

Chapter Eight

Thanksgiving at Babcie's, 1958



“Freedom from Want”

By
Norman Rockwell

There is no holiday equal to the Thanksgiving of my youth. It was a grand affair when women wore dresses and men wore suits and ties. As the New England weather cooled and the last brown, dry leaves fell from the maple trees, Halloween a pleasant memory, I looked forward to Thanksgiving at Babcie's with great anticipation.

Babcie – more properly spelled ‘Babcia’ – was the matriarch. As I reflect upon her life and what little I knew of it, she probably had no knowledge of Pilgrims, Indians, stuffed turkeys, pumpkin pies and cranberry sauce. She was a simple but very strong woman born in 1895 in Poland. Widowed young, she raised three daughters in a small community peopled by other immigrants, many Polish, drawn to the banks of the Housatonic River to work at the textile mill. Babcie had no need to learn the King’s English.

When the daughters grew up and started their own families, she invited her youngest to remain in the family home on Oak Street and raise her family there. In her later years, Babcie spent many of her waking hours tending her magnificent flower garden during the summer or in a rocking chair with Rosary in hand when the weather turned cold. The black beads passed slowly through her gnarled fingers and she whispered the mysteries in Polish so softly that you had to strain your ears to hear the words she breathed. I loved her.

On Thanksgiving Day, Babcie would occasionally stroll into the crowded kitchen as if to approve the proceedings, but Auntie was clearly in charge, testing the turkey, boiling the potatoes and directing her sisters to prepare gravy and condiment trays. The men sat in the living room and the children on the floor playing word games, anxiously waiting for the appointed time when they would be summoned to the table.

We took no turns at the table reciting things we were thankful for, because there was only one answer, and it was shared by young and old. We were thankful for being together, nothing more, nothing less.

Norman Rockwell lived not far away in nearby Stockbridge, and as the adults sat at the long dining room table with the young people at surrounding card tables, you would think it very Rockwellish. Even the young girls wore dresses and the boys, colorful ties with clips hidden discreetly under neatly folded shirt collars.

I smile when I watch the Thanksgiving scene in the wonderful Barry Levinson film “Avalon.” It perfectly captures Thanksgiving Day in Babcie’s dining room, sans the late arriving brother with sister-in-law who cries, “They cut the turkey without me!”

I don’t remember the words of the grace we prayed, or even who led the prayer, but I do remember folding my hands, closing my eyes and bowing my head, silently giving my personal thanks that I was grateful for being a part of Babcie’s family.