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Stanley's Turkey Dinner

Barb Howard



From my chair on the porch I can see the bottom half of Bob Stead. He drops a neat bundle of twigs to the ground. Bob's tidying his fir trees. Barclay, my German shepherd, pants at the base of Bob's ladder. Bob begins to descend. Barclay crouches, bares his mottled gums, raises a diamond-shaped patch of hair across his shoulders. Bob glances at Barclay, snaps off a branch, moves his work boot down another rung. He shakes the branch at Barclay. Barclay bites one leg of the ladder, drags it a few inches. Bob lunges at the tree for balance.

I'm down my porch stairs by then, yelling at Barclay. Bob shakes the branch at me. I grab a handful of skin and bristling hair from the back of Barclay's neck. He's on his hind legs, wriggling, barking, snarling.

"Throw the branch," I shout. "Throw it."

Bob tosses the branch towards his deer feeder. Barclay jumps out of my hands, dives on the branch. Tail wagging, stick held high, Barclay prances past the deer feeder, up the hill. I steady the ladder. Bob hurries down.

"Control your dog," he says, flapping his work glove in my face.



In town later that afternoon, at the A&G grocery, I spot Bob's wife Cheryl in the root vegetable section.

"Hello Stanley," she says, smiling a bit, folding her hands on her pregnant belly. "All ready for Thanksgiving?"

"I suppose. You doing a big bird?"

"Oh yes, we always do. It's in the oven. You off to friends?"

"No."

Cheryl picks up a potato, rolls it in her hand, "Well, of course you're welcome at our place, I don't think Bob would mind really. I could reset the table, put you beside my mother, across from Jonathan."

"What time?" I ask as she untwists her plastic bag, drops the extra potato on top of four already there, and pushes her cart towards the pumpkins.

When my mother was alive she always made me put on a button-front shirt for turkey dinners. For her sake, I wear one of the green shirts I used to wear when I drove to work in the city. The collar cinches around my neck, the buttons at my chest strain. That's one good thing about being laid off from the water treatment plant. No more uncomfortable clothes.

Bob and Cheryl's dining room smells of warm turkey, pine walls. At one end there's a sliding door that opens onto their new cedar deck and groomed lawn. The table is big, harvest style. Four baby

pumpkins surround a large red candle centerpiece. Every place has a turkey napkin and a turkey plate.

I sit beside the grandmother. She's on a weekend pass. Her balding head shakes no, non-stop. The other three seats are empty. Bob stands at the pine sideboards, working the cork out of a bottle of wine. Bob is a surgeon in the city. He's the kind of guy who wears pleated pants on the weekend. The kind of guy who vacuums his garage and volunteers every year for the community water co-op. I hear Cheryl running the tap in the kitchen. Bleeps and snippets of electronic sounds arise from downstairs. Jonathan must be playing computer games. He's a good kid. Only been caught shoplifting once (or so I heard at the A&G), nothing serious, just licorice. Cheryl claims that Jonathan's mathematically gifted. He plays one of those hand-held computer games while he walks home from the school bus stop. I watch from my porch, expect him to stumble, but he never does. Maybe he is gifted.

Cheryl rushes into the room and sets a bowl of cranberry sauce on the table. She's wearing pressed pants and a leaf-print maternity blouse. Her belly protrudes like a gourd from her thin body. On her way to the kitchen she stops at the sliding door.

"Bob," she taps the toe of her penny-loafer at a spot on the floor in front of her.

"I'll speak to him again," Bob says.

"He's got to learn. Just look at the dirt he's tracked in."

Bob leaves the room, thumps downstairs, stops the electronic sounds. the grandmother puts her shaky hand on my arm and asks for a taste of

wine. Noticing that she doesn't have a wine glass at her place, I fill my own and offer it to her.

"Might help my memory." The grandmother shakes.

"Mine too," I say, pouring wine into my water glass.

