

A Thanksgiving Story

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November 19, 1995

Once upon a time there was a farmer, who had worked all his life on the lands of a wealthy landowner. For long years he had planted and sowed and tended and harvested the land, only to see most of the result of his labor go to the rich landowner. One day, the master called the farmer to him and said, "You have been such a good worker, I have decided to give you a farm which will be all your own. The farm over by the foot of the mountain, all its fields and orchards and its little house and barn are now yours."

Now, you would think that the farmer would be overjoyed, to have a farm of his very own. But the truth is that the farmer was very troubled by the gift. He knew about that farm over by the foot of the mountain. True, it had wide fields and large orchards, and a snug little house and a good barn. But it was a farm with a troubled history. For the past one hundred years, no one had been able to live on that farm. In the spring the apple trees bloomed and in the summer, the apples grew round and in the fall they ripened into juicy red fruit. But when it came time to pick the apples, they became spotted, and shriveled up and fell to the ground all rotten. The grain in the fields grew tall and thick and ripened into a rich golden color, and then rotted before it could be harvested. The pigs in the barn ate and ate and ate, and never got fat. And the cows in the barn gave gallons and gallons of milk--every drop of it sour. No one had been able to produce enough food from that farm to live out the year. Every year a new family took custody of the farm, and before the year was out each family was driven off the farm because of hunger. The farmer and his family were the one hundred and first to be given this doubtful gift.

And so it was that one Spring evening, as the sun was setting behind the mountain, and the purple shadows were creeping over the land, and the smell of the apple blossoms was drifting on the air, the farmer stood between his snug little house and his barn, feeling very worried. Speaking to no one, or perhaps to the land, or maybe to himself, the farmer said, "I wish I knew what is wrong with this place. I don't mean any harm to anyone. I just want to earn enough to feed my family. I hope our being here is all right with everyone."

All of a sudden, the wind began to blow, whipping dust into the air and making a curious sighing sound in the trees. And suddenly the farmer heard, or thought he heard a voice. He could not quite make out what it was saying to him, but he was sure he heard a voice, and it sounded angry and threatening. He listened and listened, and when the wind began to die down and the dust fell back to the earth and noise ceased, the farmer speaking to no one in particular, or perhaps to the land, or maybe to himself, said, "Well, then, I'm not quite sure what you said, but it was good to hear from you. Come again any time you like--at harvest time, or at yule-tide of whenever." And the world became very still. The

farmer looked up at the first stars appearing in the sky, and out over the shadowed land, and then walked back to his snug little home.

Well, things went very well that summer. And when the harvest came, things were better than the farmer expected. Sure, most of the apples became spotted, and withered and fell rotten to the ground, but there were a few--several bushels--which were good and firm and could be used over the winter. Sure, most of the grain rotted before it could be harvested, but there was some--a few bagsfull--which was good and would last over the winter. And one of the hogs had actually become fat. And sometimes the milk from the cow was actually sweet. And the farmer knew that if they were very careful about how much they ate at each meal, there would be enough food to last the winter.

He and his wife and children were feeling very comfortable and happy in their home as Yuletide approached. Indeed, the farmer was especially happy. His wife had saved enough to be able to buy him a pair of fine boots. They were such beautiful boots, so shiny and comfortable, that the farmer decided he would never wear them outside. He would wear his old boots to work the farm and then he would come home, and put on his new boots and sit before the fire and see them shine in the firelight.

One evening the farmer was sitting by the fire, watching his children playing on the floor, as his wife put supper on the table. All of a sudden there was a great noise, sounding like a terrible wind, and door burst open. There standing in the door was a very tiny little man. He was about a foot tall and a foot wide and his hair was disheveled and he had a wild look in his eye. "Well," he said, "you invited me and here I am!"

"Oh," said the farmer, "I invited you?" He looked at his wife and at his children who were peeking out from behind her skirt. He looked back at the little man and said, "I invited you! We are about to have some supper. Would you care to join us?"

