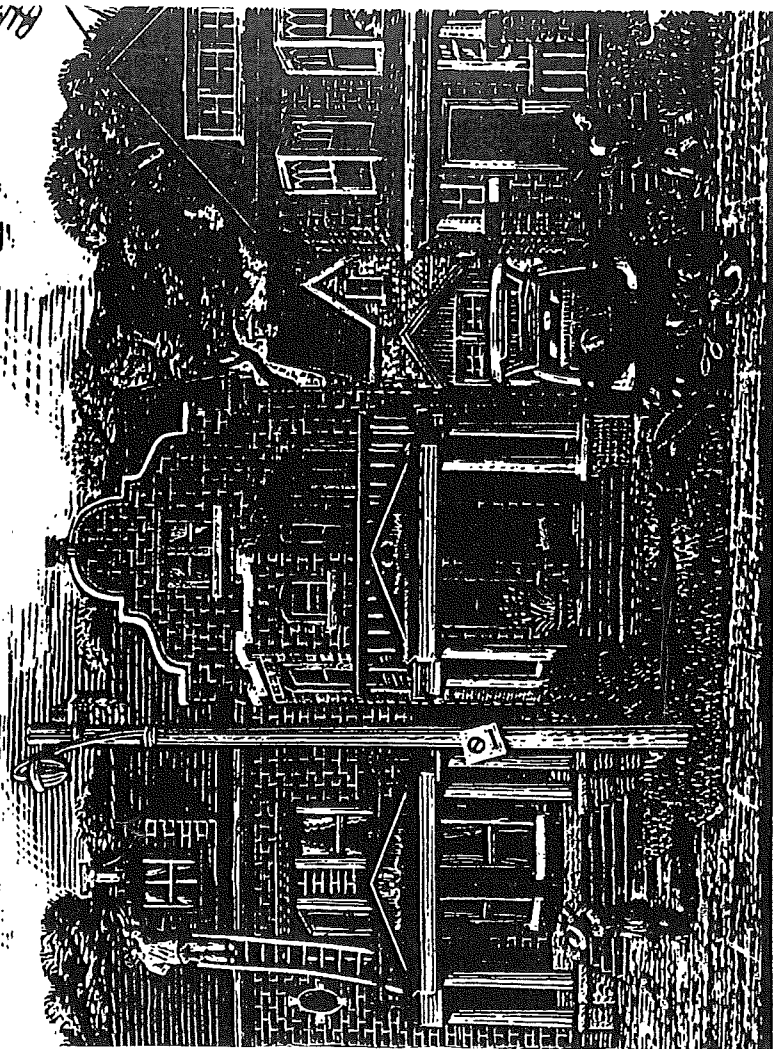


1998
tape 1997

HOME

FROM THE

VINYL CAFE
A YEAR OF STORIES



STUART MCLEAN

Dave Cooks the Turkey

When Carl Lowbeer bought his wife, Gerta, Martha Stewart's Complete Christmas Planner, he did not understand what he was doing. If Carl had known how much Gerta was going to enjoy the book, he would not have given it to her. He bought it on the afternoon of the 23rd of December. A glorious day. Carl left work at lunch and spent the afternoon drifting around downtown—window shopping and listening to carollers and falling into conversations with complete strangers. When he stopped for coffee he was shocked to see it was 5:30. Shocked because the only things he had bought were a book by Len Deighton and some shaving cream in a tube—both

things he planned to wrap and give himself. That's when the Joy of Christmas, who had sat down with him and bought him a double chocolate croissant, said, I think I'll stay here and have another coffee while you finish your shopping. The next thing Carl knew, he was ripping through the mall like a prison escapee.

On Christmas Eve, Carl found himself staring at a bag full of stuff he couldn't remember buying. He wondered if he might have picked up someone else's bag by mistake, but then he found a receipt with his signature on it. Why would he have paid twenty-three dollars for a slab of metal to defrost meat when they already owned a microwave oven that would do it in half the time? Who could he possibly have been thinking of when he bought the Ab Master?

