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CAPTIVATING BEGINNINGS SHORT STORY CONTEST*First Prize:*

Aunt Sophia
by *Efrem Sigel*

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CAPTIVATING BEGINNINGS SHORT STORY CONTEST*First Prize*

Aunt Sophia
by *Efrem Sigel*

For me it's not pictures of the dead that give me that goose-bumpy feeling of being in touch with eternity, but their phone numbers. Our old-fashioned address book with stiff cardboard cover and plastic hinges points us to the whereabouts of family and friends, some of whose addresses have been written over six or seven times as they change domiciles and discard husbands or wives. Flipping through the book, I happen on Aunt Sophia's listing, her last known digits on earth. For months she's been on my mind. It's a number in area code 203, suburban Connecticut where she spent the last 11 years of her life in a sterile high-rise set among the rolling hills, alien territory for a native of Manhattan. Sophia Schwarzman Ross, a stylish gal with reddish blond hair and a voice that could make you quiver or melt. I'd drive up from New Providence and sit in her living room-dining room and we'd sip tea as she skewered her fellow residents, white-haired ladies hiding their anti-semitism behind lace doilies and silver knitting needles.

Sophia'd been a retailing executive in the days when women were lucky to be paid half of what men got, a woman who had two babies but then went back to work at Gimbel's, unheard of, parking her kids with the Polish woman down the street and taking the subway to Herald Square. She loved music and theater and knew so many languages, Yiddish of course, from home and from the lower east side; French, which she spoke beautifully, having spent a winter in the south of France in the 50s after she'd contracted pneumonia; Italian from her love of opera; German from school; a smattering of Russian and Polish from her parents. Unlike the rest of my aunts and uncles she spoke the most elegant, polished English, standing straight and tall, that thrilling voice issuing from deep within her breast like an actress or an elocution teacher.

I find her number on a bright March day only a week before her birthday. She's been gone two years; she was 91 when she died and the last year or two weren't pretty, she refused to talk, this woman with the golden tongue, and she'd sit in the living room and give me a sad look and just a slight shake of the head or a nod when I asked a question. Would you like another cup of tea, Aunt Sophia? A shake, no. Are you too warm, should I open the window a crack? A slight nod, yes, up I get to open it the width of a pocket knife blade, a trace of a smile from Sophia.

Finding the number, staring at the pencilled digits in my crabbed hand, opens the tap to a slurry of guilt and regret: so many things I never got to say to Sophia.

Of course I know what I want to ask. What was the cause of that awful fight that divided you from Alice, your sister, my mother? The fight took place when I was 12, six years before my mother died, its effects spreading like a chemical waste spill through our house, poisoning the air and water and rendering us unable to eat, to sleep, to carry on our daily business. Unlike the typical quarrel in which the adversaries refuse to speak, this one featured daily, acrimonious volleys between Alice and Sophia, then a day or two of silence, giving way again to furious yelling, sarcastic rejoinders. Alice was the accuser and Sophia the defendant, but my questions about why, why this warfare between two sisters who'd always been so close, were turned aside: you don't need to know that, you're too young to know that.

After several weeks the war of the sisters ended on terms dictated by my mother, an astonishing turnabout. Usually Alice deferred to Sophia, who was 15 years older, more worldly and in every way her mentor and guide. However it ended, the strain was with us a long time. I could see it in Sophia's face as she sat in our living room, a drink in her hand. Howie, she liked to say, come and tell me things, but for months afterward she didn't feel like asking and I didn't feel like telling.

Sophia and her husband Arthur used to come out to Staten Island nearly every weekend. When the war of the sisters started the

visits got suspended. Then one Friday night Arthur appeared by himself. Normally he was full of talk about politics, world affairs, business but that night he sat silent, gasping for breath as if someone were astride his shoulders.

Arthur, who owned three candy stores, went off to work every day in blue pinstripe suit, a white carnation in his boutonniere. One of the stores was on East 8th Street not far from his and Sophia's apartment, and whenever I showed up there he had the suit jacket off and was in shirt sleeves dispensing egg creams and yelling at the kids not to mess up the comic books. Arthur had a head shaped like an avocado, a looming forehead tapering to a knob in back, like the tail of that green fruit. His wavy black hair was always groomed. Whatever had gone wrong between him and Sophia stayed wrong for many weeks, after which no one talked about it again.

I stare at Sophia's number, 638-2114. What is a telephone call anyway but a stream of electrons, echoing into the universe? Who's to say such a call can't still get through, even if the person being called no longer has a terrestrial exchange?

I lift the handset. "Daddy, please!" Rachel, our 17-year old, is talking to her boyfriend Scott from her room; what else is new? In the den, Mark, who's 14, has his papers spread around the carpet, his elbows digging into the writeup of a chemistry experiment. Is that heat I sense coming from the darkened screen? "No TV," I say grouchy. Stick to your homework.

