

XIII

*Ghost*

By the time they finished shouting, a glass exploded in shards, the oranges had tumbled on the floor, the house was dark again, and Dolly snoring from upstairs like some arctic beast in hibernation.

“She predicted deaths.” The words kept running through my mind like a news ticker.

“She predicted her *own* death,” said Mother.

“No, she planned her death,” said Dolly.

“Well if she planned it, you brilliant baboon, her prediction wasn’t magical, now was it?”

“Coward! Cooooooooooooowaaaaard!”

“Lower your voice, the neighbours will hear. They already think we’re insane.”

“It’s all so clear now. I’ve pieced it all together. Did you see—at the funeral—*aunt* Mary unfastened her strings? Oh, you don’t know? Why it’s tradition! So witches can roam freely after death.”

“Witches?! Dolly, for God’s sake, you’re deranged. Nobody in our family is roaming. Everyone is *firmly buried*, I assure you!”

“That’s what *you* think!” Dolly said, jabbing the air with a finger. “But I saw the way the candles flickered when they carried her. They were blowing backwards, Regina. And the priest’s face—oh!—he was as pale as feta cheese. He *knew*. Priests always know these things.”

“He was pale because he was ninety years old, you fool.”

“Aaaaggghhh! You’ve spent forty years bleaching, and wiping, and scrubbing the entire truth! If the Virgin Mary came floating through your kitchen, Regina, you’d toss a fucking rag at her!”

My mother glared. “I’d tell her to heal you.”

“That day. When you took Helen to see her, after you came back from Athens. What did she say to you?”

My mother started laughing in a sort of unfamiliar, off-key note.

“I saw your face when you came out of that room.”

“Stop it.”

“I’ve pieced it all together. You held Helen like a china doll. Wouldn’t let anyone touch her. Wouldn’t even let me kiss her!”

“You were coughing up your tonsils, you dimwit.”

“And you were shaking!” Dolly cried. “And you never told me why.”

My mother covered her face with her hands.

“What did she say to you? Eh? What did she whisper? Wanna know what she said to me? I’ll tell you. She said, on her deathbed: ‘May you eat with the devil’s spoon. May you suffer like I have, but three times over.’ Three times, yet! Greedy old bitch. And now look at me. She ruined me, Regina. She ruined my life.”

“Dolly, dear—” my mother went up to her and rubbed her back with the sort of warmth reserved for a wet dog. “She didn’t ruin you. That damn man ruined you. Just as Tibi did to her. You simply gave them too much of your life. You both were drawn to such terrible men, you made some bad decisions darling, but all missteps, all reversible . . .”

“She had power,” Dolly said, wiping her cheeks. “It’s why you shuffled off to New York and didn’t speak to us for eighteen years. Left me to rot in her poison.”

“She was superstitious and unstable. That’s why I left. That’s why I didn’t speak to you for eighteen years.”

I replayed this all in my head, not without shock, as I gathered the oranges from the floor. My grandmother—a witch? Naturally, I’d heard stories. My mother of course never spoke of her much which was a kind of telling in itself. Whatever scraps I had of her came obliquely, from my father and his parents. Sometimes, when my parents argued, I would hear my father shout that she’d cursed them.

I saw her a handful of times before she died. She was a large, pale woman with piercing green eyes shot through with red that lent her an air of unnatural menace. Things I remember now about her flat indeed seem odd.

There was this permanent coolness about it. And a brown, Soviet clutter, with many of the objects taken for junk—medallions, bowls of salt, lengths of red thread—now springing to mind with sudden importance. The walls were covered in

books, which my grandfather loved, along with calendars of half-naked girls. My grandfather was a thin, shy, studious man, but I can hardly remember him as her presence swallowed him whole. I also remember this red-laquered box with a dragon head attached to it, which I recalled only later when I saw it in a book of demons. Scattered across the rooms were also necklaces, sea shells, lipstick, tiny antique chests. It was a dark, congested flat, though something about it eerily suggested depth. The congestion itself perhaps—those nooks of crowded dim details—always repeating themselves, as if the space hid other spaces within it, growing darker the deeper you went, like entering a mouth.

I also remember the kitchen in detail. It was a blue-dimmed room with a Mediterranean mess that evoked antiquity rather than chaos. There was a darkness about it, partly due to the curtains being drawn, partly due to her moods. She was a great, violent cook—her black temper alternated with bursts of laughter and the banging of pot lids.

