

ESSAY

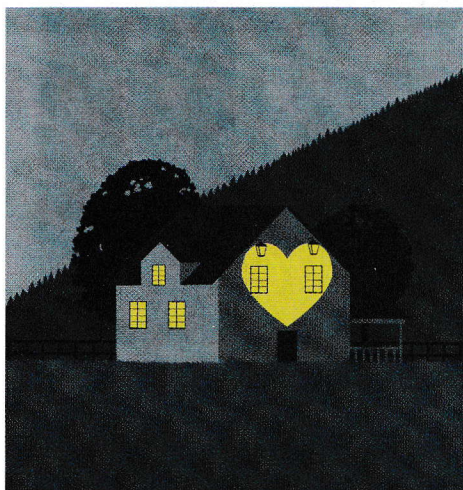
A BREAK WITH NONTRADITION

Years ago, a group of friends started an “orphan” Thanksgiving. But as time passed and lives changed, Jami Attenberg realized that she’d outgrown the celebration.

For a long time Thanksgiving was just Thanksgiving. It was a meal I had with my parents and brother at our house in the suburbs of Chicago, or sometimes at a relative’s house. My mom wasn’t that into cooking big meals. We became a family of floaters. So often there was a dinner somewhere with pleasant relatives and friends, and our family had a few fun days off together, and it was suddenly terribly cold outside, like someone had snapped their fingers and decided it would be cold, and we’d all better get used to it.

Then there was college, and Thanksgiving became slightly more complicated because I had to get from Baltimore back to the Midwest; there were airline tickets to be purchased or rides to be hitched. And there was perhaps a year in there when I didn’t come home at all. Because it wasn’t like Thanksgiving was this big deal in my family, not like with some of my other friends who had obsessive traditions and specific jobs. (“No one is allowed to make the stuffing but me.”) So Thanksgiving became less important as time passed, and I became a floater myself, spending the day in whichever of the many cities where I lived postcollege, at whatever home I could get invited to.

Then my brother and his girlfriend moved to New York City, and he began to have “orphan” Thanksgivings, for which he would open his home to all of his friends who had moved to the city from elsewhere, usually the Midwest. And these dinners became epic. At first, they were just potluck meals. My brother was still learning to cook as magnificently as he does today. Also, he was broke, as was everyone around him, and things just got scraped together



half the time. But he was in the process of creating a tradition. Instinctively, he wanted to own Thanksgiving.

For many years he had this Thanksgiving, and a lot of the guests remained with him along the way. It was a Thanksgiving I was always invited to. I knew every year this holiday would be fun and cozy and delicious, the turkey crispy and cooked to perfection. And I would get to see my brother’s cool friends, and we were all young and doing interesting things, and it was a delight, often ending in a boozy camaraderie. And that was Thanksgiving at my brother’s house, and it became an important thing in my life.

Eventually most of my brother’s friends got married, and I did not get married (although for a year or two I brought a boyfriend). The meals became more complex, but they also began to end earlier. People started having babies, and now this orphan tradition my brother had created was officially a family

tradition. And suddenly my differences and the choices I had made, which didn’t bother me too much any other time in my life, were so clearly highlighted as to make me question my entire universe. Which was not how I wanted to spend my holiday.

A few years ago, I smiled through the whole day, the delicious meal made by my generous, loving brother and others, at all the beautiful babies playing happily with one another. I chatted with the funny, kind, smart people whom I had grown to love. And when I left the dinner, I got into my car and I burst into tears. Because—and I realize this was my trip, not theirs—I did not feel like I fit in there anymore.

I told my friend Kate about it, and the next year she and her fiancé, Brendan, new enough to New England that they did not quite have their own tradition yet, said, “Why don’t you come up with us to the farmhouse in New Hampshire, and we’ll make our own Thanksgiving?” Our friend Rosie, recently widowed, decided to join us. No one has any children, although there is a dog named Dingo who

patiently waits in the kitchen to be spoiled. And all my friends are phenomenal chefs, and the food is made with love, and I love to eat it. Rosie is a writer and a bartender, and she makes special cocktails with names like Autumn Bonfire. We all advocate for decadence. If we get really lucky, we’re snowed in, so we can just eat

and drink for days. Brendan stokes the fire and we drink wine and talk about life and literature and how everything is perfect at that exact moment because we are all together. Forever I thought I was a floater, but it turns out I needed to create my own tradition all along.

