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### So My Mother Killed Stalin (No, Really!)

Early in March 1953, my immigrant Polish mother was at a Manhattan party with other Holocaust survivors. I picture her dressed in one of those stylish, gray, form-fitting Mamie Eisenhower suits, though without the gloves or hat. Her lipstick was Jungle Red, her mass of auburn hair stylishly coiffed, and she smoked like a film star. You know, the ones who wielded cigarettes as if holding a very light magic wand (or dagger, if necessary).

Various toasts were offered that evening, and then in Russian, as she reported, she raised her glass of vodka and cried out "Death to Stalin!"

The dictator was dead less than a week later and my mother fielded many calls from her witty friends, all of whom asked, "Why didn't you curse him sooner? What took you so long?"

I thought of that party years later when my literary agent was not only glacially slow in responding to me and sending my book out to publishers, but apparently started bad-mouthing a friend of mine who she also represented. This agent was telling people the lie that my novelist friend was having a mental breakdown. I have no idea what possessed her, but remembering my mother, one night I poured myself some Grey Goose, turned off the lights in my suburban Michigan bedroom, lit a jasmine candle for good measure and raised my glass.

No, I did not hope for this agent to die, I just offered a curse: "I want her career to crash and burn." I was fed up and wanted to leave smoking ruins behind me as I moved to another agency.

Not long after that night, news spread in New York's publishing circles that the agent had been booted from her agency for unprofessional conduct.

My mother was dead by then, so I couldn't ask her about any other successful curses in our family history, and maybe I was on the brink of a new career: creative cursing. Perhaps there was even someone who could teach me how to hone my power.

But I didn't ever try to curse anyone else. I was concerned that there might just be one malediction per person in our family—since my mother had never told me she cursed anyone else again—and trying for more wouldn't just be greedy, it might backfire.