

Essay

About the Author

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THANKSGIVING: A Personal History

by Jennifer New

From the mythic Midwest of my childhood to the mesmerizing Chicago of later years, this holiday has always evoked a place.

In trying to explain what was missing from her life, how it felt hollow, a friend recently described to me a Thanksgiving she’d once had. It was just two friends and her. They had made dinner and had a wonderful time. “Nothing special happened,” she explained, “But we were all funny and vibrant. I thought life would always be like that.” 1

This is the holiday mind game: the too-sweet memory of that one shining moment coupled with the painful certainty that the rest of the world must be sitting at a Norman Rockwell table feeling loved. It only gets worse when you begin deconstructing the purpose of such holidays. Pondering the true origins of Thanksgiving, for example, always leaves me feeling more than a bit ashamed and not the least bit festive. Don’t even get me started on Christmas. 2

Every year, I think more and more of divorcing myself from these blockbuster holidays. I want to be free from both the material glut¹ and the Pandora’s box of emotions that opens every November and doesn’t safely close until Jan. 2. Chief among these is the longing for that perfect day that my friend described, the wishful balance of tradition, meaning and belonging. But as an only child in a family that has never been long on tradition, I’ve usually felt my nose pressed against the glass, never part of the long, lively table and yet not quite able to scrap it all to spend a month in Zanzibar. 3

When I was a kid, of course, there was none of this philosophizing. I was too thrilled by the way the day so perfectly matched the song we’d sung in school. You know the one: “Over the river and through the woods...” Across the gray Midwestern landscape, driving up and down rolling hills, my parents and I would go to my grandmother’s house. From the back seat, I’d peer out at the endless fields of corn, any stray stalks now standing brittle and bleached against the frostbitten black soil. Billboards and gas stations occasionally punctuated the landscape. Everything seemed unusually still, sucked dry of life by winter and the odd quiet of a holiday weekend. 4

¹ glut: an excessive amount

In less than an hour, we'd turn off the interstate, entering more familiar territory. My child's mind had created 5
mythic markers for the approach to my grandparents'. First came the sign for a summer campground with its
wooden cartoon characters, now caught alone and cold in their faded swimsuits. Farther up the road, a sentry-
like² boulder stood atop a hill, the final signpost before we pulled into my grandparents' lane. Suddenly, the sky
was obscured by the long, reaching branches of old-growth oak and elm trees. A thick underbrush, a collage of
grays and browns, extended from the road and beyond to the 13 acres of Iowa woodland on which their house
was situated. A frozen creek bisected the property at the bottom of a large hill. The whole kingdom was
enchanted by deer, a long orange fox, battalions of squirrels and birds of every hue.

Waiting at the end of the lane was not the house from the song, that home to which the sleigh knew the way. 6
A few years earlier my grandparents had built a new house, all rough-hewn, untreated wood and exposed
beams, in lieu of the white clapboard farmhouse where they had raised their children. I vaguely understood that
this piece of contemporary architecture, circa 1974, was a twist on that traditional tune, but to me it was better:
a magical soaring place full of open spaces, surprises and light.

Upon entering the house, I'd stand and look up. Floating above were windows that seemed impossibly high, 7
their curtains controlled by an electric switch. On another wall was an Oriental rug so vast it seemed to have
come from a palace. Hidden doors, a glass fireplace that warmed rooms on both sides and faucets sprouting
water in high arcs fascinated me during each visit. In the basement, I'd roam through a virtual labyrinth of rooms
filled with the possessions of relatives now gone. Butter urns, antique dolls and photo albums of stern-faced
people competed fantastically with the intercoms and other gadgetry of the house.

I see now that it would have been a great setting for gaggles³ of cousins: having pillow fights, trudging 8
through the snowy woods, dressing up in my grandmother's old gowns and coonskin hat. Instead, I recall
holidays as having a museum-like hush. Alone with the friends I'd created in my mind and the belongings of
deceased generations, I was content. Upstairs, a football game hummed from the TV, a mixer whirred in the
kitchen and the stereo piped one of my grandmother's classical music 8-tracks from room to room. But the
house, with its carpeting and wallpaper, absorbed it all. As I'd seen in an illustration from one of my books, I
could picture the house as a cross-section, looking into each room where, alone, my family members, read,
cooked, watched TV and napped. Pulling the camera farther away, the great house glowed in the violet of early
nightfall, as smoke from the chimney wafted through the woodland and then over the endless dark fields, a
scattering of tiny, precise stars overhead.

² sentry: a guard

³ gaggles: groups or clusters; also, flocks of geese

The moment that brought us there together—my grandparents, mom and dad, my uncle and his partner, and my great-grandmother—was perhaps the most quiet moment of all. Thanksgiving supper, held in the dim light of late afternoon, was a restrained meal, as though it were a play and we had all lost our scripts. Only the clank of silverware, the passing of dishes and the sharing of small talk seemed to carry us around and through it. 9

If I could go back in time and enter the minds of everyone at that table, I would not be surprised if only my great-grandmother and I were really happy to be there. My grandfather: walking in his fields, calculating numbers from stocks and commodities, fixing a piece of machinery. My parents: with friends in a warmer climate, “The White Album” on the stereo and some unexpected cash in their wallets. My uncle and his partner Bob: willing themselves back home and beyond this annual homage. (Bob himself was a mystery to me, a barrel-chested man who laughed a lot and wore — at least in the one mental snapshot I have of him — a wild patterned smock top and a gold medallion. No one had explained Bob’s relationship to our family, so I assigned him a role in my own universe, much like the cartoon characters at the campground or the sentinel rock. I made sense of him and marveled at his ebullience.) And then my grandmother: thinking she should enjoy this, but tired from the cooking and management of the meal, more looking forward to a game later in the evening. 10

