

Christmas turkey

Mário de Andrade

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Our first Christmas as a family after my father's death five years earlier had significant consequences our family happiness. We had always been familiarly happy in that vague sense of happiness – we were honest people, no crimes, a home without quarrels or severe economic trouble. However, due mainly to the gloomy character of my father, a creature who lacked any lyricism at all, of an exemplary incapacity, well-seated in mediocrity, we had never fully enjoyed life nor had any taste for material happiness – good wine, a water resort, the acquisition of a refrigerator, things like that. My father had been mistakenly right in an almost dramatic way, the number-one, pure-bred dullard.

When my father died, we felt sorry, etc. When Christmastime came around, I couldn't wait to get rid of the dead man's obstructive memory which seemed to have systematized forever the obligation of a painful remembrance at every lunch, in every single family gesture. Once I suggested that mother go see a movie. The result was tears. How could one go the movies in deep mourning? Grief was already being cultivated for the sake of appearances. I had always liked my father only moderately well, more out of filial instinct than a feeling of spontaneous love, and was on the verge of disturbing any good memory of the dead man.

This was probably the reason I came up with one of my so-called crazy ideas. Early on in my life this had been my splendid conquest against the family environment. From the time I was a young boy at school, where I managed to flunk every year; since I secretly kissed a cousin when I was ten and was found out by Old Aunt, an execrable hag; and especially from the time I gave lessons to or received them from, I am not sure, a relative's maid – I had obtained in the reformatory of my home and among our long list of relatives the conciliatory

reputation of being "insane". "The poor boy is crazy," they would say. My parents would say it with a certain condescending sadness, while the rest of the family looked for an example for their children, probably with the pleasure of those who are convinced of their superiority. There were no signs of insanity in their children. It was this very reputation that saved me. I did everything that life offered me and which my being demanded to fulfill my soul. And I was allowed to do it because I was crazy, poor boy. The result was an existence without any complexes, of which I cannot complain.

Christmas dinner had always been a family tradition. A spare dinner, as one can expect – a dinner just like my father: Brazilian nuts, figs, raisins, after midnight mass. Stuffed with almonds and walnuts (how we, the three brothers, argued over the nutcracker...), stuffed with Brazilian nuts and monotonies, we would then hug each other and go to our beds. It was while I remembered all of this that I came up with one of my "crazy ideas".

"I want turkey for Christmas."

There was such consternation, you cannot imagine. Soon my saintly single aunt, who lived with us, warned us that we could not invite anyone because of our mourning period.

"Who said anything about inviting anyone? It's always the same thing. When did we ever eat turkey in our lives? We have always had turkey as a festive dish, all those relatives from hell showing up..."

"Don't say that, son..."

"Who's to stop me?"

And I spilled all my cold indifference for our countless relatives of *bandeirante* ancestry, as they say, who cares! It was time to magnify the old theory of lunacy, the poor boy, and I wasted no time. I was hit by a sudden surge of affection for my mother and auntie, my two mothers, three with my sister, the three mothers who made my life divine. It was always the same – somebody's birthday would come up and only then turkey would be prepared at home. Turkey was a dish for parties – a vile band of relatives, prepared by tradition, would invade our house because of the turkey, the pies and sweets. My three mothers, three days before the party had no other life except working, working at preparing finely made sweets and cold plates, all those relatives would devour it all and still take small packages home to those who had not come. My three mothers could barely stand on their legs out of exhaustion. The turkey was reduced to a leftover of bones, of which mother and auntie would taste a morsel of the leg the next day, a vague dark piece lost amidst the white rice. It was mother herself who served, picking out everything for her old man and children. In fact, nobody really knew what turkey was like in our family, party-leftover turkey.

No, we wouldn't invite anyone; it would be turkey for the five of us, five people. And we would have two kinds of *farofa*, the fatty kind with giblets, and

the dry one, golden-brown with lots of butter. I wanted the crop stuffed with only the fatty kind, along with plums, nuts and a glass of sherry, just as I had learned with Rose, my very close friend. I evidently omitted where I had learned the recipe, but they all suspected. They all had that air of incense in the wind, wasn't it the devil's work to enjoy such a tasty dish? And very cold beer, I assured them, almost yelling. Of course, with my taste refined outside the home, I had at first thought of a good wine, very French. But affection for mother won over the craziness, mother loved beer.

When I finished reporting my plans, I noticed all were extremely happy, with a strong desire to carry out the insane proposal that had burst from my lips. They knew it was madness, but they imagined I alone was the one who wanted it all. There could be no easier way to place on me ... the guilt for their huge desires. They looked at each other smiling, like shy, lost doves, until my sister expressed the general consensus:

"He's nuts!"

The turkey was bought, prepared, etc. And after a midnight mass that was carried out as carelessly as possible, our most wonderful Christmas took place. It was funny – as soon as I came up with the idea that I was finally about to make mother eat turkey, I could do nothing else but think about her, feel affection for her, love my sweet, old lady. And my siblings were also taken by the same violent rhythm of love, all dominated by the new happiness that the turkey was impressing onto the family. Thus, still disguising my real intentions, I let mother carve the turkey's chest. For a moment, she stopped, having sliced part of the bird's chest, almost giving in to those laws of economy that had always stupefied her to the point of senseless semi-poverty.

