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Green Gables

LESLIE JOHNSON

THANKSGIVING HAD ALWAYS BEEN THEIR HOLIDAY. Bethany and her father. As a kid she used to spend two weeks with him every summer and then Thanksgiving. At some point in her teenage years she gave up the mid-July visits in favor of her summer job and friends, but Thanksgivings she continued to drive to Worcester, even as an adult. She was thirty-four years old, and hadn't missed a Thanksgiving with him yet.

It was their holiday, and they spent it quietly: a walk around her father's neighborhood in the late morning; a two o'clock dinner at Green Gables, a shadowy restaurant with miniature lanterns on each table and trellises twined with fake roses along the walls; and an old movie in the late afternoon—whatever was playing on TCM—before they went to their separate rooms to read. Bethany liked it that way. Just the two of them.

But this year, two weeks before Thanksgiving, she got an e-mail from her father informing her that his *lady friend* would be joining them this year. *Just letting you know*. A lady friend named Trish. Bethany sat down in one of the plastic chairs by the vending machine outside of her office, and stared for a minute at her phone, shocked, before hitting Reply. *Okay Dad see u soon*. Send. She bought some Skittles and sat down again. She decided to text Edward, asking if he wanted to go with her to Thanksgiving at her dad's house.

She waited. In a couple of minutes her phone rang. Edward didn't like texting, unless he was trying to get through to one of his kids.

"Thanksgiving! Wow."

“Unless you’ve got plans,” she said. “With your kids and all.”

“No. I’m Christmas and New Year’s. Claire is Thanksgiving and Christmas Eve.”

“I mean, it’s no big deal or anything. Nothing fancy. I just thought, you know, if you wanted to.”

He hesitated. Then, “Sure! Great! Thanksgiving!”

She poured Skittles into her mouth, and chewed the big wad of them while she e-mailed her dad again. *Also letting u know I’ll be bringing my boyfriend.* Send.

Was Edward her boyfriend? She’d met him in a noontime yogalates class at the university rec center. Bethany worked in the admissions office; Edward was a political science professor. He’d asked her to go contra dancing with him at a Congregational church. “Really good cardio,” he’d said, and Bethany wasn’t positive it was even a date, but then they stopped for a beer afterward. That was over three months ago, and now it had become assumed that they’d have dinner together on Fridays (usually Thai, but twice now Edward had cooked for her with ingredients he picked out himself at a farmer’s market). They’d slept together three times, each time at Bethany’s place, but he had never stayed the whole night. He said he liked his “morning routine,” which in Bethany’s mind made the whole thing questionable. But still. She’d invited him for Thanksgiving.

The Friday before Thanksgiving, Edward was quiet at dinner, which wasn’t usual. Usually he had a topic right from the get-go, something from the news, from one of those international journals that Bethany had never heard of before. Tonight he didn’t say much. He was poking at his Pad Thai with his chopsticks, and his nose was wrinkly.

Bethany said, “What? Is the chicken funny? Weird-tasting-funny?”

He sighed. He said there was something he should probably tell her.

Ninety percent of chicken you buy at the grocery store has some kind of salmonella stuff on it, Bethany told him. She’d read it. Or maybe seventy percent. Still, seventy percent! In a news magazine. Then she balanced her chopsticks on her rice bowl and sat back with her arms crossed, waiting to get broken up with.

He said, “It might be inappropriate for me to tell you, but I think I should

err on the side of ethicality and tell you rather than hold back and err on the side of propriety.”

He smiled wanly and pushed his hair behind his ear. He was wearing it loose tonight, and Bethany liked the wavy way it fell to the neckline of his faded black T-shirt. He was kind of old, but he could get away with it.

“Okay,” Bethany said. “Shoot.”

He told her he’d had a vasectomy. After his second daughter was born. He and Claire knew their family was complete, and since she’d been the one to deal with birth control before they had their kids, they’d agreed it was only fair for him to go ahead with it. He’d never imagined at the time that she’d...that they’d separate.

Bethany said, “Oh...Huh.”

He looked her earnestly in the eye. “I don’t think I’d ever choose to reverse it, and for some women, young women who haven’t had kids yet, it could be a deal breaker, so I wanted to tell you. Sooner, that is, rather than later. As a courtesy.”

Bethany picked up her chopsticks, stabbed at a clump of sticky rice. “Not that...”

