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Norman Rockwell

Thanksgiving on Ice

Mother-in-law jokes are fairly common and sometimes seem a little unkind. I suppose that, in some cases, such verbal swipes may be justified and indeed well-earned, but if so, my wife's mother was the exception. She was smart and considerate and had a keen sense of humour. I had the opportunity to grasp the full range of her qualities when fate conspired to bring us together under one roof in the last few years of her life. It happened like this.

Her name was Bess, but we called her Loodie, though I don't remember why. Her husband of fifty-five years died suddenly, leaving her alone in the house in Dallas where they had raised their four daughters. She pretended that she was fine—just fine!—living on her own. But she wasn't, and after a while she moved into an apartment in a retirement community, where she felt lonely and miserable. Her health deteriorated rapidly, and it was soon clear to her daughters that something had to be done.

Two of them still lived in Dallas with their families, one was in Colorado, and Lillian and I were in Austin. It was agreed that we would spend Thanksgiving in Dallas and then bring the matriarch back to live with us. We arrived the day before Thanksgiving and spent the night in Loodie's apartment.

The plan was for everyone to meet for lunch at the home of one of the daughters. Each group would bring some of the items on the traditional menu. It was all arranged, and we were all looking forward to the gathering.

But it was not to be. A freak storm blew in that night, bringing sleet and freezing rain. By morning the city was at a standstill, with roads covered in ice and temperatures that hovered below 32 degrees F. It was the coldest Thanksgiving on record in the Dallas area. When we woke up and looked out of the windows, we were amazed to see everything covered with snow and ice. Phone consultations soon confirmed that the other groups were in the same boat, and it was obvious that none of us would be going anywhere. It was time to take stock. Since Loodie was planning to leave the following day, she had very little in her refrigerator. Enough milk for a few cups of tea, enough bread for a few slices of toast. Other than that, we had what was to have been our contribution to the midday feast: crab dip, bread rolls, mashed potatoes, and extra gravy. Not much of a feast. The host family had the all-important turkey, dressing, gravy, cranberry sauce, and peas. The other group had the (in my opinion) equally important pies—apple, pumpkin, and cherry—and some homemade chicken soup. We would all have to make do with what we had.

Most of the other residents of the retirement community had gone to spend Thanksgiving with families or friends and the place was virtually deserted. Loodie and Lillian and I had a modest breakfast, then played Scrabble for a while, then had our version of the traditional lunch. We expressed our thanks for the rolls and the mashed potatoes, and especially for the gravy, and thought wistfully about all the pies that people were enjoying in other, more fortunate homes. After lunch, Lillian and I made our way to the darkened cafeteria in search of a cup of coffee, but were met by a security guard who told us we could not take anything from the kitchen. A rather uncharitable stance, we thought, but there was no changing his mind. We spent the afternoon chatting, played some more Scrabble, and eventually it was time for bed.

By late morning on the following day the roads had cleared enough for us to pack up the car and return to Austin, an easy two-hundred-mile drive. Loodie admitted to feeling a little sad to be leaving the city where she had lived for so many years, but said she was ready for a change. She had no illusions about her situation, and was determined to embrace her new circumstances with her usual positive attitude and open mind. We got home without incident and installed her in her room. She settled in right away, and spent the next four years with us. It was during that time that I came to appreciate her as one of the most agreeable roommates I have ever had