1988

Frau Geller's Kitchen

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I tell my son Juergen this:

"Frau Geller took a bite of fried potatoes, or at least aimed to, aimed her fork at their very edge. But at the last moment something went afoul and she missed slightly, came up instead with a forkful of peas. 'Verwunschtl!' she exclaimed.

"Herr Geller peered at her over his glasses — the kind which have only bottoms — then returned to his evening Zeitung to read the day's events. Baby Geller, sitting in his high chair, focused on Frau Geller as alertly as a pet dog would its mistress. Frau Geller was becoming convinced that she had the palsy or petit mals or was at least mentally exhausted in the medical sense of the term. She dropped plates that seemed to move just as she gripped them. Her toothbrush had been difficult to pick up. The food on her plate was forever changing position. 'Verflucht!' It was most disturbing."

"What about the meat?" asks Juergen, who runs a fever and finds frightening the prospect of sleep.

"Yes, the meat," I answer, realizing all at once that he knows I am drawing from life; tonight we have eaten peas, the fried potatoes, and Jaegerschnitzel. "The schnitzel moved when she tried to stab it, and the tines had loaded themselves once again with peas. Although she had eaten hardly anything she stood up and, muttering something, gripped her plate with both hands to carry to the basin.

"Herr Geller stared at her in a way meant to show his displeasure. 'What?' he asked.

"'Ach, Herr Geller,' she said. 'I've gotten so clumsy, is all.'

"'Then maybe you should see the optometrist. It could be your eyes.'

"Now, here was an explanation Frau Geller hadn't thought of. She curled down her lips and raised her eyebrows. 'Well, well,' she repeated."

"When Frau Geller reappeared in the optometrist's lobby, the first things her husband noticed were that she was feeling shy about wearing her new glasses and that she looked older. How she had changed since their courtship days! Gone the long yellow braids, her hair now lanced to the back of her head in a bun meant to look perky and be practical. Gone the color of brass from her skin, which had gotten dap-
pled, white and pink. And since the baby, the addition of the five kilos. Now, he saw, he would not even be able to look directly into her eyes as he was used to doing, because the blue of them was all but obscured by a pair of large, round, thick, convex glass lenses.

"At home, Frau Geller broke things. The spectacles had made no difference in her clumsiness, and she decided not to wear them anymore."

I see now that Juergen may drift into sleep. The doctor says that sleep is just what he needs, but in his meningitic agony, he fights it. The perspiration bands his upper lip and crosses his forehead. He wrestles the blankets.

I continue, for it may be the sound of my voice that will get him to rest. "Well," I say, "you can believe that Herr Geller was happy to see his Frau looking more her old self. Her eyes were once again visible, and her upset at being so clumsy had caused her appetite and three kilos to fall away. 'Liebchen,' he was moved to say to her one evening, 'You look so very pretty tonight.'"

"Frau Geller smiled at him. Her full lips had begun to lose the puffiness of the extra weight. Herr Geller had always considered his wife's mouth her best feature. While other men looked at legs and thighs and breasts — like shopping for chicken, he had always thought — he looked at faces, especially mouths. He had once seen a woman whose lips compared to Frau Geller's — in the Mannheim Bahnhof, of all places. She was an Italian film actress, and he had been able to glimpse her only because his window seat overlooked the throng of reporters and spectators surrounding her. She had looked up into his eyes and shrugged, the intimacy of this sharing penetrating him completely, and just as the train had begun to move she'd formed a kiss. Then the corners of her lips had curled up. And then he'd lost her in the smoke."

"Frau Geller smiled gently and looked and made the connection with his eyes and blushed. Herr Geller had once told her that what had first attracted him to her was that he could not help imagining how it would appear in her mouth. Hers was perfect — not small like that of his first conquest, a razor-lipped Vladivostokian Putzfrau who looked as if he was choking her and made him feel damn sorry about it, nor so big that he would be reminded of stalag-mighty Caprian grottoes of dankness, their fetid breath puffing with obligation (well, certainly not desire!) through caverns he could not and did not want to see. No, Frau Geller's mouth was exactly the proper size for some maneuvering. He could see in his mind the instant he met her the forehead knit in pleasure or pain (the looks seemed identical), the lips relaxed but curled back slightly because of its size, the beads of wet salt on her forehead, her upper lip and chin, and the pinkness of her cheeks."
Now, he had to doing, his upper forehead, convex once in her just what his upper eyes and to her was perfect to her was perfect to her was perfect Frau Geller began to keep track of the accidents. This is the way she made sense of things.

