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The Force-Out

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Abstract

In lieu of an abstract, below is the essay's first paragraph.

"As she plodded up the walk to the front door, Molly heard the television blaring. The clamor of the ball game rankled and she winced at the announcer's piercing voice. "It's a three-two pitch, and -- He struck him out!"

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The Force-Out

by Reva Nagan Joffe

As she plodded up the walk to the front door, Molly heard the television blaring. The clamor of the ball game rankled and she winced at the announcer's piercing voice. "It's a three-two pitch, and—he struck him out!"

"So he's out, so who cares," Molly muttered, shifting her shopping bag to her other hand. Why did Sarah have to play the TV that loud? The whole neighborhood could hear every word of it.

Molly had figured that the game for sure would be finished by now. After all, how long could her old bones sit on that hard green bench in the park waiting for the baseball game to end? Like a homeless refugee she was. Sometimes she secretly wished that the TV would break down altogether.

Molly propped her shopping bag against the door. A fancy bag it wasn't, with its big red letters advertising a cut-rate drug store, but it hadn't cost a cent and was strong—look how long it lasted already—a couple of years at least. She pushed back a few white strands of hair and adjusted her eyeglasses. Zipping open her black pocketbook, she fumbled for her key. She was positive she'd taken it with her. Had she left it on the dresser? The kitchen table? Ah,

now she remembered; she was about to slip the key into her pocketbook when the phone rang, and she'd plopped it on the table instead and hurried to answer. The call was as usual for Sarah.

Now Sarah will be mad. She'll have to make the trip downstairs. Well, let her be mad. Anybody can forget a key. So what's keeping her? She can't tear herself away from her precious ball game even for a minute. Molly kept her finger on the doorbell until Sarah opened the door.

"You forgot your key for a change? Molly, you'd forget your head if it weren't tied on. Here, give me the shopping bag. You look all pooped out." Molly puffed up the stairs, stopping to catch her breath. "The game ran over into the tenth inning," Sarah flung over her shoulder. "The score was a tie, two and two."

Sarah hurried to the set. "Just my luck! I missed the best part of the game! For crying out loud, Molly, why don't you leave your key in your bag all the time so you won't keep forgetting it?"

Molly panted over to the TV, clicked it off, and headed for her bedroom. "Sarah, put the fish away in the refrigerator. I bought some pressed cheese and sour cream, too. I'm going to take off my corset and lay down. I feel dizzy and I want some peace and quiet, so, Sarah, do me a favor now and don't

play the radio or TV."

She was tired of running to the park. Every day a ball game! For the hundredth time she wondered why she had let Sarah talk her into giving up her flat after Mama died. "Move in with me," Sarah had said, weeping, after the funeral. "Since Max died, I'm lonesome and now you're alone too. And, sharing expenses it would be cheaper." But whose expenses? Sarah was always the big spender.

Molly awoke with a start. In the kitchen the radio was so loud she could make out every word of the news. If the news is on, she thought, putting on her brown felt slippers, I slept a whole two hours. Now I'll be up all night.

"Well, you finally got up," Sarah looked up from the lettuce-and-tomato salad she was preparing. "Do you feel all right now?"

Molly shuffled to the cupboard, and took out two green paper napkins, silverware and dishes. "Who feels all right when you get old—when your bones ache, and your stomach is bad, and your feet hurt?"

"So what can you expect, Molly? Our get-up-and-go has gone and went. But you still have to stay in there pitching." Sarah swung her arms for emphasis. "Didn't they have any strawberries today? Bessie Goldberg served such beautiful berries at our bridge-club luncheon yesterday."

"Two dollars and thirty cents a

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pound the salmon cost! Robbery, that's what it is, highway robbery! I figure we could do without strawberries and put the money toward the fish. I sewed at least ten thousand buttonholes, and now I can't even afford a small piece of fish."

"So far we're not starving. Between the two of us, we get along. My Alan, God bless him, he always knows what I want. Last year the sofa. He could see for himself how shabby the old one was looking. I didn't even have to tell him. And my new spring coat—isn't it a beauty?"

Molly poked at her salad. Sure, she thought, Sarah has children to help her out, but who have I got to buy me a coat? I supported Mama after Papa died. I took care of her when she was sick. Sarah married and had her family. Benny, may he rest in peace, was far away, in Dallas. So he sent a few dollars now and then. After all, he was a son. But everything was on my head. I could have married Isaac, but he was worried he'd have to support Mama. How many chances does a plain person like me have? Molly pushed the salad aside. "Why do you always make salad? You know it's bad for my colitis."

"Then don't eat it. Come on, it's almost time for *What's My Line*."

They settled themselves in the living room, Sarah on the rose-colored sofa, Molly on a straight-backed chair. The evening paper close to her eyes, she glanced at the headlines. "I thought you turned on the TV, Sarah," she said.

