



Legends of that fall
The view from the
boathouse at Manka's
Inverness Lodge

THE COMFORTS OF NOT-HOME

At a mystical hunting lodge in Northern California, **Michael Chabon** and his family learn to give thanks

YOU PEOPLE MAY ASSEMBLE with ritual correctness at the annual table under the ancestral roof, but in my family, Thanksgiving is as homeless as the Pilgrims. Our family tree has no trunk; it's all roots and branches. There is no grand high grandmother to ingather the tribes by fiat or the irresistible excellence of her fare. Instead, unwritten charts ensure that a byzantine system of mothers-in-law and sisters-in-law rotates the meal through the houses of our family, with guilt playing the role of gravitation. I am not at all sure that in the two decades my wife and I have been together we have ever passed consecutive Thanksgivings at the same table. We have gone to Ridgewood, New Jersey, and Calabasas, California, to my

mother and my mother-in-law, to my mother's sister-in-law and my sister-in-law's mother. We have even, on occasion, hosted the meal ourselves.

Sometimes all these intricacies wear us down and we flee, like tax fugitives seeking shelter from a burdensome bureaucracy, to the tranquil haven of somebody else's mishegas. One year we went to the Sacramento mansion of a Greek-American whose family gave thanks with first-generation fervor and a buffet that honored the traditions on either side of their hyphen. Another year we went to the home of some writer friends in Pacifica for a Creole soul-food extravaganza, lavishly furnished with young novelists, chess pie, and Dungeness crabs plucked that morning out

of the bay. In 2002, we fled to Manka's Inverness Lodge.

A friend—I'll call him Mr. Robinson—had phoned that fall to announce that he, his wife, and their two children were flying from their home state (east of the Sabine and south of the Ozarks) to join some old hometown friends, now residents of Marin County, for a Thanksgiving weekend at Manka's. Did I know Manka's? I did. It was an hour away from our home in Berkeley. Did I know that it was the sweetest, quirkiest, most exquisite gem of a luxury inn? I did. Did I know that every Thanksgiving, Manka's excellent kitchen cooked up a culinary narrative, operatic in its duration and epic in its whimsy, to mark the passage, so stunningly swift, of another 364 days during which we had all taken our lives and loved ones for granted, failed to appreciate the little gifts and graces, and flat-out, full-bore kvetched? That, I told him, I did not know. But I had been meaning for many years to give thanks to God or the universe for Manka's.

IT WAS AN OLD HUNTING LODGE, built in the early 1900s to shelter men who journeyed north from San Francisco to kill birds and large mammals in the fog. At its heart stood the lodge proper,



steep-roofed, deep-eaved, and the color of a pinecone. It housed the reception lounge and restaurant, with a few guest rooms upstairs. In the woods that surrounded the main building, according to no discernible plan, stood a bunch of cabins and outbuildings submerged in perpetual deep-green shade. Manka's had not been built so much as accumulated, like boots on a porch. After the presumed extinction of the huntable mammals there followed a dark period in the hotel's history, involving bikers and mysterious Czechs, about which little was said. Then, sometime in the '90s, there appeared an enigmatic neuro-psychologist named Margaret Grade, who remade the place in its own idealized image as the archetypal big-woods lodge, all Hudson Bay-blanket upholstery, animal-parts decor, and dark oak, fir, and redwood; a Marin County Rivedell; a retreat out of legend, for the hunting of sasquatches and wendigos.

If Manka's was like Tolkien's Last Homely House, Margaret Grade was an elvish presence, magical and furtive. With a blend of Zen and whimsy, she wrought meals and a vibe of fanciful rusticity out of fine local ingredients, with furnishings that dialed down the hunting-lodge gothic with touches of farmhouse minimalism, and a distinctive use of text as decor so you knew she was around. But her presence was elusive. If you caught a glimpse of her, you felt lucky and a little dazed. To catch her in conversation was like netting the rarest butterfly, and after a minute you felt compelled, out of pity, to release her.

WE NUMBERED SIX and my friend's family four; their old neighbors, who had lit out for the fringes of West Marin to spend down their inheritance in the study of soul migration, kundalini, or Swedenborgianism (I forget), brought the total of our party to 14. We arrived the day before Thanksgiving and immediately set about the leisurely work of encouraging eight children—of wide-ranging ages, with uneven degrees of acquaintance-ship, divergent upbringings, and distinct styles of getting on one another's and their parents' nerves—to cohere. This was accomplished by means of long walks on chilly beaches, the playing of board and card games, and repeated

screenings of Steve Oedekerk's inexplicably hilarious *Thumbs!* micro-epics, *The Godthumb*, *Thumb Wars*, *Bat Thumb*, *Thumbtanic*. An analogous procedure was undertaken among the couples, 66.6 percent of whom had never met, with equally effective applications of hot tubs and wine. The air was perfumed with eucalyptus, wood smoke, and the brackish breeze off Tomales Bay. We sank into thick sweaters, leather club chairs, and companionship.

Recollections are hazy about the holiday meal itself. There may have been turkey, or goose, or both. It is generally agreed that the stuffing starred rabbit sausage. There can be little doubt, given the fundamental principles of Manka's kitchen, that every course—and in our hazy, hot-tub-and-wine-soaked memories there were dozens, perhaps hundreds, of courses—was constructed from roots, fruits, leaves, milk, butter, cheese, and meat that had been, until very recently, in a patch of ground, on a

TEN YEARS HAVE PASSED since that night at Manka's Inverness Lodge. The yoga gypsies broke up a while back. Mr. Robinson's daughter was killed by a terrible disease at the age of 18, and his wife has since fallen prey to another. And two days after Christmas in 2006, a massive tree fell onto the main building of Manka's, damaging a water heater, which started a fire and burned the old lodge to the ground. We can never go back, therefore, to the place as it was in its heyday, to the families we were in our prime, to the things that we had all taken for granted up until that day.

And that, to me, is the meaning of Thanksgiving. Of all the Thanksgivings before and since, the one spent at Manka's stands out for me as the truest, even though we were far from our places of origin. Nothing lasts; everything changes. People die, and marriages dissolve, and friendships fade, and families fall apart, whether

Long after the remnants of some last outrageous pie had been cleared, there was no one left in the dining room but we six, and nothing to give thanks for but one another and the final bottle of wine.

branch or stem, or in the udder or on the bone of an animal within an hour's drive. The meal moved at a stately pace over several hours, at once eventless and exciting. The printed menu, as always at Manka's, incorporated elements of symphonic program, galactic itinerary, and Victorian novel, each dish entitled like a tone poem, sketched with outlandish precision, and brought to you by one of the inn's vast dramatis personae of local farmers, fishermen, foragers, or hunters. There was an entire menu of simpler fare for the children. One by one, they nodded and retired to their rooms until, at some late hour, long after the remnants of some last outrageous pie had been cleared, there was no one left in the dining room but we six, and nothing to give thanks for but one another and the final bottle of wine.

or not we appreciate them; whether or not we give thanks every waking moment or one night a year. For the act of returning to the same table, to the same people and the same dishes—to the same traditions—can blind you to life's transience. It can lull you into believing that some things, at least, stay the same. And if that's what you believe, then what have you got to be grateful for? None of our Thanksgivings are ever coming back; we've lost them. They're gone. And so this year, let's go somewhere with strange customs and unfamiliar recipes and the latest collection of ill-assorted chairs, and give thanks—not for everything we have, but for everything, instead, that we have lost. ■

Michael Chabon's latest novel, Telegraph Avenue, is out now.