

A CHANGE

OF

SEASONS



BY JENNIFER GRANT

As holidays go, Thanksgiving is a gift, a ritual gathering of family that brings to the table great food and feelings of deep gratitude. It can also be a day of complex emotion, especially if you're a child of divorce and your father was the legendary screen actor Cary Grant.

THE SNAPSHOT you're looking at was taken in 1968, at a friend's home in Scarborough, New York. It was only my second Thanksgiving, but the last one that my mom and dad and I would celebrate together. My parents, the actors Cary Grant and Dyan Cannon, separated very soon after this holiday. I have no conscious memory of the three of us during that preciously brief period. But here we are, celebrating our Thanksgiving as a family.

Families assume all sorts of shapes and sizes. We never know when our family picture will change; when we will lose a loved one, gain a new family member, or when those closest to us may split apart. It is the most tender of topics, one that shapes the landscape of our hearts. Whatever the outer picture of family we present, by bringing us together or pushing us apart, Thanksgiving places us nose to nose with the happiest and most daunting of memories. Like it or not, we are given

a look at ourselves—and one another—through the prism of family.

Thanksgiving is associated with a time of harvest, celebration, thankfulness, and, of course, stuffing ourselves to the gills. My father passed away just days after Thanksgiving some 25 years ago, and four years ago the second most influential male in my life, my maternal grandfather Benjamin Friesen, passed away two weeks before Thanksgiving, inside a month of his 100th birthday. For quite a while now, the “holiday” time of year has signaled deep loss and emptiness in me.

My father was the central person of my childhood. When I was born, Cary Grant retired to become a full-time father. After defining the essence of a leading man in some of the finest films of the 20th century—*His Girl Friday*, *The Awful Truth*, *Notorious*, *The Philadelphia Story*, *North by Northwest*, and perhaps most fittingly for this story, the indelible *Holiday*—he stepped out of Hollywood's limelight and never looked back. Dad was 62 when



I was born. We both knew he wouldn't be around forever, and we made every day count. For 20 years, we were as inseparable as possible.

AS A CHILD OF divorced parents, I alternated Thanksgivings between homes. For Mom's years, we flew to her hometown of Seattle, where Grandma Clara and Grandpa Ben hosted the event for the entire Friesen clan. I associate Thanksgiving primarily with Mom's side of the family because it was the one time of year when my cousins, aunts, uncle, and Mom and I got together. Grandpa Ben was one of those rare men who combine good old-fashioned values with the wisdom of having conquered his personal demons. Grandpa was pure grit. Every year I spent a week or two of my summer vacation with Grandpa and Grandma in their beautiful, peaceful West Seattle home. We picked strawberries in the nearby fields (Grandma made them into jam), attended Presbyterian ser-

vices together (Grandpa was an elder in the church), and, much to Grandma's chagrin, Grandpa taught me hands-on-the-wheel driving from my bucket seat alongside him—on the freeway.

We took daily walks to "inhale the crisp clean air" before our freshest of the fresh organic meals. "You know cooking too much takes the vitamins right out of our foods," Grandpa once convincingly counseled. "We must eat primarily fresh fruits and vegetables—they have such an abundance of vitamins and minerals that they literally bring us to life." He also consumed whole grains, fresh fish, and the occasional bit of meat...after grounding them all in prayer and chewing each bite 30 times. Still, whenever we visited friends' homes, Grandpa enjoyed whatever cheesy-sugary-fried, hormone-filled meal the host served. He knew the act of accepting kindness far outweighed dietary philosophies. Grandpa was a rock.

During Thanksgiving, cousins David, Scotty, Jenelle, Tobin, and I played pool in

Grandpa's basement, lazed around watching football while trading shoulder rubs, ran around outside, and stuffed ourselves on Grandma's divine rugelach cakes. Grandma was Jewish, a caretaker, and a phenomenal cook, so every hour meant another mini-meal. A typical day began with a breakfast of fruit salad, maple syrup-covered waffles, and Grandpa's fresh-squeezed orange juice. By midmorning, Grandpa offered up a date-banana shake. Before the glorious, drink-in-the-Seattle-skyline-and-catch-up-on-girl-stuff walks Mom and I used to take, Grandma might sneak me a grilled cheese on sprouted-grain bread. Then buttered popcorn, homemade halvah, and a veggie plate for the football games. This was all before our traditional 5 o'clock supper of turkey with all the fixins, cinnamon-dusted noodle kugel, green beans, mashed potatoes, Brussels sprouts, and—my least favorite—the Jell-O mold. I could swallow one Brussels sprout if forced, but the Jell-O mold was plain impossible.

