Good Housekeeping

BAILEY WHITE

Bailey White lives with her mother, Rose, in Thomasville, Georgia, where she teaches first grade, writes, and delivers commentaries on National Public Radio about rural life in the south and eccentric relatives.

Her late father, Robb White, was also a writer, but since he lived in California much of his life, the family seldom saw him. Bailey White graduated from Florida State University in 1973, moved to California, and then returned to live in Georgia. “Good Housekeeping” is from Mama Makes Up Her Mind (1993), parts of which appeared in various magazines or were heard on NPR’s “All Things Considered.”

Looking Ahead

In this essay, White writes about a memorable Thanksgiving. Analyze how she achieves her tone.

It was the middle of November, just a month before the wedding, when my mother announced that she was going to invite the family of our cousin’s bride to Thanksgiving dinner at our house.

“They need to get to know us on our own ground,” she said. She rared back in her reclining chair. “You girls can help with the cooking. Let’s see, there will be ten of us, and six of those Mitchells” (the bride’s family).

My mother was sitting in the kitchen, dammed in by stacks of old Natural History magazines. Behind her a bowl of giant worms, night crawlers, was suspended from the ceiling. She uses worm castings as an ingredient in her garden compost, and she keeps the worms in the kitchen so she can feed them food scraps.

My sister and I didn’t say anything for a while. I watched the worms. Every now and then one of them would come up to the edge of the bowl, loop himself out, swag down—where he would hang for an instant, his coating of iridescent slime gleaming—and then drop down like an arrow.
into another bowl on the floor. My mother had an idea that the worms missed the excitement of a life in the wild, and she provided this skydiving opportunity as an antidote for boredom.

My sister was eyeing the jars of fleas on the kitchen counter, part of an ongoing experiment with lethal herbs.

Those worms, or their ancestors, had been there my whole life, but somehow, until this moment, it had not seemed odd to have a bowl of night crawlers getting their thrills in the kitchen.

"Worms," I whispered to myself.

"Fleas," my sister whispered.

My eyes fell on a rusty 1930s Underwood typewriter under the kitchen sink. It had been there as long as I could remember; the G key permanently depressed, the strike arm permanently erect. My sister and I exchanged a look.

"What is that typewriter doing under the sink?" I asked flatter.

"Why on our own ground?" said my sister.

"Let's see, we'll have your Aunt Thelma's sweet potato crunch, and Corrie Lou's cranberry mold," my mother said.

Beside the typewriter was a guide to the vascular flora of the Carolinas, a turtle skull, and a dog brush. There were hairs in the dog brush, black hairs. Our dog Smut had died fifteen years ago. I thought about the typewriter, the turtle skull, and the dog brush. I thought about the worms. I thought about the bride's family—nice people, we were told, from Bartow County—walking into this house on Thanksgiving Day.

"Welcome to our home," my mother would say. And she would lead them over the stacks of books, through the musty main hall, and into a twilight of clutter. They would clamp their arms to their sides and creep behind her with their tight lips and furtive eyes, past rooms with half-closed doors through which they would glimpse mounds of moldy gourds, drying onions spread on sheets of newspaper, broken pottery in stacks, and, amazingly preserved, my grandfather's ship model collection. From one room a moth-eaten stuffed turkey would blindly leer out at them. "Storage!" my mother would explain cheerfully.

The guests would be settled on the front porch, where they would gaze hollowly down into the garden while our mother explained the life cycle of the solitary wasp who made his home in one of the porch columns. My sister and I would pass around plates of olives and cheese brightly, trying to keep a lilt in our voices and making the guests feel "at home."

"You can't do it!" my sister exploded. "We can never get ready in time!"
"What is there to get ready?" our mother asked innocently. "Just the food, and we'll do that ahead of time. You should always do the food ahead of time, girls," she instructed us. "Then you can enjoy your guests."

"Mama!" my sister wailed. "Just look at this place!" She gestured wildly.

"What's wrong with it?" My mother peered out at the room through a haze of dust. Behind her, another worm dropped.

"Just look!" Louise threw her arms wide. "The clutter, the filth..."

She spied the rows of jars on the counter. "...The fleas!"