I didn’t see much proof of my grandmother’s powers, apart from her afternoon rituals. She would sit at the table by the window, a deck of tarot cards out, blowing on a cup of coffee. She would turn them over one by one, squinting, sometimes sighing and puckering her lips, as if the cards confirmed something she had feared. But nothing dramatic ever happened—no candles fluttered, no winds rose.

Rum made her brighter, wilder. She came alive when she drank. I think she would have made a wonderful actress. There

were a lot of unlived lives in her. A lot of eccentricity. I remember coming back from the shop one time and finding her in such an unnatural pose, it stopped me cold. She was sprawled across the sofa, her head dangling over the edge, with her naked thighs up on the wall. Her face, swollen from the rush of blood, had taken on the look of a tomato. For a second I thought she'd died in some embarrassing catastrophe, but then she snorted out of the blue, and chased me through the house, and then we both collapsed in laughter. There was tenderness in her—asleep yet not absent. I remember this song she used to sing to me in Russian: *"My beautiful moon-girl . . . forest in her eyes, ocean in her heart, both bright, both dark."*

To this day, I know very little about my grandmother's past. She was born in Russia but emigrated in 1969 as part of a relocation program to the Moldavian SSR. Shortly after, she moved to Bucharest. She was, as I pieced from my father, the last link of a long and noble lineage with a tradition of obesity, syphilis, and suicide. My father's family hated my mother's family.

I think most of my grandmother's drama lay in the space between a crown and a hot dog. As it was, she worked in a butcher shop, which I'm sure had something to do with the person she eventually became. I suspect she felt, as she aged behind the counter, her fair share of injustices.

When she wasn't at the butcher's shop, she held tarot readings. This career proved far more lucrative in 1980s communist Romania. I later learned that certain party members sought her

services. Whatever was said in those readings must've granted her a type of protection. She was plump as a penguin, visibly spared from the shortages that famished the entire country. Today, I like to imagine my grandmother as a kind of feared and revered oracle. A shrewd, opportunistic woman—wise with secrets—of which I was about to learn a new one that night.

Dolly's voice reverberated in my mind:

"She never did get over that bastard."

Then another one of Mother's theatrical laughs.

"You must know she had others..."

Silence.

Dolly gasped, then said: "You know!"

"Of course I know," said my mother.

"Know what?" I stared perplexed at my mother.

"Must we do this, Dolly dear?"

"Do you know about—"

"Yes," said Mother, sternly.

"She told you, did she?"

"Of course she did, you fool."

"Did you meet him?" asked Dolly.

"Yes."

"When?"

"That's enough now."

"Why? Helen deserves to know who her grandfather was."

"My grandfather?" I asked. "Mom, what is she talking about?"

My mother fixed her with a kind of long, exhausted loathing. “Why are you doing this?” she said. “What’s this about? What’s gotten into you, woman?”

“Her curse! Her curse has gotten into me! Can’t you *seeeee*?! And you know something about it, Regina. I know you do. You must tell me! I have to break it! Otherwise . . . otherwise—”

“Oh, you pitiable creature.”

“Mom, who was my grandfather?!” I shouted.

My mother shut her eyes in that flinty, customary way of hers, and when she opened them again, her face was calm. Your grandfather,” she started, “your *real* grandfather—” my eyes lept outward, then she added, softer now: “Granny was with someone else before Pappy. She had an affair. Well, she loved him, they were both very much in love. These things happen sometimes.”

“Who was he?” I asked, bewildered.

“He was . . . a very interesting man.”

“Yes,” said Dolly. “*The Rotting Rat, That Slimegut Slug, Pimpled Putrid Cockroach!*”

“He was a diplomat,” said Mother, ignoring Dolly’s comments. “And a poet.”

“And father to three children,” said Dolly.

Then mother added: “Who closed his career as Russian ambassador to Rome.

“What?”

“Yes.”

“Why do you think she landed herself in this shithole,” said Dolly. “He saw to it. After she got knocked up with your mother.”

My mother’s eyes shone suddenly, wet in a way that upset me.

“She never recovered,” Dolly went on quietly. “Ruined her life over him. Threw everything away. There was no one else after that—not me, not my father. You, perhaps, Regina. And Tibi. As replacements, anyway.”

“I don’t imagine you’d have wanted her life,” my mother whispered.

“No . . . And yet I got it anyway. These things—” a deep, long sigh pulled from some cavern of grief “—well they just never stop, do they?”

