

# Pieces of April (2003)



Directing from his own script, Peter Hedges has concocted the most memorable Thanksgiving film since Gurinder Chadha's *What's Cooking?* The Burns family has to be one of the saddest, and at the same time the funniest, dysfunctional families to be depicted since—well, in regard to the first, since *Thirteen*, I suppose, and as to the second, since *The Royal Tenenbaums*. April Burns (Katie Holmes), oldest daughter of Joy (Patricia Clarkson) and Jim Burns (Oliver Platt), has never been on good terms with her mother. Now living in a cheap walkup flat on the lower east side of Manhattan, April, in an attempt to repair the family breach, has invited her upstate New York family to come down for a Thanksgiving dinner. She not only wants to patch up family relationships, but also to have them meet the young man she loves, Bobby (Derek Luke). She apparently has not told them that he is African American. The film takes place within a period of a few hours, cutting back and forth between the antics of the family journey and April's frantic attempt to cook the turkey and trimmings.

I do mean "frantic," because, after Bobby sets out on an

important errand, April discovers that her oven is broken. She knocks on the doors of neighbors, getting no results at some, rejection at others, and puzzlement from the Asian couple downstairs, who speak no English. A kindly African American couple, Evette and Gene (Lillias White and Isiah Whitlock, Jr.), offer their oven, but only for the first hour or two, because they will be needing it to cook their own turkey. The three become acquainted in their kitchen while April struggles to stuff the bird and open a can of cranberry sauce, the latter regarded with complete disdain by the more experienced Gene. Indeed, he so dismisses the jellied sauce that April secretly scrapes into the wastebasket.

In the meantime, we catch glimpses of the rest of the Burns, with middle daughter Beth (Alison Pill) trying to convince her mother to cancel the journey. She is convinced that her ne'er do well sister's meal will be a disaster and upset her mother. Her father Jim also is willing to turn back, but the grim-faced Joy insists on starting out. However, her resolve weakens as the miles speed by and she states that she cannot recall a single good memory of April. Jim, ever the optimist, answers that of course there were some good things that April did. He thinks for a moment, and then when he mentions one, Beth declares from the back seat of the car that she was the one who had done that. Her father conjures up from memory another occurrence, and Beth responds that she had done that, too. There are two other passengers in the car, Grandma Dottie (Alice Drummond) who can scarcely remember anything because she is in the mid-stage of Alzheimer's disease, and Timmy (John Gallegher, Jr.), only slightly younger than his teenaged sister, and like her and their mother, unable to recall a good memory of April. A note of tragedy runs through these funny scenes as we discover that the seemingly misnamed Joy is fighting a losing battle with cancer. Maybe this is why Timmy is so intent on capturing with his camera so many family scenes whenever they stop along the way.

In the third sequence of scenes, we follow Bobby, who, it turns out, is meeting a friend who has promised to help find him a suit. Derek hopes to make a good impression on his potential in-laws. To his chagrin, the clothing store at which the friend works, is a Salvation Army Thrift Store. This proves to be the least of his problems, when later, he encounters April's former boyfriend and a gang of tough friends, all of whom share the former boyfriend's hostility toward the one they regard as an interloper.

Late in the morning April has to find another oven, so she races up and down the stairs trying to find a sympathetic person who will let her use theirs. She finally knocks on the door of Wayne (Sean Hayes), a decidedly weird character living with a little dog. He agrees, but it, soon becomes obvious, April has not made a good choice in entering his apartment. He becomes piqued at her, and when she returns with something she has obtained from her flat, Wayne is leaving to take his dog for a walk. He refuses to let her back in, closing the door and going down the stairs. This forces April to go out on the fire escape and, using a crowbar to jimmy his window, to break into the apartment and retrieve her bird. As she resumes her search for a working oven, she encounters the Asian couple again, who by now have several younger family members with them, one of whom understands a little English.

April's hard-won success in completing her meal is but half the struggle to bring her family together again. She has gone to such great pains to pull off the meal, even decorating the shabby hallway and stairwell with welcoming balloons and crepe paper streamers, because she is well aware that because of her mother's cancer, this might be the last opportunity for mending fences. However, when they drive up to the ratty looking entranceway, they cannot believe that their daughter would live in such a place. And when the returning Derek spots them and tries to welcome them, the panicked out-of-towners are certain they are about to be assaulted, it looks as if the

family reunion will never take place. How this is all resolved makes for one of the most uplifting and inspiring climaxes to be seen in any film this year. This is one of those little films worth a dozen of the over-blown, all too often vulgar comedies sucking in the crowds at the multiplexes. It is so good that if you do not live near an art house theater, you will want to be sure to seek it out when it is released on video. We shall try to keep you posted on this.

For reflection/discussion

*(Note that there is a spoiler near the end, so wait until you see the film before reading this):*

- 1) What are your Thanksgiving gatherings like (if you have one)? Are they something you look forward to—or dread? Why?
- 2) What Thanksgiving meal crisis have you experienced? How was April herself partly responsible for the way Wayne treated her? What was he seeking?
- 3) How does the filmmaker let us know gradually Joy's condition? Do you think April persevered in pulling together her own meal, rather than giving up or ordering in food, because of her mother?
- 4) What does the story about Mom lifting the car up reveal about her? How does the comment apply to April also: "She had unbelievable strength because she had love. That's what love does!"
- 5) Why at first did you think Bobby was going out—to deal drugs? How does his great effort to obtain dress-up clothing show his devotion to April?
- 6) What moments of grace do you see in the film? How is the turning away of the Burns family a type of crucifixion? How did you feel at that moment?
- 7) How is what eventually happens an even better result than

April had planned? Do you see God's hand in this? How did Timmy's camera foreshadow the way the filmmaker portrays the climax? How is the meal a foretaste of the Messianic banquet promised by Christ?