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Ghost Call

The last time I saw my mother outside of a hospital bed, she was chatting in a featureless sky-blue hallway with an attendant in matching blue scrubs, looking as gracious as some English lady of the manor greeting guests at her yearly garden party. Straight-backed and elegant in a lovely brown tweed skirt, brown satin blouse and jaunty brown fedora, she was all smiles, though I wondered why she was wearing a hat indoors. That seemed totally unlike her, because she was a stickler for etiquette.

When I approached, I realized that she wasn't speaking English. It was Russian. A long stream of it, words crowding each other like a jostling mob ready to burst through department store doors at some amazing pre-holiday sale.

Even though the short blond attendant was nodding, I didn't think she was a Russian speaker because her eyes showed no comprehension--but they were kind, not bored or condescending.

My stocky, red-headed father came up behind me and I asked what she was saying. He shook his head. "Baby talk. It's not real words. It's *baby talk*."

And I understood then how far back in time my mother had slipped: Russian was her first language even though her parents had brought her up in Poland after they fled the Bolshevik Revolution. They weren't aristocrats or even wealthy, but her father was some minor figure in the

Provisional Government that had replaced the Czar and he feared being imprisoned or executed by his political opponents.

She was an infant when her parents left Russia and there she was, a woman in her seventies, babbling.

It was incredibly sad because my multi-lingual mom was a witty, elegant, sharp-edged conversationalist, well-read and outspoken. Current events and politics fascinated her and she was quick to see news in a historical context. When Nixon was president, she labeled him a fascist and said that his vice president, Spiro Agnew, sounded in his speeches "like Stalin on a bad day."

All that insight, all that sarcasm disappeared as steadily as she did, like an unmoored boat drifting out to sea, and I regretted the times that I had felt overwhelmed by her hard-driving conversation. I was sorry for myself as much as sorry for her, even though our suffering was not remotely the same.

Her illness was caused by a succession of small strokes, interfering with her comprehension of what she read in the *New York Times* and making instructions for medication confusing. What did three times a day mean?

She wasn't sure. Before being in this facility for observation, she had wandered from their apartment and waited outside on the street for my dad, forgetting her keys, forgetting who he was, who she was. "I am waiting for the man who is coming here" she told concerned neighbors.

My father felt humiliated, exposed. And angry.

"How could this happen?" he kept saying, as if *he* was the one who'd been cursed.

"But she was a chain smoker, dad." That was the verdict of the doctors he consulted: smoking.

He berated me. "She was not a chain smoker!"

I pictured all the ashtrays with smoking cigarette butts and the cigarette she held so elegantly. She made those tiny cylinders look as glamorous as if she was Marie Antoinette holding a painted, gilded fan. But in time, they tore her brain apart.

I understood his denial. And I hated it, hated him for making me briefly wonder "Am I crazy? Did she really smoke all that much?" Then I remembered buying cigarettes for her, remembered watching her peel off the cellophane and flip open the box, light up with a match from one of the endless Ohio Blue Tip matchboxes. I recalled the sulfur smell of the match and the arabesques of smoke curling up to the ceiling while she took one deep drag after another as if to reassure herself the cigarette would burn.

But maybe she wasn't really a chain smoker, maybe our family reality was nothing more than a kaleidoscope: he turned it one way and saw what he wanted to see, I turned it a different why to see what I supposed was real. Both might be true, both might be false.

What was indisputable was this: the wife he knew and the mother I loved had vanished, and when she was soon not speaking at all and moved to a care facility, she was like a bombed-out building whose façade is untouched, though the windows expose nothing inside, it's all been flattened to dust.

This grotesquely silent ruination lasted for seven years during which my father sometimes claimed that she recognized him on his daily visits, but more often admitted that she was a "ghost." I couldn't imagine the weight of watching the vibrant woman he had loved lie in the hospital bed, catatonic.

When she was first diagnosed with dementia, a nurse quietly predicted to me that after half a dozen years or so, we could expect her body to start shutting down, and the end came just as she said, but with a surprise.

It was February in Michigan and my old-fashioned, red desk phone rang in the bedroom when I was deep asleep under an electric blanket. I picked up the receiver and there was static, nothing more.

Somehow I starting saying "Mom, is that you? Is that you?" And then the voice I hadn't heard in far too many years replied, "I'm all right."

I hung up and woke my spouse who squinted at me as if I had turned on all the lights. I explained what happened, he said "Huh" and rolled on his side away from me. I fell asleep too and then the phone rang again.

Without preamble, my brother told me that my mother had died a few hours earlier that evening.

"I know. I just talked to her on the phone."

"Not possible. She hasn't spoken to anyone in seven years. And she's *dead*."

Wide awake now, I said it as slowly as if trying to communicate to someone who barely spoke the same language as me: "She called me anyway."

I didn't add that she had used my childhood nickname, Cookie, because it felt like I'd be sharing something too intimate. Right then, that part of the call was just between me and my mother, a sign of affection I had long since forgotten. A treasure.

After a pause, my brother said, "Why didn't she call *me*?"

I didn't state the obvious: I was her favorite when she was alive, so why would that change when she was dead? And he lived right near her care facility while I was three states

away and he could see her whenever he wanted to, so he hadn't lost touch with her the way that I had.

At her funeral, I told my dad about the phone call, but he either didn't hear me or didn't want to hear me, so I let it drop.

For years I had scoffed at people's accounts of ghosts and visions and visitations, but now it seemed clear that my loving mother had given me one last gift. This was no dream, no hallucination.

I know what I heard. I know what she said.