

Searching for My Baby Sister

by Cemil Otar

I was four years old and I was scared. On a cold winter's day, my mom had to go to the hospital. I asked my dad over and over, "Is Mom coming back?" He kept telling me not to worry. I was so relieved when she came home after a few days.



My mom, 1945

In my forties, during one of my heart-to-heart discussions with Mom, I mentioned how scared I had been when she went to the hospital.

After a long pause, she replied, "I had to get an abortion. I was already exhausted raising three children. It would have killed me to have another baby." Lowering her voice, she added, "This baby would have been your younger sister."

I jumped up to hug her. We never talked about it again.

I am now seventy. My wife and I are stuck at our condo in the pandemic isolation. Out of the blue, I remember my baby sister. I wonder how she would have turned out, what would she be like. Can I find traces of my long-lost baby sister in the women who came before her? Who were my mom's sisters? To search for my answer, I embark on a short, nostalgic trip through my mom's family.

My oldest aunt was born during the First World War. At age 14, she decided to learn French. Not just by reading books or taking classes. She wanted my grandpa to take her to France and enroll her in a school there.

On September 18, 1929, they sailed from Izmir (Smyrna) to Marseille. Four days later, they arrived. They took a two-and-a-half-hour train ride from Marseille to Montpellier. She enrolled in Lycée de Jeunes Filles de Montpellier (now: Lycée Georges-Clemenceau) as a boarding student.

A few days later, my grandpa returned home. My aunt returned home six years after that, speaking flawless French, Italian and English. She also learned Spanish, enough for everyday conversations but not sufficient to write a master's thesis about Cervantes' works. After her return, she went to medical school and became a pediatrician.

Would my baby sister have forged her own path in this single-minded way?



My oldest aunt and my grandfather, 1929

Next in line was my mother. She stayed in her hometown and studied economics. She had to quit the university shortly before giving birth to my older sister in June of 1944. A woman committed to family.

Would my baby sister have been the glue in her own home?

My aunt Selma had polio at age ten. The specialist told my grandparents that she would likely die within weeks, but she proved them wrong. The only visible sign of her ordeal was that she had to use canes for the rest of her life. At the university, she took architecture and fine arts. Eventually, she became the director of restoration at the Topkapi Palace. She travelled all over Europe, mostly to palaces and old buildings.

I have two memorable experiences with Aunt Selma. One day when I was twelve, she asked me to come to her office at the Topkapi Palace. The legendary director, Hollywood-blacklisted Julius Dassin was shooting a movie called *Topkapi*. The actors were Melina Mercouri, Maximilian Schell and Peter Ustinov. Of course I rushed over there. She took me to the outside wall of the treasure room. We had to climb the fireman's ladder to the roof.

I never liked heights much. She noticed my hesitation. She chastised me, "I have two canes, no useful body parts below my knees and I'm not scared. Move!"

I was amazed how fast she danced up the rungs. Once on the roof, she looked around and then gave the final clearance for the shoot. For the next half hour, we just stood and watched the filming.

The second memorable experience was a very special opera. She took me to Mozart's "Abduction from Seraglio" right there in the second courtyard of the Seraglio (i.e., the Palace) under starry skies. Pure magic, chiselled deep into my hippocampus, never to be forgotten.

Auntie Selma barely survived her childhood illness. She then became an expert in the field she had chosen, mostly on the rooftops that others were too scared to climb.

Would my baby sister have this much strength and perseverance?



My aunt Selma, on the roof of Topkapi Palace

My aunt Jayda liked helping others: the poor, dogs, cats, butterflies, bees. She took pharmacy at the university. She opened her store in the poorest district of Istanbul, where migrants from the Balkans were continuously flowing in. She remained poor but happy throughout her life.

Would my baby sister have been this caring for the underprivileged?

My aunts were accomplished professionals, well before women could vote in countries like France, Italy, Japan, Greece and Switzerland.

How do I think my baby sister would have turned out? With this genetic predisposition, my baby sister would be a Magellan in her own league. She would be a strong, smart and accomplished woman. I'd venture with her anywhere: concerts, cruises, operas, Royal Ascot, South Pole, Timbuktu, Ulaanbataar, Xanadu. I'd love to tell her stories about my granddaughter. I'd love to listen to her stories about her grandchildren.

“What if!”

That damn “What if!”

It is not in my nature to sit idle, even on the toilet. Early in the pandemic isolation, I decide to learn creative writing. I read, listen and watch everything I can find. I join writers groups on social media.

One day, I come across a wonderful story. It brings back happy memories of home and places I have been. It gives me a sense of tranquility in the middle of this isolation. I drop a comment. Its author replies. A few hours later, we become social media friends.

Subsequently, I figure this new friend must have been born around the same time as my mom's hospital visit. I start imagining her as my long-lost baby sister. Of course, she does not know any of this. We exchange stories once every two weeks or so. I enjoy this cordial, respectful friendship. I try my best to tiptoe the thin line between engaging and annoying, between supportive and stupid.

After three months, I receive a message saying she is uncomfortable. Mournful, I apologize. And that is how my friendship with my imaginary baby sister ends. Each incoming message pushes down her final message. Eight days later, it is no longer visible on my screen. Ouch. Ouch!

This baby sister is now only a memory hidden in four of my passwords.

Was this all a sweet dream?

Before falling asleep at night, I say a silent prayer, "Mom, I have to tell you something. I was in touch with my baby sister for a short while. She is strong, she is smart, she is talented, just like you and your sisters up there. I am blessed to know her. Thank you. Rest in peace."

I wipe my eyes on my pillow, my trusted home since age eleven. I give my wife a little kiss, close my eyes, fall asleep.

My mom appears in my dream in cool shades of gray, "You know you don't really have a baby sister, right?" She continues, "But there is one special place you might look for her."

"Where?"

"Stop trying to be Don Quixote. Be Cervantes. Look for her in the stories you write." Then she disappears, the dream is over. I am delighted to see my mom. With my happy tears, my pillow is now as wet as it was in the wash cycle earlier this afternoon.

Next day, my pain is re-buried deep, my mourning is over. I wake up early, go for a short walk, watch the sun rise over the Niagara River, and let it warm up my soul. My search for my baby sister will have to wait until my next reincarnation. Or maybe, until my next story.

Sweet dreams baby sister...