When Rachel is off the phone I dial the number. There is a strange series of clicks, then silence and the line goes dead. But not quite silence, there'd been a ghost of sound, perhaps the breath of an old woman who had lifted the phone but who was too frail to speak into it.

For the rest of the evening, as I pick at the papers from my attache case--my firm is advising one of my best clients, a big entertainment conglomerate, on an acquisition--I picture Aunt Sophia with her wide smile, lips painted in crimson, so glamorous, like Tallulah Bankhead or Dorothy Lamour, insisting that I tell her my goals for the next year. Usually this would be in September or October, just after Rosh Ha Shanah. Goals? I'd say, my mind on

shooting baskets the next afternoon with my friend Burt. I don't have any goals. No one ever got anywhere without goals, she'd snap. Now what is it you want to accomplish in life?

I considered this. "I want to be able to hit the inside fastball. I always get scared when they're in close. I freeze up and take my eyes off the ball."

Sophia had only the vaguest idea what I was talking about but that didn't temper her enthusiasm. "Now we're getting somewhere. Avanti!" she pronounced in hearty Italian. I looked around thinking the police had arrived. When I turned back Aunt Sophia was writing, "Hit the inside fastball" in large letters in her pocket notebook. She had beautiful handwriting. She'd started as a stenographer, working her way up to assistant buyer, buyer, head buyer, assistant vice president. She had the brains to run the whole place. She'd take me around the store grandly, like one of the lords in a Trollope novel strolling the perimeter of his ancestral park.

Late that evening I dial the number again. It is past 10:30. The thoughts in my head are absurd: it's late to be calling Sophia, yes, but she's dead so it doesn't matter, well if she's dead why are you calling her? This time the number is busy, the pulses shrilling insistently in my head. At the kitchen table I put away the papers, which concern a proposal to acquire Parallel Universe, a tiny outfit that creates fantasy multimedia programming from a loft in downtown Brooklyn.

Before climbing the stairs to the bedroom where Ann, a book designer by day, is watching TV, I try once more. This time I hear the phone being lifted off the hook at the other end. But there is no hello, just a hint of breathing, the light intake of air through the nostrils and its more emphatic exhalation against the mouthpiece.

Hello, I say over and over. Hello, who's there? And then I stop. If by some suspension of the laws of nature I have reached into eternity to deliver my message to Sophia, what purpose does it serve to repeat, Hello! Hello! with escalating impatience? I adjust my own breathing to the rhythm I sense at the other end, taking one deep breath, more a sigh than a breath, and then a series of slower, more shallow ones. "Aunt Sophia, are you there? I've been meaning to

call but...but..." Don't go moist in the eyes, I tell myself, not with Sophia. She was as clear-headed a dame as ever strode down Broadway to see a supplier. She had a big rollicking laugh but the only tears I'd ever seen in her eyes were tears of anger at one of her brothers for misbehaving. When she was in her 50s they still came to her, heads bowed, to confess their troubles. The oldest of 10, she became surrogate mother and disciplinarian for eight unruly boys. From an early age she was cast for responsibility.

The pair of twisted copper wires vibrates with the drama of possibilities. From what depths of imagination or longing do I hear that familiar voice? I'm glad you called, the voice says. I've been thinking about Rachel. Does she still have my coloring?

Rachel, who'd had a lot of reddish-blond in her hair until nine or ten, is darkening, turning into a brunette like her mother. I say as much. "She's growing into a beautiful young woman, Aunt Sophia, you'd be proud of her." Out of dozens of grand nieces and nephews, Rachel had been Sophia's favorite. Sophia had come to Rachel's fifth birthday party, and that night in her room, surrounded by the debris of gifts and toys, Rachel had said, When I grow up I want to be just like Aunt Sophia. She said it with that perfect five-year-old pitch. Amazing how clearly they speak at that age, before the long descent into teenage incoherence. I remember asking Rachel why. Because, Rachel answered, she's smart and beautiful and everyone listens to what she says.

The moment passes, the contact is lost. I hang up the phone. During the night I dream not of Aunt Sophia but of my mother as a young woman in her 30s, with her long hair and wistful eyes, her voice trilling with amazement as she recounted to Sophia the antics of me and my brother Arnie, then a goofy kid who could make us all laugh, now a real estate developer equally adept at shopping centers in Maryland, condo conversions in Queens and office space in New Jersey.

There is a melancholy return to terra firma as you leave the island of a dream, and it is this feeling that I experience now in the kitchen as I fiddle with the coffeemaker, looking out at a colder, grayer morning and reminding myself not to tell Ann, Oh, I called

Aunt Sophia last night. Ann, ever practical as she puts things right after Mark and Rachel's breakfast maraudings, eyes me coolly. Midnight phone calls, she says, what's that about?

