

Whitetail

By Kirsten Larson

Patricia boiled the potatoes the way she'd always wanted to, the way it should be done— with the skins on. Gary had always insisted potatoes must be peeled first. He said the skins were dirty, that they made the mashed potatoes brown. But, Patricia knew skins added flavor.

She picked a scalding potato out of the water she'd boiled them in and rubbed the skin loose between the palms of her swollen, red hands. Hot peels fell onto the piece of parchment paper she'd laid in the sink.

She still couldn't bring herself to make a mess.

Mashed potatoes were her specialty. The kids had always said so. The kids hadn't been home in, was it, eight or nine years? She could not stop herself from thinking about them. The TV was off, she could think. Patricia pulled air through her nose, down to her stomach and then let the breath out. How good it felt to breathe. How good it felt to have thoughts, no Walter Cronkite blabbing on, the TV, volume set to Gary's ears, which meant it was so loud it eclipsed everything in the house, eclipsed her.

Bits of skin floated on top of the steaming, milky potato water. She put her whole hand into the pot, fished around for the last potato and pulled it out. Skin welled up red to her wrist. She considered whether it hurt. Was she in pain? She knew pain. She decided she was out of pain. The burns were nothing.

She poured cream on top of the peeled potatoes. Just enough. Enough was enough. And butter. She unpeeled the foil wrapper from the soft, yellow butter, opened the

silverware drawer, without looking picked up a butter knife, then sliced off three quarters of the stick. It melted down between the hot potatoes. She wrapped the remaining butter and put it into the refrigerator.

Waste not, Gary always said. Gary said she was a waster. Cost him too much in groceries, too much in electricity, too much in water. No doubt about it, Gary said. Gary said Patricia was dumber than a box of rocks.

Not that it had always been that way between them. When they were young, in that same kitchen, she'd look over at him and her whole body would ache—the corded muscle of his smooth, strong neck, his wide shoulders. Her hands still had memory of the hot skin curves of his lower back, and the way he'd looked at her.

She once believed it would last forever, but it died between them about year two. Then she'd felt that for other men, one after the other. Other women's husbands. The only place it was real was in her mind though, with the weight of Gary on top of her. She understood when the pastor spoke about original sin. With desire came marriage. She'd paid a lifetime of penance for her desire for Gary.

She smoothed the worn apron down over her hips, over her good black slacks. She turned and looked at her behind, then twisted a leg out in front of her, pointed her toe. Not bad for a 63-year old woman. When she thought about it, and that second was the first time she had, she decided she liked her hips. No, she was not a fat ass.

She laughed out loud. Just one "ha," into the quiet, warm kitchen with its green appliances, and tan, patterned wallpaper—the only room in the house she liked, a house that had belonged to Gary's parents.

A house filled with the heads of dead whitetail deer.

Patricia had lived with taxidermy animals for fourth-three years— Six in the living room alone, the expressionless muzzles, brown fur curled against shiny wooden mounting boards. She lived with them in a way Gary never had, in a way Gary wasn't capable of understanding.

Patricia dusted all of the dead heads once a week. Ran her dust cloth and naked fingers through the silky fur near their ears, down through the stiff fur of their necks, over the texture of different antlers. I'm sorry, she chanted to herself. I'm sorry. Sorry.

All of that pain mounted on walls, and for what? As of two days ago, there were two or three hung in almost every room. She took them down one by one—the smallest first. She'd stood on her step stool, hugged her arms around its neck, breathed in the fur smell, and lifted it off of the wall. It was not as heavy as she'd imagined, just bulky. Now they were all lined up on the floor of the bedroom. She wouldn't have to look at them anymore. Enough was enough.

She took the masher to the potatoes with ease, with the wrist of a woman who'd mashed potatoes for 50 years. Taught to cook by her mother, taught by her mother, and so on. Patricia hadn't taught either of her daughters to cook and look at them now—one a lawyer in Boston, and the youngest, Connie, her favorite, up in Canada on a commune, as Gary called it. Connie was the kindest and smartest of Patricia's children—her pride and joy. She felt tears and pressed harder against the potatoes. When they were beat enough, she added salt, not too much, like Gary liked, but just the right amount for her taste. She hadn't written letters to any of her kids, she figured they grew up in the home, so they'd understand. She hoped her daughters would be proud of her. Patricia shook her head a bit, she wouldn't think about her kids anymore.

She gathered the potato peels and put them in the trash. She knocked the masher against the side of the glass bowl, rinsed it over the sink, and put it in the dishwasher. She dried her hands on the cotton apron.

Where was that secret ingredient? She wondered what it would taste like. Strange, she bet. Strange was not unpleasant. She found the jar on her spice rack, right where she'd put it some four months ago—the jar she's found in the old barn, it'd probably been there since Gary's grandparents era.

Patricia sprinkled grains of secret ingredient onto the buttery potatoes and stirred. She considered a moment, then emptied the bottle. After she'd stirred it in, she opened her china hutch, got one of the good crystal bowls she only used at Thanksgiving, then pulled a fork out of the silverware drawer. Before she spooned herself a portion she put her face near the bowl and inhaled, smelled like mashed potatoes was all.

She welcomed strange odors. Metal pennies, for example. Surprisingly metal. That was her only thought about it. That, and how annoying it was to have pieces of Gary's buttery, white brains on her jeans. She'd pulled her clothes right off and threw them on the floor. Left them on the floor of the bedroom, the bedroom that had in it Gary, the rifle, and then the deer heads.

She made the potatoes just in time, before Gary started to smell up the place. Metal was pleasant enough, but she wanted the house to herself for as long as she could have it and his smell permeating everything was more than she could bear. He'd always permeated everything.

Years prior, back when she still felt like she had a say, she said, "I have no place for myself in this house." Gary said, "You have the top of your dresser," and then laughed. Of all

the things that bothered her, it was the words. Fists and dirty looks were painful in a familiar way, her body held that kind of pain, but his words lived in her.

She forked some potatoes into her mouth. Warm, buttery, strong potato flavor. When was the last time she'd actually tasted anything? They were delicious, even with the slightly bitter secret ingredient. She'd been right—they were best made with the skins on. Standing at the kitchen counter she took another bite and another and another.

Wind rustled in the trees outside. Spring was coming, soon the breeze would be warm, sweetened by the pine and fir that grew in the yard. That was something she would miss.