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ALICE HOFFMAN

HOW TO TALK TO THE DEAD

TWO days after Gretel Samuelson's grandmother moved in with them, Gretel discovered her down on her knees in the kitchen, looking up past the chandelier, as though she could see through the ceiling, right into heaven. To get a true cleanliness fanatic like Grandma Frieda onto a floor which hadn't been mopped for a month was some sort of inverted miracle in itself. Usually, Frieda would have attacked the sticky traces of jelly and tomato sauce with Lestoil and a scrub brush. Now, she didn't even seem to notice the dirt. Right away Gretel thought *heart attack*. She thought *stroke*. She thought *I really cannot go through this again*.

In the past eight months Gretel's father had left and remarried, her mother had been stricken with cancer, and her brother had opted for a job in the deli department of the local Food Star rather than accept the scholarship Harvard had offered. People were going crazy, or so it seemed, and joining in seemed the best protection. In a show of self-mutilation and despair, Gretel had chopped off most of her hair and dyed it a horrible lifeless black. Ever since, her hair had refused to grow back, and she feared she'd be left this way forever after, looking more like a rooster dipped in coal dust than a real live girl whose heart had been broken.

When someone is hit with circumstances such as these at the tender age of sixteen, she can become cynical and snappish. She'll start to chew her cuticles until they bleed. She'll smoke too much; she'll be unable to sleep. If she's not careful, she may come to believe there are little stones in her veins where the blood used to be, hard, cold things which rattle and roll whenever any real emotion is called for.

On the day when her grandmother spoke to heaven, Gretel had been wasting time as usual, sneaking cigarettes out behind the catalpa tree and feeling sorrier for herself than any person has a right to. As soon as she walked through the back door to find her eighty-four-year-old grandmother kneeling on the linoleum, Gretel knew something was seriously wrong. She could feel the stones inside of her hit against each other.

"Grandma?" Gretel said.

Frieda's mouth was moving a mile a minute, but no sound escaped. This was not a woman who wished to engage in idle conversation. All the same, Gretel took a step closer. "Are you trying to say something?" she asked.

Gretel's grandmother waved one hand in the air and didn't bother to answer. She loved her granddaughter dearly, but Frieda did not like to be interrupted, especially while she was making a deal with the higher power. This was the sort of bargain you make maybe once in a lifetime. The deal was simple and pulled no punches; there were no fancy addenda, no clauses, no strings of any kind. All Frieda was asking for was her daughter's life in exchange for her own. Her daughter, Frances, was supposedly cancer-free since her operation in August, but Frieda never had trusted doctors. You wanted something done, you had to do it yourself.

Frieda got up off her knees, refusing her granddaughter's offer of help. Immediately, she began to get ready to die. First, she reached into her pocket and pulled out a twenty.

"Get a pizza," she told her granddaughter, a nice girl in spite of the hair. "Bring me the change."

"You get sick when you eat pizza," Gretel reminded her grandmother.

"Watch and see," Frieda said, and she wagged a finger as if to suggest that Gretel still had a whole lot to learn.

Gretel went to her mother's bedroom and knocked on the door. They'd moved the TV inside and Frances was sitting up in bed, watching a movie about true love, and crying. Frankly, she had a lot to cry about. She kept thinking about her ex-husband, and she couldn't seem to stop. She had even gone to a hypnotist in Brooklyn, but by the time she was walking back to her parked car, she was already imagining her ex and his new wife picking out furniture for their brand new house.

"Franny," her ex always said with a sigh when she'd been the one who had wanted anything. "You know we can't afford that."

Well, as it turned out, he could afford plenty, although that didn't change the fact that there still wasn't a decent piece of furniture in the house he'd left behind. Frances knew this for certain; on the day Sam left she'd called the Salvation Army, hoping to get rid of everything they had owned together, but the pickup guys had refused to accept the furniture. Too worn, they'd said. Too ratty and beat up.

"Grandma wants me to get her a pizza." Gretel threw herself down across the foot of her mother's bed. "I think she's lost her marbles."

"Is she cleaning?" Usually, the house was enough of a mess to keep Frieda busy and out of everyone's hair.

"Nope," Gretel said. "She's not even vacuuming. She's just talking to the ceiling and asking for pizza."

Frances took a sip of water and considered. She'd lost weight since August, and her right side, where they'd operated, still felt weak. In the last few months, she'd had a lot of time to consider the state of mankind, and she'd

decided that people actually had very few choices in their lives. Most things happened to you. Most things rolled right over you and then kept on going.

“Get her the pizza, if that’s what she wants,” Frances told Gretel. “Let her enjoy herself.”

That night, Gretel’s grandmother had a terrible case of indigestion, but she didn’t care. Her doctor had warned her not to have salt, sugar, fat, MSG, Tabasco, wine, spices, or anything cooked in oil. But the following day, when Gretel came home from school, Frieda was waiting for her with the menu from the Chinese take-out place up on the Avenue, a place called Ho Ho’s known for its hot, oily food. It had been years since Frieda had last tasted three-spice chicken, and nearly a decade since she’d dared to order barbecued spareribs.

