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**Was It Thanksgiving Dinner... Or Thursday Night Live?**

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Email

My husband, Lee, always cooks Thanksgiving dinner, and somehow it's always stressful. So this year I decided to support him more efficiently than ever. We got up at the crack of dawn and by 2:00 p.m. we had it nailed. The turkey was in the oven, the table looked stunning, the serving dishes were laid out in formation. Lee watched a football game and I took a nap.

When the family arrived at 4:00 p.m., everyone noticed our calm demeanor.

"No stress this year, Dad!" our 20-something daughters remarked. Which was true... until we entered the final stretch.

Lee was carving the magnificent bird, the side dishes were steaming, the rolls browning, the gravy was wafting its savory aroma, when someone discovered that 92-year-old Grandma didn't have her teeth in. She was already at the table, which was an ordeal in itself. So our daughters fetched the Fixodent, rummaged in her purse for the case that held her dentures, and, flanking Grandma on either side, tried to help her insert them. But there was great consternation, because 1) they couldn't tell the uppers from the lowers, and 2) they didn't seem to fit together anyway.

Neither of the girls had ever put in their grandmother's teeth (or anyone else's for that matter). They scrutinized the pink plastic choppers over the cranberry sauce and the butter plate, holding them up to the light of the chandelier, debating how they fit in her mouth.

Lee stiffened, appalled at the dental operation going on at the table minutes before his golden bird was about to be served. "This should have been done twenty minutes ago!" he grumbled.

His brother, who had brought Mom from the nursing home and was now lying on the couch munching clam dip, announced that she has two sets of teeth and they may have gotten mixed up.

"Terrific," Lee chimed between clenched teeth, waving his carving knife and telling the girls to *hurry-it-up*.

"Dad, we're hurrying!" the youngest protested. They squirted out the Fixodent, slathered it in the plastic grooves, pressed the dentures in place, then tried to figure out whether they were in backwards, and why Grandma's lower lip was sticking out well past her upper lip.

"Almost ready to serve!!" Lee threatened.

"Dad, she has an overbite -- on the bottom!" the eldest cried.

At this point, Lee's brother called from the couch that she may have brought both uppers, or both lowers, or whatever.

I petted Lee, trying to avert disaster. "Stay calm," I soothed.

Apoplectic, he ordered the girls to put the *damn*Fixodent away and get everybody to the table. Understandably both girls lost it, muttering at the injustice of it all, as Lee slapped the steaming platter of turkey on the trivet and I passed the sides. Not content to give up, the girls hastily switched the dentures (only to find they still didn't fit) and wiped the gooey adhesive from their hands just in time to bow their heads for the traditional prayer.

After the *Amen*, Grandma (always a trooper) spooned up her mashed potatoes and declared them delicious. The clicking sound of her dentures as she gummed the rest of her food punctuated the rest of the meal.

My friend, Gita, nailed the lesson of the day: "It's not about the turkey or the teeth. It's about the people and the love -- and gratitude."

To which Lee retorted: "When you've been working on a meal for two days, you can throw love and gratitude out the window, it's about the frickin' turkey." His final comment on the debacle was Marlon Brando's last utterance in*Apocalypse Now*: The horror!

The next day, Lee's brother called from the nursing home to report that Grandma's lower dentures were missing. Ultimately, he found them in her bedsheets and put the pairs in order, while she plied him with questions: "When is Thanksgiving? What are we having for dinner?"

**Forgiveness and Serendipity**

Posted: 12/05/2012 9:14 pm EST Updated: 02/04/2013 5:12 am EST

This Thanksgiving I witnessed forgiveness and serendipity in action. My sister was coming to town and I wanted to arrange a pain-free time together as we are still trying to get to know each other as adults. It's a cliché to talk about holidays and family... we all know how stressful it can be and after Sandy, I wanted to avoid any additional problems, including where to eat. So when an old friend invited us both for a free buffet being offered up by a neighborhood restaurant (I shan't mention the name to protect my own interests for next year), I leapt at the opportunity.

My sister, a bit bourgeois, was a little less excited, imagining a grey cafeteria filled with homeless souls and steam tables. Instead we found ourselves in a lovely ethnic restaurant, lined with long tables with, if not homeless, family-less people taking advantage of the chance to not have to cook. After some fumbling, our little group was seated next to a couple who were well ahead of us in the free wine department. We exchanged pleasantries as well as concerns over whether there really was food. After a few Pinots, we all began to find each other on the same page and my neighbor to the left, Sally, shared with me her shocking revelation - she had just noticed that the diner sitting to her left, was a woman she hadn't seen for 35 years, ever since their horrible car accident together. Apparently Clare, once a dear friend, had encouraged Sally to drive even though she didn't have a license. Clare was busy pouring over maps of mountain roads when a strong wind blew one of the maps across Sally's face. She immediately lost control of the car, and flipped over.

Clare, badly hurt, blamed Sally for the mishap before entering into a long, drawn-out lawsuit. They never spoke again. Now, 35 years later they are sitting next to each other at a random, free Thanksgiving dinner. How could this happen?

