

Mel Bradshaw

Your Pride and That of Your Children

“...You could have raised your daughter better, Inês. Are twelve year-olds all like her over in Canada? No manners—”

“Julia’s rude, Mother, no question,” I said. I had forced myself in the chair, tight beside my mother’s desk, where she—Senhora Catarina Raposo—would sit guests while checking their passports. Unlike most Portuguese innkeepers, she never gave a passport back till its owner was leaving. I wondered if she had burned mine.

“Running around the streets. Letting herself be pawed by dirty little foreigners. She swore “on her word of honor’ there was no pawing.” Mother cleared her throat threateningly. “Her honour!”

“I don’t think she lies much,” I protested, grasping at straws. “I—I’m sorry she’s so rude. I must be to blame, though how I could have done better these past two years, since Tomás....” Since my husband, Tom da Costa, had worked himself to death. I put my arm around Mother’s stout, firm shoulders to console us both. “I’ll speak to her now.”

Julia was sitting on our bed. She held her left shoulder as if wounded and stared at the picture of Santa Catarina being fed in prison by a dove. She had been like that for over an hour. Not too docile but too proud to try the door.

I wished I could throw myself on the bed and weep. I was dizzy from all the wines I had sampled this deceptively hopeful afternoon. I was exhausted from my eager climb back to the *pensao*. Above all, I was scared. Scared of what my Julia would say she had done, scared she wouldn’t say it.

This was Thursday.

My fear for her ruled my life. With Tom dead and our grown-up son—restless as a Vasco da Gama—off rediscovering the Indies, I had

no one in Toronto but Julia. My brothers emigrated after the U.S. relaxed its quotas and they went to Massachusetts. My mother, widowed like myself, still ran the Pensao Comercial in Oporto.

For Julia, as she teetered on the brink of adolescence, I felt terrifying responsibility. I was convinced that for a woman in my position Portugal was a better place to raise a daughter than my bountiful but permissive land of adoption.

“Women have more career opportunities in Canada,” my Toronto bank manager had said, but she was thinking of the old days. Many Portuguese women work now. And women everywhere, whatever their career, still get married.

“In ten years,” my Toronto travel agent had predicted, “Portuguese men won’t be insisting on virgin brides.” But would he gamble with *his* daughter’s future? A Portuguese upbringing held less risk. My problem was to get Julia to accept that.

I had brought her to Portugal on a three-week charter. By the last Tuesday (two days before the big blow-up) I still hadn’t told her we were moving here. I’m not sure Mother—imperious innkeeper that she was, accustomed to command—realized I was still lying in wait for the golden moment when my girl would hear me most willingly. Her life was at stake. But I didn’t want to force her.

I had had to wait till she saw my country, so different from what with the arrogance of her twelve years she swore to me it was like.

“There’s no chicken in Portugal,” she had insisted, glaring through the great, red rims of her glasses. “You’re famous for fish. Fish is Portuguese, and I hate it.”

Lucky for her she was wrong about the chicken. Without it, and cakes, she would have starved these past two weeks.

I had lived more than twenty years in Julia’s native town. I wanted her now to like mine. And she did. She didn’t notice the filthy wash-rooms, the unregulated exhaust fumes, the blind beggars—all of which should have surprised her more than me. She saw only the hills, the cobblestones, the bougainvillea, the statues of men on horseback, the brave little 1916 trams.

We were coming home from the beach Tuesday evening on the number one line, zigzagging up the north bank of the Douro. Oporto *must* be great to have a country and a wine named after it. Across the river, which flows from the vineyards to the Atlantic, I could see the warehouses of all the port wine companies. Where steepest and rockiest, the two banks are linked by soaring bridges. Two are iron, one

concrete. They're no lovelier than Canadian bridges, but each is admired and honoured with a name.

"See, Julinha," I cried, "we're coming under the Arrabida Bridge." I'll tell her now, I thought. "Look how the sunset turns the concrete gold."

She burped rudely. "Trade places with me, Ma. Then you can see out without sticking your head in my lap."

"With this view, why do you want to read?"

"I saw the view on the way out," she said. "And I promised to let Natalie have this as soon as I get home. So I have to finish it by Sunday."