"I did. By now the set should be warmed up." Sarah fiddled with the knobs. "The darned thing won't go on."

"You mean we can't watch *What's My Line*? And tonight that doctor show is on."

"Doctor what's-his-name I can do without. But the playoffs start in a few days," Sarah said. "How can I watch the World Series without TV? I'm calling the repairman right now. He's open late tonight."

When the serviceman's verdict was pronounced, the sisters gaped at each other. "Seventy-five dollars for a tube!" Molly peered up at the man in the blue uniform. "You're not making a mistake?"

"That's not any tube, lady, it's

a picture tube. You're getting a real bargain."

"It almost pays to buy a new set," Sarah mused. Her eyes brightened. "I'll let you know tomorrow what we decide."

"Another service call will cost extra. If I don't take it in now, you'll have to pay thirteen-fifty for this call."

Molly gasped. "Thirteen dollars and fifty cents for nothing?"

"Send me a bill," Sarah said, "and I'll send you the money."

As soon as the door closed, Sarah impetuously clasped Molly's hands. "Now is the time for us to buy a colored set," she said. "It doesn't have to be big like this one. We can get a nice portable model for less than three hundred dollars."

"How can you even think of such a thing?"

"We'll each pitch in the same amount. It won't be a fortune."

"But I'm saving my money for a new winter coat. Why don't you ask your Alan, if you want a colored set so much?"

"He already bought the black-and-white one. I can't ask him for everything. Both his kids are going to college now."

"Then fix up the old one. Why suddenly a colored television?"

"Look, how many more years have we got? Why shouldn't we enjoy life as much as we can? You can't take it with you, Molly. Loosen up the purse strings."

"Whatever money I have, I need. Who's going to pay my bills when I get sick?"

"Your cemetery plot is paid for? Medicare will take care of the rest. What have you got? You don't even play canasta."

"We can fix the old TV, or you can ask Alan for a new one, but I'm not going to throw away my money on something I don't need."

"Don't be such a sourpuss, Molly. Put some zing into your life, and you'll forget your aches and pains."

"I'm going to bed. This commotion gave me a headache."

The next morning, the rain was a dull downpour. Through the closed windows, Molly watched people in raincoats huddled under their dark umbrellas. The temperature had dropped twelve degrees. It was a day to stay inside. But,

to Molly, in the apartment was as dismal as outdoors. She and Sarah hardly spoke over breakfast, and the apartment was strangely quiet. Sarah snapped the radio off in disgust, the same old depressing news about the war in Vietnam, crime in the streets. Without TV, they were missing all their favorite morning programs.

"Molly," Sarah called from the living room. "I'm going out."

"In such weather?" Molly came out of her bedroom, pulling on her dark-green sweater.

"What's a little rain? Rubbers and an umbrella I have. I'm going uptown to take money out of the bank for a new television."

"Go ahead—it's your money."

"You're going to pitch in, too. You'll be watching TV more than I will. In winter, you never go out of the house."

"I can get by without television, and so can you. The ball games are on radio, too."

"How I ever put up with such sour grapes all these years I don't know!" Sarah snapped. She opened the door, then said, "If any of my card ladies call up, tell them to be here one-thirty sharp. My canasta group is playing here today instead of at Nettie's house. Her husband is going into the hospital. God knows, it's his last inning. Still, he might make a come-back."

Molly glared at the closed door. "Sour grapes am I!" she sputtered. "So you're spoiled grapes!" She went to the TV set, turned the knob on, then off, once, twice, until she yanked the plug out and stomped into the kitchen to pour herself another cup of coffee. Her hands were trembling so that some coffee spilled on her fingers. At the sink she held her smarting hand under the cold water, and half-sobbing, began to talk: "Who put up with who? Didn't I always pay my share of the expenses? Did Sarah ever have to run away from the house like me and sit on a park bench? She forgets how I used to babysit her children so she could go out for good times with Max. And Max, when he lost money on the stock market, didn't I put food on their table? Those things Sarah doesn't want to remember. The only thing on her mind is cards and baseball. An old lady like her — two years older than me, but she doesn't want

to remember that either — where does she come to be a baseball fan? *Meshuga!* Nowadays people don't know what to do with money. The way she spends money, I wouldn't have a penny left. Last year a new carpet, new lamps. So what if the carpet was worn out? We could put a small runner over the bad spot. Now it's a new TV. And next month? What will she want then? If I let Sarah spend all my money there won't be enough to put up a decent gravestone when I die. I'll put up the monument now — nobody has to do me any favors. I'll pick out my casket and take care of my own funeral. Nothing fancy. Who'll be there anyway?"

Molly turned off the faucet, wiped her eyes on her apron, and then cleaned her eyeglasses.