JAMI ATTENBERG
is the author
of four works of
fiction, including
the *New York*
Times best seller
The Middlesteins
(Grand Central
Publishing).

ESSAY

A BREAK WITH NONTRADITION

Years ago, a group of friends started an “orphan” Thanksgiving. But as time passed and lives changed, Jami Attenberg realized that she’d outgrown the celebration.

For a long time Thanksgiving was just Thanksgiving. It was a meal I had with my parents and brother at our house in the suburbs of Chicago, or sometimes at a relative’s house. My mom wasn’t that into cooking big meals. We became a family of floaters. So often there was a dinner somewhere with pleasant relatives and friends, and our family had a few fun days off together, and it was suddenly terribly cold outside, like someone had snapped their fingers and decided it would be cold, and we’d all better get used to it.

Then there was college, and Thanksgiving became slightly more complicated because I had to get from Baltimore back to the Midwest; there were airline tickets to be purchased or rides to be hitched. And there was perhaps a year in there when I didn’t come home at all. Because it wasn’t like Thanksgiving was this big deal in my family, not like with some of my other friends who had obsessive traditions and specific jobs. (“No one is allowed to make the stuffing but me.”) So Thanksgiving became less important as time passed, and I became a floater myself, spending the day in whichever of the many cities where I lived postcollege, at whatever home I could get invited to.

Then my brother and his girlfriend moved to New York City, and he began to have “orphan” Thanksgivings, for which he would open his home to all of his friends who had moved to the city from elsewhere, usually the Midwest. And these dinners became epic. At first, they were just potluck meals. My brother was still learning to cook as magnificently as he does today. Also, he was broke, as was everyone around him, and things just got scraped together



half the time. But he was in the process of creating a tradition. Instinctively, he wanted to own Thanksgiving.

For many years he had this Thanksgiving, and a lot of the guests remained with him along the way. It was a Thanksgiving I was always invited to. I knew every year this holiday would be fun and cozy and delicious, the turkey crispy and cooked to perfection. And I would get to see my brother’s cool friends, and we were all young and doing interesting things, and it was a delight, often ending in a boozy camaraderie. And that was Thanksgiving at my brother’s house, and it became an important thing in my life.

Eventually most of my brother’s friends got married, and I did not get married (although for a year or two I brought a boyfriend). The meals became more complex, but they also began to end earlier. People started having babies, and now this orphan tradition my brother had created was officially a family

tradition. And suddenly my differences and the choices I had made, which didn’t bother me too much any other time in my life, were so clearly highlighted as to make me question my entire universe. Which was not how I wanted to spend my holiday.

A few years ago, I smiled through the whole day, the delicious meal made by my generous, loving brother and others, at all the beautiful babies playing happily with one another. I chatted with the funny, kind, smart people whom I had grown to love. And when I left the dinner, I got into my car and I burst into tears. Because—and I realize this was my trip, not theirs—I did not feel like I fit in there anymore.

I told my friend Kate about it, and the next year she and her fiancé, Brendan, new enough to New England that they did not quite have their own tradition yet, said, “Why don’t you come up with us to the farmhouse in New Hampshire, and we’ll make our own Thanksgiving?” Our friend Rosie, recently widowed, decided to join us. No one has any children, although there is a dog named Dingo who patiently waits in the kitchen to be spoiled. And all my friends are phenomenal chefs, and the food is made with love, and I love to eat it. Rosie is a writer and a bartender, and she makes special cocktails with names like Autumn Bonfire. We all advocate for decadence. If we get really lucky, we’re snowed in, so we can just eat

and drink for days. Brendan stokes the fire and we drink wine and talk about life and literature and how everything is perfect at that exact moment because we are all together. Forever I thought I was a floater, but it turns out I needed to create my own tradition all along.

JAMI ATTENBERG
is the author
of four works of
fiction, including
the New York
Times best seller
The Middlesteins
(Grand Central
Publishing).