

No Thanks

by Karen Karlitz

I can't remember what I ate for dinner last night, but I see that Thanksgiving day as clearly as if I'm watching it on an old Magnavox. My mother Rose buzzes around our cramped two-bedroom apartment in Queens, New York, her hair in rollers, no makeup. She's beautiful though, anyone would agree. It's early in the day. She retrieves the tablecloth my grandmother embroidered when a teenager herself from the back of the hall closet, and sets the dining table in the foyer with her best dishes (black and white Noritake), silver plate from Fortunoff's, and real cloth napkins in a tasty shade of pumpkin. She's been up since five cooking, pies were baked the night before. But although her culinary plans are running smoothly, my mother's mood is lethal. Look closely and you can see thin plumes of smoke escaping from her mouth and the tips of two horns peeping between the rollers on top of her head. This is not uncommon for her. She's quick to anger, and this Thanksgiving she even has reason. You see, my Uncle Irving is coming to dinner. My mother hates just about everyone, Irving in particular. But my father won this skirmish the week before.

"Come on, Rose, he's all alone. What's the big deal? It's only one meal."

"I don't give a crap about him," she replies.

"He's depressed. His daughter hasn't spoken to him in months."

"He brought it all on himself."

"He's my brother. I hate to think of him being alone on Thanksgiving. And who knows the last time he had a decent meal."

"If he stopped spending his money on liquor, he could afford plenty of food. And why does he have to live in such an expensive apartment? He should get a cheaper place. Your brother always has to be so *fan-cy*."

I get ready to run out of the apartment if the fight progresses. The closet I used to take cover in during their battles hasn't worked in years.

"Please, Rosie, it means a lot to me."

"Stop it already, Sidney. You're making me sick." She pauses to procure a last pint of his blood. "You win. But I'm not happy...and he will never eat here again. And I mean never."

My mother, however, is supremely happy about my sister coming. Since Wendy moved into her own apartment, every time she comes home is an event. Wendy, according to my parents, is worthy of everyone's adoration.

I sit on the couch reading *An American Tragedy* when the doorbell rings. I wonder if it's Wendy or Irving. My father goes to answer it; my mother sprints to the bathroom to fix her hair and put on makeup. I didn't know she could move that fast.

"Wendy," he says, "you look so good I must be your father." Sickening to be sure, but my parents' vicious barbs and toxic vibes had boomeranged through the apartment at a rapid clip all day. Now some of the tension would ease with Wendy's arrival and the prospect of everyone's first drink.

After an hour my mother sashays into the foyer, the skirt of her dress swinging under a white ruffled organdy apron.

"Mother, you look beautiful," Wendy says with genuine admiration.

My mother beams. "And so do you." She kisses the air alongside my sister's perfectly made-up cheek.

Pinned to the couch and queasy as a result of their mutual admiration, I find myself rooting for Irving's arrival.

Wendy hands my mother a bunch of flowers she bought in the subway. "Oh, Wendy, these are the loveliest I've ever gotten." She throws my father, who hasn't purchased a bouquet in decades, a look meant to inflict psychic harm.

The bell rings, ending the happy homecoming. My mother opens the door and Irving stumbles in. Apparently he had a few before making the trip from Manhattan.

“Rose, you look wonderful as always, my dear,” he drawls, the fumes coming out of his mouth almost knocking her down. The combination of run-of-the-mill halitosis with Captain Morgan rum is deadly.

“So nice to see you, Irving,” she says, backing off to catch her breath. “Have an hors d'oeuvre. I have work to do in the kitchen.”

I am months shy of eighteen, the legal age then, but my parents have been letting me drink at home for a few years, making family gatherings almost palatable. I sit with Irving and my father in the living room. A weak sun seeps through the plain white blinds. We eat Waldbaum's chopped liver on Ritz crackers and drink vodka mixed with orange juice. Wendy sits at the table in the kitchen, keeping my mother company as she prepares dinner. Every now and then my sister comes in for a refill at the bar my father set up on Rose's prized fake French desk. I can see she's pouring hefty ones.

By dinnertime Irving, Wendy and my father are smashed; I am pleasantly high. My mother is cold sober, but goes about carving and serving the great bird and myriad side dishes as if the meal she labored over means more to us than our next drink.

During the main course Wendy entertains us with a running monologue about her many dates. What my parents don't know is that my sister has only been going out with Harry Krapner, a wealthy, fifty-year-old jeweler with a wife, three kids and a split level in Great Neck. Soon after Wendy discovered Harry's married state, she told my parents she broke up with him, said she was horrified to have dated a married man. In truth their parting lasted under a month.

Wendy speaks like she believes her dating triumphs. “We had dinner at Le Cirque. It was fabulous. Filet of beef to die for. Really, mother, you and father must try it.” (This suggestion is thoroughly insane. My father is so cheap he wouldn't spring for mushrooms on a pizza.) Wendy continues, “David invited me for a long weekend in Lake Tahoe, but I'm not sure if I should go. I just met him last Thursday.” She slurs her words as badly as my friend Tina does after

helping herself to her dad's Seconals, but no one else seems to notice.

“Go,” my mother advises her, as she lights up a Kent. “But make sure he gets two rooms. If he can afford to take you to Lake Tahoe, he can afford two rooms.”

Irving nods though he is barely conscious. My father's gone several beyond his daily two; his eyes are closed, his breathing deep and steady. He leans to the left, but doesn't tip over.

“You have such a glamorous life. If I were young today...” My mother has a faraway look, as she begins to clear the table.

“I'll help,” I offer, being the only one, aside from her, able to stand.

Alone in the kitchen, she starts in on me. “Look at your sister, always dressed so beautifully. That pantsuit, so smart, a classic. She'll be able to wear it for years. A real investment. And her hair and makeup are stunning.” She snarls at my jeans and black turtleneck. “Why can't you try to be more like your sister? Maybe then you'd find yourself a nice boyfriend.”

“I have a boyfriend.”

“That Barry's not for real. Trust me, I know the type. I can spot a womanizer a mile away.”

“You don't know anything about him.” I consider defending him, but don't have much to work with.

“Judy Adelstein at work wants to fix you up with her son. He's premed at NYU...They have money.”

“I don't need to be fixed up with anybody.”

“What's the matter with you? You act like this just to annoy me. I give you an opportunity to better yourself and you don't take it. Look how beautifully Wendy's doing. She's a perfect little lady. Did you notice her shoes? I'd love a pair myself. In navy,” she says, brightening. “They would be fabulous with my new suit.” She gets back on track: “Put some effort in, Deborah, it'll make a world of difference. I know what I'm talking about.” My head throbs, the vodka has worn off. My mother bristles on: “Style, that's what's important. Wendy has it, though you do favor your father's side. But

with a little..." A piercing whine from the television obliterates my mother's voice. I open my mouth to speak, then decide against it. I don't tell her that my sister is still screwing Harry Krapner. The picture on the screen goes snowy, then fades to black.

THE END