Jonathan sulks into the dining room. The bottom of his pants drag across the hardwood. His sweatshirt is huge, big enough to fit me. It's the same outfit his skateboard buddies wear at the A&G parking lot. Nice for him to have so many friends. I nod hello. He scowls, slouches into the seat across from me. I like Jonathan.

"A touch more, if you don't mind," the grandmother says. I steady her glass on the table, pour. Jonathan brightens.

"Mom," he yells into the kitchen, "Stanley's giving her wine."

Cheryl appears at the door to the dining room, pauses, inhales, "It's Mr. Davis to you," she says to Jonathan while she scoops the wine glass out of her mother's hand.

When Bob sets the huge, caramel-colored turkey in front of him the table looks like a picture from a magazine. Bob twists the first drumstick from the turkey. Juice drips from the joint. I take in the deep, hot smell.

"Dad," Jonathan asks as we begin passing vegetables, "can I eat in front of the TV?"

Bob rips open the breast skin with the tip of the carving knife.

"Daaaad," Jonathan pleads.

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"This is Thanksgiving," says Bob. "You'll appreciate the memories when you're older."

"Mom?"

Cheryl shoves a casserole dish at him. "It's tradition. Would you like some cauliflower in low-fat cottage cheese sauce?"

Jonathan picks up the serving spoon, mutters, "Who cares."

I slide the mashed potatoes towards the grandmother. She waves them off, saying, "Just fiddleheads for me."

"There are no fiddleheads," Cheryl snaps her turkey napkin and drapes it over her belly. "You're in Alberta."

"Don't we usually have turnips at Thanksgiving?" Bob asks.

"No, potatoes. We always have potatoes," Cheryl says, briskly.

"I'm sure we had turnips last year." Bob picks up his knife and fork. "We should write these things down in a note book."

"I don't need to write it down," Cheryl slowly mouths to Bob, as though the rest of us can't tell what she's saying. Bob says he'll have some potatoes. Cheryl turns to me, smiling, "Now Stanley, I'm sure this won't stand up at all to your mother's Thanksgiving dinners."

"Well Cheryl," I'm glad to be a part of the conversation, "My mother's turkey was always drier than a pretzel fart. Stuffing like wet sewage."

Cheryl looks across the table at Bob.

"And mother's gravy always made me think of diarrhea," I admit, "or vomit."

"Cool," Jonathan says.

"I know you're not supposed to say that sort of thing about your mother, especially if she's dead, but I call 'em as I see 'em."

Cheryl looks at her plate. Bob wipes his mouth.

"It's Harvard beets and black licorice that gives me the runs," the grandmother says. I like the grandmother.

Through the sliding glass door, past the deck, smack in the middle of Bob's smooth lawn, a loosely woven hammock hangs inside a small wooden shelter.

"Much luck with the deer feeder?" I ask Bob, while I reach across Cheryl for carrots. Bob's dream is to have deer browsing in his backyard. He'd especially like them there when his city friends come out for dinner.

"Not one," Jonathan interjects, "zippo."

"They're all over my place," I say. "Barclay's got more deer than he knows how to chase. "Funny that the deer don't go for Bob's putting-green lawn. This spring he spent an entire weekend in his mask and gloves pumping clover kill on his lawn. He's always aerating or fertilizing or watering. At my place the deer eat the quack grass, the clover, even the thistles that grow on the gravel pile. Like I keep telling Bob when he asks, I'm going to spread that gravel someday and make a pen for Barclay.

It's dusk by the time I scrape up my second helping. Everyone else is still picking at their first. I usually don't notice vegetables, always ate my mother's chilled Brussels sprouts and marshmallow

turnips without complaint, but Cheryl's vegetables are different. The carrots are sweet and seasoned with green flecks, the potatoes soak up buckets of the smooth gravy. I even take more low-fat cauliflower. There's lots of food, maybe because the grandmother only eats cranberry sauce. Red rivulets form in the lines under her lips. I take a breather, lean back from the table and look out the sliding door. Three mule deer file down the hill and eye the feeder.

