Table Talk

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To leave Russia, my grandfather swam across a river at night. He was a hod carrier in London, a lumberjack in Canada. He won bets breaking belts with his chest. "Let the bull eat the grass, I'll eat the bull!" was his motto. It referred to a hatred of vegetables. In Brooklyn, he ran a candy store, read law behind the counter, became an attorney, then a judge. He took a long walk in the sun and fell, spent his last twenty years staring at a tank of fish. It's from then I remember him, an immobile, rabbinic figure.

"Gramps," I asked at some family gathering. I was maybe five. "Gramps, are things going to get better...or

worse?"

"Worse," he seemed to breathe, although the conventional wisdom was he could not speak.

My mother was there when he died. She had come to keep Pearl, his daughter, company on the nurse's night off.

"What happened?" I asked.

"Well, it was very sad, of course. I was asleep on the couch. Pearl came in and said, 'I think Poppa's gone.' We went up to his room. He had been... failing for a long time. So we held a mirror to his mouth and—"

"You really did that? You held a mirror to his mouth?"

"—then we called Doctor Marcus. He was a smug son of a bitch. He said, 'There's nothing I can do for him now, my child. I'll be by in the morning.' So we went into the kitchen, I made coffee, and Pearl said— I'll never forget this. You know about Pearl, don't you?"

"Know what?"

"When Pearl was a young bride, she couldn't have been married more than a year, it was the influenza epidemic of 1919. Her husband David was sick. Pearl was all alone and had to get a doctor. But David didn't want her to go. He was delirious. He kept saying, 'Don't leave me. Don't leave me.' She said that he would be fine, that she would be right back. Well, he died, alone, while she was gone. And Pearl never forgave herself for leaving that room. She moved back in with her father. When he had his stroke, she took care of him. For years. There were men, one in particular, who wanted to marry her, but it would have meant leaving Samuel and she couldn't do that. So while we were sitting there, waiting for it to get light, Pearl said to me, 'At least this time I was here.'"

Snow swirled outside. We were upstate, hundreds of miles from the scenes she had just described. My father, perversely, had retired not to Florida or Arizona but the foothills of the Adirondacks, to a house wedged into a steep slope, halfway up a mountain. Cancer, he thought, would not find him there.

"But what about after?" I asked. "Didn't Pearl have some good times, after?"

"Your father found her an apartment. And she learned to drive. She visited us, remember?"

I tried. But what flashed out from the past seemed nonsensical, made important only by virtue of its persistence, not because of any inherent meaning.

"She was a lot of fun. Full of energy. Of course the whole time she was taking those pills her pharmacist friend got her."

"What pills?"

"Pep pills."

"You mean speed?"

"Amphetamines. In those days nobody knew the damage they did. She called us from the hospital. Doctor Marcus had put her in for observation. Your father went to see her. She said, 'I had a heart attack, didn't I?' Doctor Marcus laughed. He said, 'So, Pearlie, when did you graduate from medical school?'"

"And she died in the hospital?"

"That night."

We paused for a moment as flakes ticked against the window, an insect invasion, a million ice-white locusts.

"Pearl was a real looker," my mother went on. "Once, she went to buy a dress and the saleswoman said, 'You must have been beautiful. I can see the traces.'"

—Thomas Rayfiel