

"How Thanksgiving Began" by John McWhinnie

You once asked me to narrate the tale of how my once illustrious, but now tragically fallen, family played a role in the first thanksgiving and to give you an account of how thanksgiving truly began. That day I refused your request: but it is clear to me that rumors of the hidden shame my family brought upon our young nation has escaped from our small circle of friends and migrated to its nether regions. Just last night Heather, perhaps aware of some of the sketchy history of my family's ignoble role in the creation of Thanksgiving, requested to hear the sordid tale. And so I've decided that it's time to face squarely the terrible misdeeds of my ancestors and to tell you all something of our tawdry past and, in the telling, convey some of the terror that Thanksgiving holds for me and the entire McWhinnie brood. This Thanksgiving I'll break my silence and tell you about the tradition of thanksgiving and in doing so, perhaps purge some the enormous guilt carried by the McWhinnie name: a guilt so profound that I tremble when I think of it, and in the trembling, shake too, and while shaking, start to quake a little, and finally, a little quivering - the dreaded, unholy, quivering, unnerving me and shaking at the very place where our souls meet the body and in that conjunction, make us the spiritual animals, carne and logos, we are each fated to be.

Some of you may know that rare book dealing is in my blood: that the tradition of buying and selling the finest, rarest and most important missives of our culture is a heritage my family has pursued with a devotion bordering on the religious. Indeed my great grandfather sold the true first edition *Moby Dick*, (Called first, *The Whale*), the three volume set printed first in London, to John Jacob Astor, for a then remarkable sum of 7 dollars and three beaver hats. It made the papers, even the illustrious Trib, where the deal was said to "set the world aflame with the latest rage, fashionable tomes procured in London and sold to the newly minted megarich barons of the new world". My grandfather scoured Europe with J.P. Morgan, uncovering some of the lost texts of the Black Pope, Pope Obsidian IV, and finding the secret manuscripts of the Epiceian monastic order, including the apocryphal *Tales of Rumors of Tales of Chasing Tail from Pius to Sextus and Bachus with Amorous Pursuits in between the Legs of Angus O'Phelius and Marcus Arelius: Or How a little Pussy Purred at Heaven's Pearly Gates and Was Given Entrance Into that Region and Made Merry with the Archangel Michael, and Hastened the Fall of the Angelic Order into Dementia at the Shores of Syphylus*. I, in my own modest way, have continued the tradition of bookish innovation, just last month launching "RareBookMatch.com" a website devoted to matching rare book lovers with only the most suitable first editions based on their own unique profile. And though I'm now engaged in a contentious legal dispute with a company called "match.com" who claims I've ripped off their idea (on the face of it absurd, I mean, how much further can you get between the ideas: one matches humans with humans based upon their mutual compatibilities. My business matches *humans* with *books*, amazing books, in first edition, based upon mutual compatibilities), I continue to look boldly into the rare book future without flinching. In fact, I see a time when

digital books read on mini computers might become a reality rather than the mere science fiction of a Steven Spielberg, or the fantastic plot of a James Cameron. Perhaps, just perhaps.

But, in reality, my family's engagement with rare books was just a clever attempt to outrun our ignominious past, a ruse designed to hide our name from the shame it had accumulated over generations and to begin anew, fresh, with no history, in the tradition of O.J. Simpson (who never outlived the shame of being referred to as "the Juice") and Bob Saget (who, after an uneventful but entertaining run as the uber-white bread father on *Full House*, turned in an unconvincing performance as a loutish, foul mouthed sex fiend on *Entourage*).

