

The Case for Mashed Potatoes

by Andrew Bowen

Steam rolls out of the bathroom as Mr. Larson opens the door with a white towel around his waist. Pepper strolls up to him and purrs as she rubs her long, gray tail against his tanned legs.

"Hey, girl." He runs his coarse, scarred fingers through the cat's soft coat. "Looks like it's just the two of us."

He walks by a room to his left. Sunlight glances off trophies lining the walls. He brings his left hand to his face and scratches an itch that isn't there.

Paper crunches beneath his foot as he enters the living room. He lifts his left leg and takes white construction paper from his damp foot. Pepper purrs against his leg again.

Mr. Larson holds the torn paper in front of him and squints at the black Sharpie lettering, "Real Men Know When To Pull Out." He lowers the page and looks at the floor. "What a mess."

Pepper prances into the kitchen.

He drops the paper and watches it spin to the floor. The white page joins a mosaic of others. Reds, whites, yellows and blues--all with letters scribbled out or cut through. Stringy residue from a hot glue gun lay across the mess and glistens in the early afternoon light like a spider's web soaked in dew. The tinge of Sharpie and glue curls his lip.

Pepper meows over her bowl. He smiles and walks into the kitchen. The cool linoleum sends a chill through his feet.

"Sorry, girl," he says and opens the pantry and pulls out a blue 25-pound bag of cat food.

Brown, miniature stars of cat food tinkle into Pepper's bowl. She dips her head into the bowl and munches on the stars. Mr. Larson closes the bag and returns it to the bottom of the pantry.

A breeze tumbles in through the open kitchen window and licks his damp arms and chest. Shivers roll over him. Goosebumps rise beneath the faded red, green and yellow tattoo of a Vietnam service ribbon below the Marine Corps eagle, globe and anchor on his left deltoid.

“Guess I should get some clothes on.”

Pepper glances up at him as he rubs his arm.

He looks down at her and smirks. “Or do you think the towel is fashionable?” She licks her nose and continues eating.

Mr. Larson walks into the laundry room and opens the dryer. Lime powder and soil from the potato bin prick his sinuses as he pulls Levi's over his legs. Pepper walks in as he slips a thin, gray T-shirt over his head.

“How ‘bout we make some loaded potato skins?” he says and rubs his hands together.

Pepper chases a fly out the door and into the kitchen. Mr. Larson chuckles and scoops eight potatoes covered in white lime powder from the wooden bin and cradles them as he walks toward the door. Pepper swipes at the fly and misses. Mr. Larson watches the fly weave along the ceiling. His eyes stop on a tri-folded American flag within a glass and wooden frame set upon a shelf overlooking the entry between the living room and kitchen.

A potato falls and rolls across the floor. Pepper rushes from under a barstool and paws at it.

“Ah, girl, you don't want that.” He kneels and picks up the spud.

Mr. Larson dumps the potatoes into the stainless steel sink. He releases warm water over them, revealing brown skin where the white lime powder and soil once lay. He pushes his thumbs against clumps of dirt and powder. Lime residue seeps into hairline cuts in his hands and stings. A hum rolls deep in his throat.

Purple lilacs sweeten the warm air from the window over the sink before the breeze washes over his face. He looks out the window. A football lay in the nook of bulging roots beneath the shadow of an old oak. Grass around the ball rustles in the wind and its tips brush

against the frayed stitches in the faded leather. He sniffs the sweet air and returns his focus to the potatoes.

Pepper leaps onto the counter and lies on the cutting board. He reaches into the cabinet below and takes out a bottle of vinegar. "Hey, girl. You know, Mama would throw you to the dogs if she caught you up here."

Pepper looks up at him with a lazy gaze and yawns. Mr. Larson rubs the vinegar on his hands to neutralize the burn of lime.

He rinses the vinegar off his hands, steps away from the sink and sets the oven to preheat at 400 degrees. A red light glows within the preheat button. He returns to the sink and picks up a paring knife.

The smooth, razor edge of the knife slides into one end of the potato's flesh beneath the pressure of his thumb and emerges at the opposite end. He carves out the middles, washes the two halves and sets them in a large plastic bowl. His fingers wrap around the next potato.

An eagle cries outside.

He looks up. The eagle cries again. Its voice carries over the smooth, green mountain. He searches for the bird and its voice. A low cloud rolls up the mountain while its blue underbelly darkens the forest below.

The echoes of the eagle fade as the cloud slips over the mountain's crest.

He takes another potato and returns his focus to the sink.

The front screen door screeches open and slams shut. A book bag thuds against the living room floor. Footsteps rumble through the floor and buzz against the soles of Mr. Larson's feet.