Carl did remember buying *Martha Stewart's Complete Christmas Planner*. It was the picture of Martha Stewart on the cover that had drawn him to the book—a picture of Martha striding across her front lawn with a wreath of chili peppers tucked under her arm. Carl had never heard of Martha Stewart. But she looked like she was in a hurry and that made him think of Gerta—so he bought the book—never imagining that it was something that his wife had been waiting for all her life. Carl was as surprised as anyone last May when Gerta began the neighbourhood Christmas group. Although not, perhaps, as surprised as Dave was when his wife, Morley, joined it.

"It's not about Christmas, Dave," said Morley. "It's about getting together."

The members of Gerta's group, all women, met every second Tuesday night, at a different house each time.

They drank tea, or beer, and the host baked something, and they worked on stuff. Usually until about eleven.

"But that's not the point," said Morley. "The *point* is getting together. It's about neighbourhood—not about what we are actually doing."

But there was no denying that they were doing stuff. Christmas stuff.

"It's wrapping paper," said Morley.

"You are *making* paper?" said Dave.

"*Decorating* paper," said Morley. "This is hand-printed paper. Do you know how much this would cost?"

That was in July.

In August they dipped oak leaves in gold paint and hung them in bunches from their kitchen ceilings to dry.

Then there was the stencilling weekend. The weekend Dave thought if he didn't keep moving Morley would stencill him.

In September Dave couldn't find an eraser anywhere in the house and Morley said, "That's because I took them all with me. We're making rubber stamps."

"You are *MAKING* rubber stamps?" said Dave.

"Out of erasers," said Morley.

"People don't even *buy* rubber stamps any more," said Dave.

"This one is going to be an angel," said Morley, reaching into her bag. "I need a metallic ink stamp pad. Do you think you could buy me a metallic ink stamp pad and some more gold paint? And we need some of those snap things that go into Christmas crackers."

"The what things?" said Dave.

"The exploding things you pull," said Morley. "We are going to make Christmas crackers. Where do you think we could get the exploding things?"

There were oranges drying in the basement on the clothes rack and blocks of wax for candles stacked on the ping-pong table.

One day in October Morley said, "Do you know there are only sixty-seven shopping days until Christmas?"

Dave did not know this. In fact he had not completely unpacked from their summer's vacation. Without thinking he said, "What are you talking about?"

And Morley said, "If we wanted to get all our shopping done by the week before Christmas we only have . . ." she shut her eyes, "... sixty-two days left."

Dave and Morley usually *start* their shopping the week before Christmas.

And there they were, with only sixty-seven shopping days left, standing in their bedroom staring at each other, incomprehension hanging between them.

It hung there for a good ten seconds.

Then Dave said something he had been careful not to say for weeks. He said, "I thought this thing wasn't about Christmas."

Which he immediately regretted, because Morley said, "Don't make fun of me, Dave." And left the room. And then came back. Like a locomotive.

"Uh oh," thought Dave.

"What," said Morley

"I didn't say that," said Dave.

"You said 'uh oh,'" said Morley.

"I thought 'uh oh,'" said Dave. "I didn't *say* 'uh oh.' Thinking 'uh oh' isn't like saying 'uh oh.' They don't send you to jail for *thinking* you want to strangle someone.

"What?" said Morley.

Morley slept downstairs. She didn't say a word when Dave came down and tried to talk her out of it. Didn't say a word the next morning until Sam and Stephanie had left for school. Then she said, "Do you know what my life is like, Dave?"

Dave suspected—correctly—she wasn't looking for an answer.

"My life is a train," she said. "I am a train. Dragging everyone from one place to another. To school and to dance class and to now-it's-time-to-get-up and now-it's-time-to-go-to-bed. I'm a train full of people who complain when you try to get them into a bed and fight when you try to get them out of one. That's my job. And I'm not only the train, I'm the porter and the conductor and the cook and the engineer and the maintenance man. And I print the tickets and stack the luggage and clean the dishes. And if they still had cabooses, I'd be in the caboose."

Dave didn't want to ask where the train was heading. He had the sinking feeling that somewhere up ahead someone had pulled up a section of the track.

"And you know where the train is going, Dave?" said Morley.

Yup, he thought. Off the tracks. Any moment now.

"What?" said Morley.

"No," said Dave. "I don't know where the train's going." Morley leant forward over the table.

