Thanksgiving, Family Style

It is a chilly September morning in Manhattan. The city is roaring, cabs are honking and people are rushing. A fifty-five year old mother, C, sits on her narrow 20th floor balcony, gazing at the Upper West streets below that she knows so well. Summer has finally been swept away by the dying leaves, and the apartment is empty for the first time in months. A few minutes ago, she kissed her husband, R, goodbye as he left for work, already engrossed in his iPhone. The past week has been spent preparing for her children’s departures to university, one in Los Angeles (L) and the other in London (P). Now that they are both gone, and so far away, she has nothing to do but sit and feel the essence of her son and daughter in her empty home.

C is not saddened by the sudden emptiness, rather, she is curious about the new life her young ones are embarking on, wishing she could be closer to them along the way. She thinks back to their last dinner as a family before they left for school, and smiled at the disaster it had been. They had been playing a ferocious game of monopoly, which led to the burning of the pheasant roast and its chestnut stuffing. What should have been a gourmet French dinner became an order-in pizza night but no one really cared. In fact, the pizza tasted delicious as they laughed and played together through the night. Although C was happy to send her children away and watch them become their own people, her mind is already turning to the next occasion when her apartment will be filled with their laughter and energy. She sits in the cool air of New York city and counts down the days until Christmas.

L has just finished unpacking his bags and setting himself up in his new Californian apartment. The faint sound of his two roommates playing video games and joking about the party they had been to the night before floats down the long and narrow hallway but he is distracted. His third year is about to begin and he is ecstatic about the weeks to come, which will include lots of drinking, studying, and with luck, reconnecting with a boy who has been filling his thoughts. As he joins his friends in the kitchen and they speculate loudly about what he will make for dinner, (he is the only one who cooks), he feels a slight unease at being far away from the comforts of home and especially his mother’s cooking, but the feeling soon passes. He walks across the kitchen, swatting one of his roommates affectionately over the head and opens the fridge door.

Weeks pass with the intensity of studying and the excitements of college life. Finally, the place slows down and he sits alone in the kitchen, staring absently at the hand-painted ceramic bowl holding the apples and bananas he has just brought back from the grocery store. Suddenly he is transported to a moment a few summers ago. He had been travelling through Peru with his parents and sister and was trekking towards the Sun Gate of Machu Pichu. Thousands before had made this famous hike, but he felt immensely proud as he climbed towards what would be the most beautiful view he had ever seen. The hike was only moderately strenuous but after an hour, he reached the top sweaty and famished. He sat and stared, euphoric and stunned, feeling that he had reached the top of the world while his younger sister chatted away and complained about how thirsty she was and his mother desperately tried to take a panoramic picture. Finally noticing him, the family became silent. They sat down to eat a simple lunch they had bought on the street in Lima. Enveloped in that silence, each of them both alone and together, ate and took in the spectacular surroundings. The food was nothing special, but to this day L can still remember exactly what he ate (two hard boiled eggs and a ham sandwich) and the immense satisfaction he felt after the meal. The feeling was a combination of the ecstatic experience of the landscape combined with physical well being after the long walk and a deep, new revelation that he was part of something much larger than himself. Anything other than that simple meal would have been out of place at that moment, he thinks in retrospect. And nothing could have tasted better. He remembers the meal as a precious moment shared with his family and making them one.

L picked up the Peruvian bowl in his small apartment in Los Angeles and felt a pang of nostalgia, missing his family and their adventures. A thought began to form in his mind.

In London, P’s nerves have finally kicked in. She is sitting in her very first class in university. She’s met a couple girls around her dorm, and her roommate has the potential to become a good friend, but for now she really knows no one. London is beautiful and feels much bigger than New York. She has yet to find her way around the subway system, where she has been lost more than once already.

Sitting in class, she is surrounded by a sea of new faces, and she misses her friends back home. She had been dreaming about leaving New York City since her junior year but now that she has done it, she misses her city, her home and her family. She even misses her dad barging into her room to ask about her homework. Now that she is finally on her own, no one knows or cares if things get done on time or even at all.