“Oh, God, no!” Edward jumped right in, his smile wider now. “Not that I’m assuming anything! Not that I’m assuming you would want to have kids with me! Not at all! It’s just—”

“*Awk-ward!*” Bethany chimed, smiling back at him, trying to let them both off the hook. This whole thing was her fault. It was the stupid Thanksgiving thing. She shouldn’t have invited him. It was too soon. It made her look needy, or overstepping or something. But what was done was done.

“Seriously,” she said. “Thanks for telling me.”

“I try to live life as an open and trustworthy person.”

“You *are* open. You *are* trustworthy.”

“Thanks for saying so. That’s important to me. Thank you.”

“Thank *you*,” Bethany said.

She waved to the waitress for more tea. They smiled at each other, Bethany and Edward, over the little warm ceramic cups that they cradled in their hands. Okay, so it’s ruined, Bethany thought. Not because of the vasectomy but because of Thanksgiving. She didn’t know how she knew, but she knew, like a premonition. Ruined, and it was too late now to fix it. She could tell.

Edward was eating with appetite now, seemingly relieved, and talking in

between bites about NSA phone surveillance, protection versus privacy, and Bethany nodded or squinted randomly in reply. You could uninvite people from a lot of things, she was thinking, but not Thanksgiving. Thanksgiving seemed to Bethany like one of those things you couldn't really uninvite someone to.

Wednesday night, the night before Thanksgiving, Edward slept at Bethany's. They were getting up extra early to drive from Connecticut to Massachusetts, so it only made sense, Edward decided, for him to stay over. Bethany's apartment was closer to the freeway, and she'd offered to drive. She woke up before the alarm, and watched Edward sleeping for a while, thinking that it was like a thing from a movie, the way she was watching him sleep. She imagined a camera angle from above that showed the whole bed and the interesting antique lamp on her bedside table and her blondish hair fanned on the pillow and both of their bodies tastefully draped in Bethany's cream-colored sheets as she lightly kissed his shoulder, and it bothered her that she was thinking against her will about the movie thing. She kissed his shoulder again, this time really concentrating on just his actual shoulder. It was not muscular but it was not weak, either. He did not only yagalates but also Tai Chi, and she traced the sinew of his bicep with her index finger. He opened his eyes and tilted his head to smile at her, and she thought maybe it wasn't too late after all. Maybe it wasn't ruined. Maybe that had just been her own mind jumping to depressing conclusions that weren't founded in reality.

Would you adopt? That's what she wanted to ask him all of a sudden. Maybe they could be one of those couples with a baby girl from China or a baby boy from Guatemala, or from anywhere, really. It didn't matter to Bethany. Could they go together to a sperm bank? Bethany didn't know what the deal was with sperm banks—where they were or what they looked like. Were they in medical buildings, or just wherever? Could they go to one and pick out sperm from a sperm donor and no one except Claire would know that the child they were expecting was not biologically his, and even if they did know, so what?

She didn't ask him. She said, "Do you like to drink coffee in the morning? Or tea?"

During the car trip—when they stopped for gas and a Starbucks and found a radio station they both liked and laughed together at the Britishy voice on Bethany's GPS that she used whenever she drove on the freeways even if she

knew where she was going—it felt to Bethany like they were a couple. The day before, she'd gone with him to Whole Foods to buy the ingredients for his homemade cranberry sauce, and Bethany had held the basket while he picked things.

Her father had e-mailed her a few days earlier to let her know they wouldn't be going to Green Gables this year. Trish didn't believe in eating at restaurants on Thanksgiving. Reading the message, Bethany had felt a twist of longing for the familiar comfort of the dimly lit restaurant, the florets of cold butter served on a small plate next to a basket of soft white rolls, the stale pastel mints you could serve yourself with tiny silver tongs from a candy dish in the lobby on your way out. Edward, though, was in complete agreement with Trish. *Of course* you couldn't go out to eat on *Thanksgiving*.

They arrived at her father's modest brick house by 10:30. Bethany knocked on the door while Edward, holding his Whole Foods tote, stood at attention beside her. The door flung open; a small girl with frizzy dark hair and caramel-brown skin stood before them. She wore pink tights and a purple skirt and a sweatshirt with one of the Disney princesses on it. Bethany found herself staring at the Disney face, trying to remember which one of the princesses was Chinese. What was her name? The little girl shrieked, sort of in between a laugh and a scream, then stuck out her tongue and slammed the door.

"Wow," said Edward.

Bethany felt her heart rev, afraid that maybe she'd missed an e-mail from her father somewhere along the line telling her that he'd moved to a completely different place. But no, no, that couldn't be.