“You’re kidding, right?” Gretel said when her grandmother handed over her list.

“Make sure to get a few extra packets of soy sauce,” Frieda said. “They’ll give you plenty if you ask.”

“This is some kind of suicide thing. That’s what it is!” Gretel saw the whole picture now: Food used as a weapon. Grease and spice aimed directly at the heart and arteries. “Well, I’m not going to participate, Grandma, so don’t ask me.”

“Fine.” Frieda had faced down a lot tougher customers than her little pip-squeak granddaughter. Who had called her son-in-law a liar right to his face when he said he couldn’t afford to pay child support? Who had taken a cab out to his fancy new house when the checks had been late? “If you don’t want to go, fine. They deliver.”

That night they all sat on the edge of Frances’s bed, with plates of Chinese food on their knees. There was an old movie on, *Now Voyager*, and Gretel and her mother were both crying so hard they could hardly chew. Gretel’s brother, Jason, who continued to be less verbal and more handsome—as if the two traits were genetically linked—rolled his eyes as he finished up the spareribs.

Grandma Frieda nudged Jason. “They think crying’s going to get them someplace. It’s not going to get you anyplace,” she told her daughter and granddaughter.

“Oh, Mom,” Frances put down her dinner plate. She couldn’t take her eyes off Bette Davis. She couldn’t stop thinking about the man who’d abandoned her. “Leave us alone.”

“Never,” Grandma Frieda said.

As it turned out, the Chinese food seemed to have no ill effects on Frieda’s digestive system. The following day she took off to Atlantic City with her Canasta-playing cronies to see if they could make a killing at the Canasta championships. They went once a year, and although they hadn’t made a killing yet, they still had hope.

When the time came, Gretel went out to the front stoop to wait for the taxi that would take her grandmother to the bus station.

“Don’t you have a suitcase?” she asked when her grandmother came out of the house with only a purse.

“Who needs the extra baggage?” The taxi was approaching and Frieda signaled wildly to the driver, even though there were no other people on the street. “Listen, honey,” she said to Gretel just before she got into the cab. “I’m not really leaving you.” Facts were facts—Gretel was her favorite, and there were tears in Frieda’s eyes.

“You think crying’s going to get you someplace?” Gretel teased.

She hugged her grandmother and stood out on the curb so she could wave good-bye. She waved and she waved until she couldn’t see the taxi anymore, then she sat down on the edge of the curb and cried.

Frieda died that night at the Copper Penny Motel, the place where she and her girlfriends always stayed in Atlantic City, since the rooms were clean and breakfast was free—a bagel, eggs any way you liked them, and what the management pretended was fresh-squeezed orange juice. On the evening when she died, all the Canasta cronies had gone to a Hungarian restaurant, and Frieda’s friends wondered if it was the chicken *paprikash* that had done her in, although the official coroner’s report suggested that Frieda had a congenital heart defect—it had simply taken eighty odd years to affect her.

Gretel wore black to the funeral, except for her hair, which had suddenly begun to grow and showed a good three inches of her natural chestnut color. When she came home from school in the afternoons, she locked herself in her room. There are times when nothing seems to matter, and this appeared to be one of those times. You had to care to comb your hair, to eat a decent meal, or wash your face with Noxema. Gretel no longer cared. What was life anyway, she couldn’t figure it out. Her mother became more and more alarmed, even though Frances herself was feeling stronger every day. She went so far as to telephone her ex and demand he do something.

“What can I do?” Sam said, always his sad song. “Gretel’s been incorrigible from day one.”

“Listen, Mister, you can do plenty. Offer to send her on a trip. Buy her a new wardrobe. Invite her to your house for dinner.”

After she slammed down the phone, Frances felt elated. She didn’t think about her ex once that night, and, frankly, it pleased her that she had sounded so much like Frieda all the while she’d been shouting at Sam. Naturally, of all Frances’s suggestions, he chose the dinner invitation. What did it cost him? Two extra steaks thrown on the broiler? Another head of lettuce added to the salad? On the designated evening, Jason drove Frances’s car, a Ford Fairlane with the rear end smashed in. All the while he and Gretel were heading toward the North Shore, where the houses seemed bigger with every block, they kept the windows rolled down, as if they couldn’t get enough air.

“We’ll eat and we’ll split,” Jason said. “In and out.”

"Yeah, yeah," Gretel said. Now she knew what people meant when they said they were in the grip of depression. She was in the grip, all right, and it was holding her tight. "Whatever."

"A total of forty-five minutes." Every time he spoke of their father, the skin beneath Jason's left eye twitched. It was subtle, but if you looked closely you could see his discomfort, clear as day. "Fifty minutes tops. We're polite, we let the old man drop some cash on us, and we're gone."

They left the Ford Fairlane parked beneath a white birch tree, and walked across the lawn. It was November, that sad, gray time of the year when you feel like holding someone's hand. Gretel held her own hands clasped together, like a corpse. Jason kept his hands in his pockets. The house really was huge, and maybe that was why it took so long for anyone to come to the front door.

