

The Folks at Home · *Edith Pearlman*

JOHN SPERLING ENVIED RAY REILLY. He envied Ray's big genial household, his abundance of siblings, and the smells of cooking in his mother's kitchen. He envied Ray's prowess in basketball and his ease with girls. Both John and Ray were good students, and both played on the high school chess team; still, John managed to envy his friend's intellect. Ray's way with words made him an entertaining essayist; one of his entertaining essays would gain him entrance into a prestigious college; Ray's prestigious diploma would secure him a good job and very attractive sex partners. John's high math scores were nothing compared to Ray's gift of gab.

And the Reillys' house! There was something soft and warm in every room. The Tuesday afternoon before Thanksgiving, for instance, John, having let himself in through the unlatched back door, encountered first a cake rising in the oven, then a new kitten curled on the dining room window seat, then a dog-collared uncle dozing on the living room sofa, and finally a member of the Pittsburgh branch of the family. She was staggering up the stairs under a load of laundry.

"I'm John. Mrs. Reilly around?"

"I'm Megan. Would you give me a hand, please?"

So he carried the laundry up to the sunporch. Three spare cots had turned it into a temporary bedroom.

"Thanks. Aunt Peg's in the Room."

The Room was the entire third floor. It contained a TV, a pool table, a doll's house, and all the other stuff that a family with seven children has to put somewhere. Ray was shooting pool with another gorgeous cousin. One of his younger sisters was executing a cartwheel. One of his older sisters was standing in front of a mirror, wearing a wide-skirted dress whose pink color contrasted unhappily with her dyed greenish hair (she was the family renegade). Mrs. Reilly, puffing a little, was pinning up this costume.

"Pretty," said John politely.

"Lying's a sin, John," scowled the girl in the dress.

"She's a bridesmaid," explained the cartwheeler. "Isn't that gown hideous?"

"Oh, girls, I've seen worse," said Mrs. Reilly in her comfortable way.

John asked—it was the errand he had come on—if his mother could bring an oversized fruitcake to Thanksgiving dinner. It had just arrived from his father's great-aunt, the one who lived in London. The old lady seemed to think that the coming holiday was Christmas and that the Sperlings were a much larger unit; but John and his parents would hardly make a dent in the thing. . . . “We'd love to have it,” said Mrs. Reilly. “We're so pleased that your family can join us this year.”

“Want to shoot?” called Ray, waving a stick.

Did he want to shoot? He wanted to shoot, to thump on the upright piano, to stick pins in Sally's dress, to walk on his hands like Penelope. He wanted to rush back to the second floor and sort laundry with Megan. Then he'd slide down the bannister and settle himself and the new kitten in an armchair and listen all afternoon to Uncle Damian's wheezing slumbers. He wanted to change his name to Reilly.

He settled for pool. Also he helped Penelope with her math homework. Also he stayed to supper, a particularly joyous occasion because of the arrival, mid-way through the delicious hash, of the oldest Reilly daughter, home from medical school in New York. She came in looking rather serious and reserved under her backpack. After ten minutes with the family, though, her glasses were askew and her cheeks were flushed and she was bardicly telling her two youngest sisters and the youngest cousin about worms she had met in her textbooks, worms who lived *inside* other worms.

John walked home under icy stars. His house was only a few blocks away, but it might have been on a different planet from the Reillys' place, where a light now shone in every window. The Sperlings lived in a row house, with windows only in front and back; a high-shouldered house, hedged in by neighbors as private as themselves.

His father was reading in the narrow first floor room. Through an arch John could see the tiny neat kitchen. Two plates and two glasses gleamed on the drainboard. Upstairs, he knew, his mother reclined on her chaise, also reading, running her hand every so often through her dark curls.

“John,” said his father, looking up.

The word was greeting and blessing and dismissal all at once—though, to be fair, his father would have put down his book in a moment had John expressed a wish to talk. But these days he had nothing to say to either parent. These days they were merely names—the names under his name

on college applications. He supposed that they could not help being cultivated and reclusive any more than the Reillys could help being talkative and hearty and fun-loving. Such appetites that family had! "I wish my mother cooked like this," John had said earlier to Ray, under cover of the general meal-time din.

"What a strange desire," said Ray, as if John had admitted to a perversity.

"Well, there's such a tang in this hash."

"John guessed the horseradish!" Penelope yelled.

There was plenty of yelling at Thanksgiving. How could there not be, with nine Massachusetts Reillys, five Pennsylvania Reillys, three Sperrings, Uncle Damian, and a couple of unexpecteds. One unexpected was Mrs. Reilly's cousin, an elderly woman from Providence. The other was the medical student's local boyfriend, who looked as if he found himself wanting. In the dining room several long tables had been rammed side to side, forming a squarish makeshift piece of furniture which managed to seat twenty celebrants. John occupied one of the corners. Megan at the opposite corner was separated from him by bread baskets, condiment dishes, and a low wide bowl of massed daisies. Her head and shoulders rose above the flowers like a statue in a garden.

Food came out. Food was served. Food got eaten. Another course, and another. Wine all around. John's mother sat between Ray and Megan's father. Was her dress too austere black? he wondered. Or was its neckline too revealing? She had taken off a big gold earclip. It lay in her open hand. Ray's red head bent towards her palm, wittily, it seemed. . . . Several pies and that giant fruitcake were demolished. Uncle Damian told some improper stories. There was one distressing moment when Mr. Reilly seemed to be threatening Penelope with the carving knife, but he was only flipping her braid out of the gravy.

