



Joan Gelfand

HOLIDAY

THANKSGIVING really began last night, when Riana went missing. Riana's depressed, my boyfriend Sam told me. He was calling from the road.

"Mission: Riana Rescue" was Sam's latest attempt to save the office manager of Green Consultants. "She just needs to know that someone cares. She'll get back on track," he said. So, after work Riana traipsed along to the "Y" on Sam's guest pass. She swam laps while he shot hoops. "Got to get those endorphins going," he reported with the self-assurance of a personal trainer, but I wondered who exactly he was trying to convince as we got into bed one chilly night last week. Apparently, Riana needed more than endorphins because now she was talking suicide. If you asked me, she needed them a whole lot more than Sam. "Hers aren't the only endorphins in town," I pointed out.

Riana was an odd duck, and someone I wouldn't have given the time of day, let alone try to *fix*. It wasn't just that Riana lived alone, had stringy hair, and wore too-tight jeans and muscle-T's, the better to show off her astrological tattoos—it was her pale moon-shaped face, punctuated by slightly bulging eyeballs that reminded me of a nocturnal animal and made me feel unabashedly watched.

Sam is a program evaluator at Green Consultants, a job that keeps him out in the field most of the time. But of course, Riana isn't just the office manager; she's an artist. "El Caro, the Oracle" was a cartoon strip she'd designed as a clever tool to warn us of our impending doom, though not quite clever enough apparently to warn her of her own. El Caro—aesthetically located between "Zippy the Pinhead" and "Wonder Woman"—was a bizarre, otherworldly character with a feminist twist. "Embarrassing," I said offhandedly to Sam on the way home from a dinner party where Riana played show-and-tell with her storyboards. Sam bristled. It was what he did when he felt I was being catty. I repeated it anyhow. "Absolutely embarrassing."

Thanksgiving morning. The alarm clock shocks me out of deep sleep. I wake up on edge, jittery trying to remember a dream. I consider the day; contemplate Sam's absence. I'm on my own, with seven people due at five. It's a hurdle; the first major holiday in my post-Darrell life.

On the way into the kitchen, I peek into Aurora, my three-year-old's room. Her right arm flung over her face, she's peacefully asleep with Ruff, her stuffed cocker spaniel. Out of the corner of my eye, a picture of Darrell at the beach last summer with Aurora snuggled into his jacket like a kangaroo stares back at me. No, stares back at Melissa, who had probably shot the picture. Ugh. I swallow hard. I close the door, head for the kitchen, the jitters from the alarm clock shock following me. I can't help it. I'm fretting about the turkey. I've never cooked one in my life.

I hate Darrell being gone, miss him dearly. We passed in the hall at a "Writing That Works" conference. Between Blogging Basics and Wiki's Make it Quicker, he asked for my business card. Darrell was dangerous, eight years younger with traffic-stopping green eyes and a Harley. The first time he took me riding in the hills I was hooked. Yes, Little Miss Responsible ditched her quiet, single, domestic life for a bad boy. To make matters worse, Darrell was a very smart bad boy, fluent in French and Japanese. Boarding schools, Joie de Vivre summer camp, lazy weeks on Corsica with family friends. Raised on a dream of life as different from mine as life on the moon, his dream life was perfect, except for his alcoholic mother, who

according to Darrell had a knack for ruining everything from Christmas dinner to Mother's Day. His father, an international wallpaper maven, was grooming Darrell to take over the business. Who cared about the age difference? The guy was sexy, and heir to a fortune.

Things could have worked out but they didn't. "You don't have to marry me," I said after we'd been living together for two years. "Just father my child." But the day the little indicator read "positive" he got spooked. "I can't promise we'll be together forever," he apologized, staring at the carpet, "but I'll always be there for the baby." I could live with that. Forever was a long time. What I didn't expect was for him to high tail it when Aurora was barely one year old, to run off with a co-worker who was getting him backstage passes for the Dead.

For four years, Darrell was our self-appointed Thanksgiving coordinator. By mid-October, he would have an extensive guest list, never less than fifteen, sometimes more. And cleaning? Down to the dust in the corners! He planned the menu, made sure there were enough dishes. Darrell. That shit.

