

Devotion, A Ghost Story

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My 95-year-old mother and I have a secret word with which she'll communicate with me after she dies. In anticipation of grief, I wanted a sign to prove we continue to exist after death, (and I don't mean as stardust or memory, but in a personal, recognizable way).

We came up with this code nearly six years ago. It was spring, so I'd brought her purple lilacs in a silver vase. Because they were her favorite flower, I'd brought my mother lilacs every spring of my life. When I was very young and we had none in our yard, I'd pilfer a neighbor's burgeoning hedge. It's likely my mother knew she'd received stolen goods, but inhaling their heady scent, she asked me nothing I'd have to deny. When the inevitable day comes, my two older sisters and I will plant lilacs on her grave and pray the midwestern prairie to which we return her, gets enough annual rainfall to produce an abundance of blossoms.

The word we have chosen is not hard to remember but as her mind fogs with dementia I feel the need to review. "What's the word, Mom?" I ask. From the Early American sofa in her assisted

living apartment, she stares at the floor in good-natured concentration, as if the word might be found on the rug. “Potato!” she cries out with sudden satisfaction.

No.

“Book!”

Closer. I can see how she’s filed the word by syllable and first letter and hope her wits are restored at the time of her death. I also hope the sudden appearance of that word will comfort me when the time comes, though it may only echo the injury, like pressing a bruise.

The worst thing about my mother is her chronic anxiety. Her capacity for predicting the worst has meant I can never share my own worry. The best thing is harder to specify. When I confided a terrifying, recurrent nightmare at the age of six, she rocked me in her arms and said, “Next time, just imagine I am standing in front of you. Nothing bad can get past me, now or ever.” *This is how I will know you still love me*, I think to myself, and I whisper the word in her ear again and again.

With Dad, proof that life exceeds death manifested abruptly and unexpectedly. He’d been dead for two decades. And then he showed up.

Over a glass of pinot noir at The Charthouse, a friend had confided she’d met a medium at a dinner party whose messages were stunningly accurate. “She’s amazing,” Vicki said. It was happy hour on a Friday evening. I leaned forward to hear through the cacophony of laughter and conversation bubbling around us. “She warned me there was something wrong with my eyes and the ophthalmologist found there was!”

“How does she do it?” I asked.

“She communicates with dead people—relatives of yours-- people in spirit who care about you.”

People in spirit care about me?

Utterly charmed by that possibility, I made a note to get this woman’s name. I had some risky decisions to make and was paralyzed by fear and ambivalence. If any kind spirits cared to weigh in, a cosmic perspective was welcomed.

On an April afternoon a few weeks later, I arrived at the modest townhouse of an evidentiary medium named Allyson. Red zinnias and lush basal shouldered her front step. No weird statuary. Wearing jeans and a blousy-flowered top, Allyson was clearly surprised as she held open the door --she’d been expecting a regular client with a near-identical name. A bonus in the credibility department, I thought, shaking hands. Without the right name, she can’t have done any research online.

We settled in on either side of a wide desk in her walkout basement office. Natural light spilled in through her sliding glass doors. I sipped sweet ice-tea while Allyson got her bearings. She was a large woman, with silky brown hair, blunt cut in a clean bob and a gentle demeanor. Barely perceptible music played from a console behind her as I obsessively checked my cell phone to confirm it was recording.

I gave her my birth date and she began to explain the havoc Pluto was wracking on Pisces, while Jupiter magnified the ensuing mess all out of proportion. This, I could have guessed. Then she looked up abruptly, as if someone had entered the room. “Your father has passed, hasn’t he?” she asked, gazing intently to my left. I nodded warily. Dad was not on the list of benign spirit-helpers I’d mentally conjured in preparation for the appointment.

“Well. He’s right here.”

This was disconcerting news. My father had stashed vodka bottles behind Domino sugar bags in the pantry when I was a child and was frequently and mysteriously gone overnight. His drinking and infidelity comprised my first and second secrets, their weight staggering for a first-grader who believed she carried those burdens for her mother. He had a belt that he used for more than holding up his trousers and his favorite pastime was target practice—shooting water moccasins from the end of the pier as they zigzagged from the saltmarsh to the river at dusk. When I was in fifth grade, my young mother and I sat on that very same pier, swinging our bare feet over the side when she stopped, turned and said, “I have something to tell you.” Dad left for good the next day and married someone else the day after that, but looking back, I think the alcohol anesthetized wounds no one could see, and that his failings were no greater than many. I also think he must have been one hell of a shot.

