

The Old Man and Me:

Extraordinary Stories from an Ordinary Childhood Post WWII

CHAPTER 28 Thanksgiving Cat

Hattie Larlham was the best doggone cook West Virginia ever produced. Her Thanksgiving meals were celebrations of the joys of her kitchen and affirmations of life. Ours was the spread of thousands, the quintessential Norman Rockwell *Saturday Evening Post* cover.

From the range came twenty pounds of turkey, golden in its glazed glory, fragrant of celery and giblet stuffing. Hours had been spent drying bread – white, wheat, rye, French every sort we could find in the “day-old” bins – in the oven at low heat to make this perfect stuffing. The bird itself had been basted in soup stock and slathered with butter, then placed in a deep roaster and covered. Four hours of low-heat cooking, followed by an hour at much higher heat, with constant re-basting, created a masterpiece of edibility.

The bird was placed on a giant carving plate on the throne of the king of birds – the center of the table. Flour gravy was made from the bastings in the pan. The bird was surrounded by bowls containing potatoes whipped with milk and butter, green-bean casserole, stuffing, yams with a brown sugar sauce reduction and tiny marshmallows. Farther out in a secondary orbit were plates of rolls and butter, jellied cranberry and whole cranberry sauces, a sectional plate of olives, both black and green, celery, carrots, tiny tomatoes with a bowl of onion dip in the center.

We all bowed our heads as the Old Man said grace, in the tone of a Baptist minister praising the Lord for the wonders of life. When he had finished, we all raised our heads and gazed upon the feast before us, and its crowning glory; old Tom Turkey – from inside of which, through the great space from which the stuffing had been extracted emerged the head of *our gray farm cat!*

Pandemonium! The Old Man grabbed at the cat, which erupted from the turkey beneath his arm and streaked the length of the table, leapt over my mother, and turned left. The cat was betrayed by the grease on its feet and the linoleum floor. Sliding and scrabbling she bounced off the bottom of the stove, dug in with her claws and ran in place on the greasy linoleum long enough for the Old Man to reach her.

With one huge swoop, he had her by the scruff of the neck, yowling and unable to reach him with her claws. Continuing forward, he flung open the rear door

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and flung the cat spang into the screen door! From which she rebounded over his shoulder and into the sink-full of dirty dishes. I grabbed her as she abandoned ship, the Old Man opened the screen door and I heaved her out. Silence.

We looked at the turkey. We looked at each other. We looked at the grease and soapy water on the floor. We looked again at each other. Mother began to laugh, and it was contagious. Even the Old Man laughed.

When the laughter died down, we all sat again. "Well," said the Old Man, "we don't eat anything from the inside anyway." And he began to carve.