

An early lesson in gratitude

There I was, an 8 year old wunderkind jumping from one round bale of barbed wire to another. They were laid on their flat end, sitting like hassocks, and as each jump landed me successfully atop the next, I triumphantly spouted, "Jolly good!"

It was Thanksgiving Day and my parents and grandparents, aunts and uncles were inside my grandparent's farmhouse that overlooked Green End Pond in Middletown, gabbing away and enjoying drinks and savories before dinner.

About to perform yet another feat of heroic leaping I slipped and pitched forward, my open palms mashing down on the next spool and then my knees. I was stuck and disengaged myself by rolling slowly off. Blood poured from my hands and my pants bloomed red at the knees.

Fearful and crying, I staggered out of the storage building and toward the farmhouse. My older brother appeared from behind the big green tractor where he'd been sneaking a cigarette.

"What happened to you?" he said, rushing up to me.

"Fell on barbed wire."

He ran inside the house and came out with my mother, followed by my father.

Hysteria! Towels! And here we go again: rushing me up to Newport Hospital.

My father was really ticked. He'd been settled into a well-deserved highball, enjoying animated conversation with my uncles and now this.

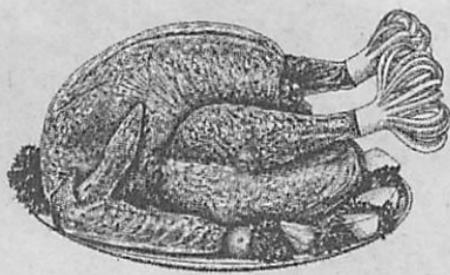
"Why in God's name were you jumping on barbed wire?"

My mother had a towel wrapped over my knees and I gripped another in my hands as we sped down the lane alongside the calm pond with the delicately arching branches of the weeping willow trees dipping into it. The cows lifted their heads at the sound of our bounding car.

They were gnarly gashes and Dr. Houston, Newport's most prominent surgeon, who was having his own Thanksgiving dinner, was called in.

The shine on his eyeglasses made me think of the pond, and he was just as calm. My father was really putting on a show, perhaps to distance his DNA from mine, and my mother was going through her usual hypochondria hysteria. "Was the barbed wire rusty? Could he get lockjaw?"

My brother told my parents: "Why don't you go back to the



farm? I'll stay with him."

My parents looked at Dr. Houston who reassured them that I would be fine, and they left, with instructions for my brother to call as soon as I was ready to be picked up.

I could see that Dr. Houston was relieved they were gone and he went about his business with a relaxed precision.

He laid in stitches on my hands and my knees. It took almost an hour for the uneven flaps of skin to be sewn together, and then I was bandaged so that I couldn't open or close my hand fully. My knees also were taped so that I couldn't bend them. I was put in a wheelchair.

"You look tough," said my brother, with a kind of admiration.

A nurse brought us into a lounge area and we were served Thanksgiving dinner on aqua fiberglass trays. There was turkey and mashed potatoes and cranberry sauce. I thought it was good. My brother had to feed me. While we were eating, we heard sirens.

Afterward, my brother pushed me around the hallways. Back then, Newport Hospital wasn't very large, and we soon found ourselves coming upon the emergency department. There was crying, and looking inside a room, we saw a little boy on a table. He lay very still and crooked. A nurse noticed us and shut the door.

"Is he dead?" I asked my brother.

Ashen-faced, he replied, "Yes."

Back at the farm, everyone made a big fuss over me.

"We're so grateful you're OK," I heard over and over.

"You must be grateful too."

"I am," I said, thinking about the boy in the hospital. That night I told my parents about the little boy and cried. They comforted me as best they could, but what can anyone say?

Inasmuch as you can, avoid hurting yourself and anyone else. Try to be helpful and enjoy it while it lasts. Amen.

— Charles Pinning, an occasional contributor, lives in Providence.