

Thanksgiving

by Bill Roorbach

When the phone rings in the empty loft Ted knows exactly who it is: exquisite Mary, gentle Mary, tough Mary and brainy--his brother's wife--for whom Ted would fall in a minute if such things were permitted. She seems cold as they climb through some small talk, gets to the point fast, warms to her task:

"Oh Teddy, really, you have to come this year. You ought to come this year. Lily wants to show you her watercolors." Lily is the oldest of Ernest and Mary's three little daughters. "And your mom would like you here."

"Why doesn't this Mom person call me herself?" Ted says, growing testy despite his resolution: this year at Thanksgiving he's going to be part of the family again, no explosions, no tumult, no bubbling in the bosom. He knows where Mary's calling from, hears Elrod's raspy barking, hears the T.V. in his parents' sumptuous den (where doubtless his mother is standing focussed like a laser on Mary and the phone).

Mary eats a laugh. "Well, she's right here."

"No shit." Teddy sees it perfectly: Mary grinning, handing the phone to Mom against feeble protests, Mom's hands up to keep this difficulty away, Mary smiling more forcedly and holding the receiver against Mom's ear. Too late; the old gal has to speak: "Well. Teddy. When are we coming?"

"I don't know, Mother. Wednesday? Thursday morning? I've got a ton of work: a lady on Beekman Place wants a portrait, and I'm showing slides at two galleries."

From his mother, silence.

Ted says, "And the Met, well not the Met exactly, but this very consequential curatorial entity wants to . . ."

"Well, marvelous. Whenever you get here is exactly right."

Now Lily has the phone, no goodbye from Mom. "Uncle Teddy?"

"Hi Lily Loops. Halloo. Are you coming for Thankspiglet?"

"Oh, Uncle Teddy!"

As always his niece's giggle is the most perfect music Ted has ever heard. She likes a sense of conspiracy so he whispers: "Bring the turkey in a paper bag. Bring eleven cranberries."

"Uncle Teddy, come on!" Oh, her laughter, this laughter right now, this is the most beautiful thing Ted has ever made. The kids! For the kids he won't be off his rocker anymore.

#

There's not a dime in sight for Ted Lyons. And not a paintbrush, either. He hasn't made the trip to a gallery--not even SpaceSpace on Avenue D--with slides in hand in a year or more, hasn't *shot* slides for six months, hasn't produced anything to photograph.

Consequential curatorial entity! Crap. This pompous spur-of-the-moment phrase plays over and over in his mind, a rebuke. Back to the nut house, Mom must be thinking. His past success as a painter, life before his--ah-hem--*rest time*, offers no succor for these angry days. He and his supposed art are in some kind of extended eclipse, the needling voices in his head so loud he can't paint in the same room with them.

The lady on Beekman Place wanting a portrait is a fat lie (though once Ted fixed a toilet in someone's brownstone there). His Mr. Fix-it ad in the back of the *Village Voice* ran out in August and he hasn't had enough money to run another. Monte Dorfman, his comfortably rich roommate and true friend, normally good for a loan, is far away--a tour of Asia and Australia--and he won't be back for three months.

Ted boils water and makes himself a plate of miserably unadorned Ziti and feels maybe a little of the romance he as a college student might have seen here: He is an artist. He is surely going mad, and for the second time. He will not ask for help, however, will not give a clue to anyone. If he does, it's back to you-know-where. And with you-know-who paying for it. And finally, the last brick in the wall of romance: Teddy is in danger of starving. Or at least of being

hungry: there's two or three nights of eating in that big ShopRite Ziti box.

Late he empties Monte's change jar, which has enough nickels and dimes for two beers at Milady's, corner of Thompson and Prince, and where two beers bought gets you one on Frankie, who will knock the bar and say, "This one's with me, pal." And knock the bar all night with a kind eye on the pile of pennies Ted scoots around in front of him, barely shiny with nickels.

A few beers, a dozen, that changes the complexion of things.

#

There's no getting back to sleep. Teddy Lyons thinks of Thanksgiving dinner and Lily Loops and Beaner and his sister Kelly and beautiful Mary and Mom. And Dollar Dad and Big Brother Ernest and Little Bro Jim. It's the family that's going to save him. Going to have to. He thinks of Monte and Jennifer in Southeast Asia and Professor Mtuboto at Brown University and the one painting no one ever had any doubt about, Ted's thesis work, "Self Portrait with Attitude," an enormous picture in oils of himself with ten feet of blank canvas to one side: his first masterpiece (that is, the first real piece of himself to reach canvas), already ten years old, moldering in some generous lady's collection. For the two thousand bucks (his first fortune) Ted wishes he still had the painting, wishes maybe he'd never bought the hope the money had afforded him. Because in a complicated web he once had a handle on, that sale launched the events that took him to Riverview Heights (formerly known as Riverview Sanatorium), a lovely place with a campus like a college and doctors like calm parents.