The poignancy of the dream, the merriment in my mother's voice echo in my head during a day of meetings about the acquisition. I and my clients haggle with an investment banker, a sharp-faced fellow with receding hair and two very small black eyes. We go back and forth over money (the offer is \$4.75 million, the ask is \$5.25 million), over the length of the payout, over how much autonomy the whiz kid founders of Parallel Universe will have.

None of this matters to me, perhaps that's why I'm so effective at it. At 1 p.m. we break for an hour. The investment banker and his proteges go off to have pizza and consider our final offer. They are an improbable pair: John Young, a buttoned down Korean engineering whiz who'd gone to MIT; and Jerry Havlak, a zany Czech who has only one outfit, a vermillion sweatshirt and threadbare jeans. We call them J&J. Determined to bring this deal in for less than five, I head for my office with a turkey sandwich and a bag of chips.

Behind the closed door, I run my fingers over the telephone touch pad. I don't give two hoots about my client's money or about J&J. I dial Sophia's number. Three shrill rings, then a phone company voice: The number you want is not in service, please check the number. I munch my sandwich, pick at the greasy chips. Looking over the papers I suddenly fix on an item in the budget. The two 20-something geniuses have underestimated the cost of three programmers to finish a game for the Christmas season. It's a \$50,000 whack out of forecast gross profit for the coming year and justifies cutting our offer. I crumple up the waxed paper from the sandwich, the cellophane bag with its bits of potato chip. By 4 o'clock we have our deal, \$4.795 million over four years.

Alan Solomon, my client's CEO, wants me to have a drink with him, a celebration before he meets his second wife at the opera. I beg off. As I walk to Grand Central in the chill March gloom, obsessed by Sophia, I figure I must have dialed a wrong number

earlier. I unfold my cell phone, slouching against a gray stanchion. Commuters hurry to the trains, their heads moist from bits of rain and sleet that have fallen from the sky; a huge Kodak ad spans the width of the station, pouring glorious yellows and blues and reds down on the tumult of evening rush hour.

I reach a woman in her prime, vivacious, talkative. "The person you want doesn't live here," she says. "Who is it you're looking for?"

A picture of this woman comes to mind, high cheekbones, fair hair, a way of gathering men around her. "My aunt," I say. "My aunt Sophia. She used to have this number but I haven't talked to her in a couple of years." And then I ask her name. I'm an ex-newspaper reporter who knows how to get people to open up.

Celia, she says. "You'll track her down. Aunts love to hear from their nephews. I hope it's no family emergency."

No emergency. I realize I'd like to let Sophia know that my father, Allen, at 79, has met a sweet old thing down in Florida, Ellen Schwartz. Funny, isn't it, Schwarzman first, then Schwartz? If he asked Sophia's advice she'd tell him, Get married, you fool. The two of them had a way of talking plainly to one another. Me? When I was old enough to really talk to her I was busy with college, travels, a career. Now that I have the inclination I've lost the opportunity. Isn't that the way it is? I speak up to make myself heard over the tramp of feet on the hard tiles, the voices that rise and fall as if chanting vespers in the nave of Grand Central.

And you, I say to Celia, how many nephews do you have?

"God, at least a dozen." Her womanly laugh floats down the wire, enveloping me in its warmth. Celia tells me it's her sister's house; she's just visiting. "To tell you the truth I needed some time away from my husband," she confesses before we say goodbye.

The next night I wait until 11:30 when Ann is asleep and Rachel's light is a dim arc of moon seeping under her door. This time I am not so much nervous as giddy. I get a fast busy signal and hang up. When the line is free there is once again the sound of the phone lifting, then a murky, imperfect silence, as if people, cars, dogs are moving about, hidden in fog.

"Aunt Sophia, I need to know if you're there."

A faint humming or keening can be heard in the background, so different from the flow of words I could count on from Sophia. I remember as a kid listening to the four of them, Allen and Alice, my parents, and Aunt Sophia and Uncle Arthur talk about everything, Sophia and Arthur's trip to Italy, civil rights, one of the brothers who'd gotten himself into debt, Dad's work, the threat of nuclear annihilation. When Sophia spoke I was mesmerized by the richness of her voice, its timbre expressing what to me was the essence of adulthood, layers of refinement and education modulating but not disguising the longing for self-fulfillment, for love, for attention. There was something sensual, maddeningly alluring, about Sophia with her wide mouth and dimples and fine golden-red hair. As a young woman she'd broken many hearts. If she was at a party the men would cluster around Sophia, refilling her glass and trying to get her to laugh at their jokes while the wives, talking together, eyed her with sideways loathing.