"Fuck it, it's freezing out here," Jason said.

"Ashes to ashes," Gretel said.

"Will you cut it out?" Jason put his hand on the doorbell and left it there. "Everybody dies, Gret. Fact of life."

"Is that supposed to cheer me up?" Gretel asked. "Because somehow it just doesn't."

It was the new wife, Thea, who answered the door. She was big and blonde, and she always seemed vaguely distraught when coming face to face with Gretel and Jason, as if their very existence made the world a shakier place.

"Right on time," Thea said.

Actually, they were twenty minutes late, but who was counting? So what if the steaks were a little dry and the salad wilted? Gretel and Jason followed their father's new wife through the front hall, toward the dining room. There were good carpets on every floor and all the furniture was highly polished.

"She's getting fat," Gretel whispered to her brother when they stopped beside the closet to take off their coats. "Look at her."

Jason glanced over his shoulder, then shrugged. "She seems the same to me."

Females over the age of nineteen never really entered his field of vision, but when their father came to join them in the dining room, even Jason noticed that he'd gained weight. Sam had lost one hundred pounds before he walked out on them; now, his girth seemed to be settling back onto his frame. Maybe his new bulk was what made Sam too uncomfortable to hug his children or welcome them to his house, or maybe it was just his true nature to nod coldly, suggesting they all sit down to dinner.

"The tubster," Jason whispered to Gretel, and for the first time in weeks Gretel smiled.

"Totally lo-cal," Thea announced as she served string beans and salad.

If Gretel wasn't mistaken, her father shot his new wife a dirty look, a gaze Gretel recognized as one he'd often turned on Frances when a meal she cooked wasn't dietetic enough. Gretel felt a surge of interest: something had soured here, of that she was certain.

These days, Gretel wasn't eating much; she was too depressed for the comfort of food. She refused the steak, but when she took a bite of baked potato she was truly surprised. "There's tons of butter on this," she declared.

Thea laughed. "Not a chance," she said. "Potatoes have a natural sweetness, if you cook them right. I don't even add margarine."

Instead of suggesting that Thea was a know-it-all or reminding her that Gretel had eaten potatoes all her damned life and had never tasted one so saturated in butter, Gretel smiled. No wonder they were getting fat. She took a forkful of green beans and chewed carefully. Drenched in butter.

"I think I'll get myself a glass of water," Gretel said, excusing herself from the table.

Jason gave her a desperate look. Still, Gretel left him to the wretched task of chatting up Thea and their father. She knew that it was all Jason could do to complete a whole sentence when in their father's presence, and she pitied him, but, frankly, she had better things to do. She went directly to the kitchen, where a row of arched windows overlooked the lawn and the herb garden. Gretel peeked into the refrigerator and found nothing particularly suspicious—diet soda, turkey roll, vegetables, fruit. A fat-free cheesecake sat on the counter, still in its box, and beside the cake was a pitcher which held a sauce of sugar-free cherries. And yet, when Gretel opened the oven there was the unmistakably rich odor of butter. She dragged her finger in a puddle collecting on the oven door; when she touched it to her tongue, she knew she was right. Definitely butter.

Somebody was sabotaging the food, turning the lo-cal into mega-cal. Gretel started to have a tingling sensation in her shoulders and arms. It was the sort of feeling you have when you believe something, yet you know you can't be right. What Gretel thought was simply too absurd. She thought she saw grandmother in the pantry. Truly, she did. If it hadn't been such a ridiculous notion, Gretel would have sworn that her grandmother was rearranging the cans and jars right then. Everything Thea had set into alphabetical order was being reorganized into food groups: The pickled items were together. The legumes were relegated to a separate section. The soups all stood in a row, from tomato to salt-free chicken noodle.

Gretel squinted, but the image was hazy no matter how she tried to focus. Still, that was her grandmother's good black dress. Those were the gold earrings she'd gotten on sale at Fortunoffs.

"Grandma?" Gretel said.

The image that appeared to be Gretel's grandmother was too busy to speak. She was unscrewing the tops of jars where Thea kept her lo-fat snacks, her granola, her popcorn, her caramel-flavored rice cakes. To each she added a stick of butter. Frieda's supply of butter seemed endless; all she had to do was reach into her pocket and out came stick after stick.

"You're haunting them," Gretel said. "That's what you're doing."

Frankly, Gretel had never felt prouder of her grandmother. She smiled broadly, and although it seemed impossible, her grandmother smiled right back. Of course, this was difficult to tell for certain as the image had now left the pantry and was headed for the counter where the cheesecake was waiting. When the image passed by, Gretel smelled something that reminded her of a rainy day, a scent so piercing and sweet that it might have been an embrace.

She was merely respecting the wishes of the dead when she walked back to the table. If her grandmother chose to add pepper flakes to the cherry sauce, well, who was Gretel to argue? She stopped only once, to whisper in her brother's ear.

"Take my advice," she told him. "Skip dessert."