Sally was sure Clare hadn't recognized her and asked me, a total stranger, what she should do. I love redemption stories almost as much as drama and quickly suggested that she must seize the moment, though it was best to wait until we all had full plates of Thanksgiving fare. The time standing in the buffet line also gave me a chance to observe Clare. She looked as normal as anyone else at the dinner and so when we sat down with our food, I said "go!" Perhaps it was the generosity of the restaurant or the spirit of the holiday, but the two of them began talking and never stopped until dessert... 35 years of anger washed away with turkey and the trimmings. Synchronicity, yes... God? Who knows? I only hoped that my sister and I would do as well. To insure that possibility we ate like piglets for three days. Time may heal all wounds but good food speeds the process.

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**'Shh-Thanks-Givin': My First Thanksgiving in America -- A Former Refugee Remembers**

Posted: 11/14/2012 12:56 pm EST Updated: 01/14/2013 5:12 am EST

"Thanks-giving," said Mr. K., my seventh-grade English teacher. "Repeat after me: Thanksgiving."

"Ssshthanks give in," I said, but the word tumbled and hissed, turning my mouth into a wind tunnel. A funny word, "Ssshthanks give in," hard on my Vietnamese tongue, tough on my refugee's ears.

"That's good," said [Mr. K.](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/andrew-lam/a-teachers-reach-my-first_b_1766835.html" \t "_hplink), full of encouragement. "Very good. Thanksgiving."

As I helped him tape students' drawings of turkeys and pilgrims and Indians on the classroom windows, Mr. K. patiently explained to me the origins of the holiday. You know the story: newcomers to America struggling, surviving and finally thriving in the New World, thanks to the kindness of the natives.

I could barely speak a complete sentence in English, having spent less than three months in America, but Mr. K.'s story wasn't all that difficult to grasp. Still, I didn't particularly see what it could have to do with me.

My family and I had arrived in America several months earlier, at the end of the Vietnam War. My father, a high-ranking officer in the South Vietnamese army, was missing, having adamantly refused to join us when we fled in a cargo plane heading out of Saigon two days before communist tanks rolled in. [Father](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/andrew-lam/my-fathers-waterloovietna_b_1602704.html" \t "_hplink) -- who had stayed in Vietnam determined to fight to the end in the jungle -- was the center of our lives, and his absence left a horrible void.

We had arrived in America with nothing but rags in our backpacks and a few ounces of gold that my mother had tucked into her money belt. An impoverished aunt took us all in. Soon there were 10 people crowding together in Auntie Lisa's tiny two-bedroom apartment at the end of Mission Street in San Francisco.

Today, in her suburban condo at the edge of California's Silicon Valley, my mother is fond of referring to our first year in America as "a time of living like wandering ghosts." We had, after all, gone from being an elite family in Saigon, with three servants and a villa, to being exiles with little to our name. We did not speak English and had no discernible skills. Without Father, who was educated and spoke English, we were destined for a life of poverty.

In that refugee's broken home, there was an oppressive silence. We ate in silence in the dining room that served as a bedroom at night. We waited silently in line for the bathroom, slept silently side by side, as if saying anything would only bring us all to tears.

Indeed, Mr. K, what was there to be thankful for?

Ah, but there was.

A few days after Mr. K. explained Thanksgiving to me, something marvelous happened: My father called. He had survived, and would soon join us, having changed his mind and escaped aboard a crowded naval ship from Saigon.

When Father arrived he was skinny and haggard, no longer the war hero of my memories, but he nevertheless brought jubilation into our lives. I remember hearing my mother laugh, hearing the adults gossip and argue, and sometimes I would close my eyes, pretending that we were all still living in Saigon. One morning I looked in the mirror and was surprised to see a boy's face smiling back at me.

As the holiday drew near, I had a change of heart about Thanksgiving. If Vietnam's final act of mercy was to release its grip on my father, America was generosity itself. As in Mr. K's story, it was populated by friendly natives who helped us out. There was that businessman at the L.A. airport, a stranger, who offered to pay for my entire family's plane tickets to San Francisco when we left the refugee camp of Pendleton. In school my friends Remigio, Tai, Marvin, Wayne, Robert -- white, black, Filipino, Mexican kids -- all adopted me. Eric taught me to play baseball; 200-pound Tai protected me from the rowdy kids; and Robert, the popular blue-eyed jock, offered to take me on vacation with his family. And best of all Mr. K., ever patient and nurturing, made me his pet. Whenever I missed the bus, or even simply asked, he would drive me home after school.

That Thanksgiving my family gathered on the floor and ate two gigantic turkeys donated by religious charities. The kids fought over the food and the adults talked about job prospects. There was even talk of a possible trip next summer to the place I equated with paradise: Disneyland.