"The train starts at a town called First Day at School,

Dave, and goes to a village called Hallowe'en, and then through the township of Class Project, and down the spur line called Your Sister Is Visiting. And you know what's at the end of the track? You know where my train is heading?"

Dave looked around, nervously. He didn't want to get this wrong. He would have been happy to say where the train was going if he knew he could get it right. Was his wife going to leave him? Maybe the train was going to D-I-V-O-R-C-E.

"Not at Christmas," he mumbled.

"Exactly," said Morley. "To the last stop on the line—Christmas dinner. And this is supposed to be something I look forward to, Dave. This is supposed to be a heart-warming family occasion."

"Christmas dinner," said Dave tentatively. It seemed a reasonably safe thing to say. Morley nodded. Feeling encouraged Dave added, "With a turkey and stuffing and everything."

But Morley wasn't listening.

"And when we finally get through that week between Christmas and New Year, you know what they do with the train?"

Dave shook his head.

"They back it up during the night when I am asleep so they can run it through all the stations again."

Dave nodded earnestly.

"And you know who you are, Dave?"

Dave shook his head, again. No. No, he didn't know who he was. He was thinking maybe he was the engineer. Maybe he was up in the locomotive. Busy with men's work.

Morley squinted at her husband.

"You are the guy in the bar car, Dave, pushing the button to ask for another drink."

By the way Morley said that, Dave could tell that she still loved him. She could, for instance, have told him that he had to get out of the bar car. Or, for that matter, off the train. She hadn't. Dave realized it had been close, and if he was going to stay aboard, he was going to have to join the crew.

The next weekend he said, "Why don't I do some of the Christmas shopping? Why don't you give me a list, and I will get things for everyone in Cape Breton?"

Dave had never gone Christmas shopping in October. He was unloading bags onto the kitchen table when he said, "That wasn't so bad."

Morley walked across the kitchen and picked up a book that had fallen on the floor. "I'm sorry," she said. "It's just that I like Christmas so much. I *used* to like Christmas so much. I was thinking that if I got everything done early maybe I could enjoy it again. I'm trying to get control of it, Dave. I'm trying to make it fun again. That's what this is all about."

Dave said, "What else can I do?"

Morley reached out and touched his elbow and said, "On Christmas Day, after we have opened the presents, I want to take the kids to work at the Food Bank. I want you to look after the turkey."

"I can do that," said Dave.

Dave didn't understand the full meaning of what he had agreed to do until Christmas Eve, when the presents were finally wrapped and under the tree and he was smuggled,

warm and safe, in bed. It was one of his favourite moments of the year. He nudged his wife's feet. She gasped.

"Did you take the turkey out of the freezer?" she said.

Dave groaned. He pulled himself out of bed and went downstairs. He couldn't find a turkey in the freezer—in either freezer—and he was about to call for help when the truth landed on him like an anvil. Looking after the turkey, something he had promised to do, meant *buying* it as well as putting it in the oven.

Dave unloaded both freezers to be sure. Then he paced around the kitchen nervously, trying to decide what to do. When he finally went upstairs, Morley was asleep. He considered waking her. Instead, he lay down and imagined, in painful detail, the chronology of the Christmas Day waiting for him. Imagined everything from the first squeal of morning, to that moment when his family came home from the Food Bank expecting a turkey dinner. He could see the dark look that would cloud his wife's face when he carried a bowl of pasta across the kitchen and placed it on the table she would have set with the home-made crackers and the gilded oak leaves.

He was still awake at 2:00 a.m., but at least he had a plan. He would wait until they left for the Food Bank. Then he would take off to some deserted Newfoundland outport and live under an assumed name. At Sam's graduation one of his friends would ask, "Why isn't your father here?" and Sam would have to explain that, "One Christmas he forgot to buy the turkey and he had to leave."

At 3:00 a.m., after rolling around for an hour, Dave got out of bed, got dressed, and slipped quietly out the back door. He

was looking for a twenty-four-hour grocery store. It was either that or wait for the Food Bank to open, and though he couldn't think of anyone in the city more in need of a turkey than he was, the idea that his family might spot him in line made the Food Bank unthinkable.

