

Thanksgiving

It's a wonder my lungs survived Thanksgiving dinners at Aunt Margaret's home in the 1950's. Coal miners might have a cleaner chest x-ray than any of us kids and adults who together inhaled at least a carton of cigarette smoke through the festive dinner and long afternoon of televised football games.

My mother smoked. Grandma, Aunt Margaret, and Uncle Jim, too. Great Aunt Rose, Uncle Bob and the couple who lived next door. On their way out to dinner, the Geary's stopped by to wish us Happy Thanksgiving, leaving behind their contribution to the growing toxic plume of tar and nicotine.

We thought nothing of it. Certainly, no regard to health hazards marred the celebration of the day. The Surgeon General was asleep through the '50's, and the danger of cigarette smoke, first or second hand, had not gained popularity among the media that depended so much on tobacco for advertising revenue.

The meal began and the smoking lamp dimmed and flickered out. The air cleared slightly as turkey and giblets and mashed potatoes and gravy and squash and rutabaga and peas and cranberries and biscuits and mint jelly and whatever I've forgotten were brought from the kitchen and heaped on the dining room table.

With the smoke abating and the food before me, my eyes stopped watering, but my mouth took over the job. I sat in famished anticipation, waiting for my mother to let go of my arm and allow me to reach for whatever dish came my way in the merry-go-round of food about to be set in motion.

Uncle Jim pronounced the blessing. He was given the task because he was a bachelor. No, I don't understand the logic of that, either, and I always meant to ask about it. But it wouldn't be on the top of my list of questions about my family I've pondered over the years..

Uncle Jim finished his third high ball before dinner at half past noon and stubbed out his Camel cigarette in the gold inlaid ashtray beside his dinner plate.

Voices around the table subsided as he raised his arms above his head, bringing them around in a great circle

to touch his finger tips together, as if he was performing an impromptu field sobriety test. His arms then dropped to his chest and his hands folded in prayer.

"And now," he intoned, "we thank the Great God Jehovah and all his angels. And His son, Little Baby Jesus. And all the saints, from Albert to Zachary, as well as all the Prophets, too numerous to name, but they know who they are. And we wish everyone around this table a joyous Christmas shopping season. And we wish all of you a fine dinner on Margaret's fine China. Eat hearty and stop when you get to the plate. Live a long life. Amen and please pass the turnips."

The food now began to travel around the table and I inhaled a serving from each dish as it arrived.. I loved every kind of food and wasn't at all picky. My grandmother always said I was a good eater. I still am.

Dinner over, the Luckies and Camels and Chesterfields and Pall Malls and Old Golds and Zippo lighters came out. The snaps and clicks of the lighters all firing off at once sounded like a company of riflemen cocking their weapons. As I worked on my dessert of pumpkin pie, smoke rolled across the table and reminded me of a battle scene I'd watched in a movie last weekend. The smoke came rolling through the forest and dropped down into numerous foxholes, causing fits of coughing among the soldiers.

There were no casualties this day, but who knows the long-term effects of all that smoke. Despite his command to live a long life, Uncle Jim did not survive to a ripe old age. He suffered a fatal heart attack at age 50. A week before, he told my Mom his chest felt tight and he would switch to a milder brand of cigarettes. But this step didn't halt the rush of the prophets coming to meet him at heaven's gate, nor all the saints from A to Z following closely behind. At his funeral, old friends and relatives gathered to remember a dear friend or brother or uncle. They told family stories and slapped each other on the back in greeting. But most of the hail-fellow camaraderie took place outside, where they could smoke. Inside by the casket were those of us too young for tobacco. And though right before our very eyes, few of us were noting the lesson.

copyright by David Griffin, 2008

Windswept Press
Saugerties, NY

www.windsweptpress.com