*Sssthanks give in. Thanksgiving.*

We have moved [into the middle class](http://www.amazon.com/Perfume-Dreams-Reflections-Vietnamese-Diaspora/dp/1597140201/ref=pd_sim_b_1" \t "_hplink) since then. My father retired from his job as a bank executive, my mother from hers as an accountant. My brother and his wife are successful suburban engineers. My sister lives in a luxury condo downtown San Francisco and, not far away, I in mine. Thanksgiving at my brother's home this year will be replete with wines and seafood and crab and yes, turkey, and fabulous Vietnamese dishes. But the Thanksgiving I remember with fond memories is the first one, where we ate on the floor and wore donated clothes, and when I was just learning to pronounce the word.

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Novelist, 'Shepherd Avenue,' 'My Ride With Gus'

**A Thanksgiving Crisis, With All the Trimmings**

Posted: 11/21/2012 12:05 pm EST Updated: 01/21/2013 5:12 am EST

One more phone call to my wife, I told myself -- one last call to tell her I love her, before I get on this plane.

I'd gone all the way through customs at London's Heathrow Airport, as I'd done countless times before, and there was a pay phone on the wall in the boarding area. I had a few British coins in my pocket that wouldn't do me any good in New York, so I headed for the phone.

This is how it works when you're 10 years into an international marriage. Kim and I have lived together in London and New York for long stretches of time, but what with families and kids and holidays, we can't always be together.

Thanksgiving is always in New York, but she can't be here this year, so I went to London for a few days.

There are a lot of tough goodbyes when you live like this, but the reunions are sweet.

"American Airlines Flight 141, now boarding."

This was going to have to be a fast call. I dialed the house and my stepson, James, answered the phone.

"We're having a bit of a problem with the plumbing, Charlie," he said.

James is the King of Understatement. If his pants were on fire he'd walk around tapping people politely on the shoulder, saying: "I beg your pardon. Might you possibly have a bottle of water I could borrow?"

Before I could ask for details my wife was on the line, gasping for breath.

"Oh God Charlie, there's water everywhere!"

My guts went into free fall. Earlier in the day we'd had some plumbing work done in the upstairs bathroom and something had gone horribly wrong. The bathroom had flooded and water was gushing through the ceilings.

This was definitely a husband situation, and here I was, prepared to board a night flight that would take me 3,500 miles from the crisis.

The final boarding call was sounding. I told Kim to tell James to shut off the main water valve. Kim's daughter Catherine was also on board, a no-nonsense young woman whose boyfriend put her in touch with an emergency plumbing service.

"I'm coming back!" I shouted into the phone.

"No, Charlie," Kim sobbed. "The house is collapsing, but don't miss your flight!"

TIme out, here, as we examine the subtexts in that amazing sentence.

"The house is collapsing" (and I'll probably die in the rubble) "but don't miss your flight" (you must see your family for Thanksgiving.)

My wife may be the only person in the world capable of uttering such a sentence, equal parts despair and generosity. What a woman. No wonder I married her.

So what do you think I did?

Hell, would I be stupid enough to share this story if I'd gotten on the plane?

I ran to the woman at the ticket counter and explained what had happened. Luckily I hadn't checked in any luggage. She cancelled my ticket and wished me luck.

Luck is what you need to get out of Heathrow under those circumstances. I was a traveller who had not travelled, but a customs agent informed me that I had to go through "arrivals" to get out of the airport.

"How can I arrive when I haven't even left?" I asked the agent, realizing as I spoke that I was inadvertently writing a country-western song. The agent was sympathetic, but it wasn't his system.

By the time I hit the street I'd sweated through my shirt. I hailed a cab and gave the driver the address.

"You can't miss it," I assured him. "It'll be the collapsed house, third in from the corner."

This guy was a true-blue London cabbie, grizzled and gray, with one eye locked in a perpetual squint. I told him what had happened, and why I'd ditched my flight.

"You did the right thing, mate," he growled. "Aw missed the birth of maw third child -- no fault of my own, the traffic was 'orrible -- and the missus blamed me! They want us there for the big stuff, that's for sure."

The big stuff. "Did your wife ever forgive you?" I asked.

He chuckled. "Reminds me about it once a week, to this very dye."

Half an hour later we reached the house, which was still standing. The cabbie wished me luck and I went inside.

Well, it was a mess, but the flooding had stopped. The emergency plumber was a soft-spoken man with a calming influence on everyone. The actual damage was somewhere between my stepson's "bit of a problem" evaluation and my wife's "the house is collapsing" assessment. James and I poked holes in the ceiling to drain the water into pots and pans, and I did my best to dry the carpeting.

Bottom line -- nobody died, and everything will be OK.

So now, to take an abrupt turn -- what am I thankful for this Thanksgiving?

I'm thankful that I made that phone call.

I'm thankful that I hadn't checked in any luggage for that flight I never took.

I'm thankful that it didn't cost me anything to change my flight to the following night, which got me back to New York in time for turkey with my parents and my son.

Mostly, I'm thankful for the look on my beautiful wife's face when I walked in that door, and the way she hugged me.

That was a hug for the ages, man. You should all live long enough to get a hug like that.

*Charlie Carillo is a novelist and a producer for the TV show "Inside Edition." You can watch the trailer for his new Christmas novel [here](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5eIub9H0Ay4" \t "_hplink)*.