

The Last Language

When they told Eleonora that her mother was still speaking, she smiled out of politeness.

They were sitting in a white room with a broad window overlooking the clinic's inner courtyard. Outside, three thin trees had been planted at such regular distances that it seemed someone had been afraid to let them grow too freely. On the windowsill, trapped inside a plastic cup, a fly kept circling without understanding that open air was only inches away.

"My mother doesn't speak anymore," Eleonora said.

The doctor did not correct her immediately. She was young, younger than Eleonora had expected someone entrusted with explaining what remained of the dead inside the living to be. She had thick, wavy hair, slender hands, and a way of looking at people that made no attempt to comfort them. Every now and then she pushed a loose strand behind one ear, only for it to fall forward again.

"Your mother is still producing something that resembles language."

Eleonora lowered her eyes to the medical file.

Elena Rinaldi, seventy. Severe impairment of episodic and semantic memory, spatiotemporal disorientation, executive dysfunction, aphasia, apraxia, partial anosognosia, dependence in the activities of daily living.

Orderly words for disorder.

"She says things that make no sense."

"That's what we thought too."

The doctor showed her a tablet on which blue lines ran between clusters of small red points.

"With patients like your mother, we used to look mainly at what disappeared: words, names, structures. Then we started paying attention to what came back."

"What came back?"

"The mistakes."

Eleonora looked at her.

"Not the same mistakes in everyone. The same mistakes in the same person."

The doctor scrolled through a series of sequences. There was a trace of pride in the precision with which she moved from one example to the next, as though the research itself had finally found a way out of the laboratory and into the room.

"Recurring images, substitutions, associations that seem random. Your mother no longer uses Italian the way she used to, but that doesn't necessarily mean she is producing nothing but noise."

“And you can understand her?”

“No.”

The doctor touched the screen.

“The model can generate hypotheses.”

There was something obscene, Eleonora thought, in the promise. It did not feel like a cure. It felt like finding a letter by accident, badly sealed and addressed to someone else: one of those letters you know you have no right to open, except that you recognize the handwriting on the envelope, and your hand remains there on the edge, guilty before the paper has even torn.

“What do you need?”

“Everything you have of her.”

“Medical records?”

“No. Your mother before the illness.”

The following week Eleonora brought two boxes.

The first contained photographs arranged in transparent sleeves: Elena young by the sea in a dark green one-piece swimsuit, one hand resting on her stomach and the other lifted against the sun; Elena holding Eleonora as a newborn, her face bright with exhaustion; Elena on her wedding day in a simple dress, with just enough lace to mark the occasion as one that was supposed to matter for a lifetime.

The second box contained less important things, and was therefore more useful.

Birthday cards, recipes scribbled on the backs of bills, a supermarket loyalty card, old school reports, letters to a cousin in Genoa, photographs badly deleted from a phone and recovered by a clinic technician, voice messages in which Elena asked whether Eleonora had got home, whether she had turned off the gas, whether she had put on something decent because evenings were getting chilly.

“Is that enough?”

“The more material we have, the better we can distinguish recurring patterns.”

So Eleonora came back with more: ten years of messages and voice notes, shopping lists, search histories: *hairstylist near me open Monday, how to lose weight after sixty, clothes that make you look slimmer, haircuts for thinning hair, actresses with big noses, quiet beaches July*.

Everything was absorbed. Gradually, Eleonora began to feel that the illness interested them less than the woman who had existed before it. They barely asked for blood tests anymore; they asked for traces. It was as though they were not trying to reconstruct a brain so much as reconstruct Elena herself.

When they called her in for the first session, her mother was sitting in a blue armchair with a blanket over her knees and a pink clip in her white hair. Someone had put it in crooked. Eleonora reached out to fix it, then stopped. Her mother would have hated being seen like that. Or perhaps Eleonora was the only one left to hate it for her.

“Hi, Mum.”

Elena stared at the wall. Her lips moved as though she were tasting a word that was too hot.

“The bread has lost its shoes.”

A grey bar appeared on the monitor, advanced slowly, then stopped.

Most likely interpretation: I don't want to go out.

Confidence: 68%.

Eleonora remained still.

“How does it know that?”

The doctor pointed at the screen. “It doesn't know.”

“It says it right there.”

“It says this is the hypothesis that currently fits best with the data we have.”

Elena smiled at an empty place in the room.

“The big lady laughs inside the bag.”

The bar started moving again.

Most likely interpretation: I'm afraid people will see how much weight I've gained.

Confidence: 74%.

Annoyance reached Eleonora before tenderness did. Even here, inside the illness, even after forgetting her daughter's name, her mother still seemed to be ashamed of her body.

Or perhaps the model had found shame because Eleonora had given it enough shame to find.

She thought of the green swimsuit, the deleted photographs, the searches she had handed over without thinking twice.

Then she remembered the sea.

She had been twelve and desperate to get to the beach. Elena would stand on the balcony of the boarding house, already dressed, already ready, and then suddenly discover a reason to delay: the wind, the heat, the sand, the people. Eleonora would cry on the bed with her swimsuit already on, hating a mother who could turn a sunny day into something to feel guilty about.