Four a.m. and he's not sleepy at all, still ruminating furiously, still entertaining the comments of all the observers of his ruminations, a clear idea having entered his head: the possibility of his own change. He could get a job like Ernest's, wed a woman like Mary, live in a suburb like Newcastle, Connecticut, his own home town, work his way towards respectability and honor, explore the

possibilities of commercial art (his dad's perennial suggestion), stop thinking of commercial art as selling out (Monte's phrase, Monte in Cambodia) but as *buying in*, as *getting real* (as younger brother Jimmy would say). Because a woman like Mary you interested only with success, with brains, with self love and self power like Ernest's. Madness was out.

Ted rose and began searching cushions of the bad furniture in his loft (Monte's loft, if you thought in terms of leases and rent and who had his shit together). Three shineless quarters in the yellow vinyl chair, a dime in the heater, nineteen cents in the cracks of the warped old floor. Sixteen one-dollar bills in Monte's desk drawer. Smiling gods of heaven!

Meds or Jack Daniels?

#

On the eve of Thanksgiving Teddy rolls out an entire bolt of the Canson Mi-Teintes paper his father, "Setting you up in business," bought him those two hopeful years ago. "Back on your feet." Dad kindly put out some mean cash at Pearl Paints down on Canal Street: "You got to spend money to make money," misunderstanding the whole artist game with unusual heart. 50 feet of the thick, beautiful paper, 45" high, and Teddy gets to work on his idea for Thanksgiving, for what he can add to the festivities and still have enough cash to pay for the train ride home. It's a mural with serious sections and comic sections, a Thanksgiving card, a love poem to his family, his thanks for their forbearance. He sips Jack Daniels and puts his nieces in there: Lily Loops and the Bean as tidy little pilgrims; the babies, April and Erin, as cherubs on the back of spotted fawns. He paints his tall mother slightly unhappy as the pilgrim matriarch, cigarette in hand, paints Dad beside her in a kind of pilgrim three-piece suit with musket and briefcase. He paints quickly, a succession of photographs in hand, quickly and with a humor that comes of using up the last of a formerly huge supply of paint, a supply that once seemed like hope itself. Good brushes, too,

worn but well cared for. Teddy shows his brawny young sister Kelly beneath an enormous and laden picnic table, holding the whole thing up with one hand and wearing a Grecian tunic--a lady Hercules. He captures perfectly his brother Jimmy and Jimmy's wife, Connie, in jogging outfits, their new twin Volvos tethered to teamed horses. He gets Elrod in there and a good deal of Edenic garden, both to honor his mom. He paints Ernest lolling magisterially in a cloud, a stern but beneficent God blowing fortune from on high. He's painting hard, he's painting fast, he's in a lather, he's damn good, he's got whiskey in his blood. "The mural is really working," say the onlookers, "It's a pageant!" He plays with the long composition, repeating figures: there's Dad off to work; there's Kelly slaying buffalo; there's Lily and April *sur l'herbe* in their swim-team suits, lunching with the painter; there's Jimmy flinging U.S. currency to the wind; there's Connie dandling Erin; there's Ernest intently making a drawing, his first.

Later Ted realizes he's put Mary in the only Native American costume, painted her at both ends of the absurdly elongated table. At one end, she gazes approvingly at the Ted figure having his *Dejeuner*; at the other, she holds the hand of another Ted figure, the two of them looking up, oh, looking up and pointing at Ernest, the great pale god, unbearably handsome.

They will like this poster. They will! The whole family, and then Teddy can ask them for succor.

#

At the Newcastle Train Station Thanksgiving morning Theodore Bricklin Lyons steps down into the bright sun, sees a row of twelve-hour parking meters, a gas station, a bent Lions Club sign, the drive-up window of the First Newcastle Bank, a particular tree, all of it fraught with sad memories: Marianne Oplenoff for one, Dad in his business suit for another, the daily commute.

No time to get misty: Dad rockets into the station parking lot in his new Hum-vee, skids in the gravel, stops so the passenger door is

exactly at Ted's hand, leans hard (no seat belt), flings the door open, shouts, "Son, get in."

