



Phone

Moscow, USSR. The 80s

The Olympics in Moscow had long passed, and the inflatable Mishka — the symbol of those Games, so beloved and tearfully bid farewell by the whole country — now lay in a warehouse, quietly gnawed by rats. The red dawns and sunsets were growing ever paler, and the wind of change crept into every corner — and into the minds of those willing to hear it.

Two students of Moscow State University — Vladimir and Andrey, childhood friends from well-off families — met at Vladimir's place over coffee with cognac and candies. A time when people were willing to stand in line all day for a bottle of vodka.

The high white ceilings of the Stalin-era building, adorned with stucco, inspired thought and conversation, while sunlight slipping through the curtains revealed dust motes swirling in the air like golden down.

"How are you, Andrey?" Vladimir asked. "It's been a whole month since we last met. And I haven't seen you at the university either. Are you okay? It's not about the black market stuff, is it?"

"Mom... I've been thinking about Mom, Volodya," Andrey said softly. "It happened so... suddenly, and I didn't get to tell her anything. Didn't even ask how she was. We'd hardly seen each other lately. Her job at the diplomatic mission took all her time. We were both always so busy, we couldn't even have a proper talk... Though what really stopped us from just dropping everything and talking?"

"But I'm okay, Vova. Thanks for asking. It's just... when I look at my record collection — the ones she brought me —  
I start crying. And I can't listen to anything anymore."

The friends sat in silence, broken only by the ticking of the floor clock — keeping time for those who, one day, would vanish at time's command.

"Andrey," Vladimir said, placing a hand on his friend's shoulder. "I know too much, and what's about to happen will change the world we live in. It's not about my parents' connections. There's something else."

Andrey listened silently.

"You know me as a serious person, raised in an atheist-materialist household, right?"

"Yeah," Andrey nodded. "And all those prophecies from Vanga and Nostradamus sound pretty far-fetched, right?"

"Right. Let me show you something."

Vladimir returned with a screwdriver and a red rotary phone — no cord.

"This phone came with the apartment I inherited from my grandparents. It just sat there in the cabinet. Here — pick up the receiver, listen."

All he heard was the usual dial tone mixed with white noise.

"It's a radiophone?" Andrey asked.

"That's the thing — it's not. Look."

Volodya unscrewed the phone and the receiver.

"You know how a phone is built, right? Exactly. There's no place here for a battery — or for jokes. This is serious. Surprised?"

"Of course I am," said Andrey. "A Sharp tape recorder needs six batteries... and this?"

"I can call the dead with this phone," Vladimir said calmly.

Andrey was silent, absorbing the words.

"But it's not that simple. There's a condition — you need to know the person's home phone number."

"How'd you find out about this?" Andrey asked.

"I dialed the number written on the phone. A woman's voice answered — gave me instructions. That's all. You can imagine, I was shocked too. But with my connections, getting numbers wasn't hard — even abroad. Just the country code, number and... boom."

"And? Who did you call?"

Vladimir didn't answer.

"Listen to me. I know what's happening and what's coming. I'm ready. I'll help you."

"And yeah, I'll brag: I called Vysotsky. He dictated his unpublished songs to me and asked me to pass them on to Irina..."

I don't know what the cost is for this, Andrey. I've called many of the dead. I've learned a lot. But who pays for the calls — and at what price — I don't know."

"But would you make a call? Who would you call right now if you could?" Vladimir asked curiously.

"My mom," said Andrey. "I'd call Mom."

"All right, my friend. I'll go to the kitchen and make us some coffee."

Andrey remembered his mother's old apartment number by heart, and with a feeling of déjà vu, he dialed the number he hadn't used in years.

A tone. A faint crackle of static. Another tone. Then someone picked up — and in the ringing silence, his mother's voice came through:

"Hello. Speak. Hello?"

Andrey was silent.

"Hi, Mom..." Andrey's voice trembled. "It's me."

"Hi, Andryusha. Too bad we're connecting under such circumstances. But I'm so glad to hear you, my son."

Andrey started crying.

"Stop. It's okay," his mother said.

"Mom, there's so much I need to say... to finally let go of this unspoken sorrow I carry..."

"I know, son."

"But how?" Andrey asked.

"I know everything. I'm your mother, after all."

The End.

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Vladislav