

SOUTH MARKET

by Edith Pearlman



Night after night during the winter of 1914, at the Knickerbocker Theater on Broadway, "They Didn't Believe Me" stopped the show. Everybody in South Market could imagine stopping a show: it would be like giving the entire audience a heart attack. Everybody also knew where Broadway was: New York. You could get to Broadway, New York, by taking a twelve-hour overnight ferry and then riding several other vehicles including an electric trolley that sometimes ran. Broadway might as well be a thoroughfare on the moon.

But sheet music was for sale here, in this middle-sized New England city, right on Market Street. A family lucky enough to own an upright could buy the piano-and-words version of "They Didn't Believe Me," as well as "You Made Me What I Am Today" and "My Yiddishe Mama," and dozens of other immortal numbers. Market Street sold newspapers too; and oranges; and prunes in baskets; and second-hand clothing, pots black as cats, candles, shoes; and crocheting thread, spools and spools of it. Any woman living in a South Market three-decker, if she happened to have a few fingers, had learned how to crochet. She could crochet without looking, crochet with one hand only while with the other she stirred the soup or dusted her single plant or fondled her latest infant.

Ira and Perla were born that winter, one week apart. They were born in flats that were to be their homes for the next

ic by Cynthia Fisher.



quarter century. The shul was nearer to Ira's house than to Perla's, the kosher butcher nearer Perla's; but in this dense neighborhood nothing was far from anything else. Ten years earlier the kindly city had torn down some wooden houses and built a modern primary school with bricks the color of corned beef. Classical High School, a few blocks north of Market, was as pale as halvah. Classical maintained so rigorous a curriculum that even some Yankees from up on the hill studied there, though they disdained or perhaps feared to cross Market Street and mingle with the peddlers and schnorrers, and the busy women and unworldly men, and the children, so many children.

The children grew up smart, most of them. Some clever boys, having learned Latin and a little Greek at Classical, would attend the local University as townies, mixing only with each other. A decade later a few whose fathers were prospering even became professionals. After the Crash their numbers dwindled.

Ira, Crash or no Crash, was not destined to become a professional. He was the third son of a tailor. His mother sold sewing materials door to door - she specialized in buttons, most of them ordinary but some carved, some iridescent, some jet. Ira was quiet, but quiet didn't mean scholarly or even studious. It just meant that he listened a lot and sometimes asked questions. He liked to know who was whose cousin. From Anapolsky the fishmonger he learned the natural history of the carp now lying dead on a bed of ice. He awarded alphabets his mild scrutiny - the English, the Hebrew in the prayer book, later the Greek. One of his curiosities might have deepened into an interest in history or biology or language, but none did. Primary school teachers did not warm to him - he was a slight, sallow boy, and his small curved nose had no character. His right eye drifted, giving him a look both dull and devious. Strabismus, a Latin word, was the name of that condition. At Classical High, though he read a lot of unassigned books, his record was mediocre. "The race is not always to the swift," his mother soothed. In Yiddish the maxim lacked conviction, but it wasn't true even in English. Brilliant fellows got ahead, ambitious ones too - not ones who found pleasure in the Dewey Decimal System. The local librarian liked him; but what did she know?

The City planted new trees in hopes of beautifying this

neighborhood of stacked porches and intersecting clothes lines. Ira played street stickball. He observed the success of the drugstore opened by a steel-haired Mr. Harrington. The store stocked the miraculous sulfa drugs developed during the Great War, and aspirin, and an anti-lice soap that smelled better than kerosene. But Mrs. Lozowitz around the corner still did a good business in a private-label abortifacient, a mixture of emetic and laxative laced with a root she grew in a box on the porch. The stuff worked one time out of three.

Ira noticed that after morning services Mr. Anapolsky visited Mrs. Furst. Bertha Bolotow, a couple of years out of high school, seemed to be favoring her right leg. He guessed that soon she'd be confined to her bed. The few families who moved out of the neighborhood into apartments near the river were criticized for uppishness. Poverty kept most people in South Market. Poverty was what held people together - not, as the downstairs widow Goldie Glecklin liked to trill, Jews caring for other Jews out of love. Mr. Glecklin, Mama mentioned, had died of sweetness.