It was a pamphlet of Tom's the Portuguese government had issued emigrants to Canada in the fifties. I had dug it out for a summer homework project Julia and her friend were doing. Besides advice on how to buy winter clothing, it was stuffed with slogans enjoining hard work, honesty, and adaptability. The one I was least sure Tom and I had lived up to was: "Being Portuguese ought always to be your greatest pride and that of your children."

Tom da Costa had had little use for Toronto's Portuguese community. He thought they should raise their children as Canadians, speaking Portuguese as well as English, but not trying to live as if they were in Portugal.

Myself, I don't think any of the Toronto Portuguese were fooling themselves about where they lived. As it turned out, when Tom had his last heart attack we had so little contact with the community, so few ties, it was natural for me to think of moving home.

After trading places with me, Julia gave her seat to an oceanically fat woman with a basket of melons.

She was a good girl, despite her alarming appearance. She reminded me of a yellow Toronto police car with her short, fair hair sleek to her head and those enormous, red, round glasses frames through which her flare-bright eyes sent warning signals.

She was a good girl, God knows, and smart at school. But how good did a girl have to be in Toronto to keep clear of cigarettes, swear words, heavy make-up, late parties, rape, drugs, pregnancy, and being brought home one night in one of those yellow police cars with the round, red lights?

It was an uphill kilometre from the terminus to the Rua do Cimo de Vila. I didn't mind. Unaccountably stiff for months, my legs always seemed to need stretching. It was likely just nerves. (A disgusting doctor had made me more nervous by telling me not to worry, that

they were exceptionally shapely legs for a woman of forty-two.) I hoped also to speak to Julia, but her yellow head kept bobbing well in front to prove she knew the way.

Our street was narrow as a ladder—and picturesque to judge by the number of idlers with long, green guidebooks. Mother's flower-potted balconies rose tightly stacked above a café that sold irresistible jelly roll. You came through a separate door and upstairs to reach the office and breakfast room of the Comercial, then up again to the guestrooms.

Mother stood at the head of the first flight, her glasses on a black cord around her neck. No one who saw her grip on her business could doubt that Portuguese women did responsible work. At sixty-five, she was sturdy as oak.

She was still dyeing her hair orange. There's more pressure on a woman in northern Portugal where blondes do occur naturally. Julia, with Tom's fairness, charmed her.

"Full up again," she yelled down at us. "I could have rented your room five times over today. You should have come in the fall."

"Julia has school next month," I said.

"We've schools here, you know. Good ones. Not all run by dehydrated nuns either." Mother had assured me that in two years Julia wouldn't remember if Canada was in Africa or Asia.

Behind the kitchen and barely big enough for a double bed and a framed print of Mother's patron saint, our room could not of course have been rented out. That was Mother's joke. Used to her own room, Julia was being a good sport about sharing a bed, and about helping with the chores. She never quite saw anything through. But it was a holiday, after all.

"Mind you don't bring any sand into bed with you," I told her that night.

"Know what Grandma said when I asked why she didn't come to the beach with us?" said Julia. "She said the water jumps around too much. Her English kills me. And notice how she always calls you *Ee-nesh*?"

"Inês is my name, though," I said. "It's just that in Canada they don't have that name, so people called me Ann."

"Inês, Inês," Julia practised softly. "You shouldn't have changed if that's your name. I never would."

Being Portuguese ought always to be your greatest pride, I thought.

“How would you like to live here, Julinha? I mean in a house of our own.”

“You mean not go back?”

We’d go back, I explained, to sell the house and Da Costa Electric. The money would go a long way in *escudos*. I held my breath.

Finally she said, “I don’t like all the spitting on the streets in Portugal.”

“Men spit on the streets in Toronto,” I said.

“Yeah. But not as much.”

“Such a small thing!” But I understood there were a lot of small things that only mattered if they were permanent. “You’re having fun, aren’t you?”

“Yeah.”

“What’s wrong then? Do you miss your friends?”

She said no, but hugged me so tightly I didn’t believe her.

