

I REMEMBER TOM

By Paul Shortt A Budget The Literary Club November 28, 2016

What a two weeks. Friends freaking out, some neighbors quite upbeat, others not, emails from Europe asking, "What's up over there?" Thanksgiving, I'm worrying how the turkey'll turn out: Underdone like last year? Overdone the year before? Or dropped on the driveway the year of the bourbon barbeque?

Thanksgiving used to be a nice welcome break from work: time for spiffing up the yard, getting the house ready for friends and family, the beautiful table, a crackling fire in the fireplace. I liked it, I loved it, I got excited by it.

This year, experiencing a somewhat more "existential" dynamic, I turned my thoughts inward, reflecting and dwelling on Thanksgiving episodes I most remember. Many popped up, but I'll relate only a few:

In elementary school, Thanksgiving was always a significant prelude - and this boy's stepping-stone - to the real "holiday of holidays" - *CHRISTMAS!* Not to discount Halloween, but Thanksgiving really was, for me, the first of a "*Grand Christmas Trifecta*" - a four-day holiday with turkey and Gramma's stuffing (yum!), and cranberry jelly out of the can (Oooo!) - no sour red berries ground-up with carrots and weird stuff for me - Oh No! Then a little diversion: our secret ritual before the pumpkin and mince pies - sneaking the dregs of Mogen David from grown-ups' glasses in the back of Gramma's kitchen! - getting a funny little buzz.

Four blocks away, on Coolidge School's pea-green walls, where pilgrim caps and turkey masks replaced lumpy pumpkins and witches' hats, Monday-after-Thanksgiving would be *Santa's turn*, with bright red suits, cotton-batting beards, and sparkly snow flakes.

Next in this personal "Grand Seasonal Trifecta" - just *two weeks* after the last turkey-and-mayo sandwich - came *MY BIRTHDAY*, occurring just a mere two weeks *BEFORE CHRISTMAS!* - a fortnight which, to this little kid, seemed like *F O R E V E R!*

So tonight, with this boy's story, I'm comforting myself without benefit of my tattered Indian blanket; instead, my Thanksgiving thoughts and feelings, past and

present. Thoughts and feelings, which, I'll admit, are quaint and corny compared to those of kids today.

I'll start with college, freshman year, with the long Thanksgiving weekend: the first chance to return home, eager to check-in with high school friends, who'd also be home, checking-in. Our communal homecoming turned quickly to partying on a whole new level: a combination of first semester's baptism-by-beer, now enjoined by old buddies, who now enjoined a roster of their new buddies, who hailed from very, very distant parts of our city, ones I'd heard of but never ventured into: neighborhoods somewhere vague, like "the far east side" or "down river." Understand: Greater Detroit was a metro area the size of Boston, Manhattan, and San Francisco combined; and flat as a pancake without the blueberries - an endless, irregular, incomprehensible *flat* pancake. And back then, certainly unlike now, it was densely populated and thriving with people and cars - cars with great tail fins, cars like enormous distinctive boats that "cruised" and "hailed ass," quite unlike the anonymous-looking compact cars of today.

But back to the first party: We were driving to an unfamiliar house, in a far distant neighborhood, whose unfamiliar high school played in an off-brand league. This all felt a bit *iffy* in the sense of "*Others*" - strangers you're a bit wary of. I was uncomfortable, nervous, even though I was with my best friend. But inside the party house - parents conspicuously absent - came familiar collegiate territory. Beer and booze were flowing, six-packs and Canadian Club crowded the kitchen table, sacks of chips and tubs of dip filled the gaps, empties collected the cigarette butts, and Motown blared. Everyone was shouting to be heard - hard going when you're trying to talk to a new girl; or just discovering a guy who knew a guy, who knew a guy you actually knew. Drinking, smoking, and adrenalin fueled this crowd of strangers; conversation was happy, even manic; the shouting only increased.

