

WHAT SO ★ PROUDLY ★ WE HAIL

The American Soul in Story, Speech, and Song

Thanksgiving Day

SUSAN MINOT

Not all homecomings for Thanksgiving are as cheerful as the one envisioned in the previous poem by Edgar Guest. This story from 1984 is the work of Susan Minot (b. 1956), who started her literary career writing short stories in the New Yorker and Grand Street magazine. A recipient of the O. Henry Prize for short fiction, she has also published four novels. In this story, she raises questions about how to celebrate the holiday when your parents or grandparents who have traditionally hosted Thanksgiving are no longer able to do so. What is the mood in the old Vincent home? Is this a close family? Compare and contrast the words and deeds of the adults and the children. Is the Thanksgiving spirit alive here? Why or why not? In many families, Thanksgiving is a matter of tradition: should the Vincent family tradition continue?

Gus and Rosie Vincent waited for their six children to crawl out of the station wagon and then slammed the doors. The Vincents were always the first to arrive.

They would pull up to the house in Motley, Massachusetts, where their father grew up, and crunch across the gravel, and in the doorway was Ma with her dark blue dress pleated from collar to waist and they would give her kisses, then file in to dump their coats in the coatroom and right away the first thing would be the smell of Pa's cigar. He waited in the other room. Every Thanksgiving they descended upon him and every year it was the same.

The three girls wore matching plaid skirts with plaid suspender straps. Caitlin and Sophie, who looked alike, had on hair bands of the same material. Delilah, the youngest daughter, was darker, with a short pixie. She said it wasn't fair she didn't have long hair too. The three boys came after, Gus and Sherman, and Chickie, in grey flannels. Chickie's were shorts, since he was the baby.

For Sophie, the best thing was getting to see the cousins, especially the other Vincents. Bit, the only girl cousin, was Sophie's age, ten. And Churly was the oldest of everybody; he was fourteen. Churly and Bit arrived with Uncle Charles and Aunt Ginny. Sophie hesitated because sometimes you didn't give them a kiss. On Aunt Ginny's cardigan was the turkey pin she wore every year. The other cousins were the Smalls.

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Aunt Fran used to be a Vincent before she married Uncle Thomas. They had three boys. The oldest was Teever Small, who drooled.

Once everyone was there, the children had to put their coats on for the annual picture. Bit had a white rabbit muff that Teever Small grabbed at, trying to flirt. “That’s enough of that,” said his father, but Bit had already snatched it back. Sophie felt how soft the fur was, thinking about the dead rabbit; the muff was in the shape of a rabbit too. The grown-ups shuffled everybody around, then stood beside Sophie’s father, who had the camera. They crossed their arms against the cold, talking to one another and watching to make sure the kids didn’t move.

“I’ll be doggone,” said Uncle Thomas. Sophie stared at his bow tie. “Will you look at that.”

“A bunch of young ladies and young gentlemen,” said Aunt Fran, smacking her orange lips. She had white hair like Ma’s, except hers was short.

“Knock it off, Churly,” Uncle Charles said.

Sophie turned around. Churly was smirking. He had a head shaped like a wooden golf club, with his long neck, and a crew cut like the other boys. Sophie looked back at the house and saw Ma inside, watching through the French doors.

After the picture was taken, Rosie Vincent told her children to say hello to Livia, and the cousins tagged along. The hall to the kitchen was dark, the floor with a sheen from the glow at the end. The kitchen was pale grey, with no lights on, and a white enamel table in the middle. Livia gave them pinched kisses, her eyes darting around the room, checking on food, on the children. She was huge and huffing in her white uniform. The kitchen smelled of Worcestershire sauce and turkey. “Are you behaving yourselves now?” She held up a shiny wooden spoon. When she was cooking, everything on Livia sweated, the steam rising behind her from the pots on the stove.

“Not me,” Churly said. “I always try to be as naughty as possible.”

Caitlin laughed while Sophie looked at Livia’s face, which meant business. Livia sat down, “Now what are the seven blessed sacraments?” she asked, addressing Gus and Rosie’s children—Catholic, thanks to their mother. Livia tipped one ear forward the way

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Sophie had seen the priest do in confession. Sophie fingered a tin Jell-O mold shaped like a fish, and Catilin busied herself by tucking in Sherman's shirttails. No one answered. Livia rattled them off herself, slicing apples so the blade came right to her thumb without even looking. The cousins drifted off into the pantry as Livia thought up new questions—all having to do with catechism.