"No, ma'am, cut it all! I myself could eat the whole thing!"

It was a lie. Familial love was so alight in me that I was incapable of eating much, to allow the others to eat more. And all the others carried the same tune. That turkey that we alone were eating in the heart of the family had revealed in each of us what daily life had completely smothered: love, motherly affection, filial affection. God forgive me, but I'm thinking of Jesus ... In that house of quite modest bourgeois people, a miracle worthy of God's Christmas was taking place. The turkey chest was reduced entirely to big slices.

"I can serve it!"

He's really crazy, for why would he serve if it was always mother who served in that house! Amidst laughter, the big, full dishes were brought to me, and I commenced a heroic distribution, while I asked my brother to serve the beer. I readily took an admirable piece of the skin, full of fat, and placed it on a dish. And, after that, I took big, white slices. Mother's voice, now in a severe tone, cut the nerve-racking space of time in which everyone yearned for his piece of the turkey:

"Remember your brothers, Juca!"

How could she imagine, poor dear, that that was her dish, my mother, my ill-treated friend, who knew about Rose, about my crimes, to whom I only managed to inform what could make her suffer! The dish was sublime.

"Mother, this is yours! Don't pass it around!"

At this exact moment she could no longer take so much commotion and started to cry. My aunt also, as soon as she realized the next sublime dish would be hers, joined the chorus of tears. And my sister, who had never seen a tear drop without starting to cry herself, broke down effusively. I then started to spurt out a number of insolent comments, so that I would not start to cry as well. I was only nineteen... What a hellishly foolish family, who ever saw such a thing, the sight of turkey making you cry! Things like that. Everyone made an effort to smile, but it was at this moment that happiness really became impossible. For the weeping had evoked by association the undesirable image of my dead father. My father, with his gray appearance, came to ruin our Christmas forever. I was furious.

Well, we started to eat silently, mournfully, and the turkey was perfect. The tender meat, of very light material, flowed joyfully amidst the flavors of *farofas* and ham, now and then nudged, disturbed and re-desired, through the most violent intervention of the plums and the petulant nuisance of the nutmeg. But, Father was sitting there, gigantic, incomplete, a criticism, a wound, an incapacity. And the turkey, so tasty... Mother finally realizing that turkey was in fact a dish worthy of the newborn Jesus.

An unscrupulous battle began between the turkey and Father's figure. I thought that by praising the turkey, I would strengthen it in the fight and, of course, I sided with the turkey. But dead people have their disgusting, very hypocritical means to win: I had hardly finished praising the bird when Father's figure loomed victoriously, unbearably obstructive.

"If only your father were here..."

I could no longer eat, I could no longer enjoy the perfect turkey, so involved was I in that battle between those two dead creatures. I began to hate my father. And I do not know where the brilliant inspiration came from, but suddenly I was hypocritical, political. At that moment, which now to me seems decisive for my family, I apparently sided with my father. I pretended, sadly:

"Yes... But Father who loved us so dearly and died from working so hard for us, Father up in heaven, must be very happy." I hesitated, but decided not to mention the turkey any longer. "Happy to see us all together, as a family."

And so everyone started calmly to talk about Father. His image began to fade, become smaller and smaller, until it became a little star shining in the sky. Now everybody ate the turkey with sensuousness, because Father was very kind, had always sacrificed so much of himself for us, he was a saint who "you, my

children, will never be able to repay". A saint, Father became a saint, a pleasant vision, a non-obtrusive little star in the sky. He could no longer hinder anybody; he was the pure object of calm contemplation. The only dead present was the turkey, dominating, fully victorious.

My mother, my aunt, all of us, were drunk with joy. I was going to write "gustative happiness", but it was not only that. It was a tremendous joy, a love of all, a forgetfulness of any other relationship that could distract us from our family's great love. And it was, I know that it was, that first turkey eaten in the heart of the family, the beginning of a new love, recomposed, more complete, richer and more inventive, more obliging and caring of itself. A family happiness was then born that, I am not an exclusivist, some may feel just as big, but I can't think of one more intense than ours.

Mother ate so much turkey that for a moment I thought it would make her sick. But then, I thought, oh, so be it! She might even die, but at least once in her life she ate real turkey! Our infinite love had transported me to such a level of lack of egoism ... Later came some soft grapes and sweets, called "well-married" in my nook of the woods. But not even this dangerous term was associated to the memory of my father, who the turkey had already converted into dignity, into the right thing, into a pure cult of contemplation.

We stood up. It was almost two o'clock, everybody was happy and tipsy because of the two bottles of beer. Everybody would go to bed, sleep, or toss and turn, it doesn't matter, because a happy insomnia is a good thing. The problem was that Rose, who was Catholic before being Rose, had promised to wait for me with a bottle of champagne. To go out I lied, I said I was going to a friend's party, then kissed Mother and winked at her, my way of telling her where I was going and making her suffer her bit. The other two women I kissed without a wink. And now, to Rose!