The door opened again, and there was her father. The little girl was wrapped around his leg, her face hidden against his trousers. This was Kayla, they were told. This was Trish's granddaughter. Did you say hello, Kayla? He opened the door wider, trying to swing his leg with Kayla attached out of their way.

"Happy Thanksgiving!" Edward said, offering his free hand in greeting. Bethany's father complied. Introductions were made. Kayla detached herself and screeched, "Ooblie ooblie ooblie to you-blie!" before running away.

Bethany's father chuckled. "What a stitch, ey? That little one is quite a stitch."

He led them to the kitchen, where Trish was mixing Stouffer's stuffing in a casserole dish. She turned to them, wiping her hands on her checkered apron.

Introductions were repeated. Bethany could hear the muffled sound of Kayla thumping on something in one of the bedrooms as the four adults stood beneath the overhead kitchen light, taking each other in. Her father placed his hand on the small of Trish's back. She was attractive: petite with blondish-silver hair and soft cheeks just beginning to jowl along her jaw. Her father looked the same as always: tall and slumped shouldered in one of the autumn-hued sweaters he always wore for Thanksgiving, bald and clean-shaven, smelling of the same piney aftershave he'd always used, wearing the same style of glasses with brown plastic frames. Bethany was sure that both of them were trying not to noticeably react to Edward's ponytail, streaked with gray and tied with a strip of leather. If her father had questions about Edward's age or status, Bethany could count on him not to ask. Her father generally kept his questions and opinions to himself. He'd always been that way: quiet, undemonstrative. But Bethany could always tell when he disapproved. His nostrils lifted, as if sniffing spoiled food. He was doing it now.

After a few minutes of small talk, Edward unloaded his groceries on the counter: gnarly roots of ginger, green apple, cumin, multiple bags of fresh cranberries.

"Well *that* looks like a lot of trouble!" Trish exclaimed.

Bethany and her father sat on the kitchen stools watching Edward meticulously mince and chop while Trish opened boxes: Potato Buds, gravy mix, canned green beans and Pepperidge Farm apple pie. Bethany saw Edward wincing at the frozen pie.

"Do you have flour and butter?" Edward asked. "I could put a fresh crust together."

Trish fluttered one hand at him. "*Believe* me. Homemade's never as good as Pepperidge Farm."

Edward moved to the sink to wash his berries. Every once in a while Kayla would leap into the room with her frizzy hair bobbing wildly and stick out her tongue at one of the adults and dash out again.

"Where are her parents?" Bethany asked.

Bethany's father answered, "Well now."

"Her mother's in rehab. Down in Florida." Trish didn't turn around from the microwave, but her voice sounded perfectly chipper. "Doing really super with it, too. And the father? We don't know where in the world *he* is and we don't *want*

to know! Right, hon?” She flashed a smile over her shoulder at Bethany’s father.

“Right, sweetie. Darn tootin’!” He continued to smile toward Trish even after she turned back to the microwave to stir at something inside with a plastic spoon.

Sweetie? Darn tootin’? Bethany stared at her father, sliding her jaw sideways, but he didn’t seem to notice. She stood up. It was time, wasn’t it, for the annual Thanksgiving walk around the neighborhood? Her father stood up, too, but Kayla burst back into the kitchen and lunged for his leg, sitting on his shoe and wrapping her limbs around his calf. “Ho there!” he said, and lifted his hands, to show Bethany his helplessness. She took the walk alone. Later she helped set the table and fill glasses with tap water. In the kitchen, Edward was trying to convince Trish to let him make gravy from the drippings in the turkey pan, but *why*, Trish wanted to know, when Banquet gravy mix was so easy and delicious?

The whole time, as far as Bethany observed, Edward had been perfectly pleasant, and he remained pleasant during dinner, although occasionally he pressed his lips together and slightly shook his head, for instance when asked to shift his chair down to the very corner of the table so Kayla could have a clear view of Nickelodeon cartoons on the television screen; it was the only way, Trish explained, they could get her to sit at the table for even a few minutes. No one except Bethany even sampled Edward’s cranberry sauce, opting instead for the Ocean Spray jelly that Trish passed around. “I like smooth food,” Kayla declared loudly. “Not lumpy-thingy food.” Those were the first human words Bethany had heard the child speak, and she was surprised at the clarity of her pronunciation. Every now and then Bethany stared across the table at Edward, waiting for him to glance up so she could give him a look of commiserating solidarity. Was it her imagination, or was he purposely avoiding eye contact?

Within minutes, it seemed, Kayla and Trish and Bethany’s father were finished eating.