Lily's in the back seat, grinning. She's a small version of Mary, her hair long and black, gap between her big front teeth, flannel shirt 20 sizes too big. Ted pokes his bulkily rolled mural into the back beside her, throws Monte's daypack on top of her, just for fun.

"Lillian," he says deeply, knowing she'll laugh. And she does, and puts a long little hand on his shoulder as he gets in, pats him expressively, pure love and acceptance, holds the daypack in her lap.

Ted pats her hand back and pat pat pat it's a joke. On impulse then he leans awkwardly to hug Dad and worse, kisses Dad on his stubbled cheek. Dad is embarrassed so hits the gas, throwing gravel, and they are off, just one mile to the old home.

The enormous vehicle has the old-home smell--Dad's cigarettes, probably, and his aftershave--and it gives Ted the old-home feeling, a mixture of comfort and dread, with the difference that now he actually recognizes that dread's in the mix. Today recognition adds consternation, not comfort. Dad drives very fast, shooting his spindly right arm out in front of Ted at every stop to protect him from his own inertia at stops as if he's a kid again.

In the back seat Lily the Looper studies the inside of the rolled mural. She speaks into it, hollow echo: "Calling Uncle Teddy. Come in Theodore Lyons. Are you going to stay this time?"

"Not you, too," says Ted.

Dad chortles, "Of course he's going to stay! He'll stay the weekend! We'll have turkey sandwiches!"

"Maybe, Dad. Maybe not. I've got a lot of work, a ton. I've got a job I might do Saturday." There's no job on Saturday. There's no job at all. Ted's head swims: Jack Daniels hangover.

Someone is telling him to get home. This he fights. He'll ask for help. He'll ask Mary, perhaps, and she can ask Mom, who in turn can go to Dad.

Into the tube of the mural, Lily intones: "You don't like us."

"Lily Loop Lungfish, you mind your manners!" says Ted, in imitation of an angry Ernest. Lily screams, getting the joke, then

laughs and laughs, sniffing through her nose, embarrassed to let it out.

"Mom's got a thirty pounder!" says Dad.

#

The house is still there, Victorian and tall, pure white everything surrounded by a neat yard and giant oaks, not a stray leaf in sight, not a stray blade of grass. The fall has been warm so the lawn's still green. The sky is blue, the air is pure, the smells are familiar to the point of memory. The grand over-arched driveway is full of cars, license plates from all over: Ted's siblings. Lily takes his hand and walks him up the driveway, feeling somehow the formality of the situation, seeming to know that it's she who must guide Ted back to the flock.

Jimmy is first out of the house to greet them. He's all smiles, wearing a tie. Ted's heart wells at sight of his little brother, who's not so little; in fact, Jimmy's a big man, over six feet, over two hundred pounds, polished and smart, thick glasses, wet hair. The brothers meet under the portico in an uncomfortable hug. Dad has hung back, thin and stiff and suspicious as an old dog. He turns abruptly and makes for the tool shed where his lawn machines will be.

Jimmy says, "You look like shit," which is a joke.

"He's tired," Lily says protectively.

"Let's go over to the mall in Stamford and get you some clothes tomorrow," Jimmy says.

"I'm fine," says Ted.

Then Connie's at the screen door--Jimmy's wife. "Uncle Ted!" she cries. Lily's little sister Bean peeks around Connie, looks impatiently at Ted, spins and leaves. In the foyer (potted plants, framed photos, a painting by Kelly, two drawings by Lily, nothing by Ted, nothing in the whole house by Ted) the whole gang turns out. Ernest is impassive, holds out his hand for a shake, doesn't quite smile, looks ready to give a speech. Kelly laughs in words--Ha Ha

Ha--hugging Ted and kissing his cheek, a mountain of cheer. And there's little April, looking pissed, her fist in her mouth. Beaner makes her way back into the foyer, dragging Mom, who looks Ted from head to toe. "What a crowd," Mom says, and turns on heel.

"You been eating enough there in New York?" says Jimmy, genuinely concerned.

And Ernest says, "Tofu," derisively, then looks Ted over sneakers to ponytail, clearly finds him wanting.

"He'll eat today!" Kelly says brightly. She's a sweetie, really a sweetie.

"Ziti, I eat," says Ted, attempting good cheer, but sounding merely cryptic, even to himself. "Tofu's more Monte's speed."

