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Papi Hubert

“Your grandfather is dying,” her father said, “and you have not been visiting him. Now you go . . . right now!”

Papi Hubert was ninety-six and had been in bed for three weeks, unaware of his surroundings, lost in a horrific past, yet fighting death with all his might.

There was something that prevented the young woman from visiting her grandpa and Mamie Valentina. She knew that her step-grandfather was the good and caring man everybody assumed he was, and she had memories that confirmed these assumptions but she also had doubts, and her desire to be a nice granddaughter created a feeling of anxiety, the source of which she could not understand.

When Clara was an infant and her mother a busy young professional woman, she hired a nanny recommended by a neighbor to take care of her six-month-old daughter. One day Papi stopped by unexpectedly. As he was about to enter the apartment with his own set of keys, he heard little Clara wailing while the woman was shouting, “Stop, stop! You shut up, shut up, you little brat, or else!”

When he came in the nanny was holding the baby and shaking her little body. Her grandfather grabbed her from her hands and told the woman not to come back.

He then changed Clara’s diaper, which was drooping from its heavy, stinky load. He bathed her in the kitchen sink, heated her baby formula, and fed her until she fell asleep in his arms. When her parents came home from work, Clara was in her crib in her nursery room, her grandpa reading the paper on the worn-out blue sofa of the living room with the large windows overlooking the gray-tiled roofs of Paris.

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“Look at you, Leila, Leila with the bright blue-green eyes.” Her grandpa would smile at her while, as a three-year-old, she became very intrigued at her reflection in the small mirror in the tiny kitchen next to the shower stall. Leila was Clara’s middle name and her nickname. It meant “night” in Hebrew and Arabic so that the name, picked by her mother, honored both her maternal great-grandmother from Morocco and her Jewish step-grand-

father.

Her grandpa often picked her up from kindergarten, holding her little hand stained with bright paint colors, and toward the end of warm spring afternoons, he would walk slowly with his cane, at the pace of her little steps, to the Jardin des Tuileries. The main entrance was flanked by two large, bronze lions, which her Papi sometimes helped her climb. Her thighs brushed against the metal skin of the lions, warmed by the afternoon sun. She would close her eyes and open her nostrils to the scent of lilacs.

On Saturday or Sunday afternoons, they often joined a group of other children, with their parents or grandparents sitting on wooden benches or green metal garden chairs, to watch the Guignol puppet and his friend the gendarme, whom Guignol always outsmarted. Although Grandpa could not hear very well, he enjoyed Guignol's antics as much as Clara did.

In late 1965, when she was ten, her family moved to a bigger apartment, still in the same district of downtown Paris, the second arrondissement, from one side of the stock exchange building to the other side, just off l'Avenue de l'Opera. Her parents needed money to pay for the mortgage, and someone at home to take care of Clara. So they sold her grandparents' apartment, and Mamie Valentina and Papi Hubert moved in with the family.

Sometime after the move, Clara grew tiny buds on her chest that felt like they wanted to burst out like flowers under the ground. Papi came into the bathroom every night while she was enjoying a bubbly warm bath before bed. "Your breasts are growing," he would say. "Now they are like rosebuds, soon they'll be like tangerines, and then they'll grow into oranges and grapefruits." This made her giggle.

Her Papi had brought along with him a full tank of exotic fish. Every Saturday afternoon, after her dad and she had finished doing and putting the dishes away, and her mom was resting and reading in the living room, he changed the water.

Clara observed him gently scooping each little critter in a net of fine-webbed metal strands with a green rim and handle before transferring it into a small bowl. She looked at each fragile creature with its long, translucent tail and fins, suspended in the air for a few seconds between life and death, while Patou, her black cat with a tiny spot of white under his chin, lay curled up and unstirred on top of the white refrigerator.

The fish were colorful, one of a deep, iridescent blue, the other looking like a flamenco dancer with its silvery scales and black polka dots, another of a bright orange with a big mouth and bulging eyes, the next one flat and round with a glimmering yellow hue.