Even my last name, McWhinnie, is fake, adopted when my great grandfather, in a last, desperate attempt to outflank the usual public censure that our surname carried, married Elizabeth MacWinney in New York City in the cold, bloody winter of 1864. Their marriage, according to family legend, occurred at city hall and was presided over by Albert Tammany himself. What research I've been able to do at the New York City Hall of Public Records and The Justice League of America, research impeded by the restraining order the ungrateful archivist of that august institution has placed on me, reveals they may have been married at a hotel called "Ill Repute" in the five points neighborhood by either Boss Tweed or Boss Hogg (who may or may not have married them on a souped up muscle carriage with a union jack emblazoned on its side, a seditious symbol as any in Northern territories in 1864). Regardless, Elizabeth, who could have also been called Lilly, Lizzy, Eliza, Betty, Betsie, Betsy, Lillie and Liza by her friends, that is, if she had had any friends, was called Elizabeth by my great grandfather and everyone else who encountered her chilly temperament.

Nancy, as Elizabeth was often called by men my great grandfather referred to as her "clients" or just as often, "paying customers", and whom their children routinely called "uncle" - as, I'm guessing, an affectionate diminutive - was a devout woman, a roman catholic formidable in the lore of the church. She was so devout that the brood of McWhinnies, many of whom seemed as unlike my Great Grandfather as Pluto is unlike Uranus, grew to enormous proportion. The census of 1871 seems to indicate that the McWhinnie clan was provided their very own zipcode, the first time a single family was thusly honored, so numerous was their number, and so powerful and long their reach into the corrupt bowels of Tammany. And the bowels were not the only place susceptible to her charm. McWhinnie legend has it that Elizabeth's teasing reach into Tammany's bowels also extended into its pockets: and yielded more than just base copper: rather she sought a new coin of the realm, cash on the barrel, and having found this new hard steel, members that grew in proportion to each teasing reach, she laid the basis for a powerhouse family of rare book dealers. Which is why, even today, the McWhinnie family has been the sole provider of rare books to every

subsequent mayor, and why even Mayor Bloomberg pays fealty to our tribe when I come calling with my first edition Salingers, Kerouacs and R. Crumbs.

But how does this family lore relate to Thanksgiving you ask? Lest you think my first paragraphs a long diversion indulged in so as to evade the full telling of the hoary truth of my ancestors, let me end the story of our recent history and return to that sordid November in 1621, a bleak, desolate month of famine and much suffering among the pilgrims. My ancestors were among that group, though not as equals. No, they were outcasts already. But in a cruel twist of fate, these outcasts played a not insignificant role in the creation of our second most important national holiday. My family lore doesn't record the original names of my ancestors: indeed, in the nation's history of shameful deeds one will not find the true names of either of my ill-starred ancestors. But this we know. My great grandfather (hereafter shortened for purposes of brevity to "Great to the 15th power") was neither first, nor last, among equals: those intrepid Pilgrim voyagers who came to claim the new virgin land as their own. But, apparently my ancestor claimed more than virginal land. He took the imperative to heart, and claimed the only virgin available to him on the dangerous passage from England to America in 1620.

She was, by all accounts, a beauty. But she was also forbidden fruit, the child of the Spanish cook hired at the last moment by the Pilgrims after their original cook, Edmund Shepherd of Cumberland Pie, was called away to avert a confectionary disaster in Northampton (weighing in on that considerable court debate between proponents of savory versus sweet, Edmund was believed to have been the author of that now famous retort to the King, "I should rather be basted with the piss of a wombat and roasted over an open fire than powdered in an unsweetened sugar, rolled into a lightly browned crust, and served warm with a creamy chocolate coating"). Desperate to replace Edmund before the perilous journey into the unknown, the pilgrims hired a man of dark complexion whose only talent, it seemed, was his ability to make a little food go a long way by serving portions in small plates. Miguel Tapas English, as he signed his name in the ship's log, adopting the surname "English" surely as a ruse to fool the naïve pilgrims into thinking him a hearty Englishman of strikingly dark complexion, brought his exotic seventeen year old daughter along for the hazardous passage from old world to new. Her obviously fabricated name was McGill, and though her father called her Lil, the pilgrims all knew her as Nancy.