“Your Dad’s making my heart hurt,” Allyson said, who, had she been guessing, could just as easily have reported, “I know you were close. He misses you.” Instead, she pressed her palm to

her chest and continued, “He’s filled with remorse. He says he’s sorry you didn’t have his love and attention. He gets it now-- what he cost you.” She paused as if listening.

“Can I trust him?” I whispered. “He was a scary man.”

“Not anymore,” she replied in a no-nonsense voice. She dropped her hand from her heart. “He says he’s still no saint, but he wants to make this up to you and he’s got plenty to say about what’s going on.”

Later, as I was leaving, I asked, “Does Dad have any signs he uses to communicate with me?” He’d been dead 26 years and I was thinking of the months in which I’d been separated from my husband. One in ten thousand three-leaf clovers has a mutation that produces four leaves, but for that entire year, they were simply strewn in my path. I’d become a 4-leaf clover savant. Walking the dog, I’d spot one along the curb without stooping. Once, running beside a train track in New Zealand, I’d spotted a four-leaf clover merely pausing to catch my breath. It was utterly bizarre. They were all over my office, pressed and dried.

“Something about stars,” Allyson said. “He says five-point gold stars.”

The next morning, during my early-hours quiet time, I walked over to my bookcase and on impulse, picked up a small cabinet my father built as a high school woodworking project. It has two 4-inch doors that swing open, one drawer in the bottom, and the top flips up to reveal another compartment in which to stow stamps and the like. I had examined this box thoroughly on multiple occasions with the idea I might paint it someday. I pushed up the lid to the top

compartment and stared in stunned disbelief at two five-point gold stars. The kind you give a child for good behavior, or for an exemplary grade, to indicate the approval I imagined other girls routinely received from their dads.

Do I think my father's disembodied spirit manufactured gold stars and placed them in that box while I slept? No. Do I think the stars were always there and that his spirit, his energy, prompted me to look? Quite possibly.

I wanted to tell someone—someone open to the idea that we don't know everything about the way the universe works. Someone curious and uncertain, who might not dismiss out of hand that there may be dimensions to reality we can't yet see, measure, or prove. I told my sisters.

We can't see infrared or ultraviolet light, I said, but by investigating the possibility, we learned wavelengths exist beyond the limitations of our senses. What else does? We can't see dark energy or dark matter. We don't even know what they are. Is it such a stretch, I asked, to think we do not know what happens to the energy of human consciousness when we die? Our dad still exists, I said. And I think he loves us better now. They were characteristically kind but politely detached, as if I'd shared a weather update.

Last May we flew from Maryland to Illinois with our mother's ashes. She died in January, but this was the soonest we could make the trip. I had not seen or heard our secret word in any significant way in the intervening months of loss. It had not appeared in a magazine, or on someone's license plate. It had not arrived in the mailbox on a promotional advertisement. As we

boarded our flight, I was wearing a locket my father gave my mother when they were freshmen at Western Illinois University-- back when she was the pretty co-ed working at the college library and he drove a yellow sports car he'd named, "Bold Adventure." Back when they were so in love, they eloped to be secretly married on a preacher's porch in the Smokey Mountains, and returned to finish college without their rings, none the wiser. The locket contains their pictures, tiny and faded. A recently added five-point gold star is pressed between them.

At the American Airlines gate in Charlotte my sisters and I sit with about 40 other bored passengers waiting for our connection to St. Louis where we will rent a car and drive to Illinois. There, we will bury our mother's ashes in the country cemetery where her headstone awaits, and where a nursery we have hired has planted lilacs. It's the cemetery her father mowed in the Depression to earn extra cash. It is the gentle rise where she played as a child waiting for the first man who loved her to take her home.

Passengers stare at their cell phones. A few lean towards each other, elbows on chair arms, and quietly converse. Others gaze in a disinterested stupor at the television monitor hanging overhead. I watch the news scrawl thinking it would be cool if our secret word appeared. I'll accept any version of the correct word. I'll take it as a noun, I'll accept it as an adverb, but I won't invent what isn't there.

Abruptly and unmistakably, the scent of lilacs fills the air. "Do you smell that?" I exclaim to my sisters. "Lilacs! *Lilacs!*" They look up from their reading, agree, smile, then go back to their

magazines. I glance around quickly to see who has sprayed perfume, who is slipping a 3.4-ounce security-screened bottle back in her carry-on, who has just walked by trailing a waft of floral scent.

But there is no movement at all. No one rushing along on the concourse near us, no one either lifting or stowing a handbag.

After a few minutes, the scent disappears, and only love, in ways we cannot yet imagine it, lives on.