"Got some deer," I wave my fork towards the sliding door.

Bob runs for his camera. Aware of Bob's motion, the deer stop, ears wide, tails tucked under, and stare through the window at us. Cheryl crouches beside the grandmother, points, repeats, "Deer, Mom. Outside. Deer." She pats the grandmother's hand and goes to the window to stand beside Jonathan, presses her palms into the small of her back, pushes her belly towards the glass. The grandmother nudges me. I fill her water glass with wine. "Too bad about the fiddleheads," I say.

Bob returns with his camera, slowly opens the sliding door, pushes the big lens outside. A black-tipped tail quivers, rises. A galloping sound arises from the side of the house, louder and louder until Barclay careens around the corner. The deer spring up the hill. Barclay charges after them, a frayed meter of rope dragging from his neck.

"Look at 'em go!" Jonathan cries. "Yeesss!"

Bob slides the door closed, flips the lock.

"Barclay never did like being tied up," I say as Bob sits heavily in his seat. "Maybe I should get that

pen built." Cheryl takes the gravy boat and potatoes into the kitchen.

"Did you see that Dad? Did you?" Jonathan pokes his fork into the pool of liquid wax surrounding the red candle.

"Stop that," Bob says sharply.

"My mother made the best chow-chow relish in Moncton," says the grandmother.

I pour her some more wine. She wipes under her eyes with her turkey napkin. Jonathan stabs a baby pumpkin with his fork.

"Mom," he yells into the kitchen, "she's crying." Cheryl hurries into the dining room.

"Pie everyone?" she asks, discretely laying a stack of tissue on the grandmother's lap.

Mom and I bought our house twenty years ago, when she retired. We got a good deal because the original owners divorced and sold before the house was finished. Mom and I finished the dry-walling and put on the porch. We used that porch almost every day. This time of year there'd be ruffed grouse in the wood pile, squirrels in the empty bird feeder, chickadees and siskins in the firs, and deer. Right up to her last day mom could identify any critter or plant within a half-mile of the house. She thought it took me a long time to learn all the names in nature. But I pretended not to know things just so we could keep talking.

Jonathan's chair scrapes when he pushes away from the table. As he turns to look at the damage he's done to the hardwood floor, something outside

catches his eye. He stands, presses his face against the glass door.

"Dad, I think Barclay's out there again."

Bob gets up, joins Jonathan at the sliding door, and squints through the glass into the dark. "Maybe a porcupine or raccoon."

"Why don't you go outside and get a good look?" I suggest from my chair.

"Dad, I think it's Barclay."

Bob reaches for the switch beside the door and flicks on the outside lights. Barclay, caught in the fluorescence on the lawn, perks his ears. His tail, stiff and curved like a hockey stick, jerks up and down while he pumps a dump onto the grass. He stops, peeks behind him, kicks back a little dirt, and trots onto the deck.

"He wants in," Jonathan grabs the handle of the sliding door.

Bob takes a deep breath and holds it before he says, "I don't think Barclay's an indoor dog."

"Sure he is," I say.

"Dad?" Bob goes to the sideboard, pours a tumbler of scotch. I empty the last of the second bottle of wine into my glass.

"I don't care," Bob says to the ceiling. "Take him to the basement." Before Jonathan scuffs out of the dining room with Barclay, Bob adds, "And get some pants that fit."

Cheryl brings in a special pot of tea for the grandmother, pours coffee for me and Bob.

"What are you hoping for?" I ask, pointing at her belly.

"Oh, a girl would be nice. You know, one boy, one girl. That would be perfect."

The grandmother farts. A real long pu-pu-pu-pu-pup. Cheryl wipes vigorously at the glass on the sliding door, complaining about fingerprints.