“Mum.”

Elena turned her face slightly.

“Why would you never come to the beach with me?”

The doctor raised a hand. “The system can’t answer questions. We have to wait for her to produce something on her own.”

Elena rubbed the blanket between two fingers.

“The legs made noise.”

The grey bar advanced.

Most likely interpretation: I was ashamed of walking in front of other people.

Confidence: 81%.

Eleonora swallowed. The sentence could explain everything, and that was precisely what made it dangerous.

Over the following days she returned more often than she had intended. At first she told herself she wanted to understand how reliable the system was; before long, she stopped pretending. She carried questions with her without asking them and waited for Elena’s language to stumble across one.

Her mother produced absurd little sentences, malformed creatures.

“The nose doesn’t fit in the photograph.”

The system proposed:

I was ashamed of the things I couldn’t change.

Eleonora stared at the screen.

“That isn’t a translation.”

The doctor was silent for a moment.

“No.”

“Then what is it?”

“An inference.”

“You called it an interpretation before.”

“It’s an easier word.”

“It isn’t the same thing.”

“No.”

The answer remained between them.

With every session, Eleonora seemed to lose one memory and receive another in its place. The mother who had criticized boyfriends for being too short, too thin, too untidy did not disappear, but shifted position. Behind her, another figure began to emerge: a frightened girl who had grown up believing that the world forgave everything except a flaw exposed to the light.

Sometimes Eleonora wondered whether that girl had always been there.

One afternoon Elena was restless, tugging repeatedly at the edge of the blanket until her knees were exposed. The pink hair clip had fallen to the floor.

Eleonora picked it up.

“Do you want it?”

Elena looked at the clip and laughed, a childish, foolish laugh with none of the old defences left in it.

“Mummy pulled the apple’s hair.”

The monitor remained blank longer than usual.

Most likely interpretation: My mother used to hurt me when she brushed my hair.

Confidence: 77%.

Elena went on.

“If you cry, the big nose comes.”

The bar moved, hesitated, and produced another sentence.

Most likely interpretation: I wasn’t allowed to look ugly even when I was hurting.

Confidence: 84%.

Eleonora read it twice.

“How can she have said that?”

“She didn’t,” the doctor replied quietly.

Eleonora looked at her mother. “And that sentence?”

“It’s what the model considers most consistent with her language and the material we have.”

“So it could be false.”

“Yes.”

“And it could be true.”

“Yes.”

That was worse.

A slow chill moved through Eleonora as she remembered all the times her mother had stood behind her at the hall mirror, fixing her hair with too much force.

Stand up straight. Don't make that face. Smile properly. Did you put foundation on? You look tired.

The same hands, the same crooked love.

“The sky is bald,” Elena said.

The monitor displayed:

Most likely interpretation: I'm afraid people will laugh at me.

Confidence: 89%.

Eleonora felt a tenderness so intense it was almost unbearable. She wanted to hold her and shake her at the same time, to tell her she had ruined too many days because of a body no one had really been looking at.

But Elena was no longer mother enough to defend herself, nor child enough to be innocent. She seemed to contain all her ages at once, and Eleonora understood that this was the cruellest thing about the illness: it had not taken her backwards, it had destroyed the order.

The child whose hair had been brushed too hard, the girl who envied women with thick hair, the mother who judged her daughter's boyfriends, the older woman who shopped at one in the afternoon so she would meet nobody, the old woman who could no longer button her own blouse — all of them now seemed to be speaking at once.

Italian was no longer enough.

For a few weeks, Eleonora believed she had been given a gift.

She would leave the clinic with the feeling that she had rescued something, like someone carrying a box of photographs out of a burning house. She called her friends less often, worked badly, slept with her phone beside her so she could listen to the recordings again.

Her mother's voice was no longer simply a voice. It had become a mine.

Soon Eleonora began bringing the model things nobody had asked for: an old diary, two unsent letters, photographs from Elena's pregnancy, a recording in which she argued with her husband in the kitchen, believing she had already ended the call.

With each new document, the average confidence increased. The interpretations on the monitor grew firmer, and even the language of the interface changed. At first it had said **Possible interpretation**. Then came **Most likely interpretation**. Eventually, during some sessions, the phrase became **Estimated meaning**.

Eleonora noticed.

“Why did the wording change?”

The doctor glanced at the screen. “It was an interface update.”

“Is the model more certain?”

“Yes.”

“Or do you just want it to sound more certain?”

The doctor looked at her.

One hand moved towards the strand of hair that had fallen across her cheek, then stopped halfway.

“I didn’t choose the wording,” she said.

It was the first defensive thing Eleonora had heard her say.

Then, one evening, the model crossed the line.

Elena was calm, watching the window while a fine rain rested against the glass as though it had no real intention of getting anything wet.

“The little girl should not have been born with all that sun.”

Eleonora almost smiled. She did not know why, but she expected something tender.

The bar took a long time. Then the screen displayed:

Estimated meaning: When you were born, I was afraid I didn’t love you enough.