"Don't mind if I do," said the little man, and in one bound he jumped up on the table. "What's that?" he demanded, pointing to a bowl of food.

"That's boiled beef," said the farmer. "Would you like some?"

"Yes!" said the little man, and he grabbed the meat and swallowed it all.

The farmer watched in amazement. He turned to his wife and asked, "Wife, is there any more beef?"

"No," she said.

"No?" said the farmer.

"No," said the wife.

"What is that?" demanded the little man, pointing at the loaf of bread.

"That is bread--for the whole family," said the farmer. "Would you like *a piece?*"

"Yes!" said the little man and forced the whole loaf into his mouth and swallowed it all.

"Is there any more bread?" the farmer asked his wife.

"No," said the wife.

"No?" said the farmer.

"No," said the wife.

In this way, the little man ate the entire meal intended for the family of four. When he was finished, he turned to the farmer and said, "That was very good. Now I have a gift for you. Come with me right now. Hurry, Hurry, right now."

At that moment, the door swung open without anyone touching it. "Come on right now," urged the little man.

"Can you wait a moment until I change my new boots. You see, it's so muddy and mucky out there and these are the finest boots I..."

"Forget about the boots," cried the little man. "I have a wonderful gift for you. Come! Right now!"

The farmer looked at his new boots. He looked at the open door. He looked at his wife and two children. And then, with shrug he followed the little man through the door, which swung closed behind him.

The little man was running across the field and straight to the barnyard. The farmer followed him. "Oh no," he said to himself, as he stepped into the barnyard and his boot sank into the muck. Another step and his other boot slipped into the muck. The little man chuckled and said, "That was a fresh one wasn't it."

Across the barnyard they ran and right into the barn where the cattle were kept. "There," said the little man, "is my home." And he pointed to a small pin-point of light in the floor of the stable.

"That's a very small hole," said the farmer. "I don't think you could fit in it and I am quite certain I could not."

"Don't be a fool," said the little man. "That's a magic door. Just do this."

And the little man inserted his toe into the hole and with a swish, he was sucked down and out of sight. Well, the farmer had come this far. He looked at his ruined boots. Stuck his toe into the hole, and was suddenly drawn down into a cave under the stable. There

was a table, there was a bed, there was a bright fire burning on the hearth, but there was no smoke from the fire.

"Welcome to my home," said the little man. "Now I have a gift for you." and he brought out an earthen bowl filled with porridge. He handed the bowl and a golden spoon to the farmer.

The farmer stared at the porridge. This was the gift he had ruined his boots to get? "Just what I always wanted," said the farmer, "a bowl of oatmeal."

"Eat it," said the little man.

The farmer dipped the golden spoon into the bowl and just at that moment, something dripped from the ceiling. Looking up, the farmer could see drops forming all over the ceiling. Another fell into his bowl. The farmer looked at the porridge. He sniffed it. "Yuck," he said. "That's muck and mire from the cow shed dripping all over this place!"

"Aha!" shouted the little man. "All day and all night it drips, into my food, onto my table, into my bed, onto my head. For eight hundred and fifty years I lived here and took care of the farm, made sure that it was fruitful and that the crops ripened and the pigs grew fat and the cows gave milk. Then a hundred years ago a farmer build a barn right over my home and for a hundred years this stuff has been dripping on me."

"A hundred years," said the farmer slowly. "So that's why things are the way they are with this farm. Suppose, in the spring, when the ground thaws, I were to move that barn, build a new barn in another place. Would that make you happy? Would that be all right?"

After a moment of reflection, the little man said, "It's a deal" and stuck out his hand. The farmer took the little man's hand and said, "It's a deal!" And then, looking down at his sad boots, he said, "This is truly the finest gift I have ever been given!"