The dining-room table has already been set. The cranberry sauce had a spoon sticking out. Bit stole some mint wafers, reaching past the blue water goblets into the middle of the table, and gave one to Sophie. "It's okay," said Bit, noticing Sophie's expression.

"I saw that," Churly said from the doorway. Sophie blushed. He came in and whispered, "All right, you guys . . ." and she saw how his eyes were like those light-blue paperweights that had white lines of glass streaked from the middle. He leaned past them and plucked a candy of the cut-glass boat. "Delish," he said. "Don't mind if I do."

In the living room, the grown-ups stood stirring drinks at the red-leather bar stand; then they sat down. Sophie's mother was the only one without a Scotch or a Dubonnet. There was nothing to do while the grown-ups talked except to look around at each tiny thing. Three walls were covered with books, and over the mantelpiece was a portrait of Dr. Vincent, so dark and shiny that the lights reflected off it. One side of the room was all French windows, with dead vines at the edges. The windows overlooked the lawn. Beside the fireplace was a child's rocking chair with a red back, an antique. Gus had gotten to it first and was sitting there, holding onto his ankles, next to Ma's place on the sofa. They had the hard kind of sofas with wooden arms and wood in a curve along the back. You could tell it was Ma's place because of the brown smudge on the ceiling from her cigarette smoke.

The girls examined their grandmother. Her shoes, the pair her granddaughters liked the best, were pale lavender with pink trim and flat bows, her fancy shoes.

"Gussie," said Aunt Fran, the one person in the world who called Sophie's father that. She said it as if it tasted bad. "How'd you like the game?" The last time they had seen each other was at the Harvard halftime in October when they were stretching their legs under the bleachers. Gus, with his children, said, "Good day to you," as if he saw his sister every day, which he didn't, each walking in the opposite direction.

The grown-ups talked about the sports the boys were playing.

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“Churly’s on the debating team,” said Uncle Charles. He was the oldest Vincent son.

“I certainly am,” said Churly, the only one of the children taking up a seat. “Anyone want to argue?”

Under a lamp was a picture of Ma before she married. She was holding a plume of roses at her waist; her chin to the side, her dark eyes and dark hair swept up.

The grown-ups were talking about the woman next door who died after she cut her finger on a splinter from a Christmas-tree ornament. Ma said how appropriate it was that a pheasant appeared out of the woods at Mr. Granger’s funeral.

“But *she* was the one who loved to shoot,” said Aunt Fran with her Adam’s apple thrust out.

“Terrible story about their son,” said Sophie’s mother. Her thumb rubbed her knuckle while the conversation continued.

They talked without looking at each other, their chairs all facing in. Aunt Fran addressed her remarks to the one spot in the room where no one sat or stood. She and Uncle Thomas were having a pond dug in the back of their house and by mistake the workers had struck a pipe. Aunt Fran and Uncle Thomas told the story at the same time, interrupting each other.

Uncle Charles said, “It’s like a zoo at my house.” When he made jokes, he barely cracked a smile. Bit was lucky, she got to have a pony and three dogs and sheep. “Our sheep just stand there in the rain,” said Churly.

Uncle Charles said the chickens hated him. And now they had a turtle, with a chain attached to the loop on its shell so it wouldn’t run away. It chooses to sleep where I’m accustomed to park my car,” he said.

“A what?” said Pa, angry at having to strain.

“Turtle,” yelled Uncle Charles.

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“Where’s our turtle soup then?” said Pa and some of the family chuckled. Sophie didn’t think he was kidding. He sat there still as a statue, his hands gripping the mahogany claws of his chair.

Caitlin was up at the bar with Churly, pouring a ginger ale. Sophie got Bit and Delilah to go to the owl room, and the boys followed. There were glass owls and a hollow brass owl with a hinge so its head lifted off, two china owls with flowers, owl engravings, and a needlepoint of an owl that Caitlin had done from a kit. They had a game they played by closing their eyes and then going to nose to nose with someone and saying, “One, two, three, Owl-lee, Owl-lee,” and opening their eye, imitating an owl. Delilah and Sherman were playing it.

