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The First Thanksgiving

A Short Not-So-Accurate Historical Comedy
For Two Men / One Woman

by J.C. Svec

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The First Thanksgiving
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Cast of Characters

MILES STANDISH; a Pilgrim

ELIZABETH; his smart, young secretary

WILLIAM BRADFORD; Governor of the Colony
The First Thanksgiving
by J.C. Svec

SCENE: Fall, 1621. The Interior of a rustic, common meeting room. A simple wood table and two simple, wood chairs are the only pieces of furniture.

AT RISE: A Pilgrim, MILES STANDISH, nervously paces the room. His secretary, ELIZABETH, sits in the chair at the table; a ledger and ink bottle sit before her. She waits for STANDISH to speak, dragging the back of the quill along her cheek. Silence.

MILES

Read it back, please.

(ELIZABETH reads from the ledger.)

ELIZABETH

Great leader and spiritual advisor Ousamequin. (Pause) How are you?

MILES

Continue.

ELIZABETH

That’s all.

MILES

That’s it? It feels as if we’ve been here forever. Really, that’s it?

ELIZABETH

It took you a while to come up with the ‘how are you’ part.

MILES

Well, what else am I supposed to say? Thanks for letting us live through the summer.

You don’t mean that.

MILES

I think this whole idea is ridiculous. This is just another one of Bradford’s gimmicks to bring attention to himself.

ELIZABETH

The celebration?

MILES

Yes, the celebration. Or feast or day of thanks... whatever it is he’s calling it these days.
ELIZABETH
The Reverend Brewster’s calling it a Thanksgiving.

MILES
That blowhard could make a trek to the outbuilding cause for celebration as long as he can find a way to add a prayer at the beginning and end of the trip... with a sermon thrown in between some where.

ELIZABETH
That’s not very fair and you know it.

MILES
Well I bet it was Brewster who planted this crazy idea in Bradford’s head.

ELIZABETH
Does it matter whose idea it was? I for one think it’s a splendid suggestion.

MILES
He’s asking all of us to gather in one place, at one time, and break bread with three thousand Indians. There’s not even three score of us. And we’re asking them to bring the bulk of the ‘bread’ if you know what I mean. Who knows if they even know what bread is?

ELIZABETH
(Surprised) Miles Standish, you act as if they’re savages.

(MILES gyrates an ‘of course they are’ gesture.)

MILES
I didn’t travel two months and six thousand miles, suffer through a long cold winter and then starve most of the summer to attend some dinner party in the middle of nowhere only to end up with a hatchet in the back of my skull while I’m shelling walnuts... which I’m sick of, by the way.

ELIZABETH
Three.

MILES
Three what?

ELIZABETH
It was only three thousand miles.

MILES
Oh... well, it felt like six.

ELIZABETH
What about Squanto? Do you consider him a savage?
MILES
That hot-head? Yes, as a matter of fact, I do.

ELIZABETH
If his people meant us any harm at all would they have sent one of their best, and most respected members of the tribe to help us plant and farm.

MILES
Did you try working side-by-side with the guy? He’s a lunatic.

ELIZABETH
If it wasn’t for him, we may not have the harvest we’re intending to celebrate.

MILES
Poke a hole into the ground, drop a seed in the hole, kick some dirt into the hole and then have one of his female minions dribble some water from a hollowed out squash on it. That’s real cutting edge, agrarian technology if you ask me.

ELIZABETH
I think you’re jealous.

MILES
Of what?

ELIZABETH
Of his... prowess.

MILES
If you’re talking about what was dangling out from under that deerskin... trust me, nothing there to be jealous about.

ELIZABETH
(Insulted) Miles Standish.

MILES
I just don’t like the guy.

ELIZABETH
(Grins) Apparently none of the men could figure it out.

(STANDISH notices the look on ELIZABETH’S face.)

MILES
(Points) What’s that?

ELIZABETH
(Confused) What?
MILES
There... on your face. You’re... smirking.

ELIZABETH
No I’m not.

MILES
Yes... yes, you are.

ELIZABETH
Oh, good gracious.

MILES
You like him.

ELIZABETH
As if.

MILES
You find him appealing, don’t you?

ELIZABETH
He has certain, rugged qualities I find attractive, yes.

MILES
He has long hair and wears beads and feathers in it.

ELIZABETH
It’s not just looks that make a man appealing to a woman.

MILES
Right, his prowess.

ELIZABETH
Miles Standish, I won’t even dignify that comment with a response.

MILES
Dress ‘em up any way you like, they are what they are.

ELIZABETH
Maybe they feel the same way about us.

MILES
What did you say?

ELIZABETH
Maybe they don’t trust us.
MILES
That’s ridiculous. What have we ever done to make them think that?

ELIZABETH
Besides laying false claim to their land?

MILES
Who said it was theirs? I didn’t see a flag flying. I didn’t see a piece of paper with their names on it.

ELIZABETH
They were here first. At the least, we’re uninvited guests.

MILES
What would you have had us do? Send an announcement heralding our coming? Dear Natives... of wherever it is we’re journeying to. Be arriving on your rock sometime in the upcoming winter, if we live through the voyage. Keep a bed warmer with coal heated for our arrival.

ELIZABETH
I just think we should be aware of how good to us the Wampanoags have been.

MILES
If you want to call not killing us en mass in our sleep being good to us...

ELIZABETH
See, there you go again.

MILES
Fine, fine... let’s get back to the letter, shall we?

ELIZABETH
Let’s.

MILES
Where were we again? Read back what we have.

ELIZABETH
Great leader and spiritual advisor Ousamequin. (Pause) How are you?

