

Aunt Iola and the Giant Turkey

Several years ago my aunt Iola decided she wanted to hold a big, traditional turkey dinner for Thanksgiving. She invited a bunch of the family and, although we all wanted to go, we were kind of apprehensive about it. See, Aunt Iola is just a bit...unique. Does things her own way. If she were rich, folks would say she was eccentric, but as she's not rich they just nod their heads and say "Iola does things her own way." Sometimes they say that while tapping their head with a finger.

Iola's neighbor, Brenda, volunteered to help her prepare the meal. They're best friends and so that made some sense, but Brenda...well, have you heard the expression "Doesn't have both oars in the water?" If Iola was "unique" Brenda was downright "odd." Think "Dr. Frankenstein and Igor in the laboratory" odd. Iola's cheese may have slipped off her cracker, but Brenda's cheese was stolen by a neon-pink mouse from outer space.

It was Brenda's idea that since they were going to have so many guests they should get the biggest turkey they could find, and she must've called nearly every butcher shop in a hundred mile radius because the bird they ended up ordering was a behemoth! I've never seen anything with feathers bigger than this, except in a zoo. This thing was a CONDOR! Plucked and gutted it easily weighed thirty pounds. Iola found an antique roasting pan at the Goodwill store (frankly, I think it was an old steel washtub or something) and once that colossus was in the pan there wasn't an inch to spare.

They planned to dress as Pilgrims and serve the turkey with stuffing, candied sweet potatoes, green bean casserole, corn bread muffins, mashed potatoes, gravy, cranberry sauce, and two different kinds of pie for dessert. With eighteen people coming for dinner you can imagine how much food that must've been. And all homemade, yet – nothing prefab or from a box or can.

When we all arrived for Iola's big dinner we didn't know quite what to expect, but we were sure it would be the kind of experience you never forget. We were right, in the same way you'd be right if you said the Grand Canyon was a hole in the ground.

If you're like many families you eat your big meal for lunch and then spend part of Thanksgiving Day watching football on TV. Iola and Brenda had different

plans. First, the turkey would be served for supper, around 6 PM – after all, roasting a turkey that big would take about five hours – and all their guests were expected at 1:00. In order to keep folks occupied between then and dinnertime the ladies planned some entertainment. Their intentions were noble, I’m certain, but I think that the karaoke machine wasn’t the best choice Iola could have made. And Brenda bringing over her Mel Torme and Slim Whitman karaoke CDs only exacerbated things.

Can science explain why a karaoke microphone turns some people a bit crazy? I mean, some folks KNOW that they can’t sing and they do karaoke as a laugh or just to have some fun, but some people think that as soon as the words hit the screen they magically transform into Sinatra or Elvis. Uncle Don was one of those people. Uncle Don is an alto with a slight speech impediment, and his choice of “Sixteen Tons” really didn’t fit. Then when he called on Cousin Doris, who is a soprano, to join him in a duet it actually became unpleasant. The song they dueted, “Somewhere Out There,” sung in Doris’ key, actually made our ears ache.

The whole afternoon was like that. Things just didn’t quite fit, somehow. Aunt Iola’s house is small and the living room, dining room, and kitchenette were certainly not spacious enough to comfortably accommodate eighteen people. Sitting so close to another person that you can’t put your hand in your pocket isn’t very pleasant, especially when you’re sitting next to Abner. Abner really wasn’t family, but since he’d saved Iola’s deceased husband in Korea he’d been unofficially adopted. Unfortunately, that day in Korea was probably also the last time he’d spent any money on a bar of soap. Abner was a very nice man but I’ve seen birds wheel around in mid-air to avoid flying over him. He always wore a flower in his lapel but sometimes I had to wonder if the flower wasn’t actually growing there.

So there we were, an assortment of eighteen friends and relatives of various ages, crammed into two small rooms. We were slowly freezing to death because all the windows were open and it gets mighty cold in northern Michigan in late November. But we needed the windows open because all those bodies generated a lot of heat. Well, and because of Abner. We did try to keep the windows closed at first but the flowers on the table were rapidly turning an unhealthy shade of brown and anyone sitting next to Abner was turning a bit green. We were all blissfully unaware of the weapon of mass destruction ticking away softly in the kitchen.

Because of the size of the turkey Aunt Iola and Brenda, never exactly the brightest bulbs on the tree, had known they’d need a lot of bread to make the

stuffing. So, trying to save a little money, they'd bought six loaves of bread at the bread outlet store. When Iola took the loaves from her cupboard and opened the wrappers she discovered why they'd been on sale because the bread wasn't white any more. Instead it had grown rather blue and quite furry and when she reached in the bag it tried to bite her. The moldy bread might have been a cure for some exotic disease but it sure wasn't fit for stuffing Gargantua-Bird, which left the two confused cooks in Pilgrim outfits a mite up a tree. The stores were closed, Brenda didn't have but a few slices of bread in her house, and if the turkey didn't get stuffed soon the main course would be unstuffed.