"Diabetes?" Ira inquired.

She grinned at her favorite. "I'm not talking diabetes, Ira. But Anapolsky and Furst ... you better forget what you see."

After graduating from Classical Ira went to work for his older brothers. They had opened a pajama factory on the Post Road, the other boundary of the South Market neighborhood. Post Road was a hybrid street: crummy buildings on the South Market side, the green cemetery of the Gentiles on the other.

Perla, now. Pearl. She became Pearl in the eighth grade. It was Ira's doing.

Fay Feinberg was lording it over everyone that year. She was taking tap dancing from some Mick in the flats - her father, who delivered beer, gave the Mick free quarts in exchange for the lessons. So Fay was learning the wing and the shuffle, and she already could belt out any song, and she was going to wow Broadway first and then Hollywood, everybody knew it. Tall and red-cheeked, Fay organized talent shows in the asphalt schoolyard. The inevitable finale was Herself, tapping up and down the stairs, singing "Oh, Gee! Oh, Joy!"

One afternoon Ira saw Perla standing by the iron

fence, watching Fay. He sidled up. "You're prettier than Fay," he said without preamble.

"Oh, Ira." Her hazel eyes met his directly - she was never a flirt. Her skin was fair. Her hair was the pale brown of woodshavings. He wanted to tell her that; he wanted to tell her about old boats made from wood - carracks and caravels. The topic could shift to alliteration. Had Perla noticed the alliterative names in South Market? - Goldie

Glecklin, Bertha Bolotow, Fay Feinberg ...

"Fay is the new Fanny Brice,"

Perla told him.

body's brief high expectations. But he didn't go courting until later.

he pajama factory did well from the start. At first it was just a low building with a few sewing machines worked by treadle. But the oldest brother had an eye for design (inherited from Mama and her specialty buttons), and the middle one understood what customers wanted (again like Mama), and Ira contributed a talent for keeping track of details (Mama). "The Designer, the Marketer, the Operations Manager,"

Ira was not destined to become a professional. He was the third son of a tailor. His mother sold sewing materials door to door - she specialized in buttons, most of them ordinary but some carved, some iridescent, some jet.



"I'll eat my hat. But you - you're the Pearl of South Market."

Her soft mouth curved in a smile.

Perla ... Pearl ... was the youngest of seven. Her father made a meager living selling nails. Her older brothers and sisters were large and dark and loud. The family loved food. They played cards whenever they found the time. This last child, this fair thin girl, seemed like a good luck piece. Teachers praised her good manners. She was intelligent, with an additional shrewdness from all that card playing. She could put a value on things. She was narrow, incurious, purposeful - Ira's opposite, when you came right down to it. Was it any wonder that he loved her?

When they graduated from the red brick school and moved on to Classical, Ira became as friendly as he could bear to be with one of her flashy brothers; became a familiar in their crowded flat, always filled with the excitement of somebody's marriage, somebody's baby, some-

Ira's admiring son interpreted forty years later. Soon they hired a secretary and more workers; they extended the building to twice its length.

In the War to come, manufacturing garments for the Armed forces, the business was to prosper splendidly. But in the mid-thirties it was prospering well enough for Papa to close his shop and be named President. Mama became supervisor of the girls at the machines, and mother to them as well, though none of them were Jewish - they were Italians, Portuguese, a few blacks. "Don't build an office separate," she said when they were enlarging the building. She spoke only English now, except to Papa. "Keep your desks there on the floor, in plain view," she added, crocheting.

The middle son nodded. "So we'll seem to be one of them."

"You *are* one of them," was the stern reply.

This enlightened management was laughed at in South Market, but the laughter grew faint when first the oldest brother and then the middle bought a car. At last Ira bought one too: a Ford.

A car and a degree were a bachelor's primary assets.

A car for the good life now, a degree for the good life later. Well, Ira had one of the assets, and he would never have the other; he owned some smart jackets, which partly compensated for his indifferent looks; he still read a lot, which informed what little conversation he had. The time had come.