After he left I slept on the floor of Aurora's room. I'd force myself to smile just so that Aurora wouldn't have to deal with a hangdog face. It wasn't that I didn't want to be her mom. Darrell and biology had commandeered my mind; I'd never considered the demands of raising a toddler alone. Then, one sunny summery Saturday morning Aurora disappeared. Well, not exactly. Frantic, I ran for the front door and found her heading for the street. That night I'd called Darrell. "I need help." And he gave it, coming by, taking her once or twice a week and more. Still, the hardest part about that time was not Aurora but myself; I was convinced that I was finished—no one would ever love me again, ever. I was thirty-five.

Enough of Darrell! I have work to do. I pour another cup of coffee, praying for the buzz that will take me through my tasks, get me through this day. I pull out the list I'd made last night:

- Turkey in: 10
- Cornbread baking: 1
- Cranberries simmering: 3

I review the guest list in my head, wondering if I should call and invite Ella, a distant cousin whom I had completely forgotten. So far, there was Yvette, my old friend and her husband, Carl; my co-worker Mar and her husband Sid; and my mother. And Aurora of course. Sam had invited Riana. But Riana was depressed. That made nine of us. Or seven, the way it was looking today.

Whether it was seven or nine, I wasn't going to call Ella, although it would have been just the kind of thing Darrell would have done. In my book, no one waited until the last minute to make plans, or ditch them! Man, Sam was messing up my whole day. Why did he wait until today to go full time with Riana? He must have known before last night that Riana was on the edge. But, no he'd said she'd been acting well, swimming her laps, smiling. That bitch.

I'm rinsing the turkey twice in cold water, the way Darrell taught me. Except that he would have brined it the night before, a detail I seem to have missed last night.

Of course Riana disappears on Thanksgiving! What better day to get everyone's attention. And she loved attention. About a month ago, six of us were at Sam's for a dinner party, Riana included. Sam and I were the only couple, and me the only parent, so we were casting about for common ground when Sharon came up with the idea of describing sumptuous details of our favorite meals. It was superficial but it got people going, remembering vacations and exotic dishes. "Ethereal salmon mousse topped with the thinnest sliver of avocado gelee," Sharon offered. Fresh picked zucchini flowers, stuffed with goat cheese, slathered with an eye-poppingly fresh basil pesto in Capri, someone else said. "Roasted John Dory in a beef stock sauce with turnip puree..." and on and on like that. We'd hit on meals we would give anything to replicate in Paris, Tuscany, Indonesia, Istanbul and Mumbai. About ten minutes into this gastronomic reverie, Riana piped in:

"Popcorn and M&M's." I caught her wink at Sam. What was she saying? That she was above food? That she was low maintenance? I couldn't tell, except that I was creeped out by the comment, and the way she'd winked at Sam.

Aurora tiptoes past the kitchen door to the living room and the TV clicks on to the Macy's

Thanksgiving Day parade. I'd promised to watch it with her last night when she was going to sleep. The morning outside is clear, cloudless. Against my better judgment, I call Sam to see if, on the off chance, he might show up.

"Riana's parents called last night."

"They called you?"

"Yes, they found a note in her apartment."

"A note?" I sound like a parrot, mimicking his words.

"I guess she drove off...they've lost track of her..."

That's when he told me he wasn't coming.

"Hmmm..." I say, "hope I don't lose track of you," and hang up.

I brace myself, turn the oven on and pat the turkey dry. Nine thirty. Back in the Darrell days, I loved Thanksgiving morning. By ten, a bright-eyed Darrell would be lighting the fire under the barbeque. Besides baking a corn bread and mixing up my Madras-style cranberry sauce, playing hostess was my only job. Now, a picture of the meal is coming into focus in my head and it isn't making me happy. Dry, hacked-up turkey, with dry stuffing. Why am I doing this again? I ask myself. Oh, right, because Sam and I planned it – last month!

