

WHAT SO ★ PROUDLY ★ WE HAIL

The American Soul in Story, Speech, and Song

Those Who Have No Turkey

LANGSTON HUGHES

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This story by celebrated African American poet and short-story writer Langston Hughes (1902–67), written in 1918 when he was still in high school, raises the disturbing possibility that prosperity may in fact be the enemy of gratitude and thanksgiving. Hughes himself did not grow up in material comfort or stability; after his parents separated, he moved with his mother and grandmother half a dozen times before finally settling in Cleveland, Ohio. Here, young Diane Jordan, from rural downstate Ohio, comes to spend Thanksgiving with her wealthy aunt Ruth (her mother’s sister) and her two daughters (Diane’s cousins) in a prosperous part of Cleveland. Distressed over discovering that the local newsboy and his family could not afford turkey for Thanksgiving, Diane impulsively invites him and his entire family to share the festive meal at her aunt’s home.

What is the difference between the life or outlook of Diane’s mother (Mrs. Jordan) and that of her sister Ruth (Mrs. Samuel P. Crane)? What do you think is responsible for that difference: is it the contrast between country and city life and customs, or is it something else? Why is Diane so interested in Tubby Sweeny, and so eager to invite him and his family? Imagine yourself as an invisible guest at the Thanksgiving dinner at Aunt Ruth’s. What was the experience like? Why is the story called “Those Who Have No Turkey”? How should our knowledge of the existence of such people influence the way we celebrate Thanksgiving? The way we live the rest of the year? How can the wealthy best show their gratitude?

A stretch of farmland, gray in the dawning, a flash of blue lake water, long lines of freight cars, the sound of many whistles and the shrill shriek of the brakes, with the sleepy voice of the porter calling “Cleveland,” told the girl that she had arrived at the end of her journey. One big puff, a final jolt, and the long limited came to a stop. Clasp ing her old traveling bag in one hand, a bundle under her arm and a shawl over her shoulder, fifteen-year-old Diane Jordan stepped to the platform, for the first time in her life in a large city.

It was early Thanksgiving morning, sometimes called the Day of Big Dinners, that Diane got her first view of Cleveland. Of course, her two cousins with Aunt Ruth were at the station to meet her. After many kisses and exclamations of welcome they guided the

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rather dazed little country girl out to their big limousine and whirled away uptown. Diane looked out of the auto window and enjoyed the ride, while Aunt Ruth asked about her only sister, Diane's mother, and her activities in the country, for Mrs. Crane had not been to visit her relative for some years.

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The Jordan family and the Crane family were in no wise alike, as the two sisters had married into vastly different positions in life. One went to a farm down in the southern part of Ohio with her husband and tilled the soil for a living. Their crops were usually good and they did well, but their mode of living remained that of simple, generous-hearted countryfolk. The other girl married Samuel Crane, a wealthy banker. The whisper of gossips said that she loved his money and not the man, but be that as it may, she gained an enviable social position; she lived in one of the finest houses on upper Euclid Avenue and sent her daughter to an exclusive private school. Mr. Crane died four years after their marriage. Mrs. Crane, busy with her social duties, seldom saw her country sister, but since her two children had spent a summer on the farm, she had always intended to have her niece, Diane, visit in the city. So that accounts for the presence of countrified, tomboyish, unsophisticated Diane Jordan seated in a richly lined limousine between the stylishly clad daughters of Mrs. Samuel P. Crane.

Soon the big auto rolled up a cement driveway and stopped under the porte cochere of the largest house Diane had ever seen. She marveled at its size, but the inside was still more wonderful. It is useless to attempt to describe Diane's feelings upon entering this mansion, so different from her rural home, as no one but a Dickens could do it.

However, after an hour or so of this indoor splendor and her doll-like cousins, Diane, a hardy child of the out-of-doors, grew a bit tired and decided to inspect the yard since Aunt Ruth would not let her help get dinner. Once in a while the scent of turkey floated in from the kitchen. In the country she always helped her mother cook, but here they seemed to hire folks to do the work. Well, city people were queer. Even their yards were not the same. Why, in the country, one had a whole farm to play in, but here the houses took up all the room, so finding the space between the house and the fence too small, Diane's adventurous feet led her to examine the neighborhood.

She had walked a block or two, stopping now and then to stare at some strange new object, when she reached a corner where two car lines crossed and many autos were passing in all directions. The scene was interesting, so she leaned against a lamppost and watched the city people go by until her attention was attracted to a small red-haired boy

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yelling at the top of his voice, “Extra papers, just out!” He reminded Diane of little brother at home. Her gaze must have attracted his attention for he demanded, “Paper, lady?” Perhaps he called her lady because her dresses were unusually long for a girl of fifteen, but on the farm clothes are not of the latest fashion.

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“What kind o’ paper you got?” asked the girl.

“*Press or News*,” replied the little urchin.

Diane pondered. “Well, give me the best one,” she said, “’cause Pa told me to bring him a city paper.”

“I’ve only got two left and if you take ’em both you’ll be sure and get the best one,” urged the little newsie, anxious to sell out.