When Sarah returned, Molly had lunch on the table. To Sarah's announcement that she'd bought a twenty-one-inch portable colored television and that tomorrow morning it would be delivered, Molly said nothing. "We can even roll the TV out here in the kitchen when there's something we want to watch," Sarah added.

Molly chewed her hamburger and sipped her tea. Sarah looked at her a moment, then said quietly, "Thanks, Molly, for getting lunch. I need a few minutes rest before the girls come. I can't rush around like I used to."

"How's the weather outside now?" Molly asked. She cleared the dishes from the drop-leaf table and stacked them in the sink. "I have to go out."

"The rain is slowing down. But why all of a sudden you're going out? You never go out when it's raining."

"I have to...an appointment."

"All right, so be mysterious." Sarah shrugged. "But change your dress. You never shortened half your clothes. A long hemline like that makes you look like an old lady."

As she turned from the sink, Molly wondered again how two sisters could be so different. Sarah was skinny, her face was long and thin. About the only way they were alike was that they both had nice white wavy hair—and thick—not like many of the women they knew, whose scalps now showed through their thinning hair. "Sarah, I'm

not your baseball team. I don't need a manager. Don't tell me everything to do. I like a longer dress. It warms my bones in this damp weather, and for your canasta ladies, I don't have to dress fancy—not for Lillian, that's for sure. I remember her from way back when she first came to work in the shop. How she carried on with the men! A disgrace. Everybody was talking. And now Mrs. High-and-Mighty doesn't even say 'hello' when she passes you in the street."

"Ah, Molly, that's only because her eyes are bad. She has her troubles too."

"Well, I've got mine and I have to go already."

"Take out the garbage when you go downstairs," Sarah reminded her.

Molly sat on a kitchen chair to pull on her rubbers. "Take out the garbage." She mimicked the words. "That's all I'm good for."

Molly intended to tell Sarah about her errand when she came home, but the canasta ladies were only just breaking up, and she was caught matching raincoats and umbrellas to the women. Years back, Molly had tried to play cards, but the women wouldn't talk about anything except their husbands and children—every time the same thing, complete with snapshots. She'd had nothing in common with them and soon she dropped out. Now she helped to usher the card-players out, polite but indifferent.

As she was getting ready for bed, she remembered she still hadn't told Sarah. "Better this way. I'll wait till the stone is up. Then she can't give me an argument."

The next morning the television set was delivered. Molly had to admit it had a clear picture and the colors were good, but when Sarah asked for her share of the payment, Molly said, "It's your TV, not mine. I didn't want it."

"You're watching it, aren't you?"

"So I won't watch your TV." Molly got up and went to her room, shutting the door hard. "Let her Alan pay for it," she muttered. "I'll bet she still has money from the policy Max left. I never had anybody to leave me anything."

For a week, whenever Sarah put on the television, Molly sat in the

kitchen or her bedroom. When the ball game was on, she fled to the park. One evening, Sarah came into the kitchen. "Molly, your doctor program is on. Come and watch it," Sarah insisted. "Come on," she said, taking her arm. "Is this a way for sisters to act? We'll talk about the money another time."

For a few days, life was pleasant. Then one morning, the phone rang and when Sarah hung up, she turned a sad face and said, "Nettie's husband died yesterday. The funeral is eleven this morning. Lillian's daughter will pick me up in half-hour. Poor man, for him, the ball game's over."

At two o'clock Molly was wakened from a nap. Such a commotion Sarah was making. Molly hurried out from her bedroom. "What happened?"

Collapsed on the sofa, Sarah was crying. "How could you do that to me? I almost fainted there, right on the spot. Lucky that Lillian was with me."

"Sarah, control yourself. What did I do?"

"We were walking back to the car from Nettie's husband's grave, when right by the front gate, there you were—your grave—your tombstone. You never told me you were putting up a stone. Everybody couldn't get over it. My God, what a shock!"

Molly was surprised that Becker's Monument Company had done such a fast job. She didn't even have the bill yet. "I was going to tell you. I was only waiting for Becker to call to say it was ready."

Sarah glared and blew her nose.

"What did I do that's so terrible?" Molly complained. "Lots of people put up a headstone. It's sensible. That Lillian, she was always a troublemaker."

"For that you have money," Sarah cried. "But to enjoy yourself, now, while you're alive, to buy a television set, for that you don't have a penny!"

"Enough already! I had enough of you!" Molly shouted. Hands covering her ears, she ran to her room. She opened the bottom drawer of her dresser, took out three flannel nightgowns and put them on the bed, then lifted two layers of tissue paper and found her bankbook. From the top dresser drawer, she took a pencil and a pad of lined

paper, and wrote the amount of her life savings. After replacing the bankbook and nightgowns, she worked over the figures, until, finally, she nodded.