While Bob and Cheryl move dishes to the kitchen I pour myself a little Grand Mariner from the side board and think of how, when I was a kid, mom and I would throw the football around after Thanksgiving dinner. She was a big woman and could catch and pass as good as anyone. She'd have me running patterns right through dusk and sometimes, depending on the brightness of the sky, into the night. Mom played in a dress, a house dress she called it, with a pair of my sweat pants pulled up underneath. She always licked her fingertips before placing them across the laces on the ball.

"Say, Bob," I call into the kitchen, "you play football?"

"No," Bob yells back, as though he was scolding a dog.

"Bob!" Cheryl calls. The kitchen tap is turned on.

The grandmother rattles her tea cup in the saucer. I top her up with Grand Mariner. The outside lights are still on. I watch the deer, the same three females as before, approach the feeder, tentatively pull some hay from the hammock. Dishes clatter in the kitchen. Bob enters the dining room, flicks off the outside light, grabs the Grand Mariner from in front of me and puts it on the sideboard.

"Got some deer out there again," I tell him.

"I'll take that coffee mug for you." Bob clears my place.

My mother played football with me right up to her final Thanksgiving. She could still throw a spiral over the gravel pile but by then I didn't very often return her throws. I ran it back. She kept our football pumped up tighter than a rock and I was afraid I'd break her hands if I fired the ball into her. Not that her hands were fragile, or even small.

Cheryl helps the grandmother up from the table.

"Maples," the grandmother says to me, still holding a tissue to her eyes, "you can't imagine the Moncton maples this time of year."

"Mom's off to bed," Cheryl steers the grandmother towards the door.

"Goodnight," I say.

"Goodnight, sweet prince," the grandmother calls happily over her shoulder.

Bob shrugs, pours only himself a drink, even though I push my glass towards him, and tells me, like he always does, that he's so sorry, really sorry, about how close he built to my house. I never reply because, as my mother used to say whenever I goofed up, saying "sorry" doesn't make things right.

Bob built last year. He's got a full six acres, but dug in right beside me, he claims, to get a flat septic field. (I know about septic, and I know about septic fields, and I know he's pushing my property line, another inch and he'd be offside, so that he can subdivide someday and sell to more Bob and Cheryl's.) After losing mother and my job and all, I

had been keeping myself in the house a lot. But once I heard the backhoe digging Bob's foundation I brushed off my old porch chair. I watched their six bedroom house being built and I watched them move in. Cheryl and Bob, in their crisp sweatshirts, directing movers all morning and spending an entire afternoon arranging their bent-willow patio furniture. And all the while, thank goodness, Jonathan was at the side of the house lighting his cigarettes with a torched-up lighter. Later, Bob came up to my porch and asked me over for a drink. A welcome drink, he called it. As though I was the newcomer.

Cheryl returns from putting the grandmother to bed.

"Went down easy," she says to Bob. They both look at me.

"Better round up that dog before you go," Bob pushes back his chair.

I fold my napkin into a tiny square, wipe crumbs from my place, smooth the table cloth. In the end I follow Cheryl and Bob to the basement where Jonathan and Barclay are laying on the couch watching television. Barclay sits up, scratches vigorously behind his ear, misting the area about him, including Jonathan, with coarse, black-tipped hairs.

"Gotta go," I say.

At home, I undo my shirt and flick on the kitchen light. Barclay whines at the dog food cupboard so I get his dish (my mother's old porridge

pot) and fill it up with dry pellets. When I set it on the floor, Barclay's tail drops between his hind legs. He looks up at me.

"Nothing special on that tonight, old buddy," I say, "even if it is Thanksgiving. But tomorrow, tomorrow we celebrate with all the fixings, just like always, including giblets and gravy for you." He cocks his head and, to make him understand, I open the refrigerator and let him sniff our butter-basted twelve pound turkey that I bought at the A&G grocery earlier in the day. Barclay howls in triumph. So do I.