

Chapter 27: Mashed Potatoes

Dinner with the Goodenough family was usually a quiet affair. That night was different. The tension around the kitchen table was thick, like it might take a backhoe to cut through it. But Susan was determined. About halfway through dinner, she patted the sides of her mouth with a napkin, cleared her throat and stood up. She did not expect a group salute, but assumed this would at least get her family's attention, perhaps a dropped beat from the rhythm of her brother's frenetic eating, a brief swivel of her mother's eyeballs, or a raised eyebrow from her father. But no. She cleared her throat again. Still nothing. Twits, she thought, and then called out in a firm, but respectful, voice, "Pay attention people." At last, they turned their heads in her general direction. She sighed, understanding this was as good as it gets, and proceeded with the well rehearsed, ten-minute lecture she'd prepared.

"Ladies and gentlemen, mothers and fathers, brothers and sisters, I am here tonight to remove the blinders of denial from your eyes. To see the . . ."

Stephen flicked a pea at her with his finger, "Put a sock in it, Sis."

Without looking up from the financials, Richard said, "Stephen," in a tone intended to sound like warning but instead just sounded tired.

Susan knew exactly what was coming next and was not disappointed when her mother said, "Would everyone please just be nice and enjoy their supper. I worked all afternoon preparing it, you know."

Susan looked at the people seated around her, bewildered, thinking surely the stork had made a mistake and delivered her to the wrong family. Once again, she made a production of

clearing her throat then continued. "Like I was saying, there is a pink elephant in this house, and I want you to see it. Actually, I want you," she said, now glaring at her father, "to deal with it."

"Deal with what, dear?" asked Richard.

"Him!" said Susan, now pointing at her brother.

"Is there some kind of problem, Stephen?" Richard asked without bothering to look up.

"The only problem I have is a nosy little sister who won't leave me alone."

"Well," said June, "I'm glad that's all taking care of."

"Right," said Richard. "Now, let's all get back to dinne

Susan, off script now, all pretense of self-control and professorial presentation gone, said, "I don't know what it is, my brother has been taken over by some foreign creature. There's something very wrong with him. All his teachers see it. His friends see it. Why can't you see it? Please, do something."

Richard, finally looking up at his daughter, said, "Susan. Your brother says he doesn't have a problem. He looks fine to me. We're all going to finish our dinners now in silence. End of discussion."

Susan Goodenough was a precocious child with an uncanny ability to observe life as it happened around her, ferret out the hidden meanings, and actually make sense of it. One day she would write a book called *Mashed Potatoes: Family Therapy for Dinner*, whose seeds were sown every evening at the Goodenough kitchen table. Susan's book would turn the psychiatric world on its ear and, eventually, save and heal more lives and families than Freud's theories had destroyed. (Although, due to the sheer numbers, that part would not happen within her lifetime.)

The problem for Susan now was that she was only thirteen years old. Despite the fact she was a true genius, no one listened to her, let alone believed her. This is nuts, she thought, and resolved to sort it out. Now. She sought out each member of her family, one by one, her keen blue eyes glaring, and made sure she caught and held each of their respective gazes before moving on to the next. This was done slowly, in a deliberate and methodical fashion, like a scientist titrating compounds for a delicate experiment.

Mother was first to feel the heat of Susan's piercing gaze. June, taken by surprise for a split-second, revealed an alarmed and desperate look but then, as if nothing had happened, replaced it just as quickly with a half-baked smile, one that was supposed to reassure Susan that everything was OK. Didn't work.

Next was her father, Richard. If the look in Susan's eyes surprised or concerned him at all, no one would have known. He paused for just the briefest moment, his loaded fork suspended in midair. She sensed that he was taking it in, evaluating, but his face never changed, and before the mashed potatoes had even lost their momentum, they resumed their journey mouthward. Susan wondered if he really had paused, or was it just her imagination.

Next was Stephen. Susan could barely look him in the eye. When she did, it was he who looked away. She was totally bewildered at the metamorphosis of this person, her brother, her former best friend and confidant. This new Stephen that she was looking at was someone she did not recognize, the old Stephen would've understood her and given her comfort. He would have known what she was thinking as easily as if he could read her mind, and, more than that, he would know what to do. That was before he had abandoned her. Stephen did not return her gaze. He just continued eating as if nothing was going on, shoveling mashed potatoes—mashed

potatoes that Susan had painstakingly made herself—into his greedy mouth as fast as he could. It was the mashed potatoes that betrayed him.

Mashed potatoes were a religion with Stephen. He would eat them slowly and with reverence, paying attention to the smallest of details, just as Susan imagined the Gallo Brothers, Ernest and Julio, might sample fine wines. He could detect even the subtlest of nuances about them. He could tell, for example, what type of potato had been used. Yukon Golds were the best for mashing, according to Stephen anyway, and it was tantamount to sacrilege to pour gravy on them or to eat them in the same mouthful with your meat or peas. White potatoes were a close second and also had to be eaten in their purest form, without the stain of gravy upon them. If someone had the nerve to use an ordinary Idaho baking potato, however, Stephen, because he was always polite and well mannered, would frown ever so slightly and look for the gravy to disguise the foul taste. He could tell precisely the ratio of butter to milk to potato that was used, he could tell whether or not the potatoes had been overcooked or undercooked before being mashed, he could tell if the potatoes were fresh, or if they had been out of ground too long and had started getting soft, if there was too much or too little salt, and of course, he could tell if someone had had the nerve to put something else in them, like garlic or cheese.

Foolishly hoping that she could win her brother's heart back, she made the mashed potatoes herself that night. She'd gone to the market herself and picked out the best Yukon Golds she could find. Then she came home and carefully peeled, cooked, and whipped them to perfection. She got them just right, something that was not all that easy to do. Normally, Stephen would've savored them and given high and extravagant praises to whoever prepared them. All she could do now was to stare watch him shovel them down as if they were dog food, It was obscene, irreverent, and just plain ugly. Whatever doubts and hopes she still had were removed.

This was not her brother, but some strange alien who'd invaded his body. There was nothing she could do.

Susan stood up so fast it knocked her chair over. Pointing a finger at Stephen, she said, "you are not my brother, you are a jerk," then, pointing at her father, "you are worthless," and at last to her mother she said, "and you are a lying, stupid bitch." Still no one said anything, they just stared at her with their mouths open, frozen. Susan hoisted herself up atop the table. With her arms arched overhead like a ballerina, she started turning around and around, slowly, right in the middle of the table, droning out a variety of phrases, like "This is Susan and this is my family around me. How come they don't know me?" Or, "This is Susan. Susan would like to request a transfer to another planet." Or, "Can Susan's parents tell that Susan is upset? What will they do to help Susan?" And when the silence continued she answered for them, "Not a goddamned thing." Food and china went crashing and splattering everywhere as Susan jumped off the table. She ran up to her room, slamming the door behind her.

Stephen, June, and Richard slowly emerged from their respective states of suspended animation. Richard was the first to speak, "Well. I was just about done anyway." He started making his way towards the family room, casually brushing away the larger portions of food that he was now wearing.

"I'll just bring the dessert into the family room tonight," June chimed in, "Some hot apple pie and ice cream will make us all feel better. I'm sure."

Stephen said nothing; he just kicked Susan's chair, sending it halfway across the kitchen, and skulked off to his room.

Susan cried herself to sleep, praying to God for the strength to never have to feel this way again.