

# Thanksgiving with a long-legged friend

By Charles Pinning

It was a dramatic last minute turn of events: I would be spending Thanksgiving at Mrs. O'Neill's, down in the Fifth Ward. To fully appreciate what this meant, it must be understood that my Portuguese mother wasted few opportunities to snipe at the "shanty" Irish, the "lace curtain" Irish, any Irish people who filled the crowded quarters of Newport's Fifth Ward down by lower Thames Street near the harbor and the bars.

This prejudice of my mother's dated back at least as far as her younger brother's marrying a leggy Irish lass from the Fifth Ward, whom my mother decided right away was not good enough for him. She often referred to my Uncle Steve's wife as "Cathie and her damn long legs."

Mrs. O'Neill was a kindly older woman who sang in the Swanhurst Chorus with my mother. Her husband, a judge, had died years back, and she lived alone in their fine brick house just off Spring Street down the hill from the Newport Public Library.

On Thanksgiving morning, my mother kissed me and straightened the hair on my forehead while my father admired the brand new 1964 Lincoln Continental parked in Mrs. O'Neill's driveway.

"Don't put your elbows on the table and remember to say please and thank you," said my mother before they sped off to Boston, where her sister had taken ill and was quite possibly on her



Up for discussion during writer's long-ago Thanksgiving: the Beatles. APPLE CORPS LTD.

deathbed.

"Happy Thanksgiving!" Mrs. O'Neill said, ushering me into the foyer. "We're being joined today by a young woman from Providence. Come in and meet her."

In the formal parlor stood a girl my age, a little taller than me. She had long dark hair, parted in the middle and was wearing a blue miniskirt and white tights.

"This is my niece, Mary McBride, from Providence," said Mrs. O'Neill.

"It's very nice to meet you," Mary McBride said, shaking my hand.

I told her it was very nice to meet her, also, and then Mrs. O'Neill's maid brought us glasses of apple cider.

"My father's a manufacturer," said Mary. "He and my mother are in Mexico, but they will be home tomorrow."

"Oh," I said. "That's interesting."

"Mary attends Lincoln School in Providence," said Mrs. O'Neill.

"Do you like it?" I asked her.

"It's OK. I can walk there. I'm an East Side girl."

"I heard you can get shot and killed by the Mafia if you go to Providence," I said.

"Basically, they only shoot each other," said Mary. "We go over to Federal Hill for dinner sometimes. We eat at Camille's. It's very nice. They have a fountain in the middle."

"Wow."

"You two certainly aren't having any trouble talking, now are you?" smiled Mrs. O'Neill.

"Do you like the Beatles?" asked Mary.

"Yes," I answered.

"Who's your favorite?"

I was hoping to pick her favorite, so I said, "Paul."

"I like John," she said. "And then George."

After dinner, Mrs. O'Neill encouraged us to take a walk, so I led Mary down Spring Street to Washington Square Park.

"I'll race you around," said Mary. "I am a bit of a tomboy."

We hung our coats on spears of the iron fence and took off. She beat me by two steps. Damn long legs, I thought.

"Why are you smiling?" asked Mary. "I just beat you."

"I don't know," I said. "Just am."

"Do you want to come up to Providence and visit me sometime?" she asked.

"Yes," I said.

When my parents picked me up, I slumped down into the backseat and watched the streetlights pass by.

"Well?" asked my mother.

"Well what?" I muttered.

"Did you have a good Thanksgiving? Did you miss us? Why don't you sit up."

I made a low, strange sound.

"What does that mean?"

Mary McBride. I played her name around and around in my head. Mary McBride. Mary. Mary. Mary McBride. ... It was the perfect name, soon to be drawn over and over in my seventh grade English book. Oh, those M's and B's!

— Charles Pinning, an occasional contributor who often writes about his Rhode Island boyhood, is a Providence novelist.