"Oh, I'd like that," said Pearl on the telephone.

During the War (he served in France) Ira would discover that *salons de the* had been part of European cultural life for a century. The one at the Hotel had been part of their city's life for only a generation; and it didn't call itself a *salon de the*, just the Lincoln Room; and although repainted recently its walls were already faded, its potted palms browning, its waiters unsteady. But the three-piece orchestra could play any song you asked for. Pearl asked for Youmans, Irving Berlin, Victor Herbert, Gershwin. Under the plain brown hair, held off her brow by a barrette, her lovely face glowed like a secret. She danced well. She sang softly into his ear. "Someday I'll find you ..." But she liked too just to sit at a small round table with her evening's partner, making a plate of skimpy sandwiches and a pot of tea last from six o'clock until eight. Sometimes nine. No later. She was a typist now; she had to get up early.

"Twenty girls at your shop!" she politely marveled.

And a shipping department, he mentioned. The department consisted of two Italian brothers, one retarded. "Of course you pay Giovanni the same as Carlo," Mama had scolded. She was going to Workmen's Circle meetings two nights a week.

"We have a bookkeeper," Ira told Pearl. "Though we need an accountant."

"What's the difference?"

"Oh, a bookkeeper records the past. An accountant looks forward - makes budgets, recommends directions, discourages blind alleys."

"Oh." In Pearl's accounting Ira was a blind alley; he knew that. To her the pajama factory was just a tailor's premises expanded. Pearl could number her own assets - the face, the figure, the refined soft voice, the modesty - and she meant to offer them to a man with education and promise. That was the extent of her ambition - to attract a doctor or a lawyer, to live in a house, to occupy a firm place in the thickening cohort of Jews who were escaping South Market.

"There are persons with limited vision," Mama said one evening, casting off a crocheted runner.

"Pearl isn't ..." he began.

"Did I specify the person?" She inspected her work, though she didn't have to.

"Strabismus is also a defect," he said.

On Pearl's porch, in front of the door, he always kissed her cheek. One night, though, after parking, he

Happiness was attributable to luck, to the throw of the dice, the shuffle of the cards. *Maze!* had nothing to do with virtue (*virtus*, *virtutis*, feminine; how lasting the lessons of Classical High). And what virtue did he possess, anyway? He did whatever the day required of him, let tasks buoy him along.

seized her in the front seat of the Ford and kissed her on the mouth. The soft lips pursed in rejection. He drew away immediately.

"I'm sorry, Ira ... We just aren't soul mates," she said.

But we are, we are ... we have practically the same birth date ... you don't know how my mind whirls, what interesting places my thoughts carry me to, they could carry you also ... and I will never grow fat, Dr. Messenger promised me ...

He stopped calling. Several months later he heard she was seeing someone ten years older, a urologist. She married the guy. Not long afterwards Ira wooed and wed the bookkeeper, who was taking night courses in accounting.

he married for love. Of course he did! You can love many people in one lifetime - Papa, Mama, his brothers, Pearl, now Annie. He wrote long letters to Annie from France. She was dockside in New York when his troopship landed, wearing a bright red suit.

They stayed with Annie's parents in South Market until



they found an apartment near the river. Pearl now lived in a bigger apartment with her husband and children - the urologist had been declared an essential civilian, so the couple had gotten an early start on their family. But Ira and Annie soon caught up.

How do you account for happiness? The question occurred to Ira many times during the next twenty-five years, though he was not preoccupied with it - he was preoccupied instead with enlarging and then steadying the business, several times; with raising his sons; with worrying about his country's penchant for Far East adventures; with improving his house (a Tudor on the hill; Pearl lived in a Colonial, doctor's office attached); with becoming curious about Israel, even learning modern Hebrew. He was elected Trustee of the Reform Synagogue. (Pearl's family attended the Conservative.) Happiness, he eventually concluded, was attributable to luck, to the throw of the dice, the shuffle of the cards. *Maze!* had nothing to do with virtue (*virtus*, *virtutis*, feminine; how lasting the lessons of Classical High). And what virtue did he possess, anyway? He did whatever the day required of him, let tasks buoy him along.