“That was delicious, sweetie,” said Bethany’s father.

Trish nodded. “I’m good at Thanksgiving food. Everyone’s always said so. And it’s so easy.”

Bethany’s father and Trish both pushed their chairs back from the table and breathed, giving their stomachs air. Kayla was vigorously stirring the uneaten food on her plate into a pinkish-brown stew. Bethany could see the clenching of Edward’s jaw as he stabbed one of his gingered cranberries and brought it

to his mouth. She watched him as he slowly chewed, deliberately swallowed. She took another bite of the cranberry sauce, too, to be supportive, although she found its taste on the bitter side. He should have used regular sugar, she thought, instead of that agave nectar from Whole Foods.

“So, what are you thankful for today, Kayla?” Edward said suddenly, startling the rest of them. Trish and Bethany’s father jerked their shoulders a bit in unison, and Bethany coughed on her mouthful of cranberry. At the sound of her name, Kayla stopped stirring for a moment.

“We’re so fortunate here, all of us,” Edward continued. “Here in the land of plenty. You can think of at least one thing, can’t you Kayla? One thing you’re thankful for?”

Bethany wondered if that was how Edward sounded in his political science classes at the university—over-enunciating, with insistence or exasperation. He said, “My girls used to always be able to think of lots of things when they were your age, Kayla.”

“Bloobie-bah-bah!” Kayla said and jumped off her booster seat and hopped on one foot to the television in the family room, standing inches close to it. The adults all swiveled their heads to look at her silhouetted in a stork pose against the widescreen.

“It’s a tradition,” Edward said, “in many families. To go around and say what you’re thankful for.”

“We never really did that,” Bethany mumbled.

Between dinner and dessert, the adults retired to the small formal living room.

“You got a new couch!” Bethany exclaimed to her father, running her hand against the nubby beige upholstery.

“And new carpeting and draperies, too,” Trish said.

“Trish helped me match everything,” he said. He touched Trish’s knee, beside him on the love seat, as if confirming she was really there, Bethany thought, not a dream too good to be true.

“If you want a classy look,” Trish said, “just stick with neutrals.”

They all settled back in their seats. When Bethany’s father turned on the living room television, Bethany was glad, actually, hoping for something good on TCM, maybe an old Katherine Hepburn or Alfred Hitchcock like they used to enjoy watching together, but then Kayla raced into the room and snatched

the remote from his hands. Nobody said anything while the girl switched cable channels over and over again, making some noise with her lips that sounded like “puh, puh, puh, puh.” Edward looked at Trish and Bethany’s father, back and forth between them, waiting, Bethany could tell, for one of them to do something. Bethany could see the tendons in Edward’s neck harden like chopsticks under his skin. Kayla kept flipping the channels, and then Edward walked out of the room with overly brisk steps that made Bethany think for a moment that maybe he was leaving her there. But no, no he wouldn’t do that.

He returned holding a half-empty bag of his left-over cranberries. He said, “I’ve got a game!” Before Kayla could see it coming, Edward darted his long arm over her curly head and grabbed the remote. The TV zapped off, and Kayla’s body seized as if she’d been pronged with a stun gun.

“I was *watching!*” she screeched.

“No you weren’t.” Edward snapped the words at her, and he stuck the remote in the back pocket of his jeans. Kayla’s arms, akimbo, remained frozen in the air, but her mouth fell open in silent outrage. “It’s a fun game,” Edward continued, smiling insistently, “but more than that, it’s a Native American game, so it’s awesome for Thanksgiving!”

Kayla covered her ears with her hands as Edward explained the rules, which involved hiding the cranberries around the room and assigning everyone a role such as the hider and the finder and the clue giver and the chanter. The Native Americans usually played with small stones or kernels of dried corn, but cranberries were just as good, Edward said. Right? Nobody else answered, so Bethany said, “Sure.”

Kayla got to be the first hider, Edward said with forceful enthusiasm, even though she was squatting now with her face between her knees. Edward turned around to the wall and covered his eyes with both hands and began singing in a low, sonorous tone. “*E-ya, ha-e, ha-e, tha...E-ya, ha-e, ha-e, tha...*”

“She’s not doing it,” Bethany cut in. “She’s not hiding them.”

“Then you be the hider, hon. Get us started, and Kayla will join in.” Edward didn’t turn around or uncover his eyes. He started chanting again. He was swaying a little to the rhythm of his own voice, his weight shifting foot to foot. Bethany felt her cheeks go warm. She got up and reached into the plastic bag of cranberries on the coffee table, gathered a few in her palm, glancing around the room. Then Kayla took one from the bag, too, and threw it on the floor and

stepped on it, grinding the toe of her sneaker.