Confidence: 93%.

Nobody moved. The doctor took a step towards the tablet, perhaps to hide the words, while Elena continued to watch the rain with perfect calm. She did not know she had said something unforgivable. Or perhaps she had not said it at all.

Eleonora turned sharply to the doctor.

“Where did that come from?”

“Eleonora...”

“Where did that sentence come from?”

“The model.”

“I know. What did it get it from?”

The doctor opened a panel on the side of the screen.

Fragments appeared: a photograph of Elena pregnant on a balcony; a message written thirty-two years later — *with children you never know if you're doing enough*; a search for *how long does postpartum depression last*; a letter to her cousin — *at first I was tired all the time and couldn't understand why everyone else seemed so happy*.

Then came a recording whose exact date was unknown.

Elena's younger voice said:

"...then when she came, it felt like everyone else knew what I was supposed to feel..."

For a moment Eleonora forgot to breathe.

"And that means she didn't want me?"

"No."

"But that's what it says."

"That is what the model says."

"On a screen. In front of me."

The doctor lowered her voice. "It's the hypothesis that best connects what we have with what your mother just said."

"So you don't know if it's true."

"No."

Eleonora looked again at the sentence.

When you were born, I was afraid I didn't love you enough.

Whether it was true or false, it had already entered her memory. From then on, whenever she imagined her mother holding her as a newborn, those words would be somewhere inside the photograph. The machine did not need to be right, it only needed to be plausible.

Elena moved her fingers across the blanket.

"The cradle was looking at me badly."

The system responded almost immediately.

Estimated meaning: I was ashamed of being sad.

Confidence: 88%.

Eleonora closed her eyes. This one she believed at once, and that was what frightened her. The machine was not giving her mother back. It was stripping away the good clothes, the makeup, the things said in front of friends, the photographs chosen for display, the smiles arranged for cameras,

even the necessary lies by which a woman had managed to become a mother without showing what it had cost her. And Eleonora was watching.

She kept going for a few more days, out of weakness rather than courage. Elena said other things, some sweet, some mean in small and ordinary ways. She said, or the model said for her, that once she had envied Eleonora because she could go outside without stockings; that mothers sometimes hated their daughters for possessing freedoms they themselves had lost the courage to desire; that Eleonora's father had loved silence more than either of them; that as a child Elena had wanted to cut off all her hair so her mother could never brush it again.

Each sentence felt like a stolen jewel. But Eleonora no longer knew who had been robbed.

It was not communication. It was looting.

When the doctor asked whether she wanted to proceed with the final calibration, Eleonora did not answer immediately.

Elena was asleep with her mouth slightly open. The pink clip was crooked again, a small patch of face cream had not been rubbed into one cheek, and a thin layer of pale pink lipstick barely coloured her dry, downward-curving lips.

She looked like a child made up to play an old woman.

"What happens after the final calibration?" Eleonora asked.

"We should be able to reduce the uncertainty further."

"How much further?"

"Enough to stabilise many of the interpretations."

"Stabilise?"

"To make the same linguistic construction produce almost the same meaning each time."

Eleonora looked at her mother.

"So when she says something, you'll know what she means."

The doctor hesitated.

"We'll know which interpretation is statistically most consistent."

"That isn't what I asked."

The room fell silent.

Elena opened her eyes. For one moment she looked directly at Eleonora. Not through her, not past her. At her. Or so it seemed.

"The water doesn't want its shoes anymore," she said softly.

The monitor lit up and the grey bar began to move.

Eleonora watched it while thinking of everything she might still learn: the woman hidden beneath the mother, the child hidden beneath the woman, the unopened rooms, the drawers, the shame, the loves never spoken of, the sentences withheld to protect Eleonora or Elena herself.

And perhaps some rooms did not exist until someone drew a door.

The bar passed halfway.

For months, Eleonora had believed that the problem was losing her mother. Then she had believed that the miracle was being able to recover her.

The bar moved steadily towards completion.

For the first time, she wanted not to understand.

She placed her hand over the screen.

“Enough.”

The doctor looked at her.

“Are you sure? The model is very close to a stable threshold.”

“Exactly.”

“We could at least see this one.”

Eleonora shook her head.

“No.”

“Your mother may be trying to tell you something.”

Eleonora looked at Elena, then at the monitor.

“Or it may be.”

The doctor said nothing.

Eleonora switched off the screen, and the room seemed suddenly quieter.

Elena watched her for a few seconds.

“The water doesn’t want its shoes anymore,” she repeated.

This time nothing appeared. No percentage, no corrected sentence, no certainty. Only her mother.

Eleonora picked up the pink clip and fixed it in her hair. Not properly. Just a little better.

Elena smiled.

Perhaps by accident, perhaps because the sentence meant something, perhaps because it meant nothing. Eleonora no longer felt the need to choose between those possibilities.

She stayed beside her, listening to words she would never again ask anyone to translate.

Outside, the rain had stopped. Drops remained on the glass, caught in the courtyard light like small living things that had not yet decided whether to fall.