

Thanksgiving

By Michael William Hogan

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Thirty-one kids and fifteen adults crowded into my parents' tiny basement to celebrate Thanksgiving on November 28, 1992. It was loud. It was chaotic. And an entire third-world country could have been fed with all the food carried down from the kitchen that day. My plump cousin Benny was the star of the show, sneaking off to the garage with two mince-meat pies and gobbling them down before dinner had even started. Not that he was without competition. All our kin tend to be big eaters and had the batteries not lost their juice in Uncle Earl's video camera, he could have taped a superb documentary on gluttony.

But, even that raucous mob would have made Emily Post proud compared to what I am witnessing on this Thanksgiving Day twenty years later. The ravenous frenzy with which the tribe before me attacks their meal is truly a sight to behold. I haven't counted how many are here; for it doesn't really matter. I am, however, acutely aware of the lack of table manners, not to mention the odd scarcity of side dishes.

"Papa", a moniker I've attached to the obvious patriarch, is systematically slicing sizeable slabs of meat from one thigh. A picture of impatience, "Grandma" elbows her

way to the opposite side of the carcass and greedily rips off an entire leg. I find the accompanying sounds of the tendons and ligaments tearing from the bones nearly unbearable.

The children seem to know enough to stay clear of the elders; though I did notice one of the young girls snatch a chunk of breast—still covered with crispy charred skin—from her mother's hand when she turned her head. One lad seems quite content to scramble around and pick up whatever scraps might fall to the ground. With all the meat flying here and there, I am confident he'll get his fill.

I can almost chuckle at the irony of this moment. Just one month ago, my girlfriend Sally talked me into spending our Thanksgiving break exploring the rain forests of Brazil. With the usual sense of immortality possessed by most humans our age, we elected to avoid the high-priced packaged expeditions designed to provide elitist tourists with all the comforts and security of home. Instead, we loaded our backpacks into an authentic hollowed-out canoe and set off alone from a small village in Western Brazil. We were to follow our map along the long and winding Amazon River valley, much of which has never been thoroughly explored.

The trip was meant to give Sally—an anthropology major—a taste of the indigenous peoples of the Amazon watershed, while providing me—a budding novelist—with fodder for future *New York Times* best sellers. Taste and fodder were achieved soon enough. Just not the way we had envisioned.

We quickly lost our way and, after many days paddling in and out of tree-lined tributaries, we found ourselves tired, hungry and surrounded by several dozen bronze-skinned Amazonians armed with efficient little blow guns. The tiny darts propelled from these weapons of minor destruction felt a lot like bee stings. And, in retrospect, it is oh so unfortunate that their poison was not lethal. For, upon becoming impaled by several projectiles each, Sally and I both fell to the floor of our canoe completely paralyzed, but very much alive.

There was much celebration—at least from what I could hear, being unable to raise my head—as we were lifted onto shore and carried through the jungle for what seemed like hours. I must say that, while all the time terrified, I did find their rhythmic chanting mysteriously pleasant, though not quite comforting. When we finally arrived at

what must be their village I, and assumedly Sally as well, was unceremoniously dropped to the ground on my back. This left my still paralyzed gaze facing skyward, though I never really saw the sky. What I did see was one face after another hover over me, each taking a brief turn at staring into my motionless eyes. This disturbed me as much as it excited them, for I realized that every last one of them was licking their lips as they looked down upon me.

Soon I was being stripped of my Eddie Bauer khakis and lifted onto a kind of wooden rack. As they positioned me just so, I was able to catch a glimpse of Sally and see that she was already naked and lashed to a similar contraption. She was not moving, but her cheek was wet with tears. Of all that had occurred to that point, seeing her tears, more than anything else, nearly hurled me into insanity. My heart fought for freedom, but my muscles were still AWOL.

After my wrists and ankles were tightly bound to my rack, I was raised into a vertical position; the rack itself was leaned against a tree trunk. From my new position I had a better view of the encampment, though I could still not move my eyes. Much of what I took in was pieced together via my peripheral vision. After a few moments, I decided I was thankful for this little blessing of visual immobility.

I surmised that several of the Amazonians were climbing in and out of a dark pit to my right. After a short while, I picked up the movement, and then the smell, of smoke coming from the pit. A few of the men moved from left to right through my direct line of sight carrying what appeared to be banana leaves or some other type of large palm leaves. Before long, the smoke became thicker and occasionally blew into my eyes causing them to sting. I still could not blink, let alone close my lids.

Off to my left, Sally; her pale skin contrasted with the chocolate shades of the natives busily moving about her. She was, of course, motionless. Unlike me, however, she was still splayed horizontally. As I tried to focus my mind on what was happening to her, one man shouted and seemed to leap on top of her. This caused a loud and immediate reaction from several of the other men as they grabbed him and threw him to the ground near my feet. As he stood, waving his arms and ranting back at them, he hesitated in front of my gaze just long enough for me to see blood smeared all around his mouth. I prayed a silent prayer that it was his blood.

Then it was my turn for tears. These were not caused by smoke, but by my thoughts of how terrified Sally must be; and how I had failed to defend her. I could do nothing to ease her fear. I could not speak calming words to her. I could only cry for her.

I must have cried myself to sleep, for I remember nothing else until I became aware of the feast taking place before me. I can move my eyes now, but that is all. My wrists and ankles throb painfully and my arms feel as if they may dislocate from my shoulders. I don't know how long I slept. What I do know, however, is that aside from the physical pain, I somehow feel *'better'*. Not quite a Christmas morning, Santa's-been-here kind of feeling, but something along that line.

I see that Grandma has now hunkered down away from the family, clumsily and noisily gnawing at her huge drumstick. Her eyes continually dart back and forth as if she's afraid that her bounty will be challenged at any moment. Grease runs down her chin and tiny bits of fat dot her cheeks.

The carcass is being picked clean quicker than you can say "stove top stuffing" and it brings to mind old film footage of piranhas ravishing a cow as it tried to cross a river. Funny how certain things bring back old memories.

Hey, here comes Papa. And Uncle Eugene. And all of my cousins. What are you guys doing? Lowering me down? Thanks, this feels better, but aren't you going to untie me? Where are we going? Down in the basement? It's darker down here than I remember. Hotter, too. Hey, you aren't leaving me alone down here, are you? Come back! What are those? Big leaves? This isn't funny!

Did Benny tell you to do this to me because I ratted on him about the mince-meat pies?

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