Later, when she was around fourteen, her grandparents moved to an independent, small apartment upstairs while Clara showed all the external signs of being a woman.

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She had developed a strong inclination for stopping in front of every mirror to look at her reflection. She witnessed the inexorable changes in her body in the same way she had observed the tadpoles she collected and fed a couple of years ago during the summer at her maternal grandmother's house in the South of France. She had observed their tails receding, their legs growing. When they reached a stage between tadpoles and frogs, they looked, in her mind, like tiny, live dinosaurs. This obsession with her strange and new body incited a mixture of irritation and amusement in her family members.

"She is beautiful," her grandfather said to her dad as she was once more looking at herself in the mirror above the mantel-piece in her grandparents' apartment.

"Yes," her father answered, "and she knows it."

As she leaned down to kiss goodbye to Papi Hubert, who sat in an armchair, his hand furtively caressed her breast. Her dad and Mamie Valentina did not seem to notice.

Before they left Paris in January of 1973, her parents had bought a ranch house in a small, suburban town near Toulouse and a smaller house next to it for her grandparents.

That Sunday afternoon, when she set foot outside of her parents' house to visit her grandfather and walked the three hundred yards that separated the two dwellings, she felt the brush of a slight breeze. In her mother's garden the tulips, daffodils, and jacinth in bloom beamed at the sun and the chirpings of birds.

When she stepped into her grandparents' kitchen, Mamie Valentina was shuffling through a large pile of papers. "Long time, no see," she said without raising her head when she heard Clara coming. "He used to throw all the mail in a drawer before I had a chance to sort it out. I am looking for that additional private insurance policy. We need it now or we can't afford the visiting nurse anymore. Go see him now and then maybe you can help me with the sorting."

When Clara was a tween, her dad would take her to the

Jardin des Plantes in Paris. Although it translates into botanical garden, it was also a museum of natural history and a zoo. As they stood in front of the orangutans that, as a little child, Clara used to call the orange-utans because of the color of their fur, she slid an open hand, filled with peanuts, between the bars of the cage. The ape, which was about her size, looked her directly in the eyes. He picked the nuts from her hand, put them in his mouth, and crunched them.

When her hand was empty and she was about to withdraw it, he grabbed it with his large, rough hand, kept looking her in the eyes, and would not let go. She did not feel afraid but assumed she should have been when, for a very short time, her father stood next to her with a worried expression. The zookeeper quickly intervened, hitting the ape with a stick, forcing him to release her hand.

“Dad, why did the zookeeper hit that poor ape? He was just friendly. He did not deserve to be beaten because of me,” she said, holding, this time, her father’s human and familiar hand.

“They are wild animals, Clara. I should never have let you him feed him. He could have bitten you. There should be some safety measures in the zoo. Let’s go home now!”

When she entered the bedroom, Papi Hubert’s eyes were closed, and he was mumbling words in French and German in his agitated and delirious sleep. “Where are my combat fatigues? Schnell, schnell, du, Jude Schweinhund! Mom, I am so sorry, I did something stupid. Mom, I am coming, I am afraid, Mom!” As she sat next to him, he opened his eyes and grabbed her hand firmly.

“Is this you, Leila? I am hurting everywhere,” he painfully uttered. She felt sorry for him, but she was also afraid he was going to drag her into the realm of his upcoming death.

She left his bedside to join her grandmother at the kitchen table. “Look at these pictures,” Valentina said. “They are all of you. You were his little sunshine. He loved you so much.”

The pictures were not unfamiliar. They were duplicates. They showed her at different stages of her life. Here were her first steps in the Jardin des Tuileries with her papi standing behind her. There was a school picture of her in her first-grade classroom, sitting at a little pulpit next to her friend Cécile. The more recent one was the one where she stood in front of a board showing the results of the baccalauréat, the high school diploma she had received just a year ago. The pictures were familiar yet she felt the surge of tears.

“Leila, don’t cry,” Mamie Valentina said, her green-blue eyes softening.

She had the beautiful eyes Clara had inherited, but in her case they had turned sharp and cold. “He had such a long and difficult life. His death will be a deliverance.”