

# Conversation on Thanksgiving

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My mother and I busied ourselves around her kitchen on Thanksgiving last year, talking about cheesecake, dieting, and the norms of two women on any given get together. She was flapping her lips so much I nearly took the meat thermometer to pin them together. I grabbed a bottle of green tea out of the refrigerator, longing for summer. I filled the bowl with hot boiled potatoes.

"If you could drink diet soda, I think that would be your best choice," she said.

"It gives me a headache. I drink water and green tea." I poured myself a glass of the local brew.

"That's good." She looked over the turkey and buttered it.

"You know, ma, I need to talk about something."

I watched her beat the bird with open palms, occasionally reaching for the counter, not able to decide if she should add the pepper.

"What now?"

I remembered this sort of "what". The kind that was said through wide lips, riding on the waves of her breath. I backed off. She continued to butter the turkey.

There wasn't much to be said as I watched this woman dress the bird. I heard the faint sound of "Diva" by Beyonce playing in the background. My mother is a mix of old black values, vulnerable lonely woman, and old hipster. She listens to the latest hip-hop and R&B. I'm more R&B and neo-soul. She keeps her needy and vulnerable men at her side, but travels Harrisburg in a lonely, existential fog.

"And what man should you trust, Sambuca," she'd ask.

"None of them," is what I always responded.

I moved my hips in sway with the beat. My mother looked cross eyed at the turkey.

"What's the matter," I said.

"The way you move. It's like sex. It doesn't belong here. You shouldn't be doing that." She tried to look at me but her eyes fell to the floor, roaming it and stopping at my boots.

"Why not? I'm 30. I'm grown. You do know that?" I looked at the Bird.

"I don't want it in my house. I don't even move like that," she said.

"Liar." I took a sip of my green tea.

"Not anymore."

Mom continued to rub the turkey. I wondered what brought on the sudden change in my mother's philosophy about the sensuality of dancing. She used to love to dance and up until this last man, she would do it regularly. The sex was good, she often said, my ears closing with the sound of the words "Bill" and "sex". It prompted the sensuality I had long seen and knew existed. She danced because she loved him. I had loved a man once. Once.

"Why don't you dance anymore, mom?" I raised the glass to my lips.

"Why do you talk like a white girl?" Her eyes made her way to mine, lit by yesterday's grief. I looked at the floor.

"That has nothing to do with anything. You're ridiculous."

"Ask a stupid question...." She turned and peppered the Bird.

"I know. Was there much between you and Bill," I said.

"I cooked. He ate. That's about it." She beat the Bird, adjusted the wings. She asked me for the bread cubes. I sighed and reached in the cupboard. She snatched them and turned back to the Bird.

"I never saw him wear that Steelers jacket." I leaned on the counter.

"That damn jacket was suede. Cost me \$150 bucks," she said.

"He never wore it," I said. I went over to the kitchen table, searching for my glass. She had put it in the sink.

"Saw her son had one like it," she said. She handed me the glass from the sink. It was still half full.

"Yeah."

I lived close to Bill at the time. I saw everything. He never knew the walls had eyes. I saw him use that other woman for a ride and a good meal. My mother tapped her foot on the linoleum, sweet as a dancer.

"What about dancing, mom?" I sniffed the tea, examined it.

"Family has joint issues, you know that. Aunt Tina just got her knees done. Cartilage is wearing down in my hips."

I looked at my mother and grinned. She pointed a finger at my nicotine and coffee stained teeth.

"I quit smoking, you know that." I closed my lips, covered my mouth with my hand.

"You should never smile. Whoever said you had a pretty smile, lied." She managed a laugh, forced it right between her teeth.

"Tim said it. I've been whitening. They aren't that bad," I said.

"How long were you with him," she said.

"Two years," I said

"He lied."

The turkey got splashed with chicken broth and salted and peppered. She stood back, hands on her tired hips, frowning at the turkey.

I fiddled with the boiled potatoes. In between skulking to the refrigerator for milk and butter and going over to the drawer under the counter for a potato masher, I shot glances at my mother, in plain view, eye to eye. She met my glances with heavy eyes, still and stern. There was a lot to say. Yet here we were, like father and son, mother and daughter, thin-lipped, stone and brick.

"The salt and pepper," I said

"On the table, Sam, where it always is." She sighed and turned towards the sink. She washed her hands and dried them on the cat-faced tea towel.

"Yeah...Hey, ma?" I wrung my hands and stuck them in my pockets.

"What now," she said.

"About what happened with the married guy." I gulped in air, suddenly not able to breathe. I clenched my fists in my pockets.

"What married guy?" She stopped moving, looking at the Bird.

"When I was sixteen," I said. I could barely open my mouth. I licked my teeth, mouth dry.

"Uunh." She walked to the refrigerator, avoiding my gaze. She pulled out some onions.

"I was sixteen." I followed her back to the turkey with my eyes, my hands in the air, waving.

"That was on you," she said.

"He was thirty-three!" My hands went to my hair without my permission, fingers trapped in the thick flip of it.

"You could have said no," she said, absently.

"I didn't. I couldn't. I was really sick," I said, running my fingers through and on top of my hair.

"You always use that as a crutch. You, a sixteen year old girl. The way you were..." She looked at me, shaking her head, looking at my body as if remembering some wrong, some thing that should not have been.

"I know it. I was sick," I said. I felt ill. The smells in the kitchen worked on my stomach like Ipecac.

"You were on medicine," she said, still looking at me, searching.

"And how about you? With Bill," I said. I felt weak and small, her eyes probing me. There was nothing I could do but let her.

"You were sixteen and did wrong. I was a grown woman," she said.

“We were both-“

She started digging at the turkey, rubbing it, pressing each regret into the taut, slippery skin, each thick crystal of sea salt, scraping her flesh, rubbing it raw.

I walked over to her. I wanted to reach out. I wanted to grab hold of her and have my mommy back. The tapping started again. I knocked a few things around on the counter. She looked at me, eyebrow raised, lips forming around words. I looked down at my feet and went over to the potatoes to mash them.

“What else goes in these,” I said. I stood at the sink, watching a woman walk a dog out of the window.

“Salt and pepper,” she said.

“You should try some garlic. You ever heard of...”

“Yeah. Garlic mashed potatoes. I've tried the instant kind,” she said, grabbing the masher and starting to mash the potatoes.

“I like those, too,” I said, handing her the salt and pepper.

She patted the turkey on the back, rubbing it one last time, looking at it, arms folded.

“Looks seasoned enough,” I said, leaning on the counter, folding and unfolding the cat-faced tea towels.

“We made the mashed potatoes too early.”

“You have the buffet tray, right,” I said.

“It's down the basement,” she said.

“I'll go get it.”

I plunged into the dark basement, where the walls held secrets. The walls stained with the tears of my mother, of me. I stood there, allowing the darkness to pour its weight around my shoulders. I shook a little and cried silently, staggering towards the wall. I heard my mother calling from atop the stairs. “I'm O.K.,” I said and flipped the light switch.