A curtain lifted in the night wind. And a hiss of tires spattering through a puddle. The sound thinned gradually into darkness, then broke, leaving the house steeped in meaningful silence. As I sat there shaken on the staircase, the image of my grandmother lying on a bed, her hands clasped in his, saying goodbye, played over and over again in a slow, gut-punching loop. Her grief seemed to pass directly into me. I could feel it rising in my throat. And then the boundary between us grew clear, and she became me, and he became him, and for a moment the past collided with the present, impossible to separate.

The similarity was striking. Both men were in politics. Both intellectuals. Both married. Obviously, I dismissed all coincidence at once. Over and over, thoughts ran through my mind: My grandfather, an ambassador? The word shimmered with dark wool suits, Russian chandeliers, midnight phonecalls, then off to Tijuana. And how had they met? *Where* would they

meet? Would she wait for him on the benches of government halls, listening for his footsteps? Had he sent her foreign aerograms, his name slanted across in a rush? Did she keep his letters? I remembered her tiny antique chests. All at once, I felt a shift in allegiance—a merging with this timid girl encased inside the frightening matriarch I barely knew—a blood-deep certainty that this man, Bogdan, had been given to me not by chance, but as atonement. As a means to set the past right.

I must've stood there for about an hour. Flustered and distracted, the skin on my neck still prickling, I surveyed the dark hallway. The pile of Dolly's stuff, crouched by the door like pigs, exuded a known heaviness, now seeping outward, diffusing through the house. I stood up and began up the stairs. I passed the landing where my father's portrait hung, the paint catching the moonlight so that his eyes gleamed in protest. Barefoot, I padded ahead through the second-floor hall—dark paintings of over-sized flowers, mahogany doors, butter roses on a centerpiece, and Dolly's porcine snores, louder and louder. And then I stopped, short of the tower stairs.

There was a breathless rhythm weaving itself through Dolly's snores. It seemed to be coming from my mother's room. Tip-toeing, I went and pressed my ear to her door. She was crying. She was crying and praying. She was praying for . . . me. I pressed my ear, harder. And then it started up again, the syllables catching, breaking—petitions, invocations: that the Virgin Mary guard me, that Jesus Christ save me, that the Holy Spirit and all the big, beautiful, divine wisdom of heaven guide me toward

goodness and honor and grace and other things which I couldn't make out but had to do with the devil. I couldn't bear it. I drifted back to my room.

Upstairs: curtains blowing in the night draft, the bed perfectly made, the desk untouched. Everything was frozen, staged—a mimicry of calm. I sat on the edge of the bed without undressing. The silence was thinner here, less intimidating than downstairs. And then the thought struck me like a live current. Quickly, I reached for my phone.

The screen shone bright-blue in the darkness of the room, and for a second I stalled, panting. His name glowed there, as the room began to recede—the walls, the furniture, the daily pattern of my life—giving way to that passionate intimacy of our intellectual communion. I read it once. Then again. Then again, and again, and again:

My dear,

It's been seven days.

I didn't intend to count them, but the truth is I felt each one of them distinctly. Silence has texture. Ours has weight, warmth even—like a held breath, slowly emptying its lungs.

I appreciated your spectacle at the restaurant. You are a marvelous actress, Helen. Though, I must say, I felt an unexpected sympathy for your pet. Poor creature. Forgive me, but I have a weakness for the casualties of charm. Perhaps that is what exonerates you of all your beguiling sins—you are full of charm, Helen.

Now, to be succinct. I didn't write because I needed to hear what the silence said on our behalf. And it spoke, unmistakably. It said that what passed between us doesn't belong to the ordinary economy of habit. That some connections do not vanish when left unattended. They deepen, like ink soaking into paper. If I stepped back, I wanted to see what remained—if the line between us would fade, or glow more clearly in the dark.

What surprised me was how poised you remained in this pause. Or, otherwise, if you pulled your hairs out one by one, you certainly contained it well which is equally impressive.

I missed you, Helen—not with impatience, or need, but with a steady, growing ache. You're like a splinter in my spirit. A painful tenderness that has nowhere to go and therefore stays salient. I missed your stubborn innocence and startling coldnesses that so engage me and give me an excuse to play, wonder, dream.

I must sleep now, opening a bracket in this timeless kingdom we've created here.

I want to see you soon. Talk to you, closely.

Yours,

B.