Soon enough, P becomes accustomed to her new city and makes new friends, meeting new and interesting people everyday. A few weeks in, she rarely thinks of home, busy studying and exploring London. But one rainy afternoon, she stops in her Brixton neighborhood café after a thirty-six hour studying marathon. She is sipping a strong black tea when her eye catches a bottle of wine from Napa on a shelf full of bottles behind the bar and her mind drifts off to the last March break she spent with her family visiting her brother in sunny California. Her parents, being avid wine lovers, had insisted on going on a tour of the Napa Valley wineries. She had been bored out of her mind, being too young to actually taste the different wines, and had spent most of her time bothering her brother. One night they went to Bouchon, a famous French bistro hidden in a field of grapes. Although she can’t remember the exterior of the restaurant, she clearly remembers the perfect Californian light that surrounded them as they entered the place. It was the kind of light that feels warm on your skin and makes everything around you twinkle and sparkle. Rays of sunshine cut through the trees, turning the green leaves to gold. The setting was beautiful, and the interior perfectly French, the waiters discreet in black and white uniforms. P hadn’t seen her brother for some time, so she was happy to spend time with him and her parents, although embarrassed to admit it. The New York apartment had felt empty without him after L left for university and she struggled to hide her happiness to have them all together again. The meal was perfect. The onion soup and fries were a still-life painting with deep satisfying flavors. The family was together, talking, laughing, and arguing over nonsense. Back alone in her Brixton café, she suddenly feels extremely home sick. She takes out her phone and makes a call.

Paper, paper, paper. R is surrounded by mountains of paper. Wherever he looks - paper. So much for the paperless Internet era. He loves his job; to be clear. He’s been a lawyer for 23 years and still wakes up happy to go to work, excited about the day ahead. But sometimes the heaps of paper get the better of him and he needs a moment to sit and forget the legal jibber jabber. He is a busy man and these moments are rare but when he finds them, he likes to check in on his children and ask what they are up to. The answer is always studying of course. He smiles to himself that they cannot imagine him as a 20 year old who would have said the same thing to his parents.

R is alone in his office, and opens a good bottle of wine from the Napa Valley that he and C had tasted and bought together on their last visit to California with their children. He sips the wine, savors the flavor of golden sun and golden memories and suddenly yearns for Christmas and the return of his children.

As he pours another glass, he thinks about his children when they were young and a night when the family went to a Manhattan restaurant that no longer exists, the name forgotten. He and his wife were overjoyed when their two children took an interest in something other than pasta and pesto. That evening was the first time the children had joyfully explored a meal together. R and C admired their children and savored the evening as L and P rushed over to the kitchen bar to watch the chef roll sushi. The children were both fascinated by the swift, fluid and precise movements of his hands. They were young and had yet to grasp the theory of personal boundaries, unafraid of leaning over and breathing on the food the chef was preparing. He fed them different pieces of sushi that disappeared quickly into their mouths and continuously asked for more.

R smiled as he thought back to that night, remembering the Manhattan bill but also, the joy of a story that became family lore, shared over and over at family events; this was the meal that introduced his children to the love of food. The meal that officially made them all foodies. As he put his wine glass down, his phone rang.

C has spent the entire day preparing Thanksgiving dinner for her husband and herself, as the children are not due home until Christmas. True to herself, she has made enough food for a small army, making sure to prepare his favorites. From her bathroom, she hears the front door open and muffled voices in the apartment hallway. She wonders if R has brought home office-mates without a place to go on this long weekend. This has happened before and she is more than prepared to receive them all.

As she walks down the hallway, she hears voices that are familiar. Her heart begins to race and when she reaches the dining room, her son and daughter are sitting at the table, knife and fork in hand, baring huge grins. She covers her face for an instant, then laughs, not able to hide the tears running down her cheeks. A family Thanksgiving conspiracy. She sits down; ready to hear anything and everything her children want to tell her, together, sharing a Thanksgiving meal.