He looks out the window.

Three children: two boys and a girl, rise his memory. They are playing around a younger version of the oak tree. Trenton, the youngest boy, runs from his little sister, Haylie, with a pink Care Bear in his hand. Haylie cries and runs around the tree after him.

Phillip, the oldest, drops his new football, wraps Trenton in a bear hug and digs his fingers under his brother's arms. "Let go or I'll tickle the piss out of ya."

Trenton drops the bear and runs off yelling for Mama. Phillip brushes off the bear and hands it to Haylie as he wipes tears from her eyes.

"Hey, Dad," a young man says behind him.

Mr. Larson stares out the window and smiles. His hand searches for another potato. "That's my boy, Phillip."

The young man clears his throat.

Mr. Larson shudders and turns. "Oh, Jesus Trent. I didn't know you were standing there." He stares at the word "Marines" over Trenton's heart in glossy white lettering against a black T-shirt.

Trenton shrugs, "It's cool," and nods toward the window. "What were you looking at?"

Mr. Larson glances out the window. The children are gone and the tree has grown. "Nothing. Hey," he picks up a potato and tosses it to Trenton. "Wanna help?"

Trenton's jaw juts forward as he looks at the potato. "Making skins?"

Mr. Larson hums, "Mm hmm," and looks into the sink.

Trenton looks back at the folded flag over the entry to the living room. Warmth rolls within his gut. He squeezes his eyes shut, shakes his head and looks back at the potato in his hand. "Haylie make all that mess in the living room?"

Mr. Larson shrugs. "I suppose."

"Huh. Guess Mom took her to the rally then."

Mr. Larson tilts his neck until it pops. "Better get to cutting if you wanna eat before late."

Trenton watches his father cut the potato. He licks his dry lips and takes a knife out of the drawer. "I, uh...I talked to a recruiter today."

Mr. Larson's knife stops halfway through the potato. His eyes close for a moment and open to a spark of light trapped within the vase of lilacs. Sweat moistens the bottom of his feet. He wipes them on the kitchen mat and slides the blade out the other side of the potato. "Yeah? What'd ya chat about?"

Trenton grabs another potato and cuts in. "Joining the Corps."

Mr. Larson draws a long breath through his nose and sighs. His hands shiver.

"I know what you're thinking."

Mr. Larson drops two halves of a potato into the bowl, walks to the stove and pulls out a baking pan. "No. Maybe when you get a son or two of your own, you'll know what I'm thinking."

Trenton drops the last potato halves into the bowl and wipes his hands on a dishtowel. "This is different. I'll do Platoon Leaders Class."

Mr. Larson sets the baking pan on the counter and sets the potato halves in the pan one at a time.

Trenton reaches into the bowl and helps. "That means six weeks of Officer Candidate School this summer and then the remaining six the next—all while in college."

Mr. Larson nods and sprinkles shredded cheddar cheese and crumbled bacon over the potato slices. "Then what?" He points his thumb over his shoulder. "Get the steaks out of the fridge, will ya?"

Trenton walks to the refrigerator and pulls out a Styrofoam plate of petite steaks wrapped in clear plastic. "Then I'll have my commission and from there I'll go to the Basic School."

Mr. Larson takes the steaks from Trenton and cuts through the plastic. The metallic scent of cold blood washes the sweetness of lilac from the air. He reaches into the cabinet above and takes down the garlic powder and Mrs. Dash seasoning. "And then you'll get deployed." He sets the spices next to the steaks. "Here, slip these in the oven."

Trenton takes the pan of potatoes. "By then the war'll be over." He opens the oven. Heat splashes against his face. He squints and slides the pan onto the oven rack.

Garlic powder rises into Mr. Larson's nostrils. He wipes his nose. "What's the point of joining the Corps if you won't be active 'til war's end?"

Trenton closes the oven door and looks back at his father. "You want me to fight?"

“Son,” Mr. Larson sets the garlic powder next to the steaks and takes Trenton by the shoulder. Their blue eyes are even with one another. Trenton's brows crunch together as his muscles tighten. “I'm proud you want to serve your country. But—”

“I'll be alright, Dad.” He nods and tightens his jaw line. “I promise.”

Mr. Larson's hands shiver. “Yeah...” He shakes his head and wipes sweat from his eyebrows. “I know.”

He walks back to the steaks. “Mind firing up the grill for me?”

“No problem.” Trenton turns and rounds the kitchen island.

The front screen door screeches open and slams shut. Women's laughter rattles the air. Trenton stops and slowly turns. Mr. Larson sets his hands against the sink and squeezes his eyes shut as he lowers his head.

