third choice. The Department Chair objected but I held firm. Due to the famous — or infamous — growing pains, I'd finally learned to turn my dreams into actions.

Papi died in the Spring before I was to leave. I'd just turned twenty and was planning my grand departure to the United States. From our circle of relatives, he was the first to go. His dying at eighty-six was in the order of things. I shed no tears at his funeral. My father and Mami's sorrow pained me more than his passing. In truth, I was selfish, like the vast majority of twenty-year-olds. My time and energy focused entirely on the new life that awaited me in the Golden State.

One day, while I was visiting Mami without my sister as I'd begun to do since she'd become a widow, she told me this:

"Papi talked to me on his deathbed. He… he wanted you to know he'd misjudged you all along. He wanted me to express his regrets. 'She's a determined young woman,' he said to me. 'She knows what she wants and is making it happen. I admire that.'"

I felt too stunned to respond, let alone tear up at his posthumous recognition. While I sat motionless on the sofa, Mami got up from her armchair and trotted toward the closet at the

back of their bedroom.

“Here, he asked me to give you this.”

She handed me a neatly folded paper bag. I pulled a soft garment out of it. His burgundy silk robe slid onto my lap.

Appeared in Issue Spring '20