"What's in her mouth," Juergen interrupts, "that gets her to working so hard?"
"Ach," I say. "I thought you'd finally drifted off, old boy."
"I can't. My back hurts."
"Where?" His young mouth turns down. It draws his entire face toward it; his brow is formed in a scowl.
"What about the thing she has in her mouth?" he asks.
"Are you sure you can't sleep?" I respond.
"Come now!" His head, no longer connected to his body, lolls from side to side.
"Herr Geller was imagining in his wife's mouth... a utensil."
"What utensil?"
"Well, Herr Geller was considered a fairly wealthy man — not exactly like a commissar, but far better off than a peasant. He had a, a set of fine silverware. He could not help imagining how it might look in the mouths of his... of the women he knew. He decided that it would please him best in the mouth of Frau Geller. She had a different name at that time, of course, and it was only when they married that she became Frau Geller.

"Frau Geller began to keep track of the accidents. This is the way she made sense of things. She tried to puzzle out the conditions under which events in her life occurred so that she could learn to control them—make more frequent the events she enjoyed, eliminate those she didn't. If it wasn't her eyesight causing her clumsiness, then she thought there must be some other reason and set out to find it. She tried to assess the time of day when the accidents happened. She had reached for the cream one morning, but found herself putting the salt into the icebox. In the evenings she invariably had problems getting her silver fork to behave. And during the daytime she found herself releasing fastidiously hung laundry from the clothesline directly onto the earth; she'd been positive that that shirt would fall over her arm. As it turned out, only when the family slept did nothing come amiss."

I stop the tale. Juergen's eyes, though unfocused, attend. I pour water from the porcelain pitcher he keeps near his bed, and hand it to him. "Juergen," I say, "really, you must sleep. Why would you want to hear about a little Soviet family anyway?"
"I thought you said they were German."
"I don't think I gave it out one way or the other."
"You said Frau and Herr and the Herr was in Mannheim."
"But I was only trying to make it so you would better understand it."

He hands me back the tumbler and rolls to his side, his back to me. "In school we've been bearing quite down on our maps," he says. "Does Frau Geller ever solve
the mystery?"

"She had determined that the safest time was when she slept. Of course she decided to get more sleep. She went to bed earlier and rose later. When she was awake she tried to come at her problem from a different angle. But it turned out that she couldn’t find a specific place or room in the house where it happened. It happened outside, in her house, and in the shops. And she could find no connection with invisible powers, either, though for days she held a horseshoe magnet to every object she was about to touch."

"Did she find out who was around when the terrible things happened?"
"I’m coming to that. You’ll spoil the story."

"I’m liking it."

Juergen is so demanding today, so restless. I pause to breathe, then—

"Meanwhile, poor Frau Geller got into more trouble. She began to stab her pretty lips with the sharp tines of her fork as she ate. Eventually, she began even to miss her mouth entirely. Sometimes she almost put it in her eyes.

‘Let me see that,’ Herr Geller said one day. Her fork had got misshapen — slightly at first, but by this time rather badly. ‘How did it come to be all twisted like this?’ he asked.

‘I hadn’t noticed until now,’ Frau Geller said. ‘Perhaps I dropped it.’

‘Herr Geller put out all the flatware on the table to be examined. The knives veered off to the right or left; the spoons had their handles set at angles which would make it impossible to eat soup; all the forks were fouled in the tines. Oh, Herr Geller was angry! He considered the silver his finest possession, and it now appeared ruined.’

‘Why had he never noticed it before?’

‘I knew you would want to know about that. I believe it was because people tend to accept small changes without question. Remember, the silver had become deformed over a period of time. Anyway, it was clear that, no matter how slowly, Herr Geller could not allow everything to be destroyed. He decided to send his wife to the clinic for some tests. At no small expense a visit was arranged, and soon she was far away from her family.’

‘Like Mama,’ says Juergen, whose mother died of tuberculosis in the sanitarium last winter. He still has difficulty accepting it — and it is nearly impossible to help him. After all, I’ve a hard time with it myself. When I speak about it I speak honestly, but as gently as possible. Sometimes this is not enough.

‘Like Mama,’ I say, ‘except that Frau Geller is expected to come home.’

My remark prompts a burst of crying. He does not remain long with the quiet weeping you would — When he is

Two weeks later, she was to fetch her — her skin —

‘There’s broken anything.

‘Even you.

‘That’s too.

‘I miss them.

‘Correct.

My thumbs are as wet as my tears. His mother died last winter, and she broke with sobs.

‘She began to live that was so twisted she melted down. Eventually, Frau Geller ate pretzels.

‘Then on.

bent. But eventually, after of their home.

‘They live.

I stop with. He is liable to blame. He is comp. It’s a

‘Such as.

‘Well, For some reason, as if a horse in. Frau Geller felt the, and it’s really stunned to the blame.

‘Yes, an.

‘Then we.
Then one day it came to her that anything could move, but only metal objects bent

you would expect of him just now, but ends by kicking and pounding the mattress. When he is finished I hand over the tumbler and he drinks.

"Two weeks later Frau Geller arrived in the Bahnhof where Herr Geller had gone to fetch her. 'You look wonderful,' he said to her. And it was true; she was radiant — her skin tight, the scowl of worry gone.