After dinner everybody sprawled in the two living rooms. The adults talked to one another; the medical student took a walk with her boyfriend; the rest of the young people played Trivial Pursuit on the floor (Ray and John distinguished themselves). Penelope organized a kids' talent show that was more or less attended to. Uncle Damian fell asleep. John's mother took off her earring again. "Still pinching?" said Ray from the floor. Neighbors dropped in. The medical student came back without

her boyfriend. Mrs. Reilly served more coffee. John's mother said they'd better be getting on home. "Thank you so much, Margaret," she said warmly.

"Thank you for coming," said Mrs. Reilly.

Mrs. Sperling almost disappeared within Mrs. Reilly's embrace. "Thanks for being with us, Lady Elegance," called Damian, who had recently awakened. His right eye was rolling independently of his left. "You have aroused unchaste thoughts in all the adult males here." John's mother blushed. "There's a time and a place for unchaste thoughts," Uncle Damian bellowed. "There's a time and a place for all the deadly sins," he said in a somewhat lower voice. "I myself lean towards gluttony and sloth," he murmured, and fell asleep again.

Outside, John walked next to his mother. His father followed them. Their three shadows revolved under the streetlamps.

"You were a great hit, darling," came Mr. Sperling's disembodied voice.

John's mother touched her hair. "Blarney." But her voice was smiling.

"I liked that naughty priest," John's father continued.

"Mmm. I liked the quiet Pittsburgh girls," she said, not looking at John.

"The stuffing was tasty."

"Some day I'll roast a turkey."

Without a word John stepped aside and surrendered his place to his father. His father took his mother's elbow. They continued their charitable conversation, their son trailing behind.

The next morning John woke to a house silent except for the sound of rain. His father was out at work, his mother upstairs in her studio under the skylight. In the little kitchen he made cocoa and toast and considered his options. He could call a friend and go to the movies. He could surrender himself to television or a book. He could wander over to the Reillys on some pretext. To retrieve the fruitcake tin? "I have a passion for fruitcake tins," he would say to Megan. "Perhaps you'd like to view my collection." Or he could ask the oldest Reilly sister for help with his college application essay, on parasitic worms. But why invent an excuse? He could wander over to the Reillys just to say hello.

But John did not go to the movies. He did not go to the Reillys either.

He spent the afternoon at the branch library, working on his essay, which was not in fact about worms but about greed. His counsellor had warned him that concern for hungry populations was being overdone this year. "Amherst could fill its entire freshman class with saints-in-the-making," Mr. Wilbraham had grumbled. So John was writing instead about the economic benefits of rapacity: a paean to the industrial giants of the nineteenth century and the megacorporations of the twentieth. Reading up on robber barons almost took his mind off the Reillys.

The little library closed at six. The rain had stopped. John walked home through the mist. All the windows of his house were ablaze with light. He stood under a tree across the street and marveled at this oddity. As a rule his mother washed out her paintbrushes at around three in the afternoon, and took a walk, and then retired to the bedroom to listen to music until John's father came home, at seven. Only then did the downstairs lights go on; only then did she enter the kitchen, where she microwaved a chicken or a piece of fish and squeezed lemon juice onto some tomato slices and called John down from his room. But perhaps his father had come home early today. Perhaps that was he, standing near the front window, putting on his coat. Putting *on* his coat? Anyway, that rangy person was much too tall to be John's father, John saw as the front door opened; and anyway he had too much hair, John saw as the fellow stepped out onto the abbreviated front walk; and anyway his hair was red; and anyway he was Ray.

Ray walked swiftly down the path and turned right. John watched from under the dripping tree. Then he crossed the street and let himself in and threw his parka onto the hook in the tiny hall.

His mother was sitting on the couch in the downstairs room. A bottle of Amontillado and two sticky glasses stood on the low coffee table. John seated himself across from her and poured himself some sherry.

"Darling, you can have a fresh glass."

"Ray's is good enough for me."

"He was sorry to miss you. So was his cousin."

John took a deliberate sip. "His cousin was here?"

John's mother nodded. "But she left when she heard that you were out. Ray stayed, to discuss Daumier with me. As if I knew anything about that genius. I paint ladylike watercolors, I reminded him, but he insisted that my paintings are full of distortion and depth." She grinned and shook her

curly head. "Did you know that he's writing an essay on the uses of exaggeration? Ambitious of him. Whatever happened to Why I Want To Go To College? That topic was good enough in my day."

So Ray too hadn't fallen into the world-hunger trap. "Which cousin?"

"From Pittsburgh. She went back to something called the Room. They'll be in town until Sunday, she said. Ray wasn't in a hurry to go home. I think he was less interested in Daumier than he was in taking a break from the gang over there. Oh, don't look so fierce, John. The Reillys are merry of course, but there are an awful lot of them, and they do all talk at once."

And you do listen, John thought; *with your head on the side that way you make a fellow feel singled out*. For a peculiar instant he experienced Ray's yearning to discuss the art of caricature with a person who was herself an artist. He felt Ray's envy of the artist's son. And—this was the strangest of all—he envied Ray's envy. To become enchanted with your best friend's mother—what a piece of luck! Ray would work his longings into an autobiographical novel. Jay McInerney would write the introduction. The book would win a prize; Ray would become a celebrity before he even got out of college. . . . John groaned.

"Ray's cousin would like you to call her," said his mother.

Damn her for knowing that he wanted to hear this. He stood up and moved backwards, his gaze never leaving hers. "The one called Eileen?"

"That little kid? Of course not," his mother said. She poured some sherry. "The one called Megan."

He turned and bolted for the telephone, thinking, as he dialed, that maybe Swarthmore *would* like to know Why I Need To Get Away From Home.