LONG-DISTANCE

 While recently enjoying our fiftieth high school reunion, my classmates and I somehow got on the topic of how much technology -- specifically telephones -- had changed since our childhoods.

 We remembered the heavy, black Bakelite phones with their thick cords, and how we used our fingers on their rotary dials. We reminisced about "party lines," and how several people on our Chicago neighborhood block needed to share a single telephone line, until the phone company could install enough individual, private household lines. Curious housewives secretly used the party line to occasionally eavesdrop on the gossip of others who happened to be on the line -- slowly lifting the telephone receiver and bringing it to one's ear, then quietly hanging up when finished. We also talked about the gradual disappearance of phone booths and public pay telephones, and how such phone calls used to cost only a dime.

 Then someone asked who in the crowd still remembered their childhood home telephone number.

 Several classmates quickly called theirs out. Mine was SO8-8559. 'SO' was short for 'South Shore,' our local neighborhood telephone district. (There were no three-digit 'area code' prefixes in those days.)

 Another classmate then suggested that we call our old phone numbers tomorrow at home, just to see what would happen. It seemed like a fun experiment, so we all agreed to do it, and then let the others know the results.

 After sleeping in late the following day -- a Saturday -- I dialed my old childhood number on my Apple iPhone.

 Amazingly, the number began ringing! On the third ring, a familiar voice answered.

 "Hello?"

 The deep, male voice was faint, and seemed like it was coming from very far away. I strained my ear to listen.

 Incredibly, it was my father, who died and was laid to rest in 1974!

 "Son, what are you doing? Something like this is not allowed. A one-time exception was granted, but we can only talk for five minutes, then never, ever again. That's the rules. Do you understand?"

 Naturally, I was stunned and confused. I began peppering him with questions as fast as I could think of them.

 "Where are you, Pop? Are you alright? Is Mom with you? How can you possibly be using a telephone?"

 "Whoa...slow down, boy. Everything is fine where we are. Your mother and all of your other relatives are here with us. We are in spirit form. We sense when each other is near, but cannot physically see each other. We exist in a kind of bright, vibrant energy cloud that stretches into infinity in every direction. Everyone here is happy and at peace -- in the loving, eternal caress of The Almighty. We appear to be waiting for something astounding and momentous to happen, but we are not impatient for anything because time no longer exists. I am conversing with you using my thoughts, when I sensed your subconscious need to reconnect with me through our old home telephone number. The voice you hear as mine is being projected directly into your mind."

 My father then said that my mother had a few words to share, but that there were only moments left to communicate. Suddenly, I heard her warm, familiar voice.

 "Oh, my son, how I miss you! (She had died in 1966.) I need to tell you something important: Don't ever worry about dying. It is merely a part of the endless cycle of creation. Simply live your life with joy and appreciation, and always, always trust in God. We have to disconnect now. Your father and I and everyone else will see you when your natural life is over. Don't worry about anything...we send you our love until then!"

 The line went dead. I immediately called SO8-8559 again, but got a busy signal. I hung up and dialed again.

 Nothing.

 What I had experienced was inexplicable and beyond belief. I was emotionally exhausted from the shock of the last five minutes. Could I have imagined the whole thing?

 Not knowing what else to do, I quickly called several of my classmates to find out what they had experienced when they called their old childhood telephone numbers. They each laughed, and said that they got a standard recording saying that the number they were trying to call was "no longer in service." When I shared what had happened to me, they said it must have been part of some crazy prank, or an internet 'hack' of some sort, using pre-recorded voice impersonators.

 The bottom line: Nobody believed me.

 A month later, I felt compelled to call the number one last time, but I got the standard recording: "...the number you have dialed is no longer in service."

 Yet I know beyond a doubt that what earlier happened to me was real, precisely as I have described it.

 Meanwhile, I suppose we must all wait to find out the truth...

 THE END

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