

Our Never-Ending Thanksgivings

By Bridget Petitti

Peanut butter kiss cookies in hand, I knock absent-mindedly on the side door and enter without hesitation. My brothers and parents follow and we walk through the small hallway and into the open kitchen. The smell of cinnamon and thyme wafts through the air as we are greeted with outstretched arms and wide smiles. Relatives – ranging from ages two through 87 – are scattered throughout the house, laughing while they swap stories of silly mistakes and mishaps. Uncles start peeling off coats while aunts squeeze the cheeks of children until their flesh turns redder than Rudolph's nose. Thanksgiving at Aunt Kathy's house is always familiar, with characters and conversations that only slightly shift year after year.

My mother is the youngest of eight children; they're all married, they all have kids, and they all live in Massachusetts. The assortment of characters in my extended family offers a rowdy day at most of our family gatherings, such as on the Fourth of July, Christmas Eve and random birthday or graduation parties scattered throughout the year. Thanksgiving is no exception; it's just another excuse for all of us to check in on each other's lives and enjoy the day together.

As I make my way through the kitchen, I glance over the island countertop. It is piled high with bangers, goat cheese and chutney, stuffed mushrooms, potato tarts, and a crock-pot of Irish stew. As I head over to get an appetizer, a different family member interrupts me at every step. I offer genuine greetings: a kiss on the cheek with a hug and "Hey! How are ya?" Uncle Jack asks me about the college process and helps me think of essay ideas; Aunt Patsy tells me how the Sox should've won last night and how she hates those damn Yankees. While shuffling

around the kitchen, a few new faces pop up: cousins' friends from college, second-cousins who decided to swing by before going to another family member's house for dinner, aunts' friends who forgot to thaw the turkey until they realized it was too late. Bent over the stove tasting sausage stuffing and butternut squash, my aunt Kathy and uncle Paul always welcome anyone who has no place to go. They know that Thanksgiving is about offering thanks for what you have, and extending help to those in need.

Before long, my mother and her three sisters are hunched over the stove preparing for the gravy contest. They playfully bicker over the gravy master and salt as they whisk together different sauces. After putting the final touches on their culinary masterpieces, they call a few cousins over to judge their gravies. Four bowls of mashed potatoes flooded with gravy are presented on the small table. With a pile of tasting spoons in the center, the bowls are passed around as each person debates which one is his favorite. The four women stand over the table, discretely pointing to theirs as loyal nieces and nephews try to decide without bias. It's always a close call, but one aunt wins and holds her pride until next year.

After I have said my hellos and tasted the different gravies in the kitchen, I walk through the arching hallway and into the living room where football is always playing and Grandma is always sunk into the couch. The large brown sofa comfortably seats five, but we pile on nine as we distractedly watch the game. I squeeze between Grandma and a few cousins as we chat about her latest doctors visit and my latest history test. My younger cousin Christian complains about how hard middle school girls are to read, and my older cousin Caitlyn teases him about how he's too young to have a girlfriend anyway. Playing "Guess Who" on the ground, little Jack and Michaela ask each other questions about the other's chosen character. My brother Ryan and my

cousin Terry argue about the last call the ref made, as Carol and Molly chat about the new sale at Derby Street.

Before long, Kathy calls us all in for dinner and we instinctively rise from the couch to wait in line. Like magic, the food on the counter changes to warm rolls, mashed potatoes, scalloped potatoes, stuffing, cranberry sauce, broccoli casserole, turkey, and the four different gravies from the contest. After filling my plate, I make my way to the dining room. The rectangular wooden table has folding tables branching out that reach across the room and into the main foyer. Bottles of wine and various salt and pepper shakers are scattered about the table. Younger cousins, like Mary Kate and Sean, can't wait to sit down so they can sneak bits of food to their mouths when they think no one's watching. Finally, everyone's settled and Uncle Jack, the oldest of the eight children, says grace. In unison, we bow our heads and silently give praise to God: the one wordless moment throughout the day.

The house is filled to the brim with energy as we start to eat dinner. There is loud banter across the table as people rise to get seconds. When the kids are too restless to sit for much longer, they bolt from the table and run through the patio doors to the backyard. They grab the football and start playing catch, waiting for the adults to join in. After another hour of sitting around the table and starting to wash the dishes, men change out of their button-downs and loafers into sweatshirts and worn sneakers. Aunts strip from pantyhose and pull up denim jeans, ready to tackle their brothers and nephews. The end zones (between a stump and a lacrosse net on one end, and two cones on the other end) are the same as last year and most of us remember, but reiterate it anyway for those that don't. Rain or shine, heat or snow, the usual players are out in the yard, while the older women watch from the patio, hot tea cupped in their hands. We slide across mud and into each other, laughing and offering apologies to those we've unintentionally

run into. After minor injuries and major exhaustion, one by one the players saunter off the yard and back into the kitchen where cookies and Barry's tea are waiting. Mud-covered players slouch around the house, laughing at the competitiveness of these annual football games.

When we've had our fill of food and stories, the group starts to dwindle. My mother rounds up my brothers and me, and we circle the bottom floor to say our goodbyes to relatives we'll see next on Christmas Eve. The ritual of saying goodbye takes up to an hour, as we go to each relative and briefly chat about our upcoming plans between now and Christmas. A final kiss on the cheek and we're out the door, carrying leftovers and platters to the car.

Every year, Thanksgiving goes something like this.. All of these little moments – the seemingly insignificant tidbits of conversations that each family member has with one another – add up to create such a unique family dynamic, that it is sometimes altered without notice. New cousins are born, different friends are invited, and our lives inevitably change year to year. But despite the new people that attend and the time that has passed, Thanksgiving Day will always remain the same to my family and me.

I'm hesitant to say, though, that Thanksgiving will always go like this. My aunt Kathy will eventually move out of her house, someone else will soon take over making the annual toast, and my uncles won't be so energetic about sliding in the mud after dinner. My older cousins will start to get married and start to have families of their own. As I am sure has happened in the past, traditions will be shifted and modified as the hands of time continue to tick away unnoticed. However, regardless of how much time has passed or who does or does not attend Thanksgiving dinner, I know that the sentiment of Thanksgiving will forever remain close to my heart.