Suddenly, there's the smell of turkey, and Ted relaxes, lets Lily tug him into the little parlor off the kitchen, sits himself down, pulls Lily down beside him on the arm of the big chair, three-year-old April eyeing them both skeptically.

Jimmy says, "I'll help Mom," and drifts back to the kitchen. There's a record spinning on the parlor turntable, vague holiday music, a fire in the parlor fireplace even though it's a sauna in here already. One by one the family files in. Lily pats Ted's shoulder. Baby Erin starts to fuss in Connie's arms so everyone looks to her.

"Thanks, Lil," says Ted, seriously, under his breath.

"For what?" says she, also seriously. Connie has heard, looks puzzled. Ernest stalks in and leans on the bookshelf, wiry and small as Dad, resumes his appraisal of Ted, visibly repressing some imperious command to get Lily off the arm of the chair. He says, "Monte and tofu in Greenwich Village," meaning: Doesn't that just say it all!

April does a somersault to much applause.

Kelly laughs--Ha Ha Ha Ha Ha, says, "Have you found yourself a girl?"

And Ernest says, "Tofu," again.

Irritable Mom in the kitchen yells out "One hour!" and Jimmy comes flying comically back into the parlor.

Ha Ha Ha Ha Ha, barks Kelly.

Then Mary steps in from the kitchen, drying the gravy boat, having rinsed out the dust of a year. "Teddy Lyons," says she. "Mary Maharg Lyons," says Ted in the same tone, which is appraising and affectionate at once.

She says, "The artist is home."

Ted says "Yeah," and you'd think he was the world's funniest comedian the way everyone laughs.

"Artist," Ernest says, and roars.

Lily says, "He brought a painting."

"You look good," says Mary. "You look very happy and healthy and handsome." She goes back in the kitchen.

"Dad needs me on his chop saw," Ernest says, meaning that some repair is under way. He says "Artist," again, not exactly shaking his head, tone modulated so carefully you'd have to guess what he meant. Observation? Derision? Kelly follows him out the door.

Jimmy and Connie linger politely. Connie tries for a conversation: "How's New York? I miss New York."

"Is that where you live?" says Bean.

"Yes," Lily says, patting Ted's shoulder. "He lives in New York City, where we've never been."

#

Just before the big meal Ted gets Lily and Beaner to help him with the forgotten mural. The little girls close the dining room doors and giggle and whisper, loving a conspiracy. Ted stands on the furniture and Dad's spattered stepladder, carefully taping the paint-stiffened paper around three walls and close up under the high ceiling. The mural clears (just) the tops of the doors and the hutch and the grandfather clock, which tocks. Bean, who is normally as skeptical as Ernest, is thrilled. She holds her belly and stares at the likeness of her little self in the pilgrim outfit, amazed.

Lily crosses her arms in front of her and gets formal, provides a review: "I think Grandpa looks perfect except his hair. His hair is white, Uncle Teddy, it's not grey like that."

Ted suppresses the impulse to argue with her. She's nine, for Heaven's sake. Also, she's right.

She purses her lips, turns slowly, taking in the mural, one end to the other. She says, "The food looks so real. And Grandma looks perfect, and Uncle Jimmy."

Teddy can't help it, he stands there beaming. Praise is praise, and he hasn't gotten much for months.

"Daddy looks mean," Bean cries, pointing, suddenly having seen the god Ernest in the clouds.

"Why is Aunt Kelly under the table?" says Lily.

"She's holding it up," says Ted.

"And look at me," Lily says. They do, for a full minute, Ted and two children, necks bent back, arms folded. Lily says, "I look stupid."

"You *are* stupid," Beaner says.

Lily says, "And Erin and April, Uncle Teddy, I don't know. Erin and April are the *worst!*"

"Babies are hard," Ted says.

"They look like little animals," says the Bean.

"And why is my mom in a bathing suit?" Lily points.

Eek. Ted needs Lily's eyes to show him that Mary's Native American costume is tiny, a great show of legs and cleavage and burning dark eyes, that old movie poster of Raquel Welch. It's obvious, awful, pure aggression, but the likeness is terrific. Ted has spent a lot more time on her than on the other portraits, and spent it later in the night of painting, bombed on that whiskey when he should have bought monthly meds. He has her face perfect down to the expression of pain and caring, has her long hair shining blue and dark as midnight, has the dent of her lip, the tilt of her head, the knuckles of her hand. But where did the cleavage come from? The oiled thighs? He wishes for paints to fix her costume, then in a fit of real grandiosity decides she'll like it.

