

prison can absorb you, and he was becoming the kind of guy who would rather teach classes in prison than have visits from his family. Because family meant guilt and failed responsibility. By comparison, prison was freedom.

Chief Running Mouth, believing Thanksgiving to be a celebration of Native American genocide, had tried to get the black guys to join his boycott. Nobody was going to do *that*. Psycho, missing the point completely, had said, "What'd them Pilgrims ever do for me?" Snakebite added, "When the white man wants to feed me some good food for a change, you want me to do *what*?" Even Toilet Paper Man, ever fearful of cosmic rays emanating from the mess hall, was there along with Bed-Sore, Bird, Stoney, and all the rest of us, standing in line, hoping the best turkey wouldn't be gone by the time we got there.

I'd finally found a seat with my little tray of turkey when a guard came up and said, "Edwards, you got a visit." I eyed my food, then looked at the other guys at the table. "Here," I said, "any you guys want this?" I got up, leaving my decent federal Thanksgiving dinner to the vultures. Up in the visiting room, families were arriving. Some inmates would let their families wait while they ate, but for most of us, family came first, even if that meant missing a special meal. Still, it was hard not to be torn between family and your buddies, the ones with whom you ate and worked and watched movies and read books and wrote to lawyers, and counted the days. The ones who were cooking contraband right now.

I had been down long enough to know that while we waited for our official meal, an unofficial one was being prepared back in the cellblock living units. Former car thieves, now with contacts in the kitchen, would be sneaking trays of turkey and pumpkin pie out the back door. And the Italian guys could prepare a meal worth a prison sentence to eat. The marijuana growers were the next best. These were men in their

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## Prison Man Considers Turkey

A first Thanksgiving in prison may be laden with maudlin sentimentality, and a last with hard-boiled familiarity, but in the middle are moments when clearly defined feelings fray and you can't be sure exactly who you are. During my first Thanksgiving season in prison, I was sitting alone in The Hole, and my last was mere weeks before I walked out of there, as they say, a free man. The second Thanksgiving the shock of being locked up was gone, as was the truculent refusal to enjoy anything pleasant a prison experience might offer. But gone also was the novelty, especially for my family, tired of long drives and disrupted holidays. This second Thanksgiving in federal prison was celebrated by someone called *Me*, but I didn't know quite who he was, and neither did anyone back home. He tutored crack dealers for their GED exams, taught Shakespeare on Thursday nights, but

forties like me—exactly like me, middle-class ex-hippies, bustling with little gardens in our cellars. We like good food.

My four-year-old son ran up to me and gave me a big hug. I looked at Mary. "Hi," I said tentatively, and got a dark look in response. "What? What'd I do?" I asked. "What's the matter with you?" she demanded. I thought about that one a while. "Is something wrong?" I asked. "Just never mind," she spat. Now, of course something was wrong. I was in prison for growing marijuana and she was stuck alone with our child. As guys were wolfing down my Thanksgiving dinner, I ate a microwave mini-pizza from the vending machine and tried to hear Mary, over the din of the visiting room, recite her stream of complaints, which I could do nothing about. Prison visiting rooms are never comfortable, and on holidays they are always crowded and hot and loud. This was our second Thanksgiving here, and eighteen months of this was getting to her. "You never give me what I need," she said. "I can't. I'm in prison," I tried lamely. "We were waiting here for almost an hour," she said. "Well, things were a little chaotic down in the chow hall . . ." "Sometimes I think you'd rather be with your friends than with us," she said. She wasn't far from wrong.

Each of us was torn, I between this hellish racket of the visiting room and the camaraderie of the prison, and she between this same hellish racket and the camaraderie that would await her when she left me for the day: prison wives sitting around a Formica table in the motel restaurant, probably ordering turkey dinner, bad-mouthing us and exchanging nightmarish tales of handling the house and kids back home alone with community and family disapproval looming over their tired shoulders. We'd dragged them into this and now, hundreds of miles from home, missing home-cooked dinners at their own parents' houses, they were prison wives whose children played together while we snuck food and cookery

behind the backs of the guards who themselves would rather have been home on Thanksgiving. It was our fault for putting everybody through this, and the guilt we felt was in part because, under these conditions, we knew we were beginning to prefer each other's company to that of our real families.

Visiting hours were over and I went back to my cell. A plate of turkey with all the clearly contraband goodies was waiting for me. Somebody, knowing I'd missed dinner, had cooked it up and made sure I got it. I have no idea who that might have been. Maybe Chief Running Mouth. Maybe Psycho.

