



Pronoun Music

Richard Cohen

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Like a good psychiatrist, Cohen shows how a character's psyche is built upon family memories. Whether an argumentative couple on Catskills holiday with their only-child, a disbarred New York psychiatrist and his patient-girlfriend, or a mobster and his relatives, all these families share a Jewish heritage.

In the opening story, a narrator who presides like Yahweh chronicles the fears of suburbanites living during the Cold War. A Twilight Zone episode the thirteen-year-old and her date are watching becomes the story-within-the-story. Ultimately, this girl envisions her escape from her bickering parents as a Twilight Zone apocalypse. She becomes the next Eve in a land where "every word will be the name of one thing, and it will always be only that thing; if it starts turning into something else, it will have to get a new name. And anyone who lies will have to know that they are lying."

Many of these stories feel as if they are being told to a therapist. In "Uncle Wolfie," the protagonist admits how he became lucky with a date when a restaurant owner ripped up a bill because he was related to the infamous Wolfie. The guy then reveals the entire tenuous relationship between his own wishy-washy father and Wolfie and their two families. He admits that when he told this to another woman she asked him to tell her something about himself.

Perhaps the best story in the collection is a desperate father's ultimate assessment of himself. Nils Goldstrom has been obsessively tacking up posters around town, begging his runaway daughter to come home. Meanwhile, he still has a wife and two twin sons. He walks out on them, at least temporarily, in a restaurant to feel himself adrift, obliged to love, and wishing he could run away, too. When his son finds him, all he wants to do is breathe the sky. His lungs sound in his own ears as loud as those of a suited astronaut. He has walked way out in the blackness; only a slender line tethers him to home.

"Could you," he begins, "could you let me stay out here, do you think? Go back in; you can all eat without me; I'll be out here waiting for you when you're done."

But he should know—his daughter knew it as a child—that of all the requests he might have made of life, that one will never be granted.

The dialogue throughout these stories truly reveals family life. Readers may feel they seem like replayed memories and that it is sometimes difficult to discern a character's dreams from a story's reality, but isn't this the way characters'—and readers'—minds perform self-analysis? Of all the requests Cohen's readers might make of him, it should be for more of his human insight.

JO-ANN GRAZIANO (January / February 2001)

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