At 4:00 a.m., with the help of a taxi driver named Mohamed, Dave found an open store. He bought the last turkey there: twelve pounds, frozen as tight as a cannonball, grade B—whatever that meant. He was home by 4:30 and by 6:30 had the turkey more or less thawed. He used an electric blanket and a hair dryer on the turkey, and a bottle of Scotch on himself.

As the turkey defrosted, it became clear what grade B meant. The skin on its right drumstick was ripped. Dave's turkey looked like it had made a break from the slaughterhouse and dragged itself a block or two before it was captured and beaten to death. Dave poured another Scotch and began to refer to his bird as Butch. He turned Butch over and found another slash in the carcass. Perhaps, he thought, Butch died in a knife fight.

Dave would have been happy if disfiguration was the worst thing about his turkey. Would have considered himself blessed. Would have been able to look back on this Christmas with equanimity. Might eventually have been able to laugh about it. The worst thing came later. After lunch. After Morley and the kids left for the Food Bank.

Before they left, Morley dropped pine oil on some of the living-room lamps.

"When the bulbs heat the oil up," she said, "the house will smell like a forest." Then she said, "Mother's coming. I'm

trusting you with this. You have to have the turkey in the oven . . ."

Dave finished her sentence for her. "By 1:30," he said. "Don't worry. I know what I'm doing."

The worst thing began when Dave tried to turn on the oven. Morley had never had cause to explain to him about the automatic timer, and Dave had never had cause to ask about it. The oven had been set the day before to go on at 5:30. Morley had been baking a squash casserole for Christmas dinner—she always did the vegetables the day before—and now, until the oven timer was unset, nothing anybody did was going to turn it on.

At 2:00 p.m. Dave retrieved the bottle of Scotch from the basement and poured himself a drink. He knew he was in trouble.

He had to find an oven that could cook the bird quickly. But every oven he could think of already had a turkey in it. For ten years Dave had been technical director to some of the craziest acts on the rock-and-roll circuit. He wasn't going to fall to pieces over a raw turkey.

Inventors are often unable to explain where their best ideas come from. Dave is not sure where he got his. Maybe he had spent too many years in too many hotel rooms. At 2:30 p.m. he topped up his Scotch and phoned the Plaza Hotel. He was given the front desk.

"Do you cook . . . special menus for people with special dietary needs?" he asked.

"We're a first-class hotel in a world-class city, sir. We can look after any dietary needs."

"If someone brings their own food—because of a special diet—would you cook it for them?"

"Of course, sir."

Dave looked at the turkey. It was propped on a kitchen chair like a naked baby. "Come on, Butch," he said, stuffing it into a plastic bag. "We're going out."

Morley had the car. Dave called a taxi. He shoved the bottle of Scotch into the pocket of his parka on his way out the door.

"The Plaza," he said. "It's an emergency."

He took a slug from the bottle in the back of the cab.

The man at the front desk asked if Dave needed help with his suitcases.

"No suitcases," said Dave, patting the turkey, which he had dropped on the counter and which was now dripping juice onto the hotel floor. Dave turned breezily to the man behind him in line and said, only slurring slightly, "Just checking in for the afternoon with my chick."

The clerk winced. Dave wobbled. He spun around and grinned at the clerk and then around again and squinted at the man in line behind him. He was looking for approval. He found, instead, his neighbour. Jim Scoffield was standing beside an elderly woman whom Dave assumed must be Jim's visiting mother.

Jim didn't say anything, tried in fact to look away. But he was too late. Their eyes had met.

Dave straightened and said, "Turkey and the kids are at the Food Bank. I brought Morley here so they could cook her for me."

"Oh," said Jim.

"I mean the turkey," said Dave.

"Uh huh," said Jim.

"I bring it here *every* year. I'm alone."

Dave held his arms out as if he were inviting Jim to frisk him.

The man at the desk said, "Excuse me, sir," and handed Dave his key. Dave smiled. At the man behind the counter. At Jim. At Jim's Mom. He walked towards the elevators one careful foot in front of the other.

When he got to the polished brass elevator doors, he heard Jim calling him.

"You forgot your . . . chick," said Jim, pointing to the turkey Dave had left behind on the counter.

The man on the phone from room service said, "We have turkey on the *menu*, sir."

Dave said, "this is . . . uh . . . a *special* turkey. I was hoping you could cook *my* turkey."

