

HOLIDAYS

ALEXIA 2002

Call me old-fashioned, but to me the holidays are special. Thanksgiving, Christmas, Easter. They represent the most important aspects of our lives. Family, friends, and faith. Since Nick was born I've tried to follow the traditions of my family growing up. Church was a given, especially during Holy Week. Each holiday also had its traditional foods centered around the main course. Turkey at Thanksgiving, ham for Christmas, lamb on Easter.

Neither George nor I had family nearby to celebrate with, so the holidays became a time to extend our family. My parents were deceased. George's mother, a widow since the early 1970s, had moved to California to live with George's sister and her growing family. We always had guests, neighbors, old friends, or unattached coworkers from George's jobs.

We were nervous this Thanksgiving. George's mother flew in from San Diego to stay the entire week, and joining us for the holiday dinner would be my oldest friends, Louise, my Italian bridesmaid, and her Czech husband Art. What was making me anxious

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was that Jesus had engineered an invitation for himself when we checked up on him after he was newly settled at the Cortez Arms, where he met us in the lobby.

“Mami, you and Dadi going somewhere for Thanksgiving?”

“No, not this year.”

“You know I make a good chicken and rice. I don’t have much room, but you can come here; Nick too.”

I could barely imagine spending five minutes in Jesus’s room after George had described it, let alone eating, not just any meal, but his definition of a Thanksgiving feast.

“Yes, the chicken and rice you made when you stayed with us was *muy sabroso*. But George’s mother from California will be with us and our friends who stood up at our wedding. We’ll be having turkey and all the fixings.”

“What? And you didn’t invite me, your third son?”

George tried damage control. “Gato, you didn’t give us a chance. That’s one of the reasons we came by today, to ask if you wanted to come for Thanksgiving.”

“OK, you won’t regret. I bring the sweet *maduros*, Cuban style. How you say Grandma in Greek? I think I hear someone at Gus’s say ‘*yiayia*.’ My *yiayia* going to like it.”

On Thanksgiving Day Jesus showed his pleasure at our invitation by showing up on time, dressed in a herring-bone suit and a cream-colored knit shirt, a small silk floral arrangement in one hand and a bowl covered in aluminum foil, smelling of sweet plantains, in the other. Not a hint of alcohol was on his breath. Of course we had forewarned Dimitra, George’s mother, giving her the story of how we became involved with him and laying out a range of behaviors she might encounter that afternoon. Nonetheless, we were nervous.

Jesus was charming. When Dimitra came out from the kitchen to meet our first guest, he didn’t wait for an introduction.

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“Hello,” he said with a bit of a bow. “I am Jesus Cárdenas,” in a distinct Spanish flourish. “You must be the sister of *Giorgos*.”

Of course Dimitra took Jesus’s flattery with a smile and a hint of a blush. “Call me Dimitra, but I am too old to be anything but George’s mama. What do you have in that bowl? It smells good.” Taking the bowl, she peeked under the foil, inhaled satisfyingly, winked at Jesus, and brought it into the kitchen. Jesus had met his match.

When Louise and Art arrived, he took their coats, made sure they sat in the only two really comfortable chairs in our living room, and brought them appetizers from the kitchen. While Dimitra and I finished our dinner preparations and George began bringing plates to the table, Jesus had become the host.

I could hear him telling Art and Louise the story of how we saved his life when Social Security declared him deceased. “They bring me into their home, they treat me with respect.” He didn’t mention the nervousness that accompanied our generosity nor the lapses in his behavior that caused us to question our sanity.

Once again George and I debated our course of action, though this time on a smaller scale. In the kitchen, I was already sipping my favorite Greek sweet wine, *Mavrodaphne*, to ease the tension of the meal’s preparation. “Should we offer drinks to Louise and Art?” I asked George in little more than a whisper.

“They’d think it strange if we didn’t.”

“What about Jesus? We made such a point of his not drinking in the house when he was staying with us.”

