



FOWL AFFRONT

Dad used to announce in his loud, bombastic voice, “When T. J. Murray dies, half the town will weep and half the town will cheer, but everyone will know I am gone.”

I sometimes wished for and wondered what it would be like to have a quiet, average Dad. My dream dad would wear flannel shirts and read books and smoke a pipe quietly in front of the fireplace. In my make-believe home, my dream dad might, for example, choose to ignore pigeon poop on Thanksgiving Day—especially just as his family and guests were arriving. But my home and my dad were not normal.

Thanksgiving Day 1952 was cold, so Joe and I bundled up and went outside to wait for Aunt Sis (Mom’s older sister and her only sibling) to arrive from Cleveland. We were sitting on the front steps and could hardly wait. Aunt Sis was an important career woman who dressed like a big-city lady. Her skin was delicate, almost translucent. Her refinement and even her voice reflected the years she had studied at the exclusive Catholic girl’s school,

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Lourdes Academy. She had curly hair that she wore naturally. She smelled of lavender and wore a coat with a big fur collar, high heels, and gloves. She always wore gloves, winter and summer.

We only saw Aunt Sis on holidays, and she always arrived carrying two black tin cans adorned with pink and green flowers, filled with homemade chocolate and surprise cookies. While we loved Aunt Sis, we adored her cookies. She also brought fancy chocolate candies, pastel mints, and mixed nuts loaded with cashews. All of her offerings were purchased from Stouffers, and each box was wrapped in beautiful paper and tied with fancy velvet ribbons. Aunt Sis would ask Joe and me to help her place a six-inch white or milk chocolate turkey at each child's place at the table. Best of all, each turkey had a small envelope tied to its neck with a bright ribbon. Inside was a crisp, new ten-dollar bill.

As Joe and I waited for Aunt Sis and her rare treasures, Dad checked the cracked bricks on the front steps of the house. Dad never took a day off. He was always engaged in some attempt to control at least his corner of the world. Suddenly he saw ten or fifteen pigeons flying overhead, depositing big, white globs on the roof of our house and his apartment building next door.

Outraged at the fowl affront, Dad charged into the house. He grabbed his shotgun from the coat closet in the foyer, dropping shells all over the tile floor as he attempted to load it. We lived in a city neighborhood filled with family homes set very close to each other, which made shooting a gun very dangerous, not to mention illegal. But that didn't bother Dad one bit.

He flew out the front door in full attack mode, and our yard became a battlefield—Dad versus the pigeons. Joe and I were invisible observers.

“You son of a bitch. You won't see the light of another day after T. J. Murray deals with you!” Dad missed pigeon after pigeon. An endless array of bad words spilled out of his mouth, louder and

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louder with each escaped bird.

Joe jumped up to run into the kitchen where Mom, who had been up since five o'clock that morning, was finishing the last-minute preparations for a Thanksgiving feast for seventeen people: turkey, mashed potatoes and gravy, cranberry sauce, rolls, various vegetables, Jell-O, and mixed salads—not to mention homemade pies. “Mom, Mom, hurry. Come outside. Dad is committing a mortal sin on the front lawn.” The mortal sin, Joe reported, wasn't killing pigeons or breaking the law—it was that Dad had said, “Son of a B and God D it.”

She put her arm around Joe and said softly, “Joe, you're always my good helper. Please put ice in all the water glasses on the table. Oh, and get the pitcher out of the cupboard and fill each glass with water. Try not to spill.” Mom was always trying ever so gently to bring a bit of civility to her brood. She had been reared in a genteel home, in which manners were important. The Cummings family thought of themselves as lace-curtain Irish. Surely a pigeon shoot wouldn't have been on their Thanksgiving agenda. But Mom was unfazed.

Thanksgiving was special for all of us. It was the first holiday after the start of school in September, and it launched the excitement of Christmas.

I couldn't wait to get home from school on the Wednesday before Thanksgiving. As I opened the front door, the smell of cinnamon and nutmeg coming from the apple and pumpkin pies baking in the oven permeated the house. By no later than four o'clock, the back doorbell would ring, and, as Mom would always say, “that pretty Davlin girl” would deliver a thirty-eight-pound turkey. The Davlin kids went to school with us. They owned a

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picture-perfect farm just outside of town. Each Thanksgiving, Christmas, and New Year's, 124 East Madison hosted the biggest turkey their farm produced.



Immediately upon the bird's arrival, Mom would take out the neck, heart, gizzard, and liver, and begin simmering them in chicken broth along with chopped onions. As they cooked, we'd get our first whiff of the next day's feast. Mom would ask Joe or me to find the long wax wicks, which required a treasure hunt in the catchall drawer next to the stove. It held foil saved for reuse, greasy hot gloves, toothpicks, string, straws, plastic bags, rubber bands, and loads of Tums, matches, and the long wax wicks. Mom would light the wick and burn the long hairs off the turkey. Joe and I would be right there, eager to help. She would then wash out the turkey and fill its cavity with towels. Too big for the refrigerator, Mom would put the turkey in the cold room just off the kitchen.

I loved helping Mom set the holiday table. We used all our best stuff—a crisply starched white Irish linen tablecloth, white linen napkins, cut glassware that was supposed to look like Waterford, Noritake china, and stainless steel utensils that were supposed to

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look like sterling silver. There was always a centerpiece of fresh fall colors of orange, gold, and green flowers adorning the center of the table. When Mom and I finished, the Murray dining room looked liked Buckingham Palace awaiting the Queen herself.



Dad's holiday jobs were to carve the turkey, open the wine, and cause a commotion. The last was his specialty. Mom would have Dad's apron and chef hat cleaned and ironed, and the knives were always freshly sharpened for Dad's big, noisy "carve the turkey" show. This year, just after Mom had lifted the turkey out of the oven and started scooping the dressing out of the cavity so Dad could begin to carve, we suddenly heard from the butler's

pantry: “Son of a bitch. What happened to my wine? Where is that damn Bob?”

Dad’s voice carried for miles and struck fear in the most courageous of hearts. He’d gone looking for the wine bottle he’d opened earlier. It was empty except for one swallow. Everyone scattered out of the kitchen, except Mom.

Bob, who was now a teenager and over six feet tall, came running into the kitchen carrying the leather-bound Bible that sat on the end table in our living room. He slammed the book on the kitchen table in front of Dad. “I swear on the Bible,” Bob shouted, placing his right hand on the book. “I never touched the wine—not one drop.”

Then from the far corner of the booth that surrounded our kitchen table, Dad heard a hiccup followed by a huge belch. Aunt Lucille sat there looking comfortable. Dad, with his face turning beet red, shouted, “Son of a bitch! You drank the entire bottle of wine, Lucille. You’re a hog.”

Thanks to that bottle of red wine and a frontal lobotomy, Lucille was untroubled by his insults. Calmly, almost cheerfully, she replied, “You are a stingy, mean old man denying your older sister a little wine on Thanksgiving Day.”

“You’re disgusting. A little wine, my ass. You drank the whole damn bottle. Now there’s no wine for *me* to enjoy with *my* Thanksgiving dinner. Son of a bitch.”

“Oh, Thomas, Thomas, Thomas,” she chided. “Behold the lilies of the field, they neither toil nor sow; yet our dear Lord takes care of all their needs.”

With that, Dad lost it again. This time completely. “The Lord? The *Lord*? Like hell, the Lord. Are you crazy? Do you know who takes care of you? Do you know who pays your bills, puts a roof over your head, and puts food on your table? *Not* the Lord. Your brother. Meeeee, little old Tommy Murray. Not the