Annie bought some paintings. He praised her choices, but his eye slid over them quickly whenever he entered his house, and rested instead on his case of antique buttons. He didn't talk about the buttons. But for their sake he made overnight trips to New York, to Third Avenue, to a dark, polished little store called Chatelaine. Chatelaine's owner Selena Settini, her eyes like Japanese lacquer,

sometimes could be induced to part with a treasure: a mother of pearl embellished with brilliants, for instance, that had once adorned George M. Cohan's waistcoat. Very expensive, but Ira was mad for it.

"It's handsome," said the dutiful Annie when he brought it home.

On another occasion Selena Settini showed him an enamel oval. Pan, a fiery orange, danced on a green background. She sold this special item to Ira at cost. She began to call him whenever she came across something she thought he'd admire. Sometimes she just called.

Ira and Annie patronized a concert series.

"Did I snore?" he'd ask, after some quartet.

"Just a little," she'd reassure him.

Then luck ran out.

Annie developed a progressive malady of the spine.



he first task: seeing specialists.

Specialist after specialist, all in vain. Bertha Bolotow was still dragging herself around South Market; but the specialists couldn't help Annie.

The second task: building a house on one level.

An architect friend designed it for them.

The third task: caretaking.

In the midst of suffering, how much there was still to observe. The workings of the nervous system and its unstoppable malfunctionings. The transformation of architectural drawings into a model, then into blueprints, then into a glass-and-redwood home. The conversion of an affectionate partnership into a lopsided arrangement between healthy and ill. The arrangement continued for five years. In the end they both wished for her death. Must all marriages come to this? No; no; Papa had died after only a week in the hospital, his first illness ever. Mama's heart failed gradually. "I'm going home," she'd told him.

Ira stayed in the glass-and-redwood house after Annie's death. He liked the birds that came to the feeders on the deck. Selena Settini still called him from New York. His sons dropped in often with their wives and children. Both young families were active in the anti-war effort - End Viet Nam War Today, the kiddies' tee shirts read.



ne evening during that same conflict Pearl became worried about her husband's lateness for

dinner. She tiptoed into the office and found him dead at his desk. Ira heard this sad story; tales of sudden catastrophe quickly get shared. "Doctors never take care of themselves," people scolded. "How fat he'd gotten."

Ira liked to drive to the old neighborhood and then stroll around. The ancient shul still commanded a minyan from the few ne'er-do-wells who remained. Max Margolis



and his sister were there, both a little slow, the City supported them. Lozowitz *ft. l*le lived in the flat she'd grown up in. Roe v. Wade had put the mother out of business, but the daughter was trafficking in something. Most of the flaking three-deckers belonged now to blacks who had come to New England after the War and who propagated a new generation every twenty years. The bricks of the elementary school had darkened - they were now the color of baked beans. Basketball hoops were stationed like sentries. Ira remembered the very section of the fence where he had stood with Perla, and she had changed her name.

He did not run into friends on these streets: just the feckless Margolises, and a few employees. The factory, expertly run by his boys, had moved to a town twenty miles north. Its old building was used as a furniture warehouse. Ira still owned the place, paid taxes, kept it from sinking into dereliction - but a warehouse was a

poor use for the site, located as it was across the street from the still green cemetery. Along the Post Road were Mexican restaurants and a colorful church. Who had heard of guacamole when he was growing up? Who had heard of Evangelicals and Baptists then - there were just Yankees and other goys. He felt his age, not unpleasantly. An idea was forming.

Three years later the new Jewish Home was opened where the warehouse had stood. Ira had sold the site to the City for a dollar. He stood on the dais with the capital gifts chairman and the big donors and the mayor. Pearl stood there, too. One of the wings was named for her late husband.

He thought her lovely, lovely in the same old way, the eyes as clear as ever, the simple hair a mixture of brown and gray, the face lined only slightly, as if her sorrows were as ephemeral as a song's brief change in key.

He'd try again.

