

The Nobel Prize

Maya saw the number on her cell phone. Her father.
Again.

There were usually two themes to his calls. The Nobel prize and his missing bank statements. Her father never directly accused her sister of mishandling his money. He hinted and probed and asked Maya to double check the accounts.

"Hi Papa. How are you doing today?" She sat at her desk, staring at the pile of unmarked student essays that seemed to have grown higher over the course of the afternoon. She would have to try to cut the phone conversation short.

"Maya. Is that you?"

"Yes, Papa, it's me." She hated yelling into the phone, but stubborn as he was, he had refused to get a hearing aid.

"Why are you calling? Are you all right?" he asked. The guttural edge of his 'r's' had deepened in old age.

"You called me." He sounded far away, and she wondered whether he held the phone upside down.

"Yes. Yes. Of course. I have some good news."

Excellent, she thought, today it would be the Nobel Prize.

"Did you know that I won the Nobel Prize?"

"That's great. For what?" This part of the story varied. Sometimes it was a computer program he had written in BASIC in the 1980s; other times, a study of patterns of flooding on the Don Valley Parkway.

She held her breath, as the gears of his brain spun like tires on glassy ice. Finally, he said, "It was the special Nobel Prize that they give to someone who never went to university."

They should have an award, like that, thought Maya. Of course, her father wanted recognition. She was the same. When talking with new colleagues, she found a way to mention that neither of her parents had finished high school. At first this may have been a simple disavowal of the shame she had felt at Yale when she had to admit no, she didn't ski. No, she had never been to Europe. But it had become a shameful humble brag, and she couldn't stop herself.

"That's the most important prize." She meant this. Even though they'd had their differences when she was growing up, she had always been proud of him, of the idea

of him. Her father, with his accent and ninth grade education, became a civil engineer.

When she was young, she spent very little time with her father. He came home right before dinner and turned on the TV in the living room. They ate in the kitchen, and he was the only one with a direct line of sight. The rest of the family had to sit in silence as he watched the news. Maya and Sonia made grotesque faces and sly gestures to get the other sister in trouble by making her laugh. The dinner time pantomime only seemed odd from her current perspective; as a kid, this, like everything, seemed normal.

After the plates were cleared, her father retreated to his bedroom where he spent hours bent over his textbooks. Maya and Sonia knew better than to make noise. No TV. No cartwheels. No pirouetting to *The Nutcracker*. Maya didn't mind because she loved to burrow under her covers reading *The Babysitters Club*. What she dreaded most was being called into "his office" - a small desk in the corner of his bedroom - for what the sisters called "the inquisition." You had to stand still while solving a math problem or translating a poem.

Maya took advantage of a lull in her father's rambling and tried to shift the conversation back to reality. "Max qualified for the state finals again this year." She didn't expect her father to show interest in her son's tennis tournaments. Her father didn't understand the Canadian obsession with children's sports. Plus, he never visited them on the West Coast so Max wasn't real to him, the way that Sonia's children were, after attending their music recitals and art shows.

The upside of his dementia was that he didn't realize that his daughters were estranged. The break had taken place a year earlier when Maya had stayed at Sonia's house so they could visit nursing homes together. In the evening there had been tense words, but they were used to bickering, so Maya was startled when Sonia said, "Get the fuck out of my house. I never want to talk to you again."

Maya had frozen, immobilized, like in a nightmare that you know is a dream but you can't rouse yourself from. But then she had discovered she could move, so she stood up and retreated to the guest bedroom. She took out her phone to order an Uber, but where would she go? Her flight wasn't leaving Toronto until the following day. She hesitated for a moment at the threshold of her sister's house, expecting

some gesture of reconciliation. When none came, she went outside and stood alone in the starless night.

In the following months, Sonia had spoken to Maya but only when absolutely necessary and usually with the pissy formality that one uses with a customer service rep after waiting for an hour on hold.

She reminded herself not to use that tone with her father as she tried to wrap things up. "Is there anything you need?"

"Just the bank account statements. Sonia won't show them to me."

Maya held her breath. She shivered with a yearning, like the one she sometimes had speeding on an empty highway imagining what would happen if she abruptly turned the steering wheel. It would be so easy to feed her father's paranoia and watch the remains of their little family burst apart.

It was absurd to think that her sister would siphon off their father's tiny savings, and not just because Sonia's husband was a cardiologist. She was a good person, but Maya enjoyed knowing she had the power to get revenge if she wanted to. The slightest hesitation on her part would fuel her father's suspicion. And if that happened, her sister, the good daughter, the one who stayed, the one

who never talked back would... would what, she mused? Would understand what it had been like for Maya growing up? Would recall the bruises and finally see their story the way Maya did?

"The accounts are in order," Maya told her father. Of course, she hadn't seen the accounts. In the first months after the fight, Sonia only spoke to Maya when she needed a signature, as required by the Power of Attorney. Recently, they had talked on the phone more often, but Maya was extremely careful not to say anything that could be construed as a criticism or a challenge. Their father knew none of this. It was an unspoken agreement that he would never learn of their falling out.

Maya's phone started to buzz. An incoming call from Sonia. These calls were starting to come more frequently, and Maya almost missed the silent treatment that she had received in the first weeks after the fight. Now it was the worst of both worlds. Her sister would call to explain the details of every medical appointment, every bill, and every complaint about the care home staff, but any advice that Maya offered would be rejected in the harshest terms.

"Papa, I have to go, Sonia is calling me on the other line."

"Sonia is here?" he asked.

"No, Sonia is calling me. I have to hang up now." Her father's resistance pulsed through the phone line. "I have to talk to her. Remember, you wanted me to go over the accounts." That did the trick. He agreed to let her go.