Stretching down the corridor were group silhouettes of Vincent ancestors, black cutouts of children with ringlets, holding hoops, or men with bearded profiles. There were Pa’s team pictures from Noble & Greenough and his class pictures from Harvard. All the faces in the photographs had straight noses and white eyeballs and hide-grey complexions. In one, Pa lay on his side, lengthwise, in front of everyone else. Sophie tried to match him with the Pa back in the living room. You never saw Pa smile, that was common knowledge, except in one picture that Vincents had at home, of Pa with the Senator. His job had been to write speeches, and according to Sophie’s mother, he got a dollar a year to do it. In the picture, his grin is closed, like a clown’s. There was Pa in an army uniform—but Sophie knew that story of that. Pa missed the war, sailing to France on the exact day Armistice was declared. At the end of the hall, Sophie came to the picture of Pa’s brother, the famous doctor who discovered the cure for a disease whose name she could never remember. He had died a long time ago.

When they drifted back into the living room, Uncle Charles was recalling when the lawn froze and they could skate over the sunken garden.

“Not true,” said Pa, gurgling. “My lawn was never an ice rink.”

“Sure,” said Sophie’s father. “Everything was frozen solid.”

Pa said, “Never happened in my lifetime.”

Uncle Charles clamped on his pipe with his back teeth. “Oh yes it did, Pa. You must be losing your memory.” His voice was squeaky.

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“Ma,” demanded Pa.

With her perfectly calm face, ma said, “I do remember it, yes.” She looked at Pa and said gently, “It was when you were away.”

“Nonsense,” he said. “I never went anywhere.”

The children’s table was wobbly. This year Sophie got to sit at the big table, and Caitlin and Churly, too. Bit said she was glad to stay at the children’s table where she wouldn’t have to use good manners.

When the plates came, they had everything on them already, even creamed onions, whether you liked them or not. Pa looked down at the food in front of him.

“Gravy, Granpa?” shouted Aunt Fran. Half-frowning, he regarded her. She swung a silver ladle over his turkey, bringing it up with a flourish. “Yummy,” she said in a booming voice.

Everyone at the table used loud voices—family behavior. When Sophie went out to go to the bathroom, she stood for a moment in the hall between the Chinese portraits and listened to the clatter behind her, the hollow echo from the high ceilings, Aunt Fran’s hooting, the knives clinking on the china, her mother’s voice saying something quietly to the little table. Sophie could tell Uncle Charles from his whine, and her grandmother was the slow voice enunciating each word the way old people do because they’re tired of talking. Sophie went up close to study one Indian picture—you could see the tongue of the snake and the man’s pink fingernails and even the horse’s white eyelashes. Ma said they used one cat hair at a time to paint it. In the bathroom was the same brown soap shaped like an owl. The towels she used were so stiff it was like drying your hands with paper.

Sophie came back as Aunt Fran was saying, “He’s a crook.”

“Now stop that,” said Ma, lifting her chin.

“Who is?” asked Churly, brightening.

“Never mind,” said Ma to her knife and fork.

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So Churly asked, “What’d he steal?”

Ma said, “They’ve started reshingling the house in North Eden.” The Vincents went to Maine every summer. A drawer in one of the side tables was always kept pulled out—a red velvet slab with rows of arrowheads, ones that Pa had found on Boxed Island in Maine. You played Kick-the-Can on the sloping lawn after supper. When Churly was it, Sophie would let herself get caught. One time, playing spy, they saw Ma on her balcony with her hair all down, falling down her arms like a white shawl. Sometimes Ma and Pa were like ghosts. You’d see them pass behind a window in their house, or snapping out a light and vanishing. In the daytime, Ma’s hair would be twisted into a knot at the back.

Aunt Fran was wondering whether there didn’t used to be a porch around the house at Cassett Harbor, the old house. Uncle Thomas shouted, “That’s right. Mrs. Lothrop said they’d have the Herreshoff teas on that porch.”

“The correct term,” said Ma, “is piazza.”

“It must have been quite a view,” said Sophie’s mother.

“It’s where you’d sit with your beaux,” said Ma.

“We tore down the piazza,” said Pa. Sophie was surprised he was listening.

Aunt Fran said, “I thought it burned down.”

“Yes.” Ma’s nod was meant to end the discussion.

“How’d it burn down?” Churly asked. His long neck went up and his ears stuck out. Sophie felt herself flushing.

Pa said, “It—was—torn—down.” His shoulders were round and low and his chin hovered inches above his plate.

Down at her end, Ma said, “The remainder was torn down, yes.” Pa glared at her. His bottom lip drooped, as white as the rest of his face.