By midnight, high, quite weary, and certainly bleary, came the reckoning. Out there, on the sidewalk, or next to it, leaning against the hydrant, puking the evening's bounty, trying to miss the shoes, I swayed, trying to remember if I brought gum. Next came the 40-minute ride home, trying to keep it together; then trying to

sneak quietly into the house and upstairs, in the dark, without waking the parents or tipping something over.

None of it I now miss. But on reflection, that beginning of opening up to complete strangers, of striking up even minimal conversations, was a gain for me. To manage it comfortably, even enthusiastically, brought about a pleasing confidence. This may seem trivial, but as a semi-articulate, socially shy boy, this opened me to a wider world, one without the local social props and friends. Today, this memory embarrasses me, as I watch my grandson and granddaughter's ease in boldly introducing themselves to new kids, and asking them to play. If they only knew my awkwardness then, I'd be such a Grampa Loser now.

Speaking of the young kids brings me 'round to the real focus of my story tonight: my own father. He was divorced from my mother when I was 18 months, my brother David 3. When I was about 5, when Harry Truman unexpectedly won, my brother and I began spending Saturdays with my father, who lived only two miles away. My brother remembered him as a real father, but me, I just went along.

My father, Jim, lived with his second wife in a small tract house, slightly smaller than my Gramma and Grampa's' house, where I lived with my mother and brother. My Grampa Sam built his family bungalow in the 20s, along with several others on the street, before the Great Depression killed his construction business. He'd been trained in carpentry by my Gramma Rose's father in Wales, where he'd met and won the fetching Rosie, beating out all the other coal-mining swains from the Rhondda Valley.

When I lived with them, Gramma and Grampa were quiet Welsh-accented elders, who I hold responsible for my introversion, but duly credit for my introspection, as they often left me quietly to my own imagination.

Meanwhile, my mother worked in a polished, wood-paneled office at Dodge, then Chrysler, answering "Mr. Colbert's office" on a phone with many buttons. She was contributing a slightly higher income than Grampa, who was now the lone custodian of an elementary school, where he sometimes let us shovel coal into the boiler on Sunday nights.

But back to my father Jim: he soon revealed himself to be a wonderful, engaging, game-playing, imaginative . . . well . . . “*Kid*”, just one bigger than us. In their very small house, raising two younger kids with a second wife (with the very same name as my mother – imagine!) he – no - *they* had the time and willingness to take David and me in many Saturdays, from morning till well after dark. And during those extended Saturdays, Dad - *fully* engaged - enthralled and involved us in all kinds of shenanigans: made-up stuff, kid games, improvised sports, daredevil pursuits, and how-to-draw sessions, even haircuts after supper. He and his two younger sons, Gary and Ronnie, showed us how to make pea-pie with mashed potatoes, and baked potatoes wrapped in tinfoil, buried in piles of burning leaves at the curb, in a darkness that concealed our dirty hands and faces, blackened from charred potato skins.

A few quick memories before I tell you of his “Great Thanksgiving Experiment:”

I realized Dad wasn’t the usual dad - not that I’d know – but playing hide-and-go-seek in the small messy basement, with my big brother David “it,” young Gary tucking himself under the dark stairs with the spiders, Dad stuffed very young Ronnie up into the overhead laundry chute filled with baby Gail’s diapers and dirty sheets. Ronnie had to be three or four, but there he was, being stuffed into this narrow chute, several feet above the laundry basket. Of course he was the last one found, and the winner. Released and giggling, he was lowered safely to the floor. The image of that crazy Saturday hide-and-go-seek game is still very vivid.

Like our family, my father’s new family was a bit cash-strapped too, so there weren’t many toys around. But, besides being good at drawing, with an imagination to please a kid, he could make things in his small basement shop, with his jigsaw, sander, and a few hand tools. All you had to do was answer his question: “What would you like me to make?” Then you’d watch, fascinated, as he cut out and crafted a pistol or a sword or even a double-barreled shotgun. To me, this ritual was better than any toy store – watching the gun crafted and handed over to you.