My great grandfather to the 15th power, whose name was never properly recorded in the ship's log, but who we believe to be Timothy Spandish (a distant cousin to the imperious Myles Standish), or "Timmy Span the Unrighteous Man into Girls with a Tan" as Myles Standish's wife caustically called him, helped himself to his own

human tapas (Nancy measured a diminutive five feet and weighed in just under seven stone) during the fraught voyage. By the time the pilgrims reached the banks of Plymouth, this unnatural mingling of pilgrim and hired help had made both Tim and Nancy outcasts, exiled from the charmed circle of worshipful pilgrims and from the tender bosom of her vexed father, whose cooking talents evaporated after his daughter left his scullery for the upper decks of English first class privilege: the secret to his tapas, apparently, was his daughter's culinary talents, and it was from her diminutive physical stature that today's "short order cook" was etymologically derived.

Nancy, who spoke no English, and Timothy, whose Spanish consisted of a few rudimentary words such as "empanada", "paella" and "senorita si", and "much gusto" communicated together using the language common to all star crossed lovers: international maritime signal flags. These they embroidered together during the long nights of the risky Atlantic crossing. The Pilgrims, forced to tolerate their unholy bonding while on the treacherous seas, turned on the cross- signaling couple once land was reached. Both Nancy and Tim were forced out of the pilgrim community and into their now infamous exile (referred to in the Annals of *Pilgrim Progress and Regress in the First Years of New World Pilgrimcy*, page 87, in this curious remark attributed to Henry Southern, one of the most reticent in Pilgrim speech, "Aye, ye all seeeth the new mingle with old, and in that mingling, produce swingling, which passeth, bye and bye, amongst the craven, but not the holyeth of thy pleasure. Indeedeth, if pleasure maye be so founde, hastened to it's private ends, among private members, and mutuality, so speaketh thy words, between sexes fair and foul").

It was during this exile that the English speaking Spandish and the Spanish Speaking Nancy Tapas English exhausted their limited vocabulary. While International maritime signaling flags were fine for the most basic conversation, particularly well suited for noun substantive talk, they were hopelessly inadequate in conveying the more subtle types of speech, for instance, the passive verbal voice needed when one chose to be the bottom rather than the top: and the flags were colossal failures when it came to the hypothetical conditional speech so indispensable to a young couple discussing their uncertain future. And so, in the year of 1645, three years after the birth of their unwholesome conjugality on that risky transatlantic voyage, they returned to the original Pilgrim community in Plymouth, barely recognizable figures clad in fur and shrouded in what appeared to be the frayed remains of international maritime signal flags. And to add to their fearsome qualities of appearance, they spoke a barely recognizable speech.

At first the pilgrims thought them to be the devil's heathen emissaries, prophecies of doom bent on bringing his wrath to their fragile community. But as they pieced together some recognizable words from their speech and looked

more closely at the faces - partially covered by tattered symbols of the international maritime community - they realized they were in the presence of none other than their own Timothy Spandish and the Spanish Nancy English communicating in some hybrid miscegenation of English and Spanish and mixed with other foreign symbols derived from their three year exile in the heathen woods of the new world.

And that, my friends - Michael, Heather, and anyone else daring enough to have read this far - is the origin of Spanglish. Formed by my cursed ancestors, Timothy and Nancy, in the depths of their need during their cruel exile, and passed on through generations of their brood, the Spanglishes as they were derisively called by the chaste Pilgrim tribe, until finally, my great great grandfather, in a desperate bid to outrun the ignominy of our cursed etymological destiny, met a fine Irish barmaid, married her and adopted her name in the hopes of purging our family of its sordid past. He started a modest rare book venture on the outskirts of the Five Points, she brought him his first clients, and the rest is rare book history. And so I conclude my story, delivering on my promise to tell each and every one of you the real story behind the origin of Spanglish. And to convey to you some of the terrible guilt my family lives with and passes on, generation to generation, and which we all hope to outrun, beating our oars endlessly against the tides of linguistic prejudice and etymological repression, until one day our world, pushed endlessly back into its past, will face the future and embrace our native Spanglish tongue.