“How’d it burn down?” Churly asked eagerly.

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Ma pulled some empty dishes over the tablecloth toward her. “You finish,” she said. She stood up and carried some things to the sideboard, then glanced over at the table to see what else to take. She piled small dishes on the turkey platter in front of Pa and went to lift it.

“Don’t touch that,” he said. He didn’t look at her, or at the platter, but stared at the middle of the table.

“I think you’re done,” said his wife.

Sophie’s mother pushed her chair back. “Let me . . .” Her napkin bloomed like a white flower when she let go of it on the table.

“I’m not through,” said Pa. “I want to pick.” He didn’t move.

“Now, Pa,” said Aunt Fran. “We’ve got Livia’s pies coming.”

“Damn Livia’s pies,” he said. “Only occasionally you will disguise a voyage and cancel all that crap.”

The little table fell quiet.

“I’m all ready for dessert.” Uncle Thomas looked perky. “You ready for dessert there, Churly?”

Churly nodded, then looked to see what Pa would do next.

Caitlin and Sophie started to take their plates, but their mother gave them a stay-put look and made several quick trips through the swinging door.

Pa growled, “I’ve been eating goddamned custard all Monday.”

Aunt Ginny asked, “What kind of pies do we have?” Each year they had the same: apple, mince and pumpkin. Everyone began saying which kind they wanted. Ma sat back down.

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As they ate their pie and ice cream, Pa kept mumbling. “Bunch of idiots. . . . Going to knock it off like a bullhorn. . . . Newspaper, *then* cigar. . . .”

“No dessert for you, Pa?” Uncle Charles asked.

“I wouldn’t set foot in there to piss,” said Pa Vincent.

Ma went down and whispered into Pa’s ear. No one could hear what she said, but Pa answered in a loud, slow voice, “Why won’t you go shoot yourself?”

In the kitchen, Sophie and Caitlin watched Churly tell Livia. She fidgeted with pans and finally set them in the sink. “Your grandfather just needs his nap,” said Livia. She studied the children’s faces to see if they understood this. She was frowning. Her gaze drifted off and she turned her mammoth back to them, kept on sudsing things in the sink. He’ll be wanting his . . .” but they couldn’t hear what.

In the living room, the grown-ups were serving coffee. On the tray were miniature blue enamel cups, a silver bowl holding light-brown-sugar rocks, and chocolate mints in tissue paper envelopes.

Ma and Aunt Fran came down from upstairs where they had taken Pa.

“Everything all right?” bellowed Uncle Thomas. His wife scowled at him.

Ma took her place on the sofa. “Fine,” she said. “Fine.”

Rosie handed her a cup with a tiny gold spoon placed on the saucer. Delilah, her arm draped across her mother’s knee, felt brave. “Was Pa mad at us?” she asked. Caitlin glared at her.

“Hah,” shouted Uncle Charles, half-laughing, “he wasn’t mad at me.”

Sophie’s father said, “He didn’t know what he was saying, Delou.” He was over by the window.

Ma sipped at the rim of her cup. Gus Vincent touched the curtain with one finger and gazed out. Rosie busily poured more coffee.

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Looking at Delilah, Ma said, “He was not mad at you, dear.”

Aunt Ginny looked up, surprised. “The turkey was delicious,” she said.

“Oh shut up, Virginia,” said Uncle Charles.

Sophie looked up at Churly and noticed his ear sticking out and all his features flattened out, stiff, into a mask.

Uncle Thomas said, “Super meal, super.” He jiggled the change in his pocket, waiting for something to happen.

“You can thank Livia for that.” Ma set down her saucer. Sherman was in the rocking chair at her feet, lurching to and fro.

“Yes,” said Rosie Vincent, “but you arranged it so beautifully.”

Ma folded her hands. Her expression was matter-of-fact. “Actually, I don’t think I’ve ever arranged anything beautifully in my whole life.”

The grown-ups exchanged looks and for a moment there was no sound except for Sherman creaking in the rocking chair at Ma’s feet. He got up, all at once aware of himself, and scurried himself to his mother. The chair went on rocking. Ma stared at it. Rocking empty, it meant something to her.

So she reached out one lavender shoe to still it, and did just that.

Minot, Susan. “Thanksgiving Day.” In *Grand Street*, Spring 1984, 44–53. Used by permission of the author.