“Your grandmother wants us in Oporto,” I said. “I can help with her accounts.” Though I wasn’t sure I could continue to run Tom’s business, I had always kept the books. “She’s getting older, you know. It’s lonely for her with none of her children here.”

“She can come home with us,” Julia pleaded. “There’s room in our house. Our five-storey tree will really charge her batteries, especially when the leaves go red.”

“Your favourite colour.” Julia didn’t rake the leaves.

“Here the only trees are in zoos. I mean parks.”

“She’s older,” I said. “It’s harder for her to move.”

“She’d be fine. She speaks English better than most grandmothers. Natalie’s doesn’t know one single word.”

I couldn’t tell Julia my real reason—terror. Whatever I said or did, however much I loved her, wasn’t she sure to throw away any chance of a decent husband in that anything-goes society over there? Every day her shape became more feminine my terror would swell. And talk about loneliness. There a parent has no ally. Even the teachers push promiscuity with their sex education. I could never make Julia understand that I didn’t want a daughter or grand-daughter like Natalie Winters. Natalie, who had a boyfriend already, was only half Portuguese, and neither her mother nor her grandmother was going to be able to save her from becoming a slut.

“Look,” I said, “today’s only Tuesday. I’ll try to find some girls your age before we leave on Saturday. You’re young. You’ll make friends quickly.”

“Sure, sure.”

"I'll look up women I knew before I emigrated, friends I had to leave."

She didn't answer, but nestled closer. I felt sand from her hair on my neck.

"To join your dad," I said, trying not to tremble. "Maybe some of *them* have daughters."

Next morning I got on the office phone. Manuela Azevedo hadn't married, so I found her number first. We arranged to meet Thursday and she put me in touch with Isabel Sousa, now Fontes.

My yellow police car came tearing around the corner from our room and down the stairs.

"Where to?" I asked.

"Just to the café for some cake," Julia called.

"Don't eat too much," I bellowed after her. "We're going to Senhora Fontes's for dinner at noon. And bring me a slice."

The dinner was disastrous. Isabel Sousa, whom I remembered as the kid who had filled the holy water stoup with vinegar, pilfered at that, had turned oh so traditional. I foolishly remarked that it wasn't so much religion with me as a practical belief that Julia would have more choices later if she grew up where there were fewer temptations. Isabel, however, saw temptations everywhere. Without the church, my daughter would always be in danger. It already showed in her table manners that she likely couldn't get through a single Hail Mary without stumbling. And why wasn't I wearing mourning? Isabel of course wore black even though her husband was there with us at table. Their daughter was in a convent in Braga.

Undergoing dehydration, as Mother would have it. I imagined Mother's first tolerant words about nuns would have to be bargained from her on her deathbed in exchange for the last rites.

"You know what they say, Senhora," Fontes droned. "Lisbon shows off, Oporto works, and Braga prays."

"How was the fish?" Julia asked over her shoulder on the climb back to the Comercial.

"It wasn't fish. It was tripe, an Oporto specialty, and very well cooked. You should have tasted it, at least." But I didn't scold too hard. I had had no idea she could sit so still and stay so quiet.

If the reunion with Manuela went no better.... I had left this so late, afraid no one would want to hear from the emigrant.

"If you'd stayed," said Julia, "would you be like Mrs. Fontes?"

"No way," I assured her. "I'd have a job."

"Where?"

Since coming home I had discovered that, while women did paperwork in banks, they still didn't get to touch the money. They weren't even tellers. "At the *pensao* perhaps," I said. "Or as a teacher, like Senhora Azevedo. Why not ask *her* about jobs? She'll know what you can look forward to."

Don't let us down, Manuela. If Thursday afternoon went like today's dinner, I would have to admit defeat.

On Thursday morning Julia said she wasn't coming. What a time to put on an act! I couldn't move her, the spoiled darling: she had her Charter of Rights. But what right had she to judge Manuela by Isabel?

The other problem was that Manuela wanted to take us to the port wine warehouses. I had never been, which for an Oporto native Manuela thought a shame. Port bored Julia silly. I wouldn't have allowed her more than a sip anyway.