In the spring, the farmer kept his word and moved the barn. And though he never saw him again, he knew the little man had kept his word, for when the apples were ripe, they released themselves to the farmer's hand and remained fresh and firm all winter long. The grain field produced bushels of fine grain. The pigs fattened as if my magic. And the cows give buckets full of milk, half of it cream, some of which churned itself into butter. And all his long life, the farmer was mindful of the little things that live on the earth and under the earth, and how his comfort was tied to their well-being. And every year the farmer would stand between his snug little house and his new barn, as the sun sank below the mountain and the purple shadows crept out over the land, and the smell of apple blossoms blew in the air, and he would say to no one in particular, or perhaps to the land itself, or maybe to himself, "Thank you for all that we have been given."

A Modest Thanksgiving

When I consider the Thanksgiving season,
I am embarrassed to realize how very small, trivial, insignificant
are the things which come to my mind.

I know I should give thanks for the big things
and in some intellectual sense, I do.
I am grateful for Love and Hope and Nourishment
for challenge and ambition and opportunity
for the history out of which we have come
and the tradition in which we stand
and the occasional glimpse of what we shall be
for all the people whose lives are woven into mine
and who, all unknowing, make my life possible.

For all of this I am truly grateful.
But there are moments
when I am startled into thanksgiving
a gratitude deeper than words
that shakes me to my very core.
Most often, it is occasioned
by something small, modest, common and ordinary.

In the morning
I stand in the shower
the splash of warm water
spilling over me,
cleansing me and renewing me.
I am suddenly aware
of the curving feel of a fresh cake of soap
nestled in my hand
and an unexpected sense of being blessed
washes over my being.

Sitting quietly, reading
I am gradually aware
of the steady sound of the clock on the wall
ticking away the unvarying moments of the day and the night
knitting together past and present and future.
And I am grateful to the wise person
who, creating battery powered clocks,
chose not to eliminate the steady, redundant
tick-tock sound of time's passage.
What wisdom and restraint!
I walk into the living room and there
on the freshly vacuumed carpet
one bright red leaf

tracked in from the outdoors
which will not be tamed and caged and kept in its place--
an unbidden reminder that despite centuries of culture
we are still rooted in the natural world,
still enveloped in its cycles
still caught in its endless patterns of turning and returning.

I smile at the small white asters
which cluster around the tree trunks
in the front lawn,
and the mushrooms which spring up after rain,
reminding me of the persistent patterns
which underlie and resist our efforts at structure and control.

Outside my window
a flock of small brown birds
makes a home in the tall, unsightly bush
which borders the drive.
Summer and winter they are there
chattering and fluttering and sweeping in and out.
I would like to cut down that bush,
or trim it back severely,
and surely my neighbors would applaud the effort.
But where would the birds go?
Summer and winter it is their home.
They flutter by the window,
reminding me I am steward, not owner,
that power does not confer right,
that the arena of duty and obligation
is large and inescapable.

I am stirred by the young and the vulnerable--
the little gray kitten playing with a bright red pod
until, weary, it seeks out its friend and surrogate mother,
a small, taffy-colored dog.
Lying securely in the curve of the dog's body
the kitten sleeps while the dog keeps watch.

And the children,
everywhere the children:
in shopping malls
and on the streets,
resting trustfully in their parent's arms,
lying quietly in strollers,
trotting along beside adults,
eyes wide and bright,

intelligent and trusting,
welcoming the world in all its confusion and complexity.
I watch them
and remember the child I was and still am,
and I try to see the world as they see it,
new and bright and full of hope.
And in their presence I am renewed.

And I am moved by the elders,
those whose eyes have seen more pain and disappointment
than anyone can guess
and who still embrace life with courage
and greet each morning with expectation.
They teach me that life is its own meaning,
that there is no greater good
than life and the living of it.

My thanksgiving is a modest thing:
rooted in the common and the ordinary.
My thanksgiving is a modest thing:
rooted in the here and now.
My thanksgiving is a modest thing:
rooted in a faith that in every moment
is beauty and glory and blessing enough
to astound God almighty and strike a horde of angels dumb.