Now, I'm positioning the turkey on its rack (a leftover kitchen item from Darrell) my heart racing, my lungs tight. "It's not brain surgery," I hear myself saying out loud. "It's a turkey. You can do it."

Turkey in place, I walk out onto the back deck where the morning has turned unseasonably warm. My favorite rose bush, the sterling, is in bad shape. I'd planted the finicky bush before Aurora was born. Today, it needs pruning and deadheading. I love this bush, with its pale lavender flowers and delicate fragrance. But if I'm too busy to administer the exact right dosages of rose food and water it languishes, all bare branches and frayed leaves. When I pay attention, it surprises me by blooming almost to December. If I can get to it, it will bloom one more time before winter sets in for good.

With a quick calculation, I decide that I can get the pruning finished before the corn bread goes in. Down the path to the garage, I remember Sam coming up this walkway one spring evening when the bush was in full bloom. I was surprised to see

him sweaty, just heading home from a run. “I was thinking about you,” he said, wanted to check in. Maybe I’m not finished, I thought that first night we made love. Sam was earthier than Darrell but still attractive enough. He had a square face, small nose and invitingly full lips. His left eye was “lazy” and wandered, especially when he was tired. Classmates with Darrell at Berkeley, Sam was “part of the family.” About a year and a half ago, after I’d been Darrell-free for a few months, he looked pretty good in the potential boyfriend department. Now, I think I might have made a mistake, or a faux-pas as Darrell would say.

In the garage I fight past a maze of boxes to unearth the pruning shears. Maybe I don’t need Sam at all I think. I’m fine; I’m really just fine on my own. I paw through boxes marked “Tools,” worried that I should not be in the garage, I should be in the kitchen, basting the turkey or something like that, but the hope of another bloom of lavender roses is simply too appealing. When I emerge from the dark garage, blinking into the bright sun, Darrell is there, examining the rusted barbeque grill in the backyard.

“You alone?” he asks, those green eyes casting mischief. They’re a tsunami warning system, an all-points bulletin. They’re seductive, they cut through me like the raggedy edge of a broken beer bottle.

I don’t bother to answer. What could I say?
Although it looks as if I am alone, really Sam’s helping, he’s just not here right now and...

“Wanna come over to my place? I’ve got a sixteen pounder on the barbeque...”

I could say it then, but I don’t. That the thrill of backstage passes had worn off and left him missing us. Because at his core, Darrell the bad boy was a homeboy. And bad as he was, he still felt guilty for running off. I knew it when he brought us a widescreen TV as a parting gift two weeks after he’d moved. He might be gone, but he still wanted us to be comfortable. Ugh.

I cringe, thinking of serving my own boring turkey, and that dark place inside reaches toward Darrell’s warmth like that rose bush toward the sun. He has this knack for waking up the small, fatherless girl inside me, the one who rarely sees the light of day. He has this knack of making me want him to protect me. Instead, I get busy, clipping the dead stems of the bush. I’ve lost touch with how I even feel about him. Besides the fact that I don’t

trust him, I'm pretty sure I've fallen out of love with him. The only sure way to know of course is to give it another go round, but I can't. I don't have the energy.

"No thanks."

Darrell musses my already messed-up hair on his way into the living room. Aurora adores him. And why not? He dotes on her tirelessly, flying kites, taking her to his place at Tahoe. In short, he gives her everything I can't.

I'm clipping dried branches when one particular Thanksgiving comes to haunt me, my favorite. I was eight, maybe nine. All the lights are on in the house; it's raining outside. Dad was home, hanging out in our small apartment kitchen. You didn't know my dad, but let me tell you, my dad never "hung out." Mom was smiling, all day. It was a dreamy day, a day when nothing mattered but being together. It was the year of nothing made from scratch either, because all day the electric can opener whirred, my mom flipping open cans of cranberry sauce, sweet potatoes and pumpkin. Grandma usually did the fancier stuff beforehand and my dad was in charge of the turkey. Yeah, mom smiled all day. Why not?

By noon, Darrell's gone home to check on his turkey and Aurora wants lunch. I slap together a PB&J, pour a glass of milk. I pull out the cornmeal and buttermilk and the bowls.