Dressed in her warm sweater, she left the house without speaking to Sarah.

In an hour she was back. She tightened her lips when she saw Sarah lying down on the sofa, watching TV. "If I lay down on your precious sofa with my shoes on, you make a big fuss!"

Sarah sat up and smoothed her hair. "I was trying to calm myself down. It's a wonder I didn't get a heart attack right on the cemetery. I can still feel my heart shaking." Her hands were shaking too as she put them to her bosom. She looked pale, breathless.

Molly went to the television and turned the volume down. "You remember Mr. Shuster, his wife died six months ago?"

Sarah nodded.

"Well, he got married again."

"When his poor Rosie died, he went crying to everyone that the light of his life went out. So now he struck a new match! Some men are afraid of the dark. Well, life is short. Good luck to him!" Sarah sighed. "But why are you interested in Mr. Shuster all of a sudden?"

"He sold his house and furniture and moved to a studio apartment in the Wilshire Apartments—you know where, next to the cleaners and the delicatessen."

"So?"

"Now he moved into his new wife's apartment. She already had lovely furniture and everything."

"Molly, don't beat around the bush."

"I rented his old apartment."

"You what?" Sarah gave a sudden start, again placing her hands on her breast.

"I gave a deposit on the studio apartment. It's a nice room, plenty big enough for me. And Mr. Shuster sold me his furniture for twenty-five dollars. What do I need—a bed and table and chairs?"

"But why? why? First you make your grave ready and now you're moving out. Two shocks in one day I can't take, Molly. In your whole life you never lived alone."

"Like you said, life is short. Why wait to do what I want? I always wanted to live alone. Not everybody's like Shuster."

"Look, Molly, because of an argument, you don't have to move. It's not the first time we had words, it won't be the last."

"For a long time I've been thinking about it, and yesterday I heard about Shuster's place. It's near you and it's handy for shopping."

"Remember what I'm saying to you, Molly. If you can't catch it, don't call for it."

Molly fidgeted. "Don't give me baseball talk. Speak plain English."

"Don't do something you'll be sorry for. It will cost you more for your own place. And you don't feel well. You're taking a chance living alone."

"I figured it all out. Here, I'm sharing the rent for a four-room apartment. There, it's only a one-room efficiency. Even counting the food—all in all, it comes out about the same. And the superindendent has a basement apartment right under me. He said any time I need anything, I should bang on the floor. And there's hardly any steps to climb. You should find a different place yourself. You don't run up the stairs like you used to either. What do you need all these steps for?"

"I like an upstairs. It's more private." Her voice choked, and the words caught in a sob, then finished in a thin, high squeak.

"Sarah, you'll come to visit me. I'll come to you. This way we won't be getting on each other's nerves. Do I have to tell you? The older we get, the more we get set in our own ways."

Even after a week in her own apartment, Molly was still excited. She felt like she was on vacation, almost like a bride, preparing her new home, buying a few towels and sheets, and some tableware and pots. "Why," she wondered "didn't I do this years ago?" For the first time in her life, she was her own boss: no shop foreman, no sick mother, no temperamental Sarah. She ate when *she* wanted, she listened to *her* favorite radio programs, she bought only what

she had an appetite for. She felt like a sore inside her was healing. The tiny kitchen with a two-burner stove, a windowless bathroom, and a small, off-white "living" room where she ate, slept and spent most of her waking hours—that was her castle.

By the end of the second week, everything was in place, the curtains hung, her shopping finished. She had more time to read the paper, to listen to the radio, and to look out the windows to watch what went on in the streets. She knew that she should call Sarah, to find out how she was, to let Sarah know that she herself was well, but she enjoyed the silence, being left alone.

After a month she wondered was Sarah waiting for a special invitation to come over. "After all," she thought, "we're sisters. Who else do I have in this world? Now that the apartment is all fixed up, I'll invite her to dinner. She'll be my first company. It will be a celebration. I'll buy two nice pieces of fresh salmon and we'll have strawberries with cream for dessert."

But when she was shopping at the delicatessen next door and telephoned Sarah, the line was busy. And three days later when she tried again no one answered. "Ah, well," she told herself, "maybe next week."

She took the pressed cheese and fish up to her little flat, and after she had eaten and cleaned up, she lay down for a rest. She heard the soft faraway music of a radio from another apartment, and remembered that she had to go out to see if Becker had done a good job on her stone. That must have shocked Sarah, seeing the tombstone with her name on it like that. She lay back, the stone, white and neat, in her mind, and wondered when she could take a bus out to see it. Money well-spent, and nobody to tell me if, or how, or when. She'd seen other stones that Becker had set, and she was sure he'd done a first-class job on hers. God knows he charged enough. She'd go out to see it soon, tomorrow maybe, she thought, and then as the faraway music faded, she slept.