She and Mother amused each other, but I had always felt I had to be there to interpret. Perhaps I had exaggerated the Atlantic's width. Leaving her at home might prove the very best way of winning Julia's heart to Oporto.

The weather all holiday was never less than perfect, though local people apologized whenever a cloud smudged their sky. It was slightly cooler than a Toronto August and far less humid. My Toronto hay fever was gone. I found myself sniffing unobstructed the old town's sweet fishiness as I trotted to the restaurant. I wore my green skirt and didn't care who looked at my legs.

Manuela and I exchanged shy smiles, then twenty-two years' separation dissolved in laughter. After stuffing ourselves with seafood as a foundation for the port, we walked arm in arm across the lower level of the Luis I Bridge. Just three minutes from the bridge, Sandeman's got too many visitors and was sparing with its samples. Taylor's, a brisk climb up the south bank, could afford to be more generous.

I couldn't remember ever feeling more carefree. It wasn't just the wine. Julia was sure to fit into Manuela's class. She would have to catch up on Portuguese history, but if she was as good a reader as I boasted that would be no problem. Portuguese history—the names of the great discoverers, the great victories (including one over Napo-

leon's troops at Oporto) tasted rich and solid as the proud Portuguese wines. Manuela also had friends to introduce us to, career women. She suggested calling on one, but I thought perhaps tomorrow. I had to tell Julia how encouraging everything looked and to start, with Oportan commercial zeal, to sell her on the move.

When I charged up the stairs at five thirty, Mother was slouched at her desk with her orange hair coming unpinned and her head in her hands.

"That daughter of yours, Inês," she said as wearily as if she had been piggybacking Julia from the street to the rooftops all afternoon. "We'll have to send her to the nuns for a couple of years to straighten her out."

"What's she done?"

"It's as bad as it can be," Mother moaned.

"But what, tell me." The mixture of dessert wines had left in my mouth a stifling, sticky sweetness I suddenly couldn't bear.

"What?"

"I—oh, sit down, Inês."

I was so impatient now I didn't think my legs would bend. But it did Mother good. Once I had forced myself into the little chair beside her desk, the imperious firmness rallied in her voice.

"She snuck out to a dirty movie with a dirty little foreign boy," she said "and she won't tell me what else."

"Where is she now?"

"I told her I was locking her in her room till you came back."

"Locked in her room!" I screamed. "What if there'd been a fire? Give me the key."

"You know that room doesn't lock, Inês. Sit down. I just *told* her I was locking her in and she hasn't tried the door. She's not all bad. But we must be stricter. You learn vicious habits over there."

"Come, Mother," I protested. "Seeing a movie can't have hurt her that much." It was a reflexive defence of what was mine. I believed it, though. My fear could picture Julia's character going to pieces over another year of bad influences—but not in an afternoon.

"Seeing a movie?" Mother exploded. "What about making a baby?"

She knew Julia wasn't menstruating yet. "I'll speak to her," I said.

"What sort of mother would she make? Babies are work and she has no idea what that is. She plays at it. Makes a bed or two, washes five or six dishes, never finishes anything. She plays at it till she's bored, then leaves it for the maid."

"I wish you'd told me we weren't doing our share," I said, baffled. Was the issue dirty dishes, or the dirty foreigner I still had heard nothing about? Spoiled as Julia was, I hadn't brought her to be Mother's slave. Mother fixed me with a look of grim amusement.

"She said she didn't come here to be my slave."

Please, God, no. Not *say* it.

The toilet flushed upstairs. Mother would be wondering if the guest had clogged it by dropping in the soiled paper or had remembered to use the plastic bucket that never could be emptied often enough.

"You'd have been crucified, Inês, for even thinking that," Mother reminded me. "You could have raised your daughter better...."

The new world viciousness was in me.

My fear that Julia would clam up was crazy. She scared me, but she talked to me. Now she needed me to hear her story.

Because Julia laughed at Mother's English, Mother sometimes let her register English-speaking guests. Julia was more than ready for a break from helping scrub the stairs when Mr. and Dr. Wiebe arrived. They had Canadian passports issued in Saskatoon and a freckled son named Roy.