"Don't worry about the fleas, Louise," our mother reassured her. "I am working on a new concoction, based on myrtle and oil of pennyroyal.¹ I may have the fleas under control by Thanksgiving."

Louise sank into a chair and looked our mother in the eye. "Mama," she began, "it's not just the fleas. It's..."

But I had come to my senses.

"Stop, Louise," I said. "Get up. We've got a weekend. We'll start on Saturday."

Louise arrived at dawn, the Saturday before Thanksgiving, loaded down with vacuum cleaners, extra bags and filters, brooms, mops, and buckets. Mama was sitting in her chair in the kitchen, eating grits and making feeble protestations. "You girls don't have to do this, Bailey. I'll sweep up Wednesday afternoon. Then on Thursday there will just be the cooking."

"I know, Mama," I said, "but we want to do a good job. We want to really straighten up. You'll be glad when it's all done. Eat your grits." I didn't want her to see Louise staggering out with the first load for the dump: a box of rotten sheets, some deadly appliances from the early days of electricity, and an old mechanical milking machine with attachments for only three teats.

Mama would not let us throw out a box of old photographs we found under the sofa—"I may remember who those people are some day"—or the lecherous old stuffed turkey with his hunched-up back and his bad-looking feet. "It was one of Ralph's earliest taxidermy efforts," she said, fondly stroking the turkey's bristling feathers down. And she let us haul off boxes of back issues of the Journal of the American Gourd Growers' Association only if we promised to leave them stacked neatly beside the dumpster for others to find. But she got suspicious when she caught Louise with the typewriter.

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¹ oil of pennyroyal: oil from the pennyroyal plant; used medicinally.
“Where are you going with that typewriter, Louise?” she asked.

“We’re going to throw it away, Mama.”

“You can’t throw it away, Louise. It’s a very good typewriter!”

Louise was getting edgy. “Mama, it’s frozen up with rust and clogged with dust. None of the moving parts moves. And they don’t make ribbons to fit those old typewriters anymore.”

“Nonsense,” said Mama. “You put that typewriter down, Louise. It just needs a little squirt of oil. Bring me the WD-40.”

Louise put the typewriter down with a clunk. I brought a can of WD-40, with the little red straw to aim the spray. Mama put on her glasses, pursed her lips, and peered into the typewriter. Skreet! Skreet! She went to work with the WD-40 and a tiny, filthy rag. “You girls are throwing away too much,” she said.

By midafternoon we began to feel that we were making progress. We could see out the windows, and we had several rooms actually in order. We had found our brother’s long-lost snakeskin collection and the shoes our great-aunt Bertie had worn at her wedding; a dusty aquarium containing the skeletons of two fish; and under a tangle of dried rooster-spur peppers and old sneakers, a rat trap with an exquisitely preserved rat skeleton, the tiny bright-white neck bones delicately pinched. “Just like Pompeii,” Mama marveled.

By the end of the day we had cleared the house out. What had not been thrown away was in its place. I had dropped a drawer on my foot, and Louise was in a bad mood. Mama’s glasses were misted with WD-40. We sat down in the kitchen and drank tea.

“What I want to know is, where are the priceless heirlooms?” asked Louise. “You read about people cleaning out their attics and finding 200-year-old quilts in perfect condition, old coins, cute kitchen appliances from the turn of the century, Victorian floral scenes made of the hair of loved ones. What kind of family are we? All we find is bones of dead animals and dried-up plants. Where are the Civil War memorabilia, the lost jewels, the silk wedding dresses neatly packed away in linen sheets and lavender?”

“Well,” said Mama, “you found your brother’s snakeskins. And I think this rat skeleton is fascinating. How long must it have been there?”

“Don’t ask,” moaned Louise. “I’m going home.”

On Sunday we dusted everything, swept, vacuumed and mopped the floors, washed the windows, and laundered the curtains, rugs, and slipcovers. By nightfall the house was ready.

“You girls have certainly struck a blow,” Mama congratulated us. “This place is as clean as a morgue.” We left her sitting in her chair with the worms, the typewriter, and the last three surviving fleas.
I walked out with Louise. "She looks a little forlorn," I said.

