

Papa's Desk

by Alina Opreanu

"You're wrong!"

I don't remember if I said it out loud or if it was only in my head, but at the time, there was no doubt in my mind that my father was wrong about my best friend.

"She is *not* using me to get ahead."

"Alina, she sees you are making good grades; she wants to be smarter than you."

"No, you're wrong!" There it was again. A fierce declaration made by my eleven-year-old self, defying my father.

I was standing across from him, with the wide drafting table between us. It was covered with writing instruments - pens, mechanical pencils, fine-tipped markers -, along with neat stacks of mail, issues of Consumer Reports, and notebooks with grid-lined paper covered in his precise handwriting.

He was midway through a project: several sheets of tracing paper with ink sketches lay flat on his desk. My eyes ran over his triangular architect's scale, the straight metal rulers, neon green circle templates, and a large T-square ruler that covered the length of his desk. It was secured on two sides by taut wires so that you could move it up and down the surface of the drafting table in order to draw perfectly straight lines.

That was his logic, moving from point A to point B, careful, diligent, committed. Being an architect was not only my father's job, it was his vocation, his very way of being in the world. As his daughter, I looked up to him, respected his authority without question, and strove so, so hard to make him proud. It never felt like enough. When I would get an A, he'd ask me why it wasn't an A+. I never felt like I was enough. When I think back to that moment when I did speak out - torn between loyalty to my best friend and my admiration for him - I am still to this day surprised that I found the courage to choose her.

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When my father first saw my daughter Colette, I think he was a bit in awe. In those first few weeks, I watched him sitting by her on the couch, surrounded by the sofa cushions,

her little hand wrapped tightly around his index finger. He seemed happy in a way I'd never witnessed. The first time I asked him to hold her, he replied softly, "I don't know how." At 83 years old, my father learned to cradle a baby gently in his arms. It was as if that tiny being cracked open the shell - a hard, firm, protective armor that my father had spent eight decades carefully constructing. All of the sudden, he was less serious... more playful, calling her pet names, and making faces - completely in love with his grandchild. He would smile upon seeing her and watch her play with a tender look in his eyes. He was completely present with her, completely unconcerned with work, or the news, or any other stress in his life. His love for her is undeniable - for me, it is a revelation.

I grew up knowing that my father loved us in the way that children who are well-cared-for know that the earth circles the sun. It's a fact. It takes 365 days for the earth to travel 584 million miles around the sun. We don't feel this trajectory through space, but it cannot be denied or disproved. My father's love was like that kind of undeniable fact: the sum of his sacrifices for his family, his careful stewardship of our finances so that we did not want for anything, and his high expectations of me and my brother, as we made our way through school. He pushed us... and pushed us... but he expected more of me

in particular. Years after I graduated from college, he told me that he pushed me so much to excel academically because he knew that I had the talent and could go further if challenged to do so. As a teenager, I often felt crushed by that pressure to succeed, without fully realizing the pressure he was under to ensure our success as a family. It took a great toll on him. He had rebuilt his life at age 50, in a new country, in a foreign language, and with skills he had mastered three decades earlier, all the while holding on tightly to his pride. All my life, I've admired his achievements without recognizing or fully understanding his vulnerability.

It wasn't until the day he held the miracle of my daughter in his arms that I ever saw him express joy openly. For me, it was a relief.

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In the afternoons at my parents' house, my father still sits at his desk - mostly checking e-mail and reading the latest news. On our last visit, I watched Colette toddle into the room and walk up to "Papa," as she calls him. He lifted her onto his lap, and looked at her, with love and patience, as she took an inventory of the pens and pencils lining his desk. With his arms

around her, completely at ease, he seemed unguarded... and gentle.  
As I watched them together, I felt a lifetime of hurt melt away.  
At that moment, I too let down my guard and allowed myself to feel his  
love.