"Is he the one you—"

"He's older, right?" said Julia, interrupting me, going her own pace. "Fifteen maybe. And he says they want two rooms for tonight. And his dad says they want *one* room with three beds for *two* nights. While they're checking out the room, he says they sleep every afternoon and he gets bored out of his skull, so is there anything to do? Lots, I say. Like I don't want him to think Oporto's dead."

Later Roy came by the office where she was writing Natalie a postcard. He learned that there existed Portuguese-speaking Torontonians, and that Julia was one. When he called Toronto a hole, she thought of calling him a farmer—but he didn't look, in his denims, any different from Toronto kids. The football players, at least.

"So he says there's a gangster movie at a theatre in the square, you know, Praça da Batalha, and he wants us to go."

"So you went," I prompted. The gangster movie scared me less, somehow, than the boy's being a doctor's son. He would know too much.

"I told him I was broke," said Julia.

"I left you cake money," I said.

“Yeah, well.... And he said he had money, in *escudos* and everything, and I said I wasn’t supposed to be dating.”

“And?”

“And *he* said it wasn’t a friggin’ date. That he had a girlfriend back home. With boobs. And I said, “A cow doesn’t have boobs, farmboy. It’s called an udder. Don’t you even know that?” And he said I was his interpreter, right? Without me, he couldn’t go.”

So Julia told the maid she was going out. Mother was napping.

When the kids got back to the Comercial, Mother was standing at the head of the stairs. She sent Roy to his parents, who had been waiting an hour, and dragged Julia by her wrist into the kitchen.

“Hold it,” I said. “What happened at the movie?”

“Nothing.”

“But did he—”

“No, wait, Ma,” she said, her police lights flashing. “Like you and Dad never hit me or anything. I was scared shirtless what Grandma was going to do. She was already crushing my wrist.”

“What I want from you, girl,” I barked, hiding the success of her play for sympathy, “is what happened in the theatre.”

“Noth-thing,” she sobbed. “We watched the movie. He didn’t touch me. We didn’t even hold hands.” Disappointment in her voice here. “Then he bought me a pop and we came right back.”

That was her story, she stuck to it, and I believed it.

She hadn’t thought she needed Mother’s permission. “You let me go for cakes without asking.”

“You sound like a lawyer,” I said, but with the beginnings of a smile. Julia was still holding her shoulder. “So *did* she hit you?”

“No, but she just about shook my arm off for talking back.”

“It’s still there.” If it was sore when we got home, we could have it looked at. “God, though, Julinha, you shouldn’t have contradicted her. It makes us both look so bad, and our country too.”

“That’s just it, Ma,” Julia cried in triumph. “I hated the way she kept calling Roy a dirty little foreigner. ‘He’s not a foreigner,’ I finally shouted, loud as I could. ‘He’s a Canadian like me’—”

Like me. I saw it.

—and just to be sure she understood, I said it again in Portuguese.”

I saw my daughter, without alarm.

We struck a deal. Julia owed Mother apologies and, for the remaining day and a half of our stay, perfect respect. I was to make no further mention of moving to Portugal.

Julia was even better than her word. Sore arm notwithstanding, she let no one else touch a bed on Friday. Aggressively irreproachable, she bristled with Portuguese dignity, industry, and pride.

My end of the bargain proved light. My restless Portuguese legs were itching to be off again. I couldn't help wondering if the neighbours had given our lawn enough water. With that big maple, we needed so much. What's more, whether I was enlightened or corrupted to want it, however much it still scared me, I realized I wanted for Julia the freedom Canada offers. Together we should know how to use it.

She barely looked up Saturday afternoon as the Lisbon train rolled with generous deliberation across the Maria Pia Bridge and the canyon of the Douro took its last bow. That was a hard moment. If the two banks had somehow started to drift apart, I knew how the bridge would feel, forced to let go of one side.

"You've got to start calling yourself Inês," Julia burst out as Oporto's red roofs disappeared over her shoulder. "I'm reading about Inês de Castro, who was murdered. And know what? When her husband became king of Portugal, King Pedro, he dug her up and made the nobles kiss her hand. Like she—bet you've heard this before...."

"Go on," I said, nudging her with my elbow. "Tell me."