By the time he hung up, she'd missed the call. She looked at the paper she was grading, then back at the phone and pressed call. It went to voice mail, and she stopped grinding her teeth.

There was a picture of Sonia and Maya as kids on her desk. They were dressed in matching but not identical outfits sewn by their mother. Sonia had on a white shirt with a stiff collar and a red tartan pinafore. Maya wore a lacy shirt and a tartan skirt. Maya scrutinized the picture and couldn't identify a single feature that they had in common. Maya had small chestnut eyes, bushy eye-brows, and a crooked half-smile, half-grimace. She was all bones and angles. Little Sonia had an apple-shaped face, thick rust-coloured curls and a beautiful, horsey smile. Middle-age hadn't softened their differences. Maya's shapeless hair was streaked with grey while Sonia remained perfectly coiffed with arched eyebrows and acrylic nails.

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That night Maya had the kind of semi-work thing she felt obliged to attend. Oysters. Natural wine. Expensive cheese.

She shut off her phone when she arrived at the party and ended up staying late. She mentioned how sick her father was, but her colleagues only inquired in the most cursory way, and when she brought up his delusions, they changed the subject altogether. Death and loss awaited them too, but it seemed unimaginable. She was on the vanguard, and it was a lonely place. When she arrived home, it was too late to call Sonia, because it was almost dawn in Toronto.

When she got up to pee in the middle of the night, her phone was glowing like the light at the end Gatsby's dock. Or was it Daisy's dock? Maya was still drunk and couldn't remember. She glanced at the screen. *Answer your phone. You have to come right away. He had a stroke.*

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Sonia insisted on picking her up at the airport, even though Maya could easily have taken a cab. Sonia was like that. Generous. Bossy. Maya spotted the blue Honda Odyssey weaving through traffic like a fat, contented seal. She wouldn't be staying at Sonia's house, that was never a possibility, but her sister insisted on driving her to "their" house. Maya didn't think of the house on Robert Street as home. She hadn't felt that way in a very long time. Maybe she never did.

In the car, the conversation was all business. Lots of detail about medications, specialists, prognostications, details that Maya pretended to understand. Sonia was surprisingly good at parallel parking. She still had some city in her, thought Maya approvingly.

Her sister opened the door, and Maya followed her inside, glancing at the rotary phone, the shag carpeting, and the teak cabinet filled with neatly arranged classical records. In the living room, the scent hit her, her mother's scent. Could particles remain suspended in the air for fifteen years? It didn't seem right that a smell could endure when a person didn't.

"Are you crying?" asked Sonia, eyes-narrowed.

Maya willed the tears to stay balanced precariously on her eyelids. If they escaped, what else would? She couldn't even shake her head, for fear the motion would dislodge something. For a moment Sonia hovered closer, as if to embrace her, but she didn't.

"It's lucky he was in the care home when it happened. If he were still here, no one would have found him in time." Maya didn't mean this. Now he would linger, comatose for days or weeks, but the statement was a peace offering. Their big fight had been about whether to move their father out of his house and into an institution. Or at least that

was what had started it. And then things got heated, and Maya said something that seemed small but turned out to be big.

The day of the fight they had visited a series of care homes. Sure, when Maya took a quick look around the *Golden Ages* and said, "I'm never putting Papa here," it *had* been a bit rude. But why waste the staff's time when it wasn't a fit? Her sister brought her rudeness up more than once over the course of the evening and finally Maya took the bait. "Are you sure I'm the one with an attitude problem? I wasn't the one 'laid-off' from my job." The air quotes had been unforgiveable.

The night of the fight, Sonia had given her the chance to take it back, to affirm that the only interpretation of events was that Sonia had been terribly wronged, but Maya had refused to control the damage. Did she really think that her sister deserved to be fired? No, but she felt a tiny amount of *schadenfreude*. Everyone loved Sonia. In high school Sonia was in the popular crowd and when they were little, relatives would say to Maya, "You should try to smile like your sister." All Maya knew was that Sonia's position was eliminated during a period when Sonia's natural exuberance had become overwhelming.

There was no sign of her sister's hyper-energy as they stared at each other in the forsaken house. After a long pause, Sonia handed her a thick manila envelop and said, "I'll meet you at the hospital at 3. I have to pick up the kids. Make sure you fill out this paperwork."

Maya couldn't answer most of the questions on the forms, so she gave up. She called her best friend from high school and complained for a while, until her friend finally said, "Maybe the problem isn't that she dumped the paperwork on you but that you don't know enough about what's going on to fill it out." That was the good thing about old friends. They called you on your bullshit.

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Maya walked through the sliding doors of the hospital. The antiseptic smell transmitted an olfactory current of anxiety. She wondered what it was like for the staff to joke and flirt and compete against the backdrop of such despair. Her sister was in the lobby tapping her phone.

Sonia knew the serpentine ways through the corridors, and Maya followed obediently. They paused outside their father's door, and Maya peaked in. She couldn't stand to see him like that, not without Sonia by her side. The only way through this was together.

She turned to her sister and braced herself, as if preparing for a blow. "I'm sorry," she said.

"For what?"

Maya had mulled this for a long time but was still unprepared. "For everything."

Sonia shook her head.

"What can I do?" asked Maya.

"You still don't get it. I don't care what anyone else thinks, but I thought that you had my back, that you really knew me. What you broke can't be fixed."

What could Maya say? How could she see the light in another person when she saw so much darkness in herself? But yet somehow, she felt better, as if naming the wound might cauterize it. "I'm sorry for leaving you alone to deal with all this -" she gestured feebly at the broken linoleum tiles in the corridor. "It's too much for one person."

Sonia nodded and said, "Ready?" Then she took Maya's hand and they walked into the room together.