

Garrison Keillor *Thanksgiving diary*

Home for the holidays? Not if I can help it, pal

We are heading into the long stretch of holiday in America, the five weeks from Thanksgiving to the new year, when we face up to the terrible truth: people you know and love can be miserable company and strangers you fall in among can be funny and charming and generous and at the holidays you feel a fleeting urge to get off somewhere where you don't know so many people. To get rid of Uncle Harold, who can do a 15-minute monologue on how he poured the concrete for the back steps, and Aunt Evelyn, who is elaborately self-effacing to the point of being a public nuisance, and have dinner at a hotel.

With family gathered around the table, beyond the pleasantries, we're uneasy. Feasting is not natural to us. We're descended from people who considered it bad luck to speak positively about anything: praise your kids and you'll corrupt them; remark on your good health and you invite a heart attack; agree with somebody and he'll take you for a pushover; befriend a stranger and he'll try to borrow money.

They kept up a barrage of complaint about the weather, politicians, children, modern art, modern literature, modern cars, anything modern, and complained about their health year after year until they died in their 50s and went to heaven where no doubt they are a little dissatisfied even now and wondering about the lax admission standards.

Art offers a road out of this dour culture, a cure for self-consciousness, and I don't mean high art either. Some wildly ambitious high-school teacher decides to put on Oklahoma and the kids come out and sing about the bright golden haze in the meadow and we know we belong to the land and the land we belong to is grand, or maybe this year it's the Sharks and the Jets, or the People of River City, or the court of the king of Siam, and each performer has to decide how much he'll invest emo-



Low season . . . raise your glass of cheap wine and try to ignore those Thanksgiving misgivings PHOTOGRAPH: HULTON GETTY

tionally in this role, whether he'll cast himself upon the audience and rise to the moment and really sing, or whether he'll try to blend into the scenery.

In the midwestern culture that I come from, work is no problem; vacationing is the hard part. Flaming desserts didn't originate here, or Elvis, or Mardi Gras, or Les Sylphides, or bell-bottoms. We take a dim view of frivolity and excess. We're minimalists. Scripture tells us that we are like sheep and as usual God is right on the mark. Grazing animals are not nearly as clever as predators. If you've ever been around sheep, you know this. Centuries of munching on grass have not honed their intelligence

much, whereas coyotes or wolves or cougars have evolved to where they could almost get into law school or go to work for Microsoft.

We being sheep, there is a natural committee instinct at work here. You invite people for Thanksgiving dinner, and they ask, "What can I bring?" The spirit of pot luck prevails: someone brings rolls, someone brings a salad, someone contributes a pie.

The heroic cook, working 48 hours in advance, marinating, trussing, tying up fresh marjoram in cheesecloth, peeling and deseeding the tomatoes, blanching the almonds, to make a masterpiece meal - that isn't how we do it. This is the land of Good Enough. You really want to

spend three hours making that fancy recipe with goose and lamb? No, no, no. Take the navy beans and chop up some wieners and put in ketchup with Worcestershire and maybe some onion soup mix for flavour, and you've got it. It's good enough.

With strangers, you can be somebody else, of course. Be sly and rakish, or quietly profound, or lead the singing of Glory, Glory, What's It to Ya? and have people gaze up at you in wonderment ("What a free spirit! If only we all could have his gift for celebrating life!") instead of scowling at you and thinking, "Who does he think he is?" But that is for another time.

This year, we gather together with our fellow stoics and fatalists and we roast the turkey dry and raise a glass of cheap wine and wish each other well and wait for the monologue about concrete and the ostentatious humility. We're like geese in a V formation heading south. At the end of one leg of the V, there are always a couple of stragglers, trying to pretend they're not really with the others, as if migration were a decision on their part. I'm a straggler. And I'm as much part of the V as anybody else.

Garrison Keillor's latest book, *Lake Wobegon Summer 1956*, is published this week by Faber, £16.99. To order a copy for £14.99 plus p&h (£1.99 first class, 99p second), call the Guardian book service on 0870 066 7979.