



# THE *Great* TURKEY DEBACLE

BY JONNA JEROME

Does the prospect of tackling a holiday meal fill you with anxiety? Don't despair, those cooking shows and glossy magazines can make anyone feel inadequate, there is hope for the rest of us.

When I learned I would be hosting the extended family Thanksgiving for the first time, I was excited. Thanksgiving at home and not driving! The start of our own traditions. Then reality set in.

My sister is the consummate hostess, and has regally carried that mantle for years. She makes Martha Stewart look like a toddler banging a pan with a spoon. Then I thought about the two sides of our family mingling. I started to perspire. That's not entirely accurate, I was sweating profusely. My family does not mingle well. They often over-share my most embarrassing life moments. Or talk politics. Or make innocently gross remarks about their latest medical procedures.

I decided to focus on the food. I consulted friends and family, online cooking sites, cookbooks and magazines. I borrowed my parents' heirloom roasting pan and prayed the skill of whipping up an amazing feast ran in the genes. I went shopping the day before, three kids in tow and purchased a fortune's worth of food. I was prepared, or so I thought.


When "Turkey Day" arrived, my husband and I got up bright and early to prepare. I now understand why people are vegetarians. Turkeys are surprisingly slippery sans feathers, and wrestling with a raw one is stomach turning. Emptying its cavities is horrifying. Stuffing said cavities even more so. Once it was in the roasting pan, my husband fled for work. I can't reach our oven, so I climbed on my step stool to slide the bird inside. I could not shut the door.

I grabbed the kids and lugged them back to the very crowded store. I put my baby and toddler in the shopping cart

and pulled my older son after me. I bought an iced espresso and stuck it on the cart as I searched for a foil pan that would fit into my easy-bake sized oven. I heard an odd slurping sound and turned to find my toddler just finishing off my espresso.

I performed automotive gymnastics getting home, concerned my daughter might have a bathroom emergency, but she was very cheerful. I packed the turkey in the pan again, then began tidying up the house. The kids made interesting additions to the decor that I did my best not to re-arrange. Shortly thereafter I noticed a strange smell.

Before I quite placed it, the smoke alarm started shrieking. I leaped onto my stool and threw open the door as smoke poured into my face. The foil had torn and the precious drippings were emptying into the oven instead of my gravy boat. I yanked the pan out and it collapsed, depositing the turkey on the floor and burning my arm in the process.

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Once again, I loaded my now very grumpy kids into the car. Even my formerly espresso-fueled daughter was yawning. I returned to my personal aisle just as an elderly lady ahead of me picked up the last foil pans. I rummaged frantically through the already ravaged shelf. “Mom! Can we just buy some mac-and-cheese?” my son asked wistfully. I blinked rapidly, trying to resist the sudden burning in my eyes. And then it happened, the first Thanksgiving miracle of the day. The lady said, “I think I’ll go with a cooked chicken. Just me and my neighbor ... we don’t need a big fancy dinner.” She handed me the pans. I paid for her chicken to thank her.

I broke all land speed records getting home again with the pans and jars of gravy. My firstborn witnessed me washing the ruined turkey in the sink. “I’m not gonna eat that,” he said solemnly. He cheered up when I allowed him to shove apples and carrots into the bird. Better him than me. I dumped it into the double-stacked pans for the third time, hoping for tear resistance. I mean rips in the pans, not tears of my own. OK, both actually.

By now I was quite disheveled and smelled strongly of smoke. There was no time to shower again, so I settled for changing my clothes and picking celery out of my hair. I was getting more and more upset with myself. Why couldn’t I enjoy this process? Admittedly I had been attacked by a turkey, beaten down by the grocery store, and deprived of my coffee. Still, why do I have this quest for perfection? It’s not like my family would disown me over a dry turkey.

The moment of truth arrived. As I delivered the meal to the table, I was in shock. It was the second miracle of the day. That bird was beautiful. My sister mixed what was left of the drippings with the store bought variety for perfect gravy. I can’t recall what anything actually tasted like, which is my entire point. If you act like a lunatic at Thanksgiving, that’s all your family will recall even if everything else is in shambles. Who wants to carry that mantle?

As I watched my kids happily holding court, wrinkled from their belated nap and not dressed in their fancy holiday attire, I realized the cliché is true. What’s on the table doesn’t matter as much as those around it. So go ahead and mess up the meal, perfect is dull. Have turkey hot dogs on the back deck. Laugh when your family says something embarrassing to the neighbors. Stir the pot and invite the chaos. These are the things you will remember in years to come — that and a sweet lady at the grocery store who restores your faith in human kindness.

*Jonna Jerome is a freelance writer who now lets her sister handle Thanksgiving dinner for the family.*