When Edward stopped chanting and turned around, Kayla lifted her foot and took three steps backward. Everyone looked at the blood-red spot.

“Gracious,” murmured Trish. “Why would someone give *cranberries* to a child in a room with new taupe carpeting?”

When Bethany looked at her father, she saw the familiar arch of his rising nostrils, directed not at Kayla, or Trish, but at Edward. Kayla wailed and threw herself on the floor. “I didn’t *know!*” Kayla shrieked. “It was an *accident!*” Her eyes squeezed shut and her hands clenched into fists at her chest. Her legs in their pink tights turned rigid, and then she started beating her heels up and down on the floor.

And within an instant, it seemed to Bethany, her father was on the carpet beside Kayla, crouched on his knees, his hands hovering in the air above her like a Reiki master, murmuring, “Sweetie, now, it’s all right sweetie. Nobody’s angry, don’t feel bad, sweetie.” He leaned close to her ear, the ceiling light reflecting a shiny circle on the top of his bald head. Bethany saw Kayla’s body relax to limpness as the child started to whimper, and her father gathered the little girl in his arms and carried her back to the family room. Bethany could hear him adjusting the channel on the family room television, getting her settled, his footsteps moving into the kitchen and back, probably bringing Kayla some kind of snack.

When he returned to the living room, Trish said wasn’t it time for dessert? It must be! The four of them ate the Pepperidge Farm pie on dessert-size Chinette plates while a dishtowel saturated with cold seltzer was left to soak on the carpet stain.

At the door, saying their goodbyes, thank yous were given and repeated all around. Thanks for the lovely meal. Thanks for making the drive. What about some leftovers? Take some turkey and Stouffers to heat up in the microwave when you get home! Oh, thanks, but no thanks, we already ate so much. Thanks anyway. Well, thanks for coming.

“What a dismal way those people live,” Edward said after they drove through her father’s neighborhood in silence and entered the freeway.

“Well...” Bethany let her voice trail off, expecting Edward to jump back in with something. Something reassuring, maybe, or something humorous. How about that Banquet gravy, she almost said, just to get some banter started, but

she didn't. She turned her head and looked out the car window. She was thinking about the way her father had swooped Kayla up in his arms, whispering to her with plaintive urgency. *Don't cry, sweetie.* His own voice almost trembling. Bethany could not remember hearing such a tone in her father's voice before. He'd always believed in remaining calm and staying out of things, letting people solve their own problems, letting children learn from their own mistakes.

As a child herself, Bethany remembered, before her parents' divorce, she'd gone through a phase of throwing tantrums. Bethany's mother, the volatile one, tried alternate approaches: pleading and soothing, shouting and slapping. *She's going to hurt herself, Lyle! For godssakes do something!* As Bethany thrashed herself around on their living room floor, her father always just stood there, neutral and unmoving. *She'll tire herself out. Let her stew in her own juices.* As Bethany got older, she came to respect her father's steadiness and reserve. She relied on it. Especially when her mother shipped her to Worcester for the whole summer she was sixteen, pregnant and angry and heartbroken. Her mother had been practically hysterical, but her father had never once raised his voice at her. He'd hired a stranger from a home-nursing company to drive her to her consultation and abortion and follow up appointments, which Bethany appreciated at the time. She didn't want to talk about it, any of it, and he'd let her be. At the end of August, she'd returned to New Jersey for her junior year of high school. "Okay," he'd said at the airport. And she'd said, "Okay."

When did her father change? When did he become emotional? Bethany wondered. Was it just because of Trish, or was it just from getting older? She looked at Edward's profile, his eyes deliberately on the road. His lips held in an even line. His index fingers tapping evenly to a James Taylor song on the oldies station. She sighed, and if he heard her, he didn't acknowledge it. She'd been right after all. It was ruined now between them. They weren't going to be a couple, and she didn't want to have Thai food with him anymore on Fridays. She didn't blame him. What he really wanted, probably, was his old family back. Claire and his girls. He wished he could be sitting with them around the fireplace right now, next to a fire he'd tended to with his own hands, nibbling on homemade Thanksgiving leftovers. He wanted what he couldn't have anymore. Bethany could understand that. She thought, randomly, of that little silver dish of after-dinner mints at Green Gables, a chalky sweetness dissolving on her tongue.

Contributors

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