Never one to give up easily, Aunt Iola began searching for a substitute for the bread. I guess her reasoning went that since bread is white and fluffy and made from grain she should choose something else that was also white and fluffy and made from grain. Brenda actually had the idea to use something from her house – something she'd bought a lot of when it was on sale. So she and Iola chose to stuff that growth-stunted ostrich with unpopped corn...after all, corn IS a grain, and when it pops it's white and fluffy and they'd heard of cornbread stuffing sooo...

The conspirators dumped seven pounds of corn kernels into a dishpan (the biggest bowl-like thing they had), added celery and onion and eggs and chicken stock and spices and mixed it all together, then packed the mixture into the turkey's cavity like they wanted revenge on the poor bird for something he'd done. When the turkey could hold no more they used an unopened can of beans and a rolling pin to pound the last crumb of stuffing up that feathered monstrosity's backside, then they sewed him up and somehow wrangled him into the oven. There was no more food preparation to do for two hours and, since Cousin Cliff was cranking up the karaoke machine for "I'm Too Sexy," they went to join in the fun in the living room.

We'll probably never know exactly what happened in that kitchen. We can imagine how, as the heat built inside the turkey and started to cook the meat and stuffing, strange sizzling, fizzing sounds began to filter from the oven. We never heard a thing over the karaoke, and Abner's pungency could have overpowered the scent of a whole warehouse of turkeys on fire so we never smelled anything burning. Nobody was there to hear the first muffled POP.

An hour passed. Aunt Carla had the microphone and was singing "Highway to Hell" in such a way that if you'd been given the choice between that trip and hearing her sing any more you'd probably have gladly purchased tickets on the next train to Brimstone County, when Bart, the youngest nephew and person

closest to the kitchen, cocked his head to one side. He had a puzzled frown on his face as he listened, trying to hear over the din. Was somebody lighting firecrackers or playing “Call of Duty” somewhere?

The intermittent popping noises became more frequent, turning what sounded like small-arms fire into a full-fledged submachine gun. Bart had to yell to be heard over Cousin Randolph and his “friend” Durrell wrecking “It’s Raining Men.” “Hey!” he shouted, “something’s blowing up in the kitchen!”

Aunt Iola and Brenda stared at each other in horror for just a second, then broke and tore for the kitchen, their Pilgrim-wife aprons flapping at their shins. But they stopped dead in the doorway, confronted by the staccato *rat-a-tat-tat* of the popcorn stuffing rapidly becoming POPPED corn stuffing. What they saw in the kitchen would have frozen Gordon Ramsey in his tracks: the door of the oven was shaking with every pop from inside Titanic Tom’s Tomb and the sides of the old oven were bulging menacingly. Chuck Norris, on his bravest day, wouldn’t have reached for the handle on that popping time bomb for love or money.

Aunt Carla, who always had to have her nose in everybody’s business, appeared at Brenda’s elbow. She had time to stammer, “Iola, I think something’s wrong with the turk...” before things went seriously to hell.

Popped corn takes up 12 times the space of unpopped corn. At seven pounds of kernel corn that turkey had been jammed so full you couldn’t get another slice of celery in it, and when all that corn popped the resultant expansion was far more than the turkey, the antique roasting pan, or that old Sears oven could bear, and with a loud WHOOMFP! they all gave up the struggle simultaneously. Pieces of oven, glass viewing port, steel roasting pan, turkey, celery, onions and scorching popcorn flew like grenade shrapnel, peppering the kitchen with greasy, burnt-smelling bits.

We all dove for the safety of the nearest solid object, hugging the floor for dear life. The oven, roaster, and turkey abruptly ceased being in solid form and unpopped corn scattered everywhere, the heat trapped in the kernels turning them into tiny blasting caps that continued to blow up randomly for a good five minutes.

Finally, everything was quiet, except for the “Weathergirls” CD playing happily by Aunt Iola’s Hamilton Collection Shirley Temple statuette. As if by signal we started to rise to view the devastation. The kitchen was a scene out of a horror movie – partially-roasted turkey fragments stuck to the walls like peeling

wallpaper; scraps of gold-colored metal, the remnants of the oven's outer shell, lay on the linoleum or protruded from whatever surface they'd penetrated in the explosion; the roasting pan was propped against the counter, blackened and twisted like a piece of re-entry junk; and everywhere – on every visible surface – was glued blackened nuggets of scorched, burnt, smoking popcorn.

We stood, staring in mute amazement, for what seemed like an hour but was really only a few seconds. Then Bart gave a low whistle and Abner softly said “That bird ain't never gonna feed all these people now.” Then the laughter began as we all pitched in to start cleaning up the mess. Yes, it truly did turn out to be an unforgettable day.

Did you know Chinese restaurants deliver on Thanksgiving?

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