

The Case of the Missing Turkey Leg

By Judy Solomon

The excitement about Thanksgiving was really building that year. Grandma arrived early with a homemade pecan pie in one hand and a pound cake in the other. Dad was poking around in a cabinet, searching for his electric carving knife. Mama was in the kitchen tapping the pots with a spoon and humming Turkey in the Straw. Little Lonnie bounced up and down on his diapered bottom, keeping time to the music. Dad smelled the air and sighed. My big brother, Slim, who was anything but slim, sneaked off to his room with a slice of the pecan pie. Even Fido was wagging his tail.

Mama stretched a new, white tablecloth over the dining room table. She put cardboard Pilgrims and colorful fall leaves from the craft store in the center, and she set the table with real china and real silverware. Then she looked up, smiling. "Help me carry in the food," she said.

Slim, who had come out of his room by this time, went racing into the kitchen. "I'll get it! I'll get it!" he screamed. The rest of us piled in behind him, with everyone grabbing a pan or a dish. Into the dining room came the dressing, cranberry sauce, mashed potatoes and gravy, peas, and corn, Grandma's pound cake and the pecan pie, minus a slice. We placed the pans and dishes on the sideboard and looked up to watch Dad carry in the biggest, brownest, best-smelling turkey we had ever seen with Mama's hand under the platter, just in case. Together they lowered the turkey to its place at the head of the table.

It was the tradition in our family for each of us to think of something for which we were most thankful, and we knew Mama wouldn't let us eat until we had done it. We all ran to the table yelling something like "I'm thankful for Grandma" or "I'm thankful for school being out" or "I'm thankful for pecan pie!" All eyes were on that enormous turkey as we took our seats at the table.

Yes, everything was perfect except for one thing. Three hundred sixty-four days of the year Mama served the dinner, but not on Thanksgiving. That was the one day of the year when Dad sat at the head of the table and carved the turkey. It was an honor that he had eagerly anticipated for days in advance, as he discussed the relative merits of white meat versus dark meat, thick pieces versus thin pieces, with gravy and cranberry sauce, or without. Now Dad was not a well-coordinated man. He frequently tripped over his own two feet, and he could be counted on to drop just about anything. He was said to have two left thumbs, or as Mama sometimes called him, he was a clumsy ox.

That's why we all eased back from the table just a bit when Dad plugged in the electric carving knife, and we all eased back just a bit more when he tested it in the air. Dad went to work on the white meat first with surprisingly few problems. Slice after slice landed neatly on the platter. Dad leaned forward and grabbed the end of the left turkey leg and cut it off at the thigh joint, placing it whole on the platter beside the white meat. His oily fingers glistened in the light of the chandelier, and Mama waved her napkin. "I'm all right, Mama," he said. "I'm all right."

But as Dad leaned forward to pull back the right turkey leg, a button from his cardigan sweater caught under the edge of the platter. He pulled back the turkey leg and lowered the electric carving knife to the thigh joint. The turkey leg slipped from his slippery fingers and popped back to its original position, splattering Dad's sweater with gravy. As Dad jumped backward to avoid the gravy, the

button from his sweater lifted the edge of the platter. He dropped the carving knife and grabbed the platter. Slim and I jumped from the table in terror as the carving knife fell to the floor and began chewing the table leg. Dad looked down at the fallen carving knife and lost his balance. As he started to fall, he tossed the turkey and platter in the air. He regained his footing just in time to grab the platter and slip it under the falling turkey. Mama quickly unplugged the carving knife and placed it on the table.

"A mess!" screamed Mama. "What a mess!" She ran around the table with a napkin, mad as a wet hen, wiping drips of turkey stock from her new, white tablecloth. Finally Mama settled down, and we all pulled our chairs back up to the table. Dad looked at Mama. "At least I saved the turkey," he said.

"Tucky leg!" yelled Lonnie, bouncing and kicking in his seat. "Tucky leg! Tucky leg!"

All of us looked at the turkey. Lonnie was right! A turkey leg was missing. We looked around the room, under the table, at each other. We looked at Fido, who was standing at the toddler gate licking his lips. Little Lonnie began to cry softly for he was the one who had expressed that he was most thankful for turkey legs.

Just then a brown blob of turkey juice landed on a Pilgrim and dripped down its costume. Everyone looked upward. There, balanced on the top of the chandelier, was the missing turkey leg.

"Clumsy ox," muttered Mama under her breath.