In the morning I call Dad in St. Petersburg. "I've been thinking about Aunt Sophia. What was it that set mom off, you know, that fight when I was 12? What did Sophia do?"

Oh, Dad says, you know how Sophia was. She could be so high-handed and preemptory, she was always setting your mother's teeth on edge.

Dad, I interrupt, there was something that happened, something very specific. What was it?

"Poor Arthur," he says without warning. "The guy had no idea what hit him, it came out of left field. A divorce. Can you imagine? People of our generation didn't get a divorce. Especially Jews. He had no clue. Out of the blue she says to him over supper, 'I want a divorce.' He was devastated."

"What was it? Was there someone else? She was fooling around?"

He's 1200 miles away but I can see him shake his head no. "Honest to God I don't think so. I grilled her and grilled her. 'Who is

it? Come on, you're sleeping with someone, aren't you? Is it Roger?" Roger was her boss at Gimbel's, a vice president who got to take people out to lunch and put it on the tab. A porky man who combed his sparse hair the long way around a barren scalp. He used big words: prognosticate, eventuate. I'd met him at cocktail parties that Sophia gave for her colleagues and Greenwich Village artist friends. Roger had gone to Columbia, which put him in a different world from Alice and Sophia and their eight brothers, only one of whom had made it to college: Uncle Isaac, a rabbi from Chicago.

If Sophia and Roger hadn't slept together, perhaps he had nonetheless stoked Sophia's impatience. When people asked what her husband did she ignored the question. Looked them right in the face and went on talking about whatever came to her head.

Uncle Arthur, in shirtsleeves and bow tie, liked to sit at the piano and lead a sing-along. Sophia would stamp her feet in frustration. Arthur was deaf in his left ear and Sophia could never remember, always thought it was the right ear. She'd lean in over his left shoulder, shouting at him to stop and he'd grin and start in on another chorus of "Down By the Old Mill Stream."

"Dad, there had to be something, some reason. A person doesn't just wake up one fine day and ask for a divorce." These days, of course, that's exactly what happens. But in the fifties?

"Sophia was different," he says. "She had this attitude that she could do what she wanted." The next day I'm in the office by 7 for a morning of furious memo writing, meetings, a presentation to the client's executive committee. I call late that afternoon, in the grip of a compulsion that obliterates second thoughts. Like a drug addict I marvel at my own lucidity.

This time the phone rings only twice. What I hear inside my head is the voice of yet another woman, younger than Celia, much younger than the old woman who wouldn't speak two nights ago. Sophia? I say. Just a minute, she replies. She's corralling a child. She and I fall into easy conversation. She's 18, the oldest of 10, and if she can get them fed and bathed and doing their homework by the time her parents come home from work, she'll be able to go out tonight. When she hears who I'm looking for she says, Sophia, that's

such a beautiful name. Her name is Rosa. Boring, she laughs. Now Sophia, that's elegant, I love that name.

Do you have any sisters? I ask. Just one, she says, Anna, she's not even three. Sometimes I look at her dirty feet and the smudges on her cheeks and try to imagine how it'll be when we're both grown up and married.

I think about Sophia. All her life she did the right thing, she ran the house for her father, after she got married at age 23 she looked after her baby sister. It was Sophia who brought Alice to live with her and Arthur after my grandmother Sura died of leukemia. Mother was only seven. Then Sophia had two kids of her own, a business career and still she took care of her brothers, lending them money, patching up their marriages when their wives had had enough.

It is Aunt Sophia who I imagine is thundering in my ear. What did you expect, she exclaims, my whole life was spent looking after others. Is it any wonder that at 51 I wanted to live for myself?

What did *you* expect? That your sister Alice would stand for your turning your--and her--world upside down? After decades of telling her what to do, did you think she'd remain silent as you made the biggest blunder of your life? You stayed on track for 50 years and then in one fell swoop you tried to jump the rails.

To tell the truth, I didn't think Alice had it in her. Telling me to my face that I was a selfish bitch. My God, the anger in your mother's voice, Sophia recalls, enjoying the irony of the memory; she could always laugh at herself.

Mother wasn't the only one who was angry, I realize. My quest to reach Sophia has its origins in a barely acknowledged rage of my own. Your sister was dead of ovarian cancer at 42, I bark. How come you got to go on and on to 91, and there she was, already in her grave 30 years?

It's not fair to blame the living for surviving the dead, but our feelings aren't based on fairness; they never have been, they never will be. In the aftermath of my outburst I hear kitchen noises on the

line, a salad spinner turning, the simmer of a stew pot and then Rosa's voice, telling me farewell.

I do my best to warn her. Watch out, I shout. Watch out for life. It'll sweep you along before you realize it, you won't know where you're going, you won't understand how you got there. Instead of a reply there is only dead air on the line, nothing but dead air.

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