THANKSGIVINGS WITH DAD took on life when I was 12 and my lovely stepmother Barbara joined the Grant family. The first year, the unsuspecting Barbara all too generously asked what I might like for the Thanksgiving meal, meaning something along the lines of, "Apple or pecan pie, darling?" My entitled 12-year-old self took full advantage of a shot at my favorite meal. From that time on, Barbara, Dad, and I would be found at home in Los Angeles, gorging ourselves on an entirely untraditional Peking Duck supper, with mince pie for dessert. The talented Barbara somehow pulled the elaborate process off every year. She drove to little Chinatown to fetch two whole ducks that then hung in our kitchen, blown about by their own personal fans, to dry. By the third year, Dad placed a bow tie around the "male" duck's neck. If they were going to be regular guests, they might as well dress the place up. We spent the rest of the day playing cards, watching the telly, and having a good chat about life.

A Moveable Feast Childhood was a coast-to-coast adventure for me. From far left: Dad and I (as a newborn) on a crisp day in Santa Monica; the Hamptons, on New York's Long Island, was a summer wonderland for us; Mom, Grandpa, and I relished our time together in Seattle; and San Francisco's Golden Gate Bridge framed a beautiful memory for Dad, Barbara, and me.

The two most important men in my life. Both taken near Thanksgiving. A double whammy for November. There are countless other reasons for gratitude (topping the list is the love I share with my mother, son, and the rest of my crazy-wonderful family), but I've also felt a certain pressure not uncommon at Thanksgiving: the pressure to be happy and grateful when you're feeling silently miserable.

My heart ached when Dad and Grandpa passed on, but after a brief term of grieving, I refused to recognize the enduring sorrow. While my intellect reasoned that it was time to move on, my emotions had other plans. Neglecting the obvious, I routinely, conveniently "forgot" when it was that Dad died. For many years, on the night before the anniversary of my father's death, I would "suddenly" feel awful and have no idea why. Repression takes boatloads of energy. Someone would eventually remind me of the fact of his death, and the fog would lift—but, miraculously, I managed to deceive myself again the following year. Instead of embracing the sadness, I judged it, so the grief came out sideways. Childhood Thanksgivings had been simple, happy times of gluttonous togetherness. Unconsciously, I insisted on the

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Recently, Mom and I went on a lovely tour of the Turkish Isles. Here, she caught me taking in the peaceful journey.



impossibility of that same simplistic happiness again. That very insistence shoved the pain down someplace unrecognizable. Every year I had mysterious chest rashes at Thanksgiving, as if my body was crying because I refused to. I was good at giving thanks but terrible at admitting what I saw as weakness. I wore gratitude as a mask to conceal my pain. But as the years have passed I've found a way to navigate the conflicted emotions this holiday stirs in me.

To embrace my loved ones' passing means, first of all, consciously accepting the truth: I love them, I miss them, and I still yearn for them. Once I've spent even a brief time reflecting, my gratitude for the amazing family and friends currently in my life takes on deeper hues. I can plant new seeds, knowing that they will yield fruit in their own time.

SINCE GRANDPA'S DEATH, my cousin Tobin has bravely, graciously taken on the role of our Pacific Northwest host. Tobin and his three beautiful children, Tra, Mia, and Grace, serve up a beautiful feast, along with plenty of trampoline, charades (Mom and I love the game), and soulful, cathartic laughter.

This year, I am engaged to be married and pregnant with my second child, due November 20th. Thanksgiving is once again a time of personal harvest. In Thanksgivings future, my son Cary, husband Scott, and our new baby will forge our own path, create our own traditions, and fall into our own traps, while striving to embrace it all.

We never know how long our seasons together will last. The time may be brief and the impact deep. Whatever our span of life together, we must celebrate the beauty, forgive our mistakes, and mourn our losses—sometimes all at once. Emotional maturity is a huge meal to swallow. We like the tasty bits, but there's always the Brussels sprouts and Jell-O mold. I've finally acquired a taste for brussels sprouts. The Jell-O, I'm still working on.

Jennifer Grant's memoir, Good Stuff—A Reminiscence of My Father, Cary Grant, was recently published by Knopf.