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Assimilation

Without Sayeed, there would have been no turkey. You see, we're basically an immigrant family, and small besides and we wouldn't normally have a turkey for dinner at any time of the year. A turkey breast some times. Turkey burger for spaghetti sauce certainly, but never a whole turkey.

We visit Sayeed's Sharwama restaurant and butchery about twice a week, in the late afternoon, so my daughter can have a sandwich after school but before her music lesson. I've wondered about the effects of chicken, hummus and garlic sauce before her singing class. So far there have been no complaints from the teacher. As we talked, Sayeed assembled and rolled the shawarma. I was taken aback when he asked me, "Have you ordered your organic turkey for Thanksgiving yet?" His eyes widened when I asked "When is Thanksgiving?" for I had no clear idea when it was. It also became clear that we would really need to order a turkey from him, because he would never understand that we don't normally have a whole turkey at any time of the year and that Thanksgiving was something, like American football, that we don't really understand and only know about because of references in movies and TV. It's in November. Well, no, it's much sooner than that.

And turkeys are big. "What's the smallest turkey we can order?" I asked. Eight pounds. That sounded O.K. We'd be able to take it over to Grandmother's and there would be four of us to eat it. It would be fun and interesting to try something new. So we added our name to the long list in the school notebook containing the orders: Name, phone number and "eight pounds".

The weeks went by through the mild fall and, as you know, the federal election campaign. We stopped in for shawarma. We watched the satellite news from Persia on the big screen TV that gets switched to Much Music during the lunch-time rush. We commiserated about the obnoxious sports bar next door: they have loud outdoor speakers and play music for happy hour and volleyball. It's impossible to enjoy the warm weather because of the noise. The government is confused about the Middle East. Sayeed has been everywhere and knows the details of every political machination there. Certainly if you want to know about the modern history of the Middle East, Sayeed is your man.

And for turkeys, too. And the warm fall days went by, and the election campaign, and the music lessons and we came to the Saturday before Thanksgiving and the federal election and we picked up the turkey. "Give them a bigger one. They need a bigger one." said Sayeed's wife. We took the smallest one they had: twelve pounds. It came out into the sunlight, in doubled white plastic bags. It was really big. My daughter wrapped both arms around it to carry it.

We telephoned Grandmother. "Hey, Baba, we're having turkey for Thanksgiving." "Why Turkey? What's wrong with chicken schnitzels?" Chicken schnitzel is our traditional, holiday fare. Christmas, although it's not the real Christmas. Easter. Birthdays. With carrots, rice and mushroom sauce. Not like the pirogies and cabbage rolls that Baba makes for every day. "I will make chicken schnitzels." "No, look, Baba: we have a turkey and we'll come over to your place to cook it. It's organic. It'll be fun." "It won't defrost by tomorrow. I make chicken schnitzels." "No, no, Babcha, it's not frozen. We'll come in the morning. We'll change the oil in your snowblower." "No, no, you can't work on the snowblower on a Sunday! I like cranberry jelly. When will you come?"

Sunday morning we gather up big bird and drive to Baba's through a forest of election signs. Blue and red and orange and a few green. "Why are they polluting the environment with all these stupid signs?" our daughter asks. "I think I'll vote for Karpatsky House Painters," my wife jokes as we see a small notice nailed to a telephone pole. And we go past the open stores, rushing in to get cranberry jelly, an aluminum roasting pan and, oh yes, a meat thermometer. "It's made in China:

better not tell Baba." Recently Baba buys nothing from China although our home grown processed food seems to be potentially just as dangerous. And flowers. There are some on the corner near Sayeed's Shawarma Restaurant. We see that he is closed, for once, and are thankful for he seems to be in his store from dawn to late night every day. "Perhaps he is having turkey to-day too. What do you think?" my wife ponders.

At Grandma's house there are several blue and red signs along the street, although none in front of Baba's. For some years she didn't vote in elections because she didn't want her name to appear on the voters list: it would reveal that she was a woman living alone after her husband's death. But she's 82 now and is looking after people on the street. She talks to everyone and knows what's what. The retired doctor next door has mixed up whether the ferns or the periwinkle between their houses was planted first. The engineer on the other side doesn't know that a new couple has moved in at the corner. Such a waste of money: the previous people paid \$10,000 to reface their kitchen but the new owners are tearing it all out. And she's voting again. She won't say for whom.

As we come into the house, Baba is on the phone with her friend in Rochester, another old lady who left the Ukraine many years before and who now lives alone. They talk several times a week. Baba is recommending a breakfast cereal which she has found, well, efficacious in keeping her regular. "It's Quacker," she is saying, loudly, for her friend is a little deaf. "Quacker: the one with the Mennonite on the box."

By silent agreement we do not talk about the election but set about getting the turkey cooked. "Perhaps I'll just cook some chicken schnitzels in case it's dry." But then there would be no space in the oven, so in goes the twelve-pounder. We don't want to talk about politics. Baba left home on foot, ahead of the Russians, when she was nineteen, narrowly missed being sent to Auschwitz when she was in Vienna before coming to Canada. My background is not that different, since my father left northern Europe in the 1930s after fleeing Russia in 1921. I, however, affect progressive views while Baba lives in a prosperous suburb of Ottawa that prides itself on years of balanced budgets. That was before it was amalgamated into the free-spending, socialist-

style capital. "You'll take the rest home with you?" We reassure, although it seems like we will be eating turkey until Christmas, the bird is so big. At least compared to a chicken schnitzel. "It needs to be well cooked." We demonstrate the meat thermometer, removed from its tell-tale packaging.

And although we can't change the oil in the snow blower, we can check the eave troughs for leaves. Baba insists on holding the foot of the ladder herself. Then we sit down to watch TV. Although there are 150 channels Baba only watches soap operas, the Ukrainian program on Saturday and the weather channel. But Sunday was a perfect, sky-blue day and despite its best efforts there were no alarming reports to be made. We watch a movie while the turkey cooks. What movie to watch? Well, actually there is only one movie: "The Russians are coming, the Russians are coming!" unless we want to watch a Kenny Rogers special video, only \$2.00 at the super store. "Isn't it funnier every time? That's such a funny movie!" A vodka and orange juice or two. "Emergency! Emergency! Every body to get from street!" And solitaire and reading the newspaper. Of course bellowing to communicate with our daughter, who has been listening intently to her iPod all this time.

Soon Baba must cook the carrots, the rice and the mushroom sauce. She accepts no help: standing and stirring, a flurry of culinary efficiency. We lay out two tablecloths, one folded, so the hot turkey won't mark the table. And plates and knives and forks and glasses for the wine. The turkey must be probed with the thermometer in several places and carved. I cut off a leg, a wing and three slices from the breast. "That's enough. We carve more if we need it." And, in fact, it was enough. We had our dinner and there were only about eleven pounds of the turkey to take back home.

And, with dinner, the wine began to flow: a sweet German Riesling. Since Baba had a couple of small glasses and my wife and I had both enjoyed our vodkas and orange juice, we really got down to politics now. "What you think about your green lady now?" Baba demanded suddenly. "She did well in the debate, " I said. "Certainly better than those pompous men." "Whenever. That's the stoopest thing I ever heard. You vote for her and you throw your vote away!" Baba, it turns out, fancies the sitting member, a person whose aggression and partisanship

are watchwords. "We need stronger laws," she says. "Those other guys, they allow too much immigration: crooks and thieves and Russian mafia! They let anybody in."

I found myself wondering who Sayeed would be voting for and thinking that he'll soon be selling fresh organic turkeys for Christmas.

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