"She’ll get used to it," Louise declared. "And the Mitchells will never dream that we are peculiar!"

Thanksgiving morning, Louise and I divided up the cooking. She made the sweet potato soufflé and the squash casserole, and I cooked the turkey and made bread. Mama spent the morning in her garden picking every last English pea, even the tiniest baby ones, because we knew we would have our first freeze that night.

At ten o’clock we set the table. For a centerpiece Mama put some pink and white sasanquas to float in a crystal bowl, and the low autumn light came slanting in through the windows onto the flowers and the bright water. We had built a fire in the stove, and the heat baked out the hay-field fragrance of the bunches of artemisia hung to dry against the walls. The floors gleamed. The polished silverware shone. Beneath the sweet fall smells of baking bread and sasanquas and drying herbs I could just detect the faintest whiff of Murphy Oil Soap. Louise and I stood in the middle of the living room and gazed.

"The furniture looks startled," Louise said.

"It’s beautiful," I said. "And here they are."

"Welcome to our home. We’re so glad you could come," Mama was saying to the Mitchells. "Come out onto the porch. You will be interested to see the wasp who lives there. It’s a solitary wasp, quite rare . . . I know it looks a bit cleared out in here; my girls have been cleaning. Bailey, Louise, come and meet these Mitchells."

We sat on the porch for a while, bundled in coats, and watched the last petals of the sasanquas drift to the ground. Mr. Mitchell examined the neat, round hole of the solitary wasp with some interest.

"Do you have a knowledge of the hymenoptera," Mr. Mitchell? Mama asked. And she was off.

Mrs. Mitchell had smiley eyes and a knowing look. She leaned over to Louise and me. "It’s the cleanest house I’ve ever seen," she whispered. We were friends. Louise and I took her to the kitchen to help with the food.

Other guests arrived—our brother and his family, aunts and uncles, and the bridal couple. The house was full of talk and laughter. We brought out food and more food. Everyone sat down.

Then, "Where’s Daddy?" asked the bride.

Sure enough, an empty chair . . . two empty chairs.

"Where’s Mama?" asked Louise.

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2 hymenoptera: an order of insects that includes wasps.
“On the porch?”
No.
“In the kitchen?”
No.
“Everyone please start. The food will get cold,” I said. “I’ll go find them.”
Outside, the temperature was dropping. This was the last day the garden would be green. I wandered along the path, following the scent of bruised basil until I heard voices way in the back of the yard.
Mr. Mitchell: “... and this is?”
“Franklinia altamaha, Mr. Mitchell, and quite a spectacular specimen, if I do say so.”
“The famous Lost Franklinia of John Bartram,” Mr. Mitchell murmured reverently, gazing up into its branches. “I have never seen one.”
The sun shining through the crimson leaves of the Franklinia lit up the air with a rosey glow. Mr. Mitchell was holding her arm in his and gesturing with her walking stick. She was cradling some stalks of red erythrina berries in their black pods.
Mr. Mitchell turned slowly and looked over the garden. “Silver bell, shadbush, euonymous, blood-root, trillium”—he named them off. “Mrs. White, I’ve been collecting rare plants and heirloom seeds all my life, and I’ve never seen anything to equal this.”
“It’s an old lady’s pleasure, Mr. Mitchell,” said my mother. “Now wait till I take you to the dump and show you my bones. Louise threw them out,” she whispered hoarsely, “but I know right where they are. We’ll get them tomorrow, if you’re interested. You will be kind enough not to mention it to my girls.”
“It would be my extreme pleasure to see your collection of bones, Mrs. White,” said Mr. Mitchell. And slowly he led her out of the pink glow and back to the party.
The next day Louise came over, and we went to sit in the kitchen and drink hot chocolate with Mama and congratulate ourselves on a job beautifully done. But Mama was not in her chair. There was a note on the kitchen table. It was typewritten. Every letter was clear and black and even.

Sorry I missed you girls. Mr. Mitchell and I have gone on a little errand. Make yourselves some hot chocolate.

Love,
Mama

3 John Bartram: eighteenth-century American botanist.