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The white plastic sphere came flying cross court in a high arc. I thought it was going to be well off the end of the table but it dipped and bounced high and sent me reeling back nearly tripping on the ill placed carpet that had caused so many spills. My cousin Jean had even split her head wide open a few summers ago and it still hadn't been moved. These minute thoughts cajole for space alongside angle measurements, calculations of speed and then bodily movement as I bring my table tennis bat around the side of the ball and deliver it deep to my cousins' backhand side. Underspin now from Danny, the ball just popping over the net, all the while its bounce and speed fading. My outstretched arm reaches out for a gentle down the line push but NO! The ball goes out and I howl in despair, laughing, as Danny energetically pumps his fist back and forth. At fifteen, the little brat is ten years my junior. I'm waiting for the 'C'mon!' and the horizontal palm angled back towards the forehead as he gloats in imitation but for today, I'm spared.

'So, what's the score now Jim? Is it six four or seven four my way?' He asks in his voice on the point of breaking which never ceases to make me laugh (or is it cringe) as I remember that I myself sounded like that until I was seventeen and how when I'd answered the phone my sisters' friends would begin their incessant jabber straight away and how I, for the first few months, would inform them immediately of their mistake, and then after I wised up, started to pretend that I was indeed Julia to see how much juicy information I could wheedle out of them.

'I don't know Danny' I replied and he said 'Why not?'. 'Because it's not written down and I haven't been keeping count.' I said. That satisfied him for about two seconds. 'Well, we're going to have to have a real championship to the death.'

All of a sudden my four-week Christmas vacation, infantile at an age of three days, was starting to look like the longest twenty-eight days of my life. Thankfully, the smells of a roasting chicken had the effect of silencing Danny's spirited recounting of the game.

My gran smiled at me from the kitchen bench and I asked her if there was anything I could do. She asked me to top and tail the beans and keep an eye on the steaming beets. My uncle Maurice was making the gravy and as I was stringing beans I heard a commotion from downstairs. Only the arrival of my aunt Faye could induce such hysteria. It had been fifteen years since she'd been to a family Christmas. I looked at gran and she rolled her eyes. Faye was dearly loved but outspoken and was often the last at the dinner table looking for one more bottle of wine. My uncle Amos came gliding in to the kitchen and

looked firstly at me and then secondly to my task. 'Jimmy!' he exclaimed and then 'How ya bean?' at which everyone groaned. He grabbed a raw bean and kept walking through the kitchen, intent on raiding a small morsel from each plate. 'Amos would you get out of the kitchen!' thundered gran. We all laughed again but we were soon drowned out by an ecstatic aunt Faye who barrelled into the kitchen and started howling at all of us hysterically. I returned to look at my beans but discovered I couldn't see them. They had become blurry as tears welled in my eyes. The love in my family was smarting me, drawing me into realisation of another love I had to let go.

Catherine had left six months ago. I arrived home to a half empty house to find her sitting on the kitchen table, her eyes red, her skin puffy, tears running down her cheeks. We stood like that in the kitchen for what felt like a long time although it was maybe only two minutes. All the while she cried more and more, her sobs burning hot in my chest, as I stood motionless, empty and unable to speak. When I finally lifted my leaden limbs I walked over to her and took her in my arms. Her breathing was irregular by that stage and her nose running wildly. She blew her nose on my shirt and slowly her tears ebbed to a stop. When my tongue unfurled itself from the roof all I could say was 'Go' over and over again in a whisper. She got up and left and I sat down at the table in the fading afternoon light and fell asleep. She had done what I hadn't had the guts to do. She had seen the beauty of our union go stale and left. I felt distraught, joyous, unburdened and empty all at the same time but most of all I felt envy. Envy that she'd left before me, that she'd been stronger. That feeling coupled with the love I felt for her, faded as it was, had made me so sad.

Tears were running down my cheeks and my gran was crying too. No one else noticed as I sobbed and sobbed. I needed that convivial kitchen and I needed unconditional love. I cried and cried for what felt like a long time. I dried my tears on gran's apron then we strained the beans together. My cousin Alyson was putting her famous cauliflower cheese on the table and the racket coming from that room seemed at once unbearable and necessary for survival.

Gran and I were the last ones to sit amidst the din, which was finally broken by Danny's high-pitched voice garnering everyone's attention.

'Hey, who wants to play table tennis after dinner?! I beat Jim today 22-20...'

*Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Declan Kelly.*