She kept up with show tunes, she told him

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at their first dinner. She and her husband had flown to New York three or four times a year to take in the latest musicals. And Europe, oh, yes, they'd been to Europe. She answered questions politely. She was still limited. He loved her blindly.

Over several evenings he told her about the Governor's Commission on Human Rights (he had chaired it for three years); and about the variety of birds who came to his feeders; and about his collection. He mentioned the George M. Cohan button. He did not mention Selena Settini. He told Pearl about the time he and Annie had stopped in Greece on their way home from Israel, and rented a car, and driven around with no destination, and they'd found a village - well, Annie had; honorably he gave her credit. They were the first Americans to visit there. Nothing classical about that place, not a ruin in sight, the population descended from Turks. In the white-washed church a mummified saint slept under glass.

"You have gone beyond South Market," she said.

"We all have."

"Most of us are just living better," she said. "You ... expanded. Though you are still so thin," she hurriedly added.

His chance! He paid for the dinner, he escorted her to his Volvo, he took the wheel. In front of her house he turned towards her and kissed her hard, like a boy, like a teenager with no thought for tomorrow, like a young man who wants his way at last. She tasted of brandy. She clutched his upper arms. For a heady moment he thought the gesture was response, then knew it for resistance. He stopped, wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "Aren't we soulmates yet?" he helplessly asked.

"Oh, Ira, we are not."

He stared at her. *Sometimes attraction just isn't ... reciprocated*, his mother had said to him long ago. Her English was fluid by then, but words of many syllables still gave her trouble. Ira had appreciated Mama's effort to get the words right, but the sentiment was wrong. Pearl was too ambitious to settle for a wall-eyed fellow who worked for his brothers. That's what he had believed then. That's what he had continued to believe until a minute ago. *Some things are ... inexplicable*, Mama had insisted. She must have spent an hour with his dictionary in order to impart her unheeded wisdom.

his time around Pearl married a retired lawyer known for his wit and his low handicap. He had blue eyes and broad shoulders. "You're my everything," Ira imagined her murmuring into his ear.

And Ira? Selena Settini continued to call from New York. Everyone here in town had someone for him to meet. Even the rabbi arranged a dinner party where he

presented a cousin recently moved from Canada: wan and beautiful and moneyed. At the party as filler was the principal of the Temple's Hebrew School. She was a large woman dressed in a navy suit like a bank teller. Her romantic and unsuitable name was Shoshanah. He renamed her Rosy.

"I was a square dark child," she told him the next week. "My family called me the Pawnee." She had grown up in Omaha. Then university, then some years in Israel, then Chicago, finally settling down in New England. "Somehow I forgot to find a husband." How plain she must have been, how overlooked. What good company she was.

He was glad to marry her.

Selena Settini stopped calling.

He heard that Pearl's new spouse was bad-tempered. Rosy was a dream to live with. She praised his intelligence, his kindness, and his learning - haphazardly acquired and thus all the richer, she exulted.

Between Desert Storm and Operation Iraqi Freedom Pearl slipped into the dreaded Alzheimer's. Ira endured a series of strokes that ruined his body but did not affect his mind. He insisted that the time had come for the Jewish Home. At last Rosy assented.

Pearl's husband put her there, too.

osy spends every afternoon with Ira, continuing their spirited conversation. She helps him with his dinner - it's served in the Salon Room at five o'clock. They listen to the news on the little radio wedged between Ira's thigh and the side of his chair. Then, reluctantly, Rosy leaves.

Pearl's husband drops in once a week for an hour.

Every night, when all visitors have left, Ira turns his steady gaze on Pearl's vacant one. With his good right arm he wheels himself to the chair she's strapped into. With his good right thumb he presses a button on the pre-programmed radio: Gold Standards. "Love Walked Right In," an orchestra plays. "My Heart Stood Still" ... He extends his good right hand.

Pearl's bewildered fingers creep towards Ira's open palm and allow themselves to be embraced. He leans perilously forward and kisses the unresisting mouth. ◻

Edith Pearlman won the 2003 Mary McCarthy Prize in Short Fiction for her most recent collection of stories, How to Fall (Sarabande Books).