“All right, I’ll take them,” she agreed. “You’re in a hurry to get home and eat some turkey, aren’t you?”

“Turkey! What do yuh mean?” asked the boy to whom the word was but a name. “We ain’t got no turkey.”

This answer was surprising to Diane. The girl could not imagine anyone not having turkey for Thanksgiving. All the people in the country had one. Truly, city ways were strange! Why, she had never known anybody to be without a turkey on Thanksgiving Day except once when her Uncle Si said that he was “just durned tired of having what other folks had,” so his wife cooked two ducks and a chicken instead of the usual fowl. Perhaps this boy’s mother intended to have duck.

“Well, you’re going to have duck for dinner, then?” Diane said.

“Naw, we ain’t got no duck,” he replied.

“Poor little boy,” she thought. “Why then, it must be chicken, isn’t it?” her voice suggested.

“Naw, we ain’t got no chicken, either.”

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“Well, what in the world have you got?” she demanded of this peculiar boy who had neither turkey, duck, nor chicken for dinner on Thanksgiving.

“We ain’t got nothin’ yet,” he said, and looking up into Diane’s sympathetic face, he added, “and we won’t have much if dere’s not enough pennies in my pocket to get somethin’. My mother’s sick.”

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“Oh-o—,” said Diane, looking down at the ragged little boy. It took her a long time to comprehend. She had never heard of anybody having nothing for dinner except the poor war-stricken Belgians, and that was because the Germans had eaten up everything. “Oh,” she repeated. “Are you going to buy something?”

“Sure I am,” he replied proudly. “Want to help me count my change?”

He had a dollar fifty-four cents.

“Gee, I kin get a dandy dinner with this,” he said. “Ma’s able to cook now.”

However, Diane was not very sure about how much a dollar fifty-four cents would buy, especially for a Thanksgiving meal. Suddenly a big thought came to her. She would ask the little boy and his mother to her aunt’s house for dinner. Surely Aunt Ruth would not mind. In the country they always had lots of extra company at the Thanksgiving table.

The newsie was rather puzzled at the strange girl’s generosity. Nothing like this had ever happened to him before and he had sold papers in the streets since the age of three. Finally Diane forced him to accept her invitation, the lure of unknown turkey being too much for the little fellow. He promised to come at three.

“Where do you live?” he asked skeptically.

“Down there,” Diane pointed to the large house not far away. “I mean I don’t live there but I am staying there now and you and your mother can come down today for dinner.”

“But I got two sisters,” said the boy.

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“Oh, bring them along.” What were two sisters added to a dinner party? Why, her mother’s table at home could feed twenty at once, if necessary.

“And I got a little brother, too,” he continued.

“Well,” murmured Diane, “bring him with you. I like babies.” However, she hoped that he had no more relatives. “Now, tell me your name,” she demanded, “so I can tell Aunt Ruth who’s coming.”

“Tubby Sweeny,” he replied, “and we’ll sure be there. S’long.” Off he ran down the street to deliver the invitation.

Diane went back to the great house without a doubt in the world but that her aunt would be “tickled to death” to have extra company for dinner. Mrs. Crane had been worried about her niece for the last twenty minutes and when she learned of the invitation, that august lady was too shocked for words. At first she hotly refused to admit the coming guests to her home. However, after many hugs and kisses and tearful entreaties from her two daughters, who thought it would be great fun to have such queer company, and from Diane, who declared she would not eat unless the newsboy and his family could eat, too, the elderly lady finally consented. She gave one of the maids instructions to have every one of the guests, when they came, wash their face and hands thoroughly before entering the drawing room. Diane was satisfied, although she thought the washing unnecessary. They never sterilized visitors at her house.

About three o’clock the family came. They were of foreign extraction and none of them, except Tubby, spoke English well. There was the weak little mother, who did not understand the invitation at all but came only because her son insisted; the small twin sisters; and the cute, but none too fat, baby with big black eyes and tiny, mischievous hands that kept Mrs. Crane’s nerves on edge. They always wanted to touch something and babies quite often break things!

During dinner the quiet little mother did not talk much, but the young Sweenys—they ate and jabbered to their hearts’ content. They expressed a marvelous joy and delight over the turkey, as they had never even tasted that fowl before. And as for the plum pudding and large, round pies, no words in the world could express their feelings! But when they had finished, their stomachs were as tight as kettledrums from very fullness, and the baby resembled a pert little cherub like those painted around Madonna’s pictures. Indeed, the

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tired-looking woman who held the babe would have made a wonderful model if some artist wished to paint “A Madonna of the Poor.”

After the ice cream had been eaten and each one of the children had a handful of nuts, the little mother said that they must go, much to Mrs. Crane’s relief. The woman thanked them very sincerely for the grand dinner and each one of the little Sweenys kissed Diane and would have kissed the others too, but the Cranes refused to go through the ordeal as they said kissing breeds germs. After the door had closed upon the departing Sweeny party, Mrs. Crane declared: “Those people were the strangest dinner guests I have ever entertained!” And when Diane got back to the farm, she told her mother all about it and ended her story with “Well, Ma, I never knew before that there are people in the world who have no turkey on Thanksgiving.”

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