"'There's nothing the matter,' she said. 'I'm in perfect health. And I haven't broken anything in days.'

"'Even your complexion looks golden again,' he told her.

"'That's the sunshine,' she said.

"I miss the sun," Juergen says. We've had none in weeks. The earth is covered in slush. "Could you rub my back, Papa?"

My thumb and middle finger span him full breadth at the shoulders. His pajamas are as wet as laundry.

"Morose baby Geller became himself — even laughed to see his mother again," I say, "but as soon as he had kissed her she craved water, and she broke the tumbler as she filled it.

"She began to suspect anew that it was something in the neighborhood where she lived that was causing her problems. While she pursued this idea the silverware became so twisted that eating contorted the user, and Herr Geller sold it to the jeweler to melt down. They began using steel tableware, but that too became deformed. Eventually, Frau Geller found some wooden utensils that were cheap and didn't curl up like pretzels.

"Then one day it came to her that anything could move, but only metal objects bent. But even this discovery did not leave her family without problems, for much of their house was fashioned of metal.

"'They lived in a metal house?' Juergen asks, squirming.

I stop with his back. The disease ruins the nerve casings near the spine; any contact is liable to be painful. But it seems to me that though he broils with fever and suffers, he is completely lucid. "Not exactly," I say. "There were metal things in the house."

"Such as?"

"Well, Frau Geller found that the washtub she used for a hundred chores looked as if a horse had kicked it. The pipes running up the outside walls became bent. Herr Geller felt that there was a mysterious force at work, and he was worried. But what really stunned him was that for every bit of the ruination, his wife seemed to assume the blame. 'This only happens around here?' he asked her.

"'Yes, and I've thought of everything, every possible reason for it.'

"'Then you must think about the impossible. You know...the unthinkable.'
"The only thing left is that it has something to do with you or — God forgive me — the baby."

"Mainly to demonstrate his wife's dementia Herr Geller decided to test her idea. Soon he discovered astonishing correlations. When he left the house to play cards with his cronies, accidents always happened. But when he and Frau Geller left the baby with friends, Frau Geller broke nothing, and it appeared nothing became dented or bent."

"I was right then," whimpers Juergen, who appears suddenly weaker. The perspiration has gone, leaving behind powdery trails of salt, and his eyes are huge in his drawn face.

"You were," I say. "And once they discovered it, the Gellers established to an increasing certainty that their child was an agent in the destruction. 'But why only with me?' Frau Geller wondered.

"'The baby always looks at you,' Herr Geller observed. 'Perhaps it is because you feed him... bathe him... take him everywhere you go. It is a fixation.'"

"During the weeks that followed, Herr Geller and his wife began to find in their detective work a closeness which went even deeper than what they had felt during their courtship days —"

"Um," Juergen says—a sigh of half-sleep.

"...And their house became a curiosity for people travelling along the lane on their way to the village, for the chimney — which had once been vertical and straight — now bent ninety degrees and discharged its smoke to the side, the iron fence rippled in the wind, the spigot twisted so that water gushed up out of it, and the cold water pipe looked as if a troop of Pfadfinder had practiced tying knots in it; near its top, in fact, was a perfect monkey's fist."

"Ha. Ha. Ha ha ha," Juergen exclaims, reacting, I believe, to a dream. His eyes are almost closed, the lids leaving only a white crescent at the bottom of each.

"But the curling of the metal no longer disturbed Herr Geller so much," I say. "Not only because he was becoming accustomed to it, but because in solving a part of the mystery a great weight of responsibility had been lifted from his wife, to whom, in her distraction, he had missed being close. Soon enough, they formed the pleasant habit of staying up after baby Geller had gone to sleep.

"And in those quiet hours, the two of them sat at the table near the stove, and looked at each other's light, Frau was able to forget and pain — lips — lips... But Juergen declares — quiet, restful..."
and forgive me

Herr Geller decided to test her idea. He and his wife were to play cards one evening, but Herr Geller left the table, dented and

perspiration ran down his drawn

face. I ask, 'What is happening to an increasing number of people? Do you want to stay with me?'

He says, 'I have no health because you

are not well enough.'

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did not feel during

The one on their

meandered straight —

once rippled

cold water

ears its top,

His eyes are

and

I say, "Not

part of the

whom, in

the pleasant

stove, and

looked at each other, and twined fingers, and stroked each other's hair. In the firelight, Frau Geller's skin shone like brass. And often, even in that flickering light, he was able to see in her face, moist with perspiration, the concentrating look of pleasure and pain — the very expression he had imagined there the first time he'd ever seen her — lips parted... the cheeks reddened...."

But Juergen is at long last still. His expression has nothing at all to do with pain. Complaint is absent. Left in him is not one bit of inquiry. He looks so at peace, and — quiet, now — I draw up his covers.