

welcome

family, food, and friends

MEGAN IS STRESSED OUT. There is a health center in the middle of her high school campus; it is a white, frame house. It sounds comforting, as she describes it. She would like to be curled up in a bed there, having a nap. It would take the edge off her stress. There are houses that invite such cozy allegiance. I have a few favorites, old farm-

houses, that I routinely drive by. I have never been inside them, but from the outside they give off a promise of warmth, and gentleness, and intimacy. Nothing you want is too far away in such little houses. I think that is their appeal. The sofa is close by the fireplace; the teacup is close by the sofa; the bookshelf is near the tea tray; the friend is near the hearth, too; everything fits on the old Persian rug; the stairs to bed are narrow and high and swift. Megan says that the health center recommends sleep, food, and friends as the best helpers in alleviating students' stress. Family, I notice, is not on this list. I remember that when you are a teenager the only comforting members of the family are the ones who live far away (and are usually eccentric); most people in the immediate family cause stress.

Megan is one of my dinner partners at a Thanksgiving meal to which I have been invited by the generous and kindhearted friend of a friend. I'm not a third wheel, or a fifth wheel, but a loose wheel this holiday, one that has come clattering off my own family's caravan and rolled right into a stranger's campsite.

Carrie, our hostess, stands up at dessert to announce that it is a tradition in her family to go round the table and have everyone talk about the things for which they are thankful. It's the kind of tradition that makes you groan with anxiety, and then, unexpectedly, makes you well up with the pleasure of listening to people open their hearts. We begin with the children's table, and everyone, from ages 3 to 17, is remarkably coherent. They list food, friendship, and, this time, family; they are grateful that the world has not been blown up entirely. It has come to that, for our children. (Perhaps it is only the health center that is avoiding the family.) The adults take their turn, with fancier or simpler versions of the same things. I'm shy with strangers (I like hiding behind this page), and so I say, simply, I'm with the children's table: family, food, friends.

What I really wanted to point out—so, Carrie, my Thanksgiving talk, a year later—is the wisdom of the children's simple triumvirate. Because, at any moment, one or more of these will fail you: food will turn to ash; family will disappoint; friends will break your heart. But, most of the time, these disasters

don't happen all at once. Your True Love will abandon you, but your brother and sister will fly to your side. Your father may infuriate you, but your girlfriend listens long, and with such care that she leads you to remember the deeper connection, the force of an attachment that makes you vulnerable to such anger. Your mother lets slip a casual, stinging remark; but, please, pass the pumpkin pie. It is delicious, especially with such cold, rich milk. Of course, the health center meant for us to consider the nutritional value of food. We will, later. But sometimes what is most important is the comfort value of food; comfort deserves its own section in the famous food pyramid (which keeps getting turned one way and then another). Of course, I would vote for making comfort food the base from which all else rises.

And so it goes. Things go awry, people fall away. Others come forward, like the volunteers that spring up in your garden, bringing hope and happiness and surprise. The constellations wheel round the skies; summer stars turn to winter stars; our spirits rise and fall on their own moons and planets. Our children grow old enough to leave home, and they shut the door on their childhood beds and books with such full, bright, brimming, hopeful hearts. Their lives are so full they cannot imagine the emptiness they leave behind—nor should they. The light goes out in one room; you carry your candle to another. A grief that once felt crushing eventually turns

out to be like every dead thing: hollowed out, desiccated, a shell, and then dust, blown away on a whisper. We let go because we have no choice. We give love and we are given love—and we give and receive pain, disappointment, fear, sadness. But we are thankful for it all, if only because it means we are deeply, endlessly, joyously engaged with life. Happy Thanksgiving!



Dominique Browning, EDITOR