The man from room service told Dave the manager would call. Dave looked at his watch.

When the phone rang, Dave knew this was his last chance. His only chance. The manager would either agree to cook the turkey, or he might as well book the ticket to Newfoundland.

"Excuse me, sir?" said the manager.

"I said I need to eat this *particular* turkey," said Dave.

"That *particular* turkey, sir," the manager was non-committal.

"Do you know," said Dave, "what they feed turkeys today?"

"No, sir?" said the manager. He said it like a question.

"They feed them . . ."

Dave wasn't at all sure himself. Wasn't so sure where he was going with this. He just knew that he had to keep talking.

"They feed them chemicals," he said, "and antibiotics and steroids, and . . . lard to make them juicier . . . and starch to make them crispy. I'm allergic to . . . steroids. If I eat that stuff I'll have a heart attack or at least a seizure. In the lobby of your hotel. Do you want that to happen?"

The man on the phone didn't say anything. Dave kept going.

"I have my own turkey here. I raised this turkey myself. I butchered it myself. This morning. The only thing it has eaten . . ." Dave looked frantically around the room. What did he feed the turkey?

"Tofu," he said triumphantly.

"Tofu, sir?" said the manager.

"And yoghurt," said Dave.

It was all or nothing.

The bellboy took the turkey and the twenty-dollar bill Dave handed him, without blinking an eye.

Dave said, "You have those big convection ovens. I have to have it back before 5:30 p.m."

"You must be very hungry, sir," was all he said.

Dave collapsed onto the bed. He didn't move until the phone rang half an hour later. It was the hotel manager.

He said the turkey was in the oven. Then he said, "You raised the bird yourself?" It was a question.

Dave said, yes.

There was a pause. The manager said, "The chef says the turkey looks like it was abused."

Dave said, "Ask the chef if he has ever killed a turkey. Tell him the bird was a fighter. Tell him to stitch it up."

The bellboy wheeled the turkey into Dave's room at quarter to six. They had it on a dolly covered with a silver dome. Dave removed the dome and gasped.

It didn't look like any bird he could have cooked. There were frilly paper armbands on both drumsticks, a glazed partridge made of red peppers on the breast and a small silver gravy boat with steam wafting from it.

Dave looked at his watch and ripped the paper armbands off and scooped the red pepper partridge into his mouth. He realized the bellboy was watching him and then saw the security guard standing in the corridor. The security guard was holding a carving knife. They obviously weren't about to trust Dave with a weapon.

"Would you like us to carve it, sir?"

"Just get me a taxi," said Dave.

"What?" said the guard.

"I . . . can't eat this here," said Dave. "I have to eat it . . ." Dave couldn't imagine where he had to eat it. "Outside," he said. "I have to eat it outside."

He gave the bellboy another twenty-dollar bill, and said, "I am going downstairs to check out. Bring the bird and call me a taxi." He walked by the security guard without looking at him.

"Careful with that knife," he said.

Dave got home at 6:00. He put Butch on the table.

The family was due back any minute. He poured himself a drink and sat down in the living room. The house looked beautiful—smelled beautiful—like a pine forest.

"My forest," said Dave. Then he said, "Uh oh," and jumped up. He got a ladle of the turkey gravy, and he ran around the house smearing it on light bulbs. There, he thought. He went outside and stood on the stoop and counted to twenty-five. Then he went back in and breathed deeply. The house smelled like . . . like Christmas.

He poured himself another Scotch, and looked out the window. Morley was coming up the walk with Jim Scofield and his mother.

"We met them outside. I invited them in for a drink."

"Oh. Great," said Dave. "I'll get the drinks."

Dave went to the kitchen, then came back to see Jim sitting on the couch under the tall swinging lamp, a drop of gravy glistening on his balding forehead. Dave watched another drop fall. Saw the puzzled look cross Jim's face as he reached up, wiped his forehead and brought his fingers to his nose. Morley and Jim's mother had not noticed anything yet. Dave saw another drop about to fall. Thought, Any moment now the Humane Society is going to knock on the door. Sent by the hotel.

He took a long swig of Scotch and placed his glass by the hand-painted paper napkins that Morley had made.

"Morley, could you come here," he said softly. "There's something I have to tell you."