

Op-Ed: I should spare my loved ones from the most annoying Thanksgiving host in the world: me

By OLIVIA COLE
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“We can host if no one else wants to,” I submit to my extended family in a group text. “I don’t mind.”

I say this every year before Thanksgiving. It sounds like a casual offer. It is not. Others might have a desire for hosting blooming within them, but I will crush that blossom as plans begin to take shape. Hosting Thanksgiving dinner — and whipping myself into a frenzy of oven schedules and prep work — fills me with a sense of purpose.

My husband inevitably whispers into the void, “We don’t *have* to host, you know.”

But we do. We do, because how else will his family know that although I am a standoffish Popsicle most of the year, I do actually love them a great deal? My day-to-day moodiness and internal monologues prevent me from demonstrating this fact, but a production that requires triple-rinsing collards and removing the backbones of whole chickens? Yes, this is how I show them. Cooking is my love language. “Olivia may be an ass, but at least she can cook,” I imagine them whispering, and I’m not even mad, because it’s true.

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This year, however, as I drew the holiday gathering into my clutches, I had an epiphany. I am, truly, the last person who should be allowed to host Thanksgiving. Or any holiday.

I saw the signs last year but ignored them. Last Thanksgiving I had a 1-month-old baby, was still healing from childbirth and my first book was about to be published. I hobbled back and forth from kitchen to living room to office, stirring bechamel sauce, breastfeeding an infant and checking for updates from my publisher. I was a madwoman. I had no business having people come to my house for a bowl of cereal, let alone Thanksgiving dinner.

This year I'm a little better off — my daughter is a year old and the next book isn't coming out until April — but I still am forced to acknowledge that my hosting desires are in conflict with the greater good.

I should spare my loved ones from the things that make me the most annoying host in the world. Because I am. It begins with the food. The more difficult the dish, the more likely it is I will make it, even as our families protest. My loved ones are not pie people and yet I make three. They beg for only one carb and yet in addition to macaroni and cheese I make rolls and mashed potatoes. They don't like gravy and yet I scrape the pan and skim the drippings. I do what is difficult and sweaty so that they know that I love them. Whether they like it or not.

And then there's my house. "We have the space" is the trick I've used lately to lure family over for the holidays, since we've been renting a house. But the space is no longer space, really. Babies have a way of taking over, one board book and musical bear at a time. My living room is carpeted with Lego blocks, a minefield for unsuspecting guests. The TV sits there like a paperweight because we have a strict no-screens-until-she-turns-3 rule for the baby. You can't watch Thanksgiving football, but please feel free to build a Lego tower, or play tug with the dog.

Oh, and the dog. My enormous shaggy dog, Oscar, once the most well-behaved animal on the planet, has transformed into an attention-starved semi-domesticated wolf since my daughter was born. He will shove his long snout into whatever crevice he thinks will get him a scratch on the head. He never used to beg; now he practically sits at the table.

Between the baby and the books, I'm half-wild myself. I don't mean any harm — quite the opposite. But the more I consider what I put guests through just to deliver a little love disguised as baked macaroni and cheese, the clearer the truth becomes: The clearest expression of my affection would be to let them stay as far away from my house as possible and have nothing to do with me.

After I offered to host in the group text, I raised my eyes to my husband. I saw him steeling himself for what lay ahead. There was in his eyes not fear, but the resignation of a man who has survived eight or nine of these hurricanes. He knew that all his offers to help would be shot down, that he would watch the kitchen sink transform into a dystopian hellscape.

Perhaps this will be the year I spare him — and the whole family — the full cooking storm. Perhaps this is the year I love them by reining myself in.

But there are breadcrumbs in the cabinet. I just bought a new pie plate. And can my sister-in-law or anyone else love this family enough to put Muenster in the mac and cheese? No. It falls to me.

After Thanksgiving, there will be time to learn a love language that exercises more restraint. Maybe by next year, I will speak it.

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