(Silence.)

MILES
You think it’s too much?

ELIZABETH
Which part?
The great blah, blah, blah bit.

MILES

Maybe a little.

ELIZABETH

What’s that name he goes by?

MILES

Massasoit?

ELIZABETH

That’s it. What’s that mean again?

MILES

Great leader.

ELIZABETH

There you go. We’ll use that. A sign of... cultural understanding and recognition. Now, read it back.

MILES

You’re kidding.

ELIZABETH

No, go ahead. I want to hear how it sounds.

MILES

Dear... Massasoit.

ELIZABETH

No, all of it.

MILES

Dear Massasoit. How are you?

(MILES ponders the salutation.)

ELIZABETH

Good. Respectful. Concerned. I like it. (Pause) In recognition of the, no, our first successful harvest in our new land...

(MILES looks up form the ledger.)
MILES, Continued

...in this new land... We are planning a feast to recognize the achievement of our joint collaboration and friendship. That’s good, right?

ELIZABETH

Pretty good.

MILES

I’m not exactly sure how to word this next part.

ELIZABETH

What do you want to say?

MILES

What do I want to say? What do I want to say? (Builds) What I want to say is bring as much food as possible because we don’t have enough and we’re all freakin’ hungry.

ELIZABETH

What if you alluded to their hunting skills? Prove what great providers they are.

MILES

That’s good. Come up with something along those lines and read it back.

ELIZABETH

What?

MILES

(Breaks) Elizabeth, I can’t do this. It’s not right.

ELIZABETH

You don’t have a choice. This was a direct request... no, order, form Governor Bradford.

MILES

Don’t you see, he’s just trying to put a positive spin on this whole disastrous year. He needs to make this cockeyed venture look successful to his drinking buddies and sponsors back home. He’s up to no good. I’m sure of it. This... hoopla is just the beginning. And what next... a year from now, when he’s invited all his cronies from the old World over, he’ll want a bigger celebration and a bigger one yet the next year. Thanksgiving II, then Thanksgiving III... when do you think it will stop? No, I want no part of this.

(A knock at the door startles STANDISH and ELIZABETH.)

MILES, Continued

(Defensive) Who’s there?

GOV. BRADFORD (O.S.)

Governor Bradford.
MILES

(To ELIZABETH) Keep writing.

ELIZABETH

Write what?

MILES


GOV. BRADFORD (O.S.)

Is there a problem in there Standish?

(MILES composes himself.)

MILES

Come in, Governor.

(GOVERNOR WILLIAM BRADFORD enters the room. He is sullen as he roams the room.)

MILES, Continued

We were just finishing up the letter to Ousamequin.

Who?

GOV. BRADFORD

Massasoit.

ELIZABETH

GOV. BRADFORD

Yes, day of thanks invitation... well, stop writing Elizabeth.

Governor?

ELIZABETH

GOV. BRADFORD

It’s no longer necessary.

MILES

(Feigns concern) Is there something wrong, Governor?

GOV. BRADFORD

The bastards beat us to it. (To ELIZABETH) Excuse my language, my dear.

(ELIZABETH nods her head.)

MILES

Who beat us to what, Governor?
GOV. BRADFORD
(Angry) The Berkeley Hundred, that’s who. And Thanksgiving is the what.

MILES
What is the Berkeley Hundred?

GOV. BRADFORD
The Berkeley Plantation. A group of thirty or so English brethren who had settled on the North Bank of the James River. Near some place called Charles Cittie.

MILES
That’s in the Virginia Colony. I thought Jamestown was the only settlement down there.

GOV. BRADFORD
So much for news traveling fast. Here, read it.

(GOVERNOR BRADFORD hands a letter to STANDISH who in turns hands it to ELIZABETH.)

ELIZABETH
(Reading aloud) For immediate release. December 4, 1619. Richard Berkeley, founder and land owner of eight thousand acres of prime Virginia Colony land to be known as Berkeley Plantation, is proud to announce the celebration of their arrival in “The New World.” In an opening ceremony speech, group spiritual leader Captain John Woodleaf recognized the day as the First Annual Thanksgiving Day. In his observation, he stated, ‘we ordain that the day of our ship’s arrival at the place assigned for our settlement in the land of Virginia shall be recognized yearly and perpetually kept holy as the day of Thanksgiving to Almighty God.’

(The room is silent.)

GOV. BRADFORD
We can’t top that. They covered it all. Good angle, cause, wording... God.

MILES
What are you going to do about it?

GOV. BRADFORD
There’s nothing we can do. It’s all over.

(A moment.)

MILES
That should about wrap it up, then. Anyone want to get a mug of cider? It’s on me.

ELIZABETH
Maybe we should have our own celebration.
MILES
(To ELIZABETH)
Didn’t you hear the Governor, it’s all over.

GOV. BRADFORD
Didn’t you hear, Elizabeth? They’ve established a holy day called Thanksgiving.

ELIZABETH
Yes, celebrating their arrival.

GOV. BRADFORD
So?

ELIZABETH
We’re celebrating a harvest. With natives.

GOV. BRADFORD
Go on.

(Behind Bradford’s back, STANDISH does his best to dissuade ELIZABETH from continuing.)

ELIZABETH
We make it a week long event.

GOV. BRADFORD
I’m liking what I hear.

ELIZABETH
Add some games, some singing and dancing between meals.

GOV. BRADFORD
A whole week with the Wampanoag? Where do we put them? We barely have shelter for our own.

This is Not the End of the Play
Ending Intentionally Omitted for Security Purposes