

Thanksgiving

Justin walked through the front door, stepped over Audrey Rose. “That’s sick. I hope you’re going to clean that snot up.” He turned on the TV.

“Jesus, Audrey Rose, I thought you were dead.” Joe was squatting next to her.

“Why would you think that?” Audrey Rose stretched and sat up.

“Because you were lying on the living room floor barely breathing.” Joe sat down next to Audrey Rose. They faced each other. “What happened to you?”

“I was dancing through galaxies giving birth to stars.”

“Drinking last night?”

“Tons.”

Joe brought her a glass of water as she crawled across the floor towards her closet. She swallowed and swallowed then lay back down on the floor, eyes closed, only a few feet from where she started. Joe picked her up and carried her into his bed.

“Don’t sleep for too long, it’s Thanksgiving.”

“Oh, shit.” A stream of energy rushed through her. She was up and bouncing around the room.

“Thank you, thank you, thank you.” She squealed.

“For what?” Joe was almost out the door.

“Who cares, it’s Thanksgiving. I give thanks to you, to this cuddly blanket that was going to take care of me. For the feast I’m going to cook all of you.”

Before Joe could get the words out, the TV shot to mute. “You’re cooking?” Justin and Joe echoed at the same time.

Audrey Rose was rummaging through her closet and came out with a purple floral apron with white lace on the edges. In her excitement she had forgotten to put anything else on. As she climbed out the window, her bare bottom lit up the room and she was gone.

They had to admit, the food smelled good. Julie was concerned when she saw Audrey Rose struggling with the turkey, to nick its neck. The turkey wasn't ready to go yet, but Audrey Rose finally convinced the bird with only a few pecks to her hands and arms.

Audrey Rose fried up some onions in a soup of butter, ripped apart stale bread and seasoned the hell out of it, stuffing the bird until he looked pregnant. She put a couple of pats of butter on the bird, salt and pepper and slid him into the oven. The pounding in her head provided her a rhythm. Chop, chop, sprinkle salt. Chop, chop, water boils. Chop chop, veggies in. Chop Chop time for drink.

Julie had bought white wine, which she poured for everyone. She even brought a chef's hat that Audrey Rose wore proudly, The boys set the table and Joe even remembered the desert forks. Everyone had invited a friend and Audrey Rose had invited Mike.

The last time she had seen him, he was so high he couldn't remember her name or how he knew her. Finding him today was no easy task; he had been kicked out of his home, was staying on couches for a while. She finally found him camped out in some smelly guy's trailer. The whites of his eyes were actually white and he had shaved. Audrey

Rose didn't linger, the turkey was squawking in her arms. She asked him to come, didn't know how it would be, she just knew she missed her friend.

The table almost overflowed. Potatoes with a black hole of butter running through them, turkey browned perfectly, a huge pitcher of gravy, no lumps. Squash, salad and peas. Audrey Rose curtsied before she sat down and bowed her head, which made her chef's hat fall off. Everyone applauded. Joe sat opposite her, carving the turkey into piece after luscious piece. The table was filled with friends, Julie's boyfriend, Justin's latest, Joe's sister and an empty place for Mike.

Audrey Rose tried not to notice empty gap that kept the table from being complete. Plates were being passed around and food heaped high. Audrey Rose put five peas on her plate, a tablespoon worth of potatoes and squash, although she did drown the plate in gravy. She pushed things around while faces were filling and bellies expanding.

Then a knock at the door. Mike. Something lifted from the table and flew out the open door. Audrey Rose hugged him. He had on a clean button-down shirt and navy pants. He was shaved, his eyes still bright. They buried themselves in each other. After introductions were made, and Mike's plate filled, Audrey Rose began to really eat. She went back for seconds, then thirds. She didn't notice Joe shift uncomfortably, avoid eye-contact with Mike. His voice raised, too confident. Conversation drifted over her as she

filled her mouth with the flavors of her grandmother's kitchen, of the dinners as a kid where her parent's had given her a special china tea-cup full of Coca Cola while they had wine.

Justin's latest, Kelly, was a petite girl, wiry, with huge eyes, pupils almost filling the iris. The scraping of knives on the plate irritated Audrey Rose less than the high pitched whistle of the voice this girl had. So far they had heard about her family life, every boyfriend she had ever had, her ankle problems. Currently, she was going on about her life as a single girl. Everyone else tried to listen politely or engage in conversation with the people closest to them.

"I mean, it's so hard in this town. There's so many guys, but where are the good guys?" Even Justin had stopped listening to her, or maybe had never started.

"Excuse me, princess." Audrey Rose interrupted.