That left my great-grandmother and me. Both of us were happy to have this time with family, this mythic meal in which we both believed. And, really, everyone else was there for us: to instill tradition in me, to uphold it for her. Isn’t that what most holidays are about? Everyone in the middle gets left holding the bag, squirming in their seats, while the young and old enjoy it. Within a few years, though, by the time I hit adolescence, I’d had my fill of tradition. Not the boulder, the huge house with its secret niches⁴ nor even the golden turkey served on an antique platter that my grandmother unearthed every year from the depths of a buffet held any appeal. Gone was my ability to see the world through the almost psychedelic rose-colored glasses of childhood. I also hadn’t gained any of the empathy that comes with age. Instead, I was stuck with one foot in cynicism and the other in hypersensitivity. The beloved, magical house now looked to me like a looming example of misspent money and greed. My great-grandmother, so tiny and helpless at this point, now struck me as macabre and frightening, her papery white skin on the verge of tearing. 11

Perhaps my parents took my behavior, moody and unkind as it was, as a sign that traditions are sometimes meant to be broken. I’m not sure whether they were using me to save themselves from the repetition of the annual holiday, or if they were saving the rest of the family from me. Either way, we 12

⁴ **niches:** ornamental recesses in a wall for the display of decorative objects
stopped pulling into the wooded lane that fourth Thursday in November. For the next few years, we’d drive

instead to Chicago. My mind managed to create similar mythic land markers: the rounded pyramids near Dekalb, Ill., which I've since realized are storage buildings; the office parks of the western suburbs where I imagined myself working as a young, single woman, a la Mary Tyler Moore; the large neon sign of a pair of lips that seemed to be a greeting especially for us, rather than the advertising for a dry cleaner that they actually were. About this point, at the neon lips, the buildings around us grew older and darker, and on the horizon the skyscrapers blinked to life in the cold twilight air. The slow enveloping by these mammoth structures was as heady as the approach down my grandparents' lane had been years earlier.

We would stay at a friend's apartment, or better yet, in a downtown hotel. I was mesmerized by the clip of urban life. On the wide boulevard of Michigan Avenue, I'd follow women in their fat fur coats, amazed and appalled. The wisps of hairs from the coat closed tight around their necks, hugging brightly made-up faces. Leather boots tapped along city streets, entering the dance of a revolving door or stepping smartly into the back of a yellow cab. The mezzanines of department stores — Lord & Taylor, Marshall Fields — dazzled me; the glint of light reflected on make-up-counter mirrors, the intoxicating waft of perfume on a cacophony⁵ of voices. And my parents, freed of their familiar roles, seemed young and bright. They negotiated maître d's and complex museum maps; they ordered wine from long lists and knew what to tip. 13

Of course, like that adolescent hero, Holden Caulfield, I was that thing we hated most: a hypocrite. I couldn't see the irony in my fascination with the urban splendor vs. my disdain for my grandparents' hard-earned home. Or that my parents possessed the same qualities and talents no matter where we were. I definitely couldn't pan out far enough to see that I was just a teenager yearning for a bigger world, a change of pace. 14

During these city trips, my sense of Thanksgiving shifted. No longer was it a wishbone drying on the kitchen windowsill, or foil-wrapped leftovers in the refrigerator. Instead, late November connoted the moneyed swirl of holiday lights flickering on the Magnificent Mile as an "El" train clamored over the Loop. It was the bellows of drivers and the urbane banter of pedestrians, weighted down with packages. The soft glow of restaurants — the darker the better—cut me so far adrift from my day-to-day world that I might as well have traveled to another continent. Far away from the immense quietude of the house in the woods, the bellhops now served as my uncles, shop clerks and waiters my cousins, and the patrons in theater lobbies and museums became my extended family. Late at night, I'd creep out of my bed to the window and watch with amazement as the city below continued to move to the beat of an all-night rumba. Without having to be invited or born into it, I was suddenly, automatically, part of something bigger and noisier than my small family. 15

⁵ **cacophony**: harsh discordant sound; dissonance

In years since, I've cobbled together whatever Thanksgiving is available to me. After college, friends and I, waylaid on the West Coast without family, would whip up green bean casserole and cranberries, reinventing the tastes of childhood with varying success. There were always broken hearts and pining for home at these occasions, but they were full of warmth and camaraderie. Then, for several years, my husband and I battled a sea of crowds in various airports, piecing together flights from one coast to the other in order to share the day with his family.

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On my first visit, I was startled by the table set for more than 20 people. This was a family in which relatives existed in heaps, all appearing in boldface and underlined with their various eccentricities⁶. Neuroses and guarded secrets, petty jealousies and unpaid debts were all placed on the back burner for this one day while people reacquainted themselves, hugging away any uneasiness. This family — suburban, Jewish, bursting with noise and stories — so unlike my own, made me teeter between a thrilling sense of finally having a place at a long table, and a claustrophobic yearning for a quiet spot in a dark cafe. Or, better yet, in a dark and quiet woodland.

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This year for Thanksgiving, I will rent movies, walk with the dog down still streets and have a meal with my parents and husband. Throughout the day, I'll imagine myself moving through the big house in the woods that my grandparents sold years ago. Padding down carpeted hallways, I'll rediscover hidden doorways and unpack that platter from the buffet. A bag of antique marbles will open its contents to me as the grandfather clock chimes. Counting "12," I'll look outside onto the lawn and watch a family of deer make their nightly crossing through the now barren vegetable garden, jumping over the fence that my husband and I put in their path, and into the neighbor's yard. I'll press my nose against the cold glass and wish myself outside and beyond the still of the house.

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⁶ **eccentricity**: a behavioral oddity or peculiarity