

Pack of Lies

It's a wonder my ten year old lungs survived Thanksgiving dinners at Aunt Margaret's home in the 1950's. Coal miners would have cleaner chest x-rays than any of us kids and adults who together inhaled at least a carton of cigarette smoke throughout the festive dinner and the long afternoon of televised football games that followed. My mother smoked. Grandma, Aunt Margaret, and Uncle Harry, too. Great Aunt Rose, Uncle Bob and the Geary's who lived next door. On their way out to dinner in a restaurant, the Geary's stopped by to wish us Happy Thanksgiving, leaving behind their contribution to the growing toxic plume of tar and nicotine.

We thought nothing of it. No regard to the health hazard marred the celebration of the day. The Surgeon General was asleep through the '50's, or wasn't born yet, and the danger of first or second hand cigarette smoke was somehow not important to the media moguls who depended so much on tobacco for their advertising revenue. A popular magazine ad of the day pictured a physician smoking while he held up a pack of his favorite cigarettes. And yet, everyone knew someone who could no longer breathe well after years of smoking.

As the meal began the smoking lamp dimmed and flickered out. The air cleared slightly as turkey and giblets and mashed potatoes and gravy and squash and rutabaga and peas and cranberries and biscuits and mint jelly were brought from the kitchen and heaped on the dining room table.

As the smoke abated and the food began to arrive, I sat in famished anticipation, waiting for my mother to let go of my arm and allow me to reach for whatever dish came my way in the merry-go-round of food about to be set in motion.

Uncle Harry pronounced the blessing. He was given the task because he was a bachelor. True, the logic of that is not apparent, but neither were a hundred other family traditions I'd always meant to ask about.

Uncle Harry's way of "saying the grace" always intrigued me, especially when he was drinking. Polishing off his third high ball before dinner at half past noon, he stubbed out a Camel cigarette in the gold inlaid ashtray beside his dinner plate and began his invocation.

Voices around the table subsided as he raised his arms above his head, bringing them about in a great circle to touch his finger tips together, as if he was performing an impromptu field sobriety test. His arms then dropped to his chest, his hands folding in prayer.

"And now," he intoned, "we thank the Great God Jehovah and all his angels. And His son, Little Baby Jesus. And all the saints, from Albert to Zachary, as well as all the Prophets, too numerous to name, but they know who they are. And, uh ... we wish everyone around this table a joyous Christmas shopping season. And we wish all of you a fine dinner on Margaret's fine China. Eat hearty and stop when you get to the plate. Uh ... live a long life. Amen, and please pass the turnips."

The food now began to travel around the table and I practically inhaled a serving from each dish as it arrived. I loved every kind of food and wasn't at all picky. I was always a good eater. I still am.

Dinner over, the Luckies and Camels and Chesterfields and Pall Malls and Old Golds came out. The snaps and clicks of all the Zippo lighters firing off one after another sounded like a company of riflemen cocking their weapons. As I worked on my dessert of pumpkin pie, smoke rolled across the table and reminded me of a Civil War battle film I had seen in our fourth grade class. My mind's eye saw soldiers stumbling through the woods, banging into trees, hacking and coughing as they struggled to find a breath of air.

There were no casualties here on this day, but the long-term effect of all that smoke had consequences. Despite his command to live a long life, Uncle Harry did not himself survive to a ripe old age. He suffered a fatal heart attack at age 50. The week before, he told my Mom his chest felt tight and he would switch to a milder brand of cigarettes. But that didn't halt the rush of the prophets coming to meet him at heaven's gate, nor all the saints from A to Z following close behind. At his funeral, old friends and relatives gathered to remember a dear friend and brother and uncle. They slapped each other on the back in greeting and told the same old family stories, a harmless pack of lies that glossed over the hurt and loss and struggle and stumbling in all human life. Most of this hail-fellow camaraderie took place outside where they could smoke. Inside by the casket were those of us too young for tobacco. We were old enough to learn bad habits from our elders, but not smart enough to heed advice from the dead. Right before our eyes was a lesson that few of us were noting. Some lies came twenty to a pack.

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Windswept Press
Saugerties, NY

www.windsweptpress.com