Laughter stops. Haylie's jaw drops as she stares at Trenton's shirt. She stands on the brown carpet bordering the entryway to the kitchen.

Mrs. Larson gasps and covers her mouth. Her eyes glisten with budding tears. “Oh no, baby.”

Haylie throws her red, green and yellow posters to the floor and extends her hands to her sides. “What the hell, Trent? You joined?”

Trenton's fingers brush across the Marines logo over his heart. He looks up at his father. Mr. Larson opens his eyes and stares out the window.

Trenton looks at Haylie. “I was thinking about it.”

“Are you crazy?”

Mrs. Larson rests her hand on Haylie's shoulder. “Haylie, don't.”

Haylie steps away from her mother and pushes her hand from her shoulder. “Don't what, Mom? You had plenty to say at the rally. Why aren't you jumping down his throat?” She reaches toward the shelf above her and takes down the tri-folded American flag. Mrs. Larson's hand shivers over her mouth. Haylie hands the flag to her mother. “Or do you want another one of these?”

Mrs. Larson takes the flag case and cradles it against her chest. A tear drips from her left eye and catches the light as it falls to the linoleum floor.

Trenton takes a step forward. "It won't be like that. I'm going to officer's school. The war will be over by the time I'm finished."

Haylie shakes her head. "Then what's the point of joining, genius?"

Mr. Larson takes his hands away from the sink and stands tall. "Enough, you two!"

Everyone falls silent and looks at Mr. Larson. Pepper jumps from the counter. He takes a deep breath. Words and thoughts crash into one another in his chest and throat.

He turns and looks at his children. "Trent wants to serve his country." He folds his arms and sighs. "I support his decision. We need to stick by him." Tension leaves his shoulders and his voice softens. "We need to stick together."

Haylie's face burns red. She grabs her hair with both hands, "I can't believe this! I don't want another brother blown away for this war." Tears shake loose from her eyes. She snatches the folded flag from her mother and shoves it against Trenton's chest. "Here!"

Trenton grunts and stumbles back with the flag in his arms. His sweaty thumbs glide along the glass face. It feels heavier than he thought it would. He stares at his reflection in the glass. Jealousy and vengeance roll like a hot, molten core inside his chest. Years of middle-child limbo and torment ripple from his hands to the glass. The shivering glass distorts his face.

Haylie stomps back toward the living room. "There you go, Marine, your consolation prize for being one of the few and the proud."

"Not another word!" Mr. Larson's voice broke. "The Marines provided for this family. None of you wanted for anything." His left hand shivers. He grasps it and shuts his eyes. Children play behind the red of his eyelids. "Let's not talk about this now." He shakes his head. Phillip's closed casket takes the place of the young, laughing children in his vision. A friend's name appears next. "Anthony

Richards," etched in white against the black granite of the Vietnam Memorial.

His insides tremble and his voice quivers. "Not now..."

He looks up with moist eyes and draws a deep breath through his nose. "Trent, get these steaks on the grill." He sets the plate on the kitchen island.

Trenton holds the flag in front of him, walks up to the divide between the kitchen and living room and returns the glass and wood frame to the shelf. He steps backward until he reaches the island, takes the steaks and walks toward the door.

Mr. Larson turns and reaches into the cabinet below the sink for a bottle of 409 cleaner. "Dinner'll be ready soon." He holds the bottle's trigger. "Why don't you girls go wash up?"

Haylie's voice scratches her throat "Not hungry."

The bottle thuds against the counter. Mr. Larson leans against his right hand on the edge of the sink and lowers his face. "Come on," he says and takes up the bottle again. "Trent's got steaks going and there's potato skins in the oven."

"Potato skins?" Haylie slips away from her mother's arms. "Are you serious, Dad?"

Mr. Larson sprays the puddles of blood on the counter. The 409 saturates the red and turns the puddle pink. A grenade flashes in his mind and rattles his focus. He squeezes his eyes shut. "Stop," he whispers as his hand shivers.

Screams burn in his throat as he pushes through the smoke, foliage and water of memory. Anthony's body is face-down in the creek. A watery red cloud expands around the body and flows in a slow ribbon downstream. Mr. Larson turns him over and cries out. The face and chest are lacerated and cooked. Rain falls and dilutes the blood that covers Mr. Larson and Anthony as he cradles the corpse. He screams, "Anthony," toward the sky as bullets zip and crack against the water and leaves around them.

He opens his eyes and holds his shivering hand. The view of lilacs is fuzzy. "What, you don't like skins?"

Haylie sniffs. "Phillip loved potatoes. Especially skins."