"I wanna bake!" Aurora shouts.

I lift Aurora up, show her the measuring spoons and their increasing capacities. Carefully she slips the tablespoon measure into the baking soda, spills it into the dry ingredients, mixing up the cornmeal, salt and sugar with a fork. In another bowl, we mix the milk and eggs.

"Good!" I stroke the top of her head.

"You're baking!"

I slide the pan of cornmeal into the oven, thinking Okay, I can do this. I can raise my girl, alone. Besides, Sam's been more trouble than he's been worth. Besides, the last thing I need is another kid to take care of.

Aurora content in her room with her Barbies, I stomp down the back steps with the rose clippers, hacking at that plant like nobody's business. So why did Darrell come over here—looking so

healthy? And why is he flirting with me? I would never go back with him. And Sam. What the hell is up with him? And why did he act so willing last week when we discussed the holiday? I'm just inviting a few friends, I said casually, purposely waiting until the last minute to tell him that I was having Thanksgiving here. I look up from my pruning toward the kitchen, expecting to see smoke, or some other culinary disaster. Instead, I get a clear, dark picture of Riana. Where the hell was she? And why does Sam have to be the one...but of course Sam is the one. Sam picks up strays, Darrell once said. At first, I thought Sam gravitated toward strange people because he was an outsider himself, raised in a Hasidic family in a working-class neighborhood of Philadelphia. Popcorn for dinner! Hadn't Riana gotten the healthy foods memo? Now I'm sure that she was milking it for Sam, playing his sympathetic strings. And hadn't it worked?

"Mommy?" Aurora calls to me from the deck. "Play with me!"

I check my watch, tell her to set up a game. I check the turkey. Browning nicely, but I don't trust it to taste like anything. Darrell was always fussing with it, rubbing things onto the skin, performing turkey miracles. I don't know any turkey miracles—no one ever taught me. Game pieces clattering in the living room, I lose myself in a yellow leaf cut loose from the tall cottonwood tree in the backyard. I watch it spin aimlessly to land on the roof of my office cottage. I look at the cranberries, a lump in my throat, threatening.

If only someone would call me! A phone call would kick me out of my funk. *Dinner*, I think, it's only dinner.

Then it hits. I should just call it off, call Mar and Yvette and say I just can't make it. I'll take my mom and Aurora out.

I flip open the phone book; narrow my search to hotels, large hotels that serve Thanksgiving dinner. "For our annual Thanksgiving day dinner, please call seven to ten days in advance for reservations..."

What am I thinking? I don't want to go to a hotel! Hotels reek of a faux jolly atmosphere, and a dining room peopled by ancient couples and old bachelors, maybe together. No, I don't want to go to a hotel. Besides, I'll have leftovers.

“One game, OK? Mommy still has to finish cooking.” I settle in, resting my back against a pillow propped up by our old couch. I’m going to serve this dinner and everyone will like it, I think, smiling.

“I thought I’d do something different,” I hear Mom’s voice in my head, that first Thanksgiving after my father died. On the table was the most pitiful duck. We ate, if you could call it that, gnawing at the tough, greasy bird.

“One game,” I say, shaking the dice.

Aurora rolls her die and with a screech scoots her marker up the biggest chute.

Cranberries rattle into a saucepan, the familiar sound of the hard fruit reassuring. I pick the rotten, shriveled ones out of the strainer and pour them into a pot. Cardamom, cinnamon, orange peel. The smell of warming spices fills the kitchen. What was I thinking—hotels? This is our day! Mine and Aurora’s, and my mom’s, if no one else’s. The hell with Riana, and Sam for that matter! I have a family! I have a life. I check the turkey, once more, just to be sure, when the phone rings.

“Yes, Mom. The turkey’s in the oven...”

I’m rummaging my cupboards for a can of mushroom soup. “You made a pumpkin pie?”