To Lily he says, "I need help."

Lily looks at him seriously.

"Come carry things, girls," says Ted's mother.

"April and Lily come help," calls Mary, as if they are miles away.

Ted takes advantage of the empty dining room to raid the liquor cabinet. He pours several fingers of Wild Turkey into an large ornamental cup from the top shelf of the hutch. He drinks fast, pours again, stows the bottle back in its cabinet, drinks up, steps cheerfully into the kitchen fray, pats Miss Bean on her head.

#

Dad, torn away from his machines, sits at the head of the enormous old table as always, with Bean at his right hand. Mom sits at the foot. Elrod the mutt, having roused himself, stations himself underneath, stiffly, seventeen years old, waiting for scraps.

Ted's mural hovers above, surrounding the family on three sides. Everyone but Kelly thinks it's in bad taste to have painted Kelly under the table like that, holding things up--but she's proud of her strength, her size, kindly says she doesn't mind. Ernest seems to like his position in the clouds, gazes up at himself approvingly. No one says a word about Mary's costume, though Mary gives Ted a hard look. His parents barely look up.

Not another word about the mural. Big-hearted Connie, all manners, leaps into the void, takes it upon herself to offer praise, something the Lyonses just aren't good at. She praises the likenesses, praises Ted's generosity, praises his palette, praises his ingenuity, praises the perspective, the difficult trick of getting everyone in there, praises and praises him in the silent room.

And in the silence that remains when she's through, Dad says grace. Mom and Kelly start passing food around. Ernest's in the same seat he's always been in, exact center of the fire side of the table, equidistant between Mom and Dad. Mary sits beside him. Jimmy and Connie, as always, sit across, neatly dressed. Ted's next to Mary, Lily beside him. Kelly's across from Ted on the piano bench next to Bean, rocking baby Erin, chatting earnestly with April, who is failing to sit quietly. The plates fill up. Forks clatter. The meal commences.

Moms grows sad, sighs and pokes her food. Unasked, unannounced, Dad gives a technology quiz straight from childhood: "At what temperature does all movement stop?" and instantly the siblings are shouting out answers, childlike in competition. Mary and Connie laugh, watching the familiar regression. "Absolute zero," shouts Ernest for the eighth time.

Dad pretends not to hear, won't give Ernest credit, moves on. He says, "By what process is plastic derived from oil?" Jimmy and Ernest and Ted all start talking, none giving ground, none exactly knowing the answer, so, soon and also at once, they shout out jokes to cover themselves, they shout with laughter.

"I paid for how much college?" Dad says.

"Teddy smells like booze," cries Lily.

"Lily smells like baby powder," says Ted. He feels inordinately and absurdly proud that she has chosen to sit beside him, that he is her relative. He tickles her between bites, steals food from her plate. "You are crazy," she says, patting his shoulder.

"Crazy," Ted says back.

Kelly says, "Oil is turned into plastic by fouling beaches and destroying indigenous populations and by widening the gap between rich and poor and otherwise assuring the hasty end of human culture as we know it and shortly thereafter the death of the earth. Ha Ha."

Gentle Connie sees the gauntlet hitting the parched earth, says: "At my office there's this gal who has this dream to fly in a balloon. Of course we just laughed and laughed at her . . ." And keeps trying, though only Mary even pretends to listen.

"Bhopal," Ernest says, cryptically.

". . . signs up for this balloon *tour*."

"For or against," says Kelly. Ha Ha Ha.

"Human error," says Dad. "Those Indians are *ineducable*."

"No more quizzes," Mom says.

Connie never gives up, tells the entire story of an eleven-balloon pilgrimage to Cumberland Island, even as Ernest and Dad and Kelly

face off three ways about the responsibility of multinational corporations to world culture, not the slightest agreement between them in any direction.

"You want to stop driving your car?" Dad shouts, finally, his grin a rictus: "You want Ted to stop using his paint?"

Ted raises his eyebrows.

"Teddy needs help," Lily cries.

"So I guess the lesson is: pursue your dreams," Connie says, and goes silent.

"Maybe we should take the billboard *down*," says Ernest. He means Ted's mural and says it like it's Ted's mural that has caused the ruckus.

"Oh, Ernest," says Mary.

Ted feels himself stiffen.

"Pinkos," says Dad. It's supposed to be a joke but it is not funny and not even Connie laughs.

"You hurt Ted's feelings," says Lily, soulfully, aggrievedly to her father. She pats Ted's shoulder, says, "You say sorry."

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