THE END

Oh, wait a minute, I promised to tell you about the true origins of Thanksgiving, didn't I? ... and how my family played no small part in the creation of that cursed tradition, and how we feel no small shame in what really transpired on that snowy November day in 1621. Well, o.k. but I'll have to be brief in my story and short in my tale, as I am sure I have taxed all of our patience with my tale about how my family sullied the purity of the English language and birthed a heathen language, that hideously darkened parody of England's gloriously radiant tongue. O.k. you want to know how Thanksgiving began?

It all began in 1641, twenty years after the supposed first Thanksgiving repast with the Indians, or Native Indians as they preferred to be called then, not having a word in their tongue for “America”. In 1641, my ancestor Timothy Spanglish, now a widower (Nancy, who barely survived the great mashed potato wars waged between the Huron and Massakwas from 1636 to 1638, was lost in the sweet potato famine of 1639) lived alone on the outskirts of both Indian and Pilgrim society. It was a time of pestilence and war. The Native Americans, introduced to the exotic Pilgrim fare, had found themselves helplessly intoxicated by the potato in all its wondrous variety. In 1640, it was the potato chip they fought each other mercilessly for. In 1641 the Yam was an incendiary hot potato ready to blow up the fragile peace. While war threatened their proud nation, the Pilgrims were dealing with intoxicants of their own hellish new world design. In 1632 Eleanor Stuffer had created the first documented version of “stuffing” and in the ensuing years the Pilgrims fattened themselves on this delicious mash up of bread, crouton, celery, nut, pepper and other secret ingredients (it was rumored among one dissenting pilgrim sect that Eleanor used the seeds of pomegranate to flavor her side dish; a rival sect claimed it was the oil from the devil’s very own hair which gave the aromatic filler its unsavory but irresistible flavor).

From 1632 to 1640 an uneasy truce was kept between Pilgrim and Native American through a yearly exchange of potato and the ingredients needed to make stuffing. Every fourth Thursday emissaries from both peoples met to conduct their ritual of barter and buying. Native Americans returned to their nation bearing the fruits of the potato, which in their language translated as “English apple grown underground”; the Pilgrims carried back a bountiful booty of savories required in the concoction of stuffing’s well kept secret recipe.

In 1641, however, in the wake of the potato famine, and the internecine battles within the Pilgrim community over whether Eleanor Stuffer’s stuffing was the creation of her free will or divinely inspired and thus predestined, it appeared that no meeting between natives and pilgrims would occur. The consequences of this failure to exchange were profound, imperiling the uneasy truce between warring Indian nations and the Pilgrims fragile community.

Both communities needed a diplomatic emissary, a bridge between the two communities, someone who had partaken of both nations but was equally an outsider. My forbearer was a natural choice. In exile for over twenty years, he had survived, especially after Nancy’s death, by living on the outskirts of the Indian villages, feasting on whatever scraps they in their pity might leave for him. A keen observer of human behavior, he had adopted many of their customs: from fashion to palette. Among the Hurons he was known as Nohooso Watcheta Lokum Nibooyo. He had also followed the Native American tradition of taking and domesticating wolves, and was often seen in the company of a strong willed she-wolf of surly disposition.

While tolerated by the Indians, the Pilgrims rarely interacted with Timothy, preferring to shun his family and wolf. They were particularly spooked by how foreign Timothy had become to them, more closely resembling the Native American in dress and speech (which now mixed Huron, mattekwa and Spanglish). They understood that the Indian name given to Timothy meant “He who dances with wolves” and this too caused a vague feeling of dread and unease. But seeing no other alternative in the dreary autumn of 1641, the Pilgrims begrudgingly accepted my ancestor as the interlocutor between them and the Indian nations.

