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"I have chosen a Thanksgiving pageant for you, children," announced Mrs. Hetherington to the Portford Elementary School Drama Club one chilly autumn afternoon.

Barely taller than the older students, Mrs. Hetherington clicked across the gymnasium floor in high heels, peering intently at her young actors and actresses through jewel-rimmed eyeglasses. "I wrote a charming poem that we will turn into a play."

The Drama Club met after school each Tuesday and Thursday afternoon. Under Mrs. Hetherington's direction, the students learned to memorize lines and say them with expression, pantomime, paint scenery, choose costumes and props, apply stage make-up, and operate microphones, spotlights, and curtains.

"Would you like to hear the poem?" continued Mrs. Hetherington. She laughed. "Of course you would!" She cleared her throat, adjusted her topknot of gray hair, and began speaking in her most eloquent voice:

*Today is Thanksgiving! The doorbell will chime.
How our home bustles at holiday time!
For days we've prepared for our loved ones so dear;
my dad even polished the brass chandelier.
My mother has dusted and shopped, baked, and shined.
She was up before sunrise, but she didn't mind.
The house smells of turkey and dressing and pie.
Mom dons an apron, and Dad wears a tie.
I look out the window. Oh, when will they come?
And then they arrive here, all twenty-and-some.
I pile all their coats on my big sister's bed,
then off with their food to the kitchen I head.
Mom carves the turkey and sets it in place.
Sis sets the china, and Dad says the grace.
We eat and we visit, we laugh and we play,
until our sad parting at the end of the day.
We've much to be thankful for—food, friends, and kin.
I can't wait until next year . . . they'll all come again.*

The boys and girls looked at one another. No one spoke a word.

"Well?" asked Mrs. Hetherington expectantly. The kids squirmed in their chairs. "Leigh, what do you have to say?" demanded Mrs. Hetherington, tapping her toe on the floor. Leigh thought for a moment.

"It's . . . perfect, Mrs. Hetherington," she said quietly. Mrs. Hetherington beamed.

“But,” continued Leigh, “it’s *too* perfect. I don’t think many people actually celebrate Thanksgiving that way.”

“Yeah,” Gerry piped up. “With six kids, our apartment always bustles. We’ll be going to my aunt’s for Thanksgiving dinner, but we’ll have to be home by three o’clock so my dad can go to work. And what’s a brass chandelier?”

“Well, it’s a—” Mrs. Hetherington began.

No one heard her. “My mom works the early shift at the hospital, so she’s up before sunrise every morning,” Phoebe chimed in. “But when she gets home on Thanksgiving Day, she and Aunt Edith and my cousin Luella and I are going to a Chinese restaurant for dinner.”

“My house definitely won’t smell like turkey,” said Noah. “My parents are vegetarians. But my dad’s a great cook.”

“We do have turkey,” said Christina with a laugh. “But last year when Dad went to carve it, it was still frozen in the middle!”

“My dad’s boss and his family are coming to eat with us,” said Tianna. She covered her ears. “His kids will play their violins after dinner.”

“My mom *might* wear an apron, but my dad never wears a tie! He’ll probably wear his favorite team sweatshirt,” said Lars.

Jessica grinned. “We have ‘twenty-and-some’ relatives like in your poem . . . but that’s just on my mom’s side. When everyone comes, there are, like, fifty of us! The first few people through the line get to sit at the table. The rest use the couch, easy chairs with TV trays, footstools, stairsteps, folding chairs, or even the floor. We always hope for good weather so the kids can go outside as soon as we eat!”

“We always have friends over for Thanksgiving dinner,” said Juan. “All our relatives live too far away.”

“Thanksgiving’s the only time of year most of my relatives see me,” said Kirsten. “They always say exactly the same thing . . . *My, how you’ve grown. We’ll have to put a brick on your head!*”

“Maybe that’s what happened to me,” murmured Mrs. Hetherington.

“We pile the coats on a bed, like in your poem,” said Jamil. “But last year Grandpa went in there to take a nap after dinner, and no one could leave until he woke up!”

“My mom doesn’t like to invite my cousins because they crowd first in line and never help clean up,” said Nicholas. “But she says she has to because they’re family.”

“We don’t have any fancy china,” said Jordan. “But everyone has to help wash dishes so we can watch the football game on TV after we eat.”

“Everyone brings food to our house, just like in your poem,” said Kayla. “But my uncle plays the same joke every year. He says, *Here’s my covered dish* and pulls out an empty bowl with a lid.”

Mrs. Hetherington giggled.

“My relatives bring Italian food,” said Michael. “And we all say a blessing together.”

“My brother from college never comes empty-handed, either,” said Batina. “He always brings home plenty of dirty laundry!”

“Dad won’t let me help with the food,” said Julie. “Last year I kept sampling everything, so this year I have to entertain my baby nephew. All he does is get into my stuff. He bites, too!”

“I’m flying to my dad’s house to be with him and my stepmom and their new baby,” said Kim. “We’re going to help serve dinner at a homeless shelter.”

Leigh turned back to Mrs. Hetherington. “See what I mean?” she said. “Instead of acting out the poem, how about letting each of us come up with our own script about how we celebrate Thanksgiving? We could all be onstage at the same time, and whoever is running the lights could shine a spotlight on each of us as we say our parts.”

The kids held their breath. Mrs. Hetherington chewed on her bottom lip. Then she clutched her hands under her chin and looked intently at each student, one by one.

“You’re true actors and actresses now,” declared Mrs. Hetherington. “You understand that a story must touch your heart before it can touch the hearts of your audience. I’m so proud of all of you! Yes, you may write your own lines. I’ll expect them at our next rehearsal, along with scenery, costume, and prop suggestions.” The kids cheered.

When the night of the performance came, the Portford Elementary School auditorium had never looked more festive. The Drama Club members moved across the stage without turning their backs to the audience, projected their voices, and said their lines with gusto. The audience clapped and cheered.

After the curtain call, the kids escorted Mrs. Hetherington to the stage and presented her with a bouquet of roses. She bowed deeply to the audience amid wild applause.

Backstage, Mrs. Hetherington gathered everyone for a group hug. “Bravo!” she said. “Bravo, children! Now we will begin planning for our Christmas pageant. Oh, the music! Oh, the trimmings! Oh, the . . .”

The kids all grinned. “Here we go again!” whispered Leigh.