He drops the bottle again and raises his arms. "Fine! I'll mash them up. Will that make it better? We'll have mashed potatoes instead. Then can we finally eat as a family without everything reminding us of Phillip?"

The back door shuts.

Haylie and Mrs. Larson jerk and stare at Mr. Larson. He turns and looks out the window. Trenton walks toward the grill with his face hanging toward his chest. The muscles strain in Mr. Larson's neck and cheeks. His arms burn and he slowly lowers them. He looks away from Trenton and meets his wife and daughter's eyes.

"It doesn't matter what you do to them, Dad." Haylie bends over and picks up her anti-war posters. "They're still potatoes."

Tension melts off Mr. Larson's shoulders. Haylie turns and walks away.

Trenton flips the steaks. Vapor and spice roll in a fog over his head. He watches the smoke rise until he spots the black underbelly of a vulture circling high above him.

Mrs. Larson forces a smile. "I love you." She blows a kiss to her husband and turns away.

He sighs. "I love you, too."

The oven beeps. He glances at the orange glow burning out of the glass face of the oven. "When she gets hungry enough, she'll eat."

Trenton knocks on the back door as Mr. Larson takes out the white, ceramic plates and silverware. He rounds the kitchen island and opens the door. "They smell good."

"You're telling me." Trenton steps inside and sets the plate of browned steaks on the island. "Almost dug into one outside."

Mr. Larson pats Trenton's back. "I'll set up the plates. Wanna clear the table?"

"No problem."

Clear juice springs from the fork punctures on each steak as Mr. Larson lays them on the plates. Black char lines stripe the browned meat. The tinge of Mrs. Dash seasoning and melted cheddar cheese from the potato skins dresses the air. He smiles and slides the last potato skin off the spatula and onto a plate.

Trenton clears the last placemat from the table as his father walks into the dining room with two plates, one in each hand. "Drink?"

Trenton rolls up the placemats and sets them on the china cabinet. "Don't worry about it. I'll get mine."

"Mmk."

Mr. Larson grabs the two remaining plates as Trenton pours a can of Pepsi into a glass with three ice cubes. The cubes crackle and pop as fractures rip into the ice.

They walk into the dining room and sit in their seats. Trenton takes a sip of Pepsi.

Mr. Larson blinks looks at the three empty seats. "Lunch is ready, ladies!"

Trenton swallows another sip of his Pepsi and turns his face toward the entry to the dining room. "Don't think they're coming."

Mr. Larson looks at Trenton's profile. He's a baby now, a little over a year old, sitting in his highchair and his face is covered with spaghetti sauce. Phillip is three and stumbling around the chair, screaming, "G.I. Joe! G.I. Joe!" in his father's black combat boots. Mr. Larson is behind his wife, rubbing the bulge on her belly as she washes dishes.

"Want another boy or a girl?" he asks.

Mrs. Larson hums. "Well, it'd be nice to have some estrogen around here."

They chuckle. Mr. Larson holds her snugly. His hands move from her belly and slip around to her buttocks. He squeezes them and rolls his hands and knuckles up her spine. She sighs and tilts her head back with her eyes closed. Steam from the running hot water in the sink tumbles over her breasts and neck and moistens her skin. Mr. Larson's lips tiptoe across her left shoulder and pucker against her neck.

"Ow!"

Mr. and Mrs. Larson jerk and turn. Phillip runs toward them crying as he wipes chunks of ground beef saturated in red pasta

sauce and spaghetti noodles from his eyes. His face is unrecognizable.

Trenton is laughing in his highchair. He slings pasta all over the floor and wall.

"Earth to Dad," Trenton says as he squints at his father. Mr. Larson stares through his youngest son. He sees Mrs. Larson grappling a closed casket, demanding to see Phillip's face.

Trenton claps his hands. "Dad!"

Mr. Larson blinks.

Trenton grins. "You alright, old man?"

A drop of sweat rolls down his back. He scratches the back of his head and feigns a smile. "Yeah, sure. Just daydreaming."

"Thought you lost it there."

Mr. Larson shakes his head. "No, I'm fine. Let's eat."

They each take up one potato skin and slip them into their mouths. The warm cheddar cheese mixes with the potatoes' soft flesh as the bacon crunches beneath their molars.

Trenton swallows his first bite and takes a drink. He wipes his mouth and glances at his father. "You know," he says takes another bite of his potato skin. "Maybe if you actually mashed the potatoes, Mom and Haylie would eat with us."

Mr. Larson lowers his fork as he chews. "I'm sorry you heard all that."

"It's cool," Trenton says and cuts into his steak. "Potatoes are potatoes, right?"

His father nods and looks up at his son's smiling face. He blinks and forces a grin. "Potatoes are potatoes."