On the afternoon of the fourth Thursday of November, Indian and Pilgrim arrived with my ancestor. After much debate and haggling, and despite harsh words and the occasional international maritime signal flag mistranslation, a remarkable deal was struck: In acknowledgement of their symbiotic relationship, both parties agreed to meet on the fourth Thursday of every November henceforth in order to exchange much needed supplies. My ancestor, clever man that he was, also slipped into the written agreement a subclause specifying his immediate return to the Pilgrim community with the rights and privileges of a Master Pilgrim of the Highest Peerage, a rank until then reserved only for Myles Standish and Anne Bancroft. Before the Pilgrims could object, the Native Americans, desirous to be rid of Timothy themselves, began a glorious repast, distracting the Pilgrims with heaping helpings of stuffing and native rum. They feasted and drank into the dark hours of early morning and awoke the next day to find that the Indians had left, their written agreement tacked to a white spruce for all to see. They were shocked to find the subclause returning Timothy Spanglish to full investiture with the Pilgrims. The language was ironclad - and being a righteous people incapable of breaking covenant, they accepted Timothy “He who dances with wolves” Spanglish back into their Pilgrim community.

And if this sounds like a happy ending to you - for Timothy, Native American and Pilgrim - and if you wonder where the massive shame haunting my family derives and why that guilt drove us from the bosom of our country's first families into the questionable trade of rare book peddler - consider this. In Wampanoag, the word “Lokum” is indeed translated literally as “dances”. However, in that language “dances” can have a literal and metaphorical meaning, much in the same way the verb “to know” is used in the old testament to describe a cognitive state, “I know Jezebel” or a carnal drive, “I fucked Jezebel”. For among the Indians, it was rumored that Timothy Spanglish, bereft of Nancy and lonely for the companionship of a strong woman, had danced with his wolf a very forbidden dance. And true or false, the shame of that name has been passed through generations of Spanglish until my great great grandfather, in a desperate attempt to put an end to the snide remarks and alleyway titters, met and married an Innkeeper's daughter he met in a bar in the five points, a woman of formidable talents herself, and changed his

name, taking hers for his own, and in doing so, ended a legacy of shame and began a legacy of shameful book peddling, one so illustrious that it is carried on in five convenient locations spread throughout the tri-state region.

And that, my friends, is how the first Thanksgiving Happened and why it haunts every new generation of rare book dealing McWhinnies.

THE END

P.s. I have spent a good portion of my rare book-dealing life researching my family history in the archives of Native American Culture (NAC) and The Society of Pilgrim and Pilgrimages (SOPP) in an attempt to parse the truth from the mythology of my cursed family name. I have never been able to substantiate the rumors of my ancestor's misdeeds, but neither have I been able to prove false the sordid tales that still sully our name. They follow me even into cyberspace, and every year, it seems, on this day, some new voice from the internet appears to taunt me and my family. In our meager defense, I have heard that Timothy Spanglish lived a chaste life upon his return to the Pilgrims. In fact, all written records after 1641 refer little to him, and when they do, they say little other than he was a man with an abiding interest in husbandry, which I take to mean he found himself a lovely Pilgrim wife and settled down to be a good husband. One dissenting note occurs in the highly dubious record of Pilgrim apocrypha (this apocrypha was discovered in an old barn in Stockbridge Ma in 1968 near a restaurant owned by Alice Guthrie). In this bundle of poorly written documents I found a curiously annotated journal of Hesther Dow and this passage: "He that has come agin to commonweal was like a jester on the sideline with a failed limb covered in paste and wet liniment. And when he passeth an evening with the frail sex, The Wolf Dancer prefers the ways and styles of the canine, or "doggy" when he doeth it. This hath vexed Pastor Simon, a missionary man himselth of many years late with the Indians. The camp is divided between those that prefer this way, the wayeth of the dog, or the other way, prone on thy back, in devout prayer as the missionary prays when he lays himself upon us and prays we purge ourselves of the devils gibbering words of lust"). Curious words indeed - from a document in an almost illegible hand, a date sometime in the late 1640's, and whose poetic invocations of the style of the dog and missionary I ponder to this very day.

THE END

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