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Giving Thanks to George

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In 1970 every teenager knew what the Beatles looked like, including Wendy Glomb, who happened to be walking her schnauzer when a long black limo pulled into our driveway. The only eyewitness to his arrival, she apparently sprinted home to inform her friends that George Harrison had chosen to celebrate Thanksgiving in Englewood, New Jersey.

My mother, who'd spent the last three years cooking in a tiny cockroach-infested kitchen in Manhattan, was up early preparing a traditional feast with trimmings in a state-of-the-art kitchen complete with dishwasher. We even had a dining room table so the family could finally sit down together to eat.

My mom planned and executed the entire meal even though she couldn't hold up her head without a neck brace. By the time George and his wife Pattie arrived, she'd changed her clothes and put on one of the thrift-store hairpieces she'd bought to cover the bald spots from chemotherapy.

Shrimp was far too expensive for my dad's salary as a pop music columnist at the New York Post, so when she announced she was serving it as an appetizer, I knew this had to be an important occasion. The accompanying dip was memorable--recently I was surprised to find that her recipe (carefully printed by hand on an index card and tucked away in an old box) called for only mayonnaise with chili, curry, and garlic powder.

My parents hadn't told us who was coming for dinner. They were sure we would break their confidence. So until Thursday morning, the identities of our honored guests remained a mystery. (A third guest that evening was David Bromberg, a musician who would ultimately fall short of the stardom my father expected when he "discovered" him playing backup guitar for Jerry Jeff Walker for \$25 a night.)

The night before, I'd stuffed 72 mushrooms with a mixture of bread crumbs, butter, parsley, chopped onion, Parmesan cheese, and white wine. They were such a family favorite that I multiplied the recipe six times to guarantee there would be enough for everyone.

Pattie Harrison was tall, with long, straight blond hair and bangs that fell just shy of her large blue eyes. She was a rainbow I couldn't stop staring at, fearing she might suddenly disappear. George's beard was full, his hair was pulled back in a ponytail, and he wore a beige satin shirt and orange knit vest. He was soft-spoken, humble, and full of love.

My mother basted the turkey every half hour with a teriyaki marinade until the skin was a crisp golden brown. I'd savored this recipe when my best friend Rebecca invited me to her house for lunch on Saturdays, after Shabbat services. I felt awkward knowing I could never reciprocate. Even if I'd known who was coming for dinner when I asked for the recipe, I still wouldn't have told Rebecca. There was a lot I couldn't tell her.

I couldn't tell her that my family life was filled with drugs. Not only pot but the white powder stashed in my dad's night table--a stash which terrified me. I didn't know if it was cocaine or heroin, and it didn't really matter; I'd been warned at school that pot led to "stronger" drugs. My dad insisted they were feeding me lies and propaganda.

My mother was practically drowning in her coffee from the handful of pharmaceuticals she took each day. She was never without her own brown bag of pot either. Her perpetually altered state from these drugs and from the cancer beating her down caused me embarrassment, shame, and humiliation, part of a barrage of feelings I couldn't accept. There was nothing left of my mother that was normal.

I also couldn't tell Rebecca about the musicians and celebrities who formed the backdrop to our lives. All she knew was that my dad wrote for the Post. She had no idea that if given the choice of hanging out with her or going to the city with my dad, I would always tag along with him in the hope of meeting someone interesting. I couldn't wait for the next opportunity to experience another someone's "magic." I was hooked in much the same way my parents were hooked on their drugs. If my friends knew about my life, would they really be my friends?

My mother knew nothing about George and Pattie's strict vegetarianism. The possibility that they might have dietary restrictions never entered her methadoned mind. Gratitude was the only force she could harness to prepare our feast--her effort was overwhelming just to watch. But George would never refuse a meal so lovingly prepared by a dying woman. With great thanks we all sat down to eat. I didn't know who was coming to dinner any more than I knew that our move to Englewood had been made possible by a loan of \$50,000 from George, one that would never be repaid.

After dinner, George and David moved to the sofa in the living room. With dueling guitars, they began to compose a song called "The Holdup."

Stick up your hands, you must stand and deliver,

My stomach's empty, my clothes are all torn.

Open your hearts to the joys of the giver,

Only your pockets are terribly worn.

This is a holdup, no way to mistake it,

We're men of violence, so don't fool around.

If you have money, we're going to take it,

Don't try and stop us, you'll end underground.

They then broke into a bridge that sounded like the sound track to an old western...

When we get your money, we'll ride towards the sunset,

At Rose's cantina we'll stop at the door.

We'll spend all your money just getting the nose wet,

Tomorrow evening we'll be back for more.

...and went into a final verse:

So hand us the money, don't stand there and shiver,

Tax time is coming, give alms to the poor,

They stumbled trying to think of something to rhyme with "shiver." But the song was writing itself, and quickly they came up with:

Or I'll put a bullet right through your best liver.

and laughed at their own silliness before finishing with:

Wealth is disease and I am the cure.

Sparks seemed to fly from George's guitar to David's and back again. Maybe they were feeding off the excitement of the mass of teenagers who'd assembled on the front lawn. We were "holed up" on Thanksgiving in a house in suburban New Jersey when the phone rang.

"It's for you, [Brett](#)," my mom said, and I rushed up to my bedroom and closed the door so no one would hear the guitars in the background.

"[Brett](#)!" It was Rebecca. She sounded serious. "I heard George Harrison is at your house. Why didn't you tell me?"

"It's not George Harrison, Becca. It's my uncle."

"Why are you lying?" I could tell she was hurt.

"He just looks like George Harrison," I told her.

"I'm your best friend!"

"I'm not lying. People get them confused all the time."

I couldn't even trust my best friend with the truth.

Our front lawn was now covered with teenagers. Music was leaking from every crack in the house. Faces bobbed up and down outside the windows as kids boosted each other up for a glimpse of George. The doorbell rang.

"Can we come in and listen?" a wide-eyed girl with brown hair and braces asked.

"Absolutely not." My father was firm. "You're invading our privacy."

Finally he called the police. "Can't you get them off my lawn?" he begged. But Englewood's finest refused, claiming there was nothing they could do.

I don't remember how long the evening lasted, or how often the party retreated upstairs to my parents' bedroom, sweet smoke drifting out from under their door. I don't remember when the crowd in front dispersed, or when the limo finally whisked George and Pattie away. I don't remember what we had for dessert, though I'm sure it wasn't the pumpkin pie delivered by a red-haired boy in oven mitts who told us, "It's a gift from my family."

I felt hungover the next morning, exhilarated yet exhausted as I faced a kitchen that needed cleaning, and I wondered what we would do about our trampled and muddy lawn.

On Monday morning I walked past Wendy Glomb's house. I was angry that her big mouth had disrupted our Thanksgiving. I was still embarrassed that we hadn't been able to offer the Harrisons a quiet and private holiday.

All day at school I wondered if Wendy or anyone else who'd assembled on our lawn would be able to identify me as one of the residents of 128 Cambridge Avenue. Though I was a lonely, overweight seventh grader, I was sure I didn't need a whole new set of "friends" before the end of the day.

I walked home certain I was leading a unique life that carried its own special burden. I was sure I'd never really have anyone I could share it with.

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