



my mother's ghost

If you could ask a lost loved one anything, what would it be?

Three years ago, I moved to Cambodia, a land of ghosts. They are said to inhabit tall trees and the bodies of dogs. They protect important buildings. Every foreigner I know eventually encounters the ghosts of Cambodia, in houses or offices or dreams. I had allowed the Khmer their belief but never shared it. Then, one evening last summer, my ghost came.

It was my mother. She died in 1977, but I'd never sought her spirit, never even really believed in such a thing. I was only 9 when she died, and back then the spookiness of imagining her neither dead nor alive terrified me. For the first year, I spoke out loud to the air, just in case she could listen—but only to warn her away and tell her how scared I'd be if her face suddenly appeared in the dark. In time, the fear dissipated into the absoluteness of her absence.

The day she finally came to me, the air in my apartment changed; the light turned yellow, and I simply knew she was there. Listening. I wasn't terrified or sad, just comforted.

How do you sum up 30 years of a life? I stuck with the specifics. "I inherited your chest and your hips," I said out loud, "so thanks a lot for that." Somewhere in the room, I sensed laughter.

I told her how I'd cleaned her childhood home after my grandmother died because she was already gone by then. How I'd found her high school French dictionary—until then I'd never even known she once spoke French. How I'd always wished she could meet my best friend, Ann. To some of these things, I heard, or sensed, answers. She told me she'd met Ann many times.

Then I shared the dilemma that had been haunting me: how I wished she were around to help me decide if my partner, Paul, and I should have a baby.

"Even if I were there," she said, "I couldn't help you with this decision."

Her answer stunned me. It seemed wholly unmotherly. Throughout my life, I'd always assumed that having a mother meant having all the important answers at your disposal—and that when mine had died I'd lost a channel to wisdom that other women took for granted. But in that moment, I realized how deeply wrong I'd been.

Having a mother around might have meant having a model, an outline of sorts. All my big decisions—the kids, the job, the soul of a life—had belonged to my mother once, 40 years ago, just as they might belong to my own child someday. But in the end, the details of those difficult choices were all mine—as they always had been. All along, I'd been unwittingly creating my own outline; my mother stopped by that day not to guide me but to cheer me on. **R**