The girl came out of her monologue and stared at Audrey Rose.

"Hi, yes you, sunshine." Everyone at the table stopped talking, utensils held mid-motion.

"Well, don't you agree?"

"Look, just so we can clear all this up, and go on about our business without you dominating the conversation and making everyone wish they were somewhere else, what exactly is it that you are complaining about?"

"I wasn't really complaining, I was just sharing some observations."

Audrey Rose paused, took a large drink of wine. Everyone stared at her, not knowing where else to look.

“It would seem to me that there must be something you want. We are all familiar with your family, your past, what you might want in the future, but what do you want right now?”

“I don’t know.”

“Well, I suggest you figure it out. You’ll never get what you want if you don’t know what it is that you want.”

“I guess I want to find love.”

“You aren’t going to find love if you keep dumping your problems on people you hardly know. Good. I’m glad we’ve cleared that up. I think we should say a Thanksgiving grace. Anyone?” Everyone’s eyes dropped into their plates, anything to not look at Kelly or Audrey Rose. They quickly regained the use of their hands and pushed their food around trying to look busy.

Joe looked up at the wrong moment.

“Thanks for volunteering, Joe.”

Audrey Rose dropped her head in reverence.

“But the meal’s already over.”

Audrey Rose raised her eyes in a stern gaze, “But the day isn’t.”

Heads bowed around the table. Joe cleared his throat. “Um, Thank you for the poor Turkey that gave its life for us, wherever Audrey Rose may have scavenged you from. Thank you for our friends, our lives and for this moment. Amen.”

“Amen,” echoed around the table.

“Now, let’s each say what it is we’re thankful for. Kelly, since we’re already clear that you’re thankful for figuring out what you want, let’s start with Justin.” A couple people

snickered. Audrey Rose got up and re-filled everyone's glass with wine, making sure Mike had another full glass of Coke.

"I guess I'm thankful for not having to cook dinner or clean up." He smiled at his clever attempt to get out of clean-up.

"Julie?"

"I'm thankful to have such considerate roommates." She glared at Justin who let the look bounce off him. "And I'm thankful for having Audrey Rose come into our lives."

"Ken?"

"I'm thankful for finding love in this town." Julie blushed. "And for my family, good food and good friends."

"I'm thankful for Ski Season starting." Joe said feeling proud of himself for coming up with something else to say.

"I'm thankful for another year safely passing." Joe's sister said, keeping her gaze in her lap.

Mike had been fidgeting. They all waited for him. He looked down at the napkin on his lap. "I'm thankful for not having had a drink in five days, for not touching coke or pot or meth in two weeks. I'm thankful I don't feel like throwing up, that the headaches are stopping and that there was at least one person who never gave up hope."

Audrey Rose put down her wine, came behind Mike and put her arms around him, hugging him, her chin resting on his shoulder. She whispered in his ear "I'm thankful you're here."

“A toast.” Audrey Rose called. “To Thanksgiving.” Everyone clinked glasses, then Audrey Rose jumped on the table and began dancing through the plates and messes of gravy and mashed potatoes smushing up through her toes.

Julie rushed to clear the table, then jumped up with her. The guys moved to the couch and turned on the TV. The girls, even Kelly laughed and twirled.

“Oh, I almost forgot the dessert.” Audrey Rose said as she hopped down from the table. She brought the Snicker’s Pie out from the freezer and set it on the counter to thaw. Joe, not realizing how frozen it was, grabbed the pie and smashed it into Justin’s head. The pie cracked and broke into pieces on the floor.

“What the fuck?” Justin jumped up, a huge egg swelling on his head.

Joe was hysterical with laughter, they all were, except for Kelly who had rushed over to him and was inspecting his head, cooing “Poor baby.” Justin shrugged her off and came at Joe.

“I had no idea it was frozen, I swear.”

“I really don’t think he knew,” said Audrey Rose between tears of laughter.

“Forget it.” Justin stormed off to his bedroom, Kelly in tow. When they managed to get themselves together, Audrey Rose’s smile faded.

“But we don’t have any dessert. We need dessert.”

“I think I can help.” Julie pulled out a pumpkin pie with fresh whipped cream out of the crisper drawer.

“When did you...?”

“To be honest,” Julie said, “I wasn’t sure how dinner was going to turn out, so I had a back-up plan.” Audrey Rose grabbed the pie and threatened Julie with it, but sliced it up instead.

When the silence of consumption filled the table, they heard moans from Justin’s room.

“I guess it didn’t hurt that much,” said Joe.

Audrey Rose went around the table giving each person a kiss on the cheek.