I’m back at the stove when the heaviness of the day lifts like fog in a San Francisco summer afternoon. *What do you do when you’re not where you want to be?* drifts through my mind like that fog lifting in delicate wisps, and in a moment, I realize that I can not only just “do” my life, I could do it and actually be happy. Why not? I baste the now promising looking turkey, pull out the cornbread, and stir the cranberry sauce.

The next thing I know, dinner is almost done and I’m pouring my mother a cup of coffee. Mom’s once glamorous face is gone, replaced by a wrinkled visage. But her high cheekbones are still there, and the petite figure and perfect posture, giving her a regal, if worn, look. She sips the hot coffee, pinky finger extended.

“That rose bush needs pruning...” she points at the other bush I’d planted, a tea rose.

“I started to but then Darrell stopped in...”

My mother gives me the ‘you’ve got to be kidding’ look. “Are you all right?” she asks, her voice implicates me; it’s the voice of the judge. She never liked Darrell and she totally doesn’t like messes.

Aurora bursts into the kitchen: “Play with me, Grandma!”

“What are we playing?” my mom takes over.

Aurora takes her grandmother by the hand. When I told my mother that I was pregnant and that I wasn’t going to marry Darrell, she tried to talk me out of it. “Children ruin your relationship,” she said. *They do?*

When I left that night, I tried to think how I had ruined her life. The more I thought about it, I thought that it wasn’t her life I’d ruined but her relationship with my father. He was too busy for children, and it was left up to her to raise us. In the end, it was left up to her completely and she knew as well as I did that she had all but failed us. I know in this moment, that’s a life I don’t want to repeat. I’m going to give my girl my best. Why not? I’m tired of giving it to someone who has other pulls on him, and when I need him, isn’t around. I think of Sam’s lazy eye, and how at first I tried to catch it, to make it focus, on me.

By three forty-five the house smells like everything anyone could hope for from Thanksgiving; it smells like home, and it’s clear to me that this whole day has been a message, a test. I can do this on my own, I think. I can do this on my own, and like it.

At four-fifteen, the kitchen looks like Hurricane Frances: cornmeal dusts the counters, onion peels, broccoli stalks and dirty pans fill the sink. The sky turns dusky gray. I pop the rolls into the oven, set the timer, and go into the living room, where my mother has just miscounted the number on the dice to narrowly miss the chute that would have let her win the board game. Aurora crawls into my lap, twirls my hair between her thumb and forefinger. I lower my face to her head, breathe in fresh child smell, and pull her closer, to my chest.

At five o’clock, the tea rose bush is pruned, I’m dressed to kill and Aurora and my mother are sitting at the dining room table that they have just set.

“They found her Volkswagen parked at a trailhead...in Yosemite.” Sam is urgent, clearly rattled.

I imagine Yosemite Valley awash in brilliant yellow aspens, red maples, a joyful brightness against majestic granite peaks. Even if I’d considered it, the colors and scenery alone would be enough to keep me from wanting to kill myself.

“She held them off—at gunpoint!”

“No...”

“Yes. And the fact that she was on federal land...well, it’s a federal offense. It’s a mess...I’m going to stay here with her parents. They’re pretty shook up...”

I can’t help it, I burst out with a laugh.

“What’s so funny?” Sam asks.

“Too much. Anyway, Happy Thanksgiving.”

“But...”

At five, Mar and Sid and Yvette and Carl arrive.

“Ta da!” I bring in large platters: a steaming pan of stuffing, a plate of turkey (terribly butchered), spicy cranberry sauce, steamy rolls and a last-minute broccoli casserole, Aurora’s favorite.

“Where’s Sam?” my mother mouths.

“You don’t have to whisper,” I announce to the assembled. “Sam’s out saving someone.”

I’m watching Aurora pile food onto her plate, an uncommon occurrence in our house and shake my head.

And, in this moment, I don’t want to think about Sam, or Riana, or Darrel or Melissa. I want to live, for just a moment, in my be-here-now, newly free, world. I want to relish, for a moment, a fait accompli, a success. I raise a glass of the fancy Pinot Noir that I’d splurged on last night—to the meal, to my family, past and present, and know, in my body, that I will be somewhere else next year.

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