“Not to mention my lectures.”

Dimitra offered her opinion, “We are Greek, we have wine with our meals, even if it’s not a holiday. He’s either going to have just a little like everyone else, or he’s going to have too much, no matter what you do.”

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“Mami, you need help with anything?” He was in the doorway to the kitchen on “anything.”

“No, you just keep Art and Louise entertained.”

“That’s why I am here,” Jesus replied. “They like a little wine. Louise wants white, Art red.”

While we were debating, he was taking orders, the consummate host.

“George will bring them out. Here, you bring in this plate of cheese and crackers.”

“Your wish is my command.”

After George delivered the wine, he finished carving the turkey, arranging the slices of white and dark meats, surrounded by the drumsticks and wings. By this point Louise, Art, Jesus, and Nick were all poking their heads in the kitchen, volunteering to carry platters, bowls, and casseroles to the table: sweet potatoes, mashed potatoes, cranberry sauce, *fasolakia* and *yigantes* beans, gravy, and of course the turkey.

After everyone but George and I were seated, somehow with Jesus at the head of the table, I brought in my glass, and George followed with bottles of white and red in his hands. He filled glasses for Dimitra and me, refilled for Louise and Art, raised his glass of water for a toast and to proclaim his sobriety, when a throat clearing interrupted George’s “*Yia mas!*”

“Excuse me, did somebody forget something? Is everyone going to toast but me? I don’t seem to have a wine glass.”

George was turning rosé. I turned around to the hutch, grabbed two glasses, and chastised George for not setting the table carefully enough. “Red or white?” he asked Jesus.

“I start with the red.”

As George poured one for himself as well, Jesus rose. “*Gracias el Señor por la comida, nuestra familia, y amigos nuevos. ¡Salud!*”

As the meal progressed, Jesus became looser with each glass of wine. When the red was gone, he kept his promise and moved on to the white. Surprisingly he kept both his charm and food intact. But another surprise was in store. When he finished the white, he brought a half-empty pint of cheap vodka from his jacket. "Everything else too expensive, 'specially when I have to share with my friends."

After dinner we insisted that he did not have to help clear the table or wash dishes (our best china). "Jesus, this is your evening to relax and enjoy. You men watch the game; we women will tackle the dishes."

"Sister, you are a saint," Louise proclaimed out of earshot of the fans on the electronic fifty-yard line. "I would never imagine doing what you have done with Jesus."

"You can see, we have our doubts."

Dimitra removed the doubts. "This is the Greek way. We offer friendship to strangers."

"Well, despite his drinking, you have his respect. What's more, you'll have his loyalty. In the old neighborhood, on Taylor Street, we had a few guys like him. Of course, like the rest of us they were Italian, but they drank too much and couldn't hold down a job. But if you did good by them, they'd watch out for you."

Assured by Louise's insight but getting tired, I suggested to Louise that the day was getting long. In turn she prompted Art, who offered halftime as a good breaking point. A few head gestures later and a touchdown given up by Art's team and he was ready to go, somehow getting the message he should offer a ride home to Jesus. Everyone mused at the possibility of an encore celebration the following Thanksgiving. Dimitra, George, Nick, and I were happy to be alone again, even with half the cleanup still to be done.

One of the last things Dimitra told us before returning to

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California was that she was proud of us. “I know now we raised George right, and you were too, Alexia. Something good will come from helping Jesus, even if it’s hard, and you don’t know what the good will be.”

That holiday season we continued to “do good” by Jesus, though for Christmas we decided not to mix guests or drinks. Marty was in from New York, but as usual, his schedule was dictated by his mother’s plans. The highlights of our celebration were two: Jesus learning to say *Kala Christougena* and the pleasure he took in the presents we gave him, especially the tape recorder he had found and fooled around with during the time he stayed in our spare room.

George suggested that Jesus record his life’s story. That got a laugh out of Jesus. “Hey Dadi, how many cats like me die then tell their story?”