Dad was also a big sports fan – Red Grange, the Galloping Ghost from Illinois was his hero. Dad liked to play baseball, football, or basketball with us, always in a

very impromptu way, always at our small scale. How's this for pick-up baseball: In his scrappy backyard, backed by a shabby garage with a door that never shut, he'd pick up a handy rock for a ball, and you'd whack it with a suitable bat: a strong stick fallen from the oak tree that scattered acorns on the patches of grass below.

Now my favorite: a game called "Pheasant," fraught with danger and excitement, played in a nearby woods with winding paths, little hills, big trees, fallen branches and underbrush. We'd all gather - Dad, David, Gary, Ronnie and me. Dad always began as the "hunter" and we as the "pheasants." He'd go behind a tree and count to 20, as we'd rush off in various directions. Then he'd yell out, "*Here-Comes-The-Hunter!*" or something equally ominous, and start his search - So far, no big deal. But for pheasant "ammunition," he'd pick up large sticks along the way to throw at us "pheasants" in hiding. Now a stick flying at you, whizzing overhead or past your ear, was thrilling. Quickly you took off to a new hiding place, making whatever noise you thought a pheasant made. You see, the closer the stick whizzed by, the bigger the thrill. I don't remember anyone ever getting hurt, but I do remember the fun and the thrill of it. Seems like none of his games would meet approval today.

Now finally, Dad's "Big Thanksgiving Experiment:"

It was the Saturday before Thanksgiving. Immediately after being dropped off, Gary and Ronnie excitedly asked if we wanted to go down the basement to see Dad's Thanksgiving surprise. Silly question. There was only one answer and we raced for the basement door. "Careful now," Dad called, as we clamored down, not knowing whether the warning was about the rickety stairs, or what lay ahead in the dark. Suddenly, we heard a clucking sound from somewhere in the dimness. Curiously, there were a lot of cardboard boxes scattered about. My dad was the last one down as young Gary called out, "Who wants to see a turkey fly?" David and I showed cautious enthusiasm as Gary and Ronnie called out, "Here Tom - Here Tom," maneuvering to corner "Tom," who was feinting and dodging in amongst the boxes. The wide-eyed squawking continued as the three closed in. Finally Dad managed to corner Tom and pick him up, cradled, wings folded, and sharp feet secured. But Tom's garbles, squawks, and croaks continued and his eyes bulged as he struggled in Dad's arms. Poor Tom I thought. Then Gary and Ronnie began chanting, "Make him

fly - Make him fly.” And of course, David and I, by now, craved the climax of this Little Rascals-style experiment: to see Tom-the-Turkey really fly, especially in this small cramped basement.

Dad cued Gary and Ronnie, who quickly stacked boxes up next to the staircase. Then Dad, carefully cradling Tom, climbed the stairs, leaned over, and placed Tom atop the boxes. They must have practiced as Gary, laughing, pushed the boxes over just as Dad released Tom. Resigned to his fate, Tom awkwardly (or frantically) “flew” across the short distance, to what his turkey brain considered a “safe haven.”

I suppose this was the closest taste, as kids, David and I ever got to the climax of the Wright Brothers at Kitty Hawk. To us kids, it was all fun and foolish and absurd and childish, but I still recall feeling a small pang of pity for Poor Tom. Obviously I was forgetting what lay ahead next Thursday.

Fifty years on, some thirty years after Dad died, I asked his wife, Gwen, about all that turkey business: Was it all just something to enthrall the kids – raising a baby turkey, et cetera? I asked. “Oh no,” she said. “Jim heard a rumor that there was going to be a serious turkey shortage, and he wanted to make sure we had one; he’d also save a lot of money buying a turkey chick. (Dad had once memorably raised a batch of guinea pigs for profit in the cellar, so he was a credentialed basement wrangler.)

“What about Ronnie, Gary, and Gail - what did they think on Thanksgiving Day?” I asked Gwen.

“The tears were just streaming down their faces. They couldn’t eat a bite.”

I wonder if Dad couldn’t either. He had a great heart, and a great sense of tomfoolery, usually on the side of kids, except maybe this once.

Then reality trumped nostalgia as Gwen chuckled. “There never was a turkey shortage anyway,” she said, smiling the way she always did.

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