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Haggis in the Land of the Free

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Today is Thanksgiving — and if you're reading this, stop hiding out in the computer room and get back to your family right now! Yes, we know how Uncle Waldo gets after a few bottles of Scotch and yes, if Aunt Lois hugs you one more time you could permanently disappear into the fat rolls on her arms. But that's tradition, my friend...and even though everyone has their own sense of what that means, isn't it what holidays are all about?

Actually, who am I to say? Especially when it comes to Thanksgiving. I'm nothing but a big Thanksgiving faker. I wasn't born into it — and quite frankly, even when I'm celebrating in my full pilgrim dress and hand-fashioning a wreath from dried corn stalks, I feel like I'm just going through the motions.

You see, I was but a lass when my people crossed the big water to escape the mindless tabor-tossing and haggis-munching of our native Scotland. We came to the Land of the Free, and let's set the record straight — I'm truly grateful to be here. Just never having to eat a boiled sheep's gut stuffed with barley and spices is enough to fill anyone with genuine gratitude.

After we'd settled in and figured out which side of the road to drive on, fall approached and we began to hear whisperings of a brand new holiday — Thanksgiving. It was new to us, being British (and ingrates, to boot). Yet it revolved around copious amounts of food, and we were immediately game.

At first, people invited us into their homes to introduce us to this celebration, taking the wayward Scots under their turkey wing, as it were. Perhaps our hosts found the six of us too entertaining. Perhaps they weren't charmed when we licked our plates clean and stuffed our pockets with dinner rolls on the way out the door. Whatever the reason, we were never invited to the same place twice.

And so it came to pass, inevitably, that we had burned up all the good will surrounding us and were left to our own devices to celebrate Thanksgiving in our home, as a family. Preparing Thanksgiving dinner wasn't much of a challenge since most Brits serve Turkey at Christmas dinner...along with, say, stuffing and potatoes. Thus, Thanksgiving dinner became something

of a dress rehearsal for Christmas dinner. But it was food; we were together as a family; and if we somehow got out of helping with the dishes, we were grateful.

Our tradition of feasting as a family on Thanksgiving hasn't held up well over time. Since marrying several years ago, my sister Jane and her family spend the holiday with her in-laws. My older brother Jonathan lived for years in another state, before recently moving back to my parents' home town of Louisville. I rarely made it home from St. Louis, saving the mileage toll on my crappy car for Christmas. My younger brother Dave just showed up at my parents' table and hoped some food would emerge, poor guy.

The real truth, though, is that no matter how long we'd lived in the states, Thanksgiving has never really felt like "our" holiday. After all, when you think about it, what's there to celebrate for us Brits? That first Thanksgiving dinner didn't bode well for us. The pilgrims were talking real estate with their new neighbors before the Brits even dreamed up our genius taxation-without-representation plan. (Yes, my father still jokes that we should all wear black armbands on the 4th of July.) And few in the family besides yours truly had the gluttony/commitment required for acquiring the taste for pumpkin pie. (No one likes it the first time, do they?)

And so this year, as the rest of the country travels cross-country to surround themselves with every relative they have, our family will be observing Thanksgiving in our own way. My sister Jane, 75 months pregnant, will trek to her in-laws with her husband, Bill, and their three children, Billy, Jennifer and Rebecca. Probably theirs will be the closest to a bona fide Turkey Day. I'm sure there will be a Jell-O salad of some sort.

My brothers, Dave and Jonathan, will cook up a gourmet feast — all I know is that duck will be involved — for my parents at their house in Louisville. I can guarantee there will be no pumpkin pie. And me? As usual, I'll get together with my dear friend, local singer/songwriter Brandy Johnson, for our no-pressure non-Thanksgiving celebration — joined this year by my brand new husband and our beloved friend Renee. We'll go out for Indian food and then, if we're feeling inspired, maybe we'll hit the movies.

No travel. No turkey. No gourd-based foods anywhere. After all, that's our Thanksgiving tradition. I'm getting kinda misty just thinking about it.

Julia Smillie Carey is none other than *STLtoday's* illustrious advice columnist. "Ask **Julia**" appears on our front page every Tuesday, so read up already — or send your questions to: askjulia@stltoday.com.

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