

Around and about at Thanksgiving

The farm overlooked Green End Pond in Middletown on the island of Aquidneck, which also comprised Newport and Portsmouth. It was a place of immigrants, new and old, as well as of money, new and old, some and none. The same could be said for the levels of education.

It was not unusual at Thanksgiving for a local spinster or educator, or even a black-sheep socialite, to join the family, happily putting aside an inbred aversion to "kitchen smells" to wallow in the steaming redolence of Portuguese chourico and caldo verde, fritters, as well as the traditional turkey and blunderbuss load of stuffing and cranberry sauce. More people than you might think have nowhere to go on Thanksgiving. My grandparents welcomed all.

Past willows weeping into the pond and black and white Holsteins, the Pontiac shook, rattled and rolled down the gullied lane and up between the two towering maples to the farmhouse. I had tried to cajole my father into bringing the .22 to shoot cans and bottles off the stone wall, but my mother scotched that.

My aunts and uncles and cousins came from nearby. Off-island relatives came from Bristol and Warren. Madame Soubirous, my French teacher at Miss Collings School, joined us, as well as Arthur Harrington, a professor of earth sciences at Brown who owned a black Checker, the floor

of the rear seat covered with an Oriental rug.

A whiskery, five-foot-tall Portuguese man who helped my grandfather at hay-baling time, and whom we only knew as "Pachute," arrived by bicycle. And there was the cat, Jelly Bean, who slept under the table on my grandfather's foot.

"I simply never understood how Hemingway, sensitive as he obviously was, could shoot defenseless wild animals," said Madame Soubirous.

"Probably because he liked to!" cut in my Uncle Arsenio enthusiastically.

I was allowed one glass of wine, made by my Uncle Manuel from his own backyard grape vines in Bristol. He brought it in gallon jugs, and my Nana said it had been blessed for me.

Uncle Freddy saw fit to announce: "I love it when Eileen gets undressed at night and flings her clothes across the room to the chair. I tell her, 'Eileen, you should have been a stripper!'"

Everyone, except my grandparents, burst out laughing. Eileen, his wife, said, "Thank you for sharing that with everyone, Freddy."

"Why not sweetheart? You look great!"

My grandfather, my Voo, took the occasion to excuse himself from the table and head out to the barn to check on the cows.

"There's no need for guns," said Professor Harrington.

"Humans are doing a fine job killing off each other, and it will only get worse. Too many of us to begin with, and when the oil runs out and all the water is polluted, and the air and every piece of land is built upon ..."

I slid off my chair and joined some cousins outside kicking a soccer ball around. Professor Harrington came out after awhile and lit one of the long, unfiltered Pall Mall cigarettes he smoked.

"Around and about," he said, watching us, taking a deep drag and exhaling. "Around and about."

Young though I was, I understood his commentary upon our activity encompassed the ongoing efforts of all humanity.

The ball got booted down the slope of the lane and I chased it toward the placid pond just as the sun slipped below the trees on the far bank. The ball rolled into the water. A swan glided by, wondering who-knows-what, and I turned to see if anyone saw, looking back at the white farmhouse that is no longer there. No more barn or cows or Nana, Voo, or Jelly Bean. Just new buildings, businesses. Instead of the narrow lane by the pond, a two-lane highway.

As my mother was fond of saying about her girlhood: "I thought we were poor growing up on the farm, but now I know how good we had it."

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