

Washing Up

by A.M. Salt

I've got my legs wrapped around the legs of our kitchen table and the metal is cold but it feels good. This is my favorite spot to sit and watch the potato dance because it's really close to the sink and that's where Mom always sets the pot when she's ready to start mashing. She grins, grabs the pot of potatoes she just drained and picks up her favorite masher. The heavy pot goes onto the side of the sink and she reaches into the cupboard for butter, then into the fridge for milk.

Dad's sitting here too, and now and again he looks down at me from across the table and winks. I think he winks to tell me that he knows what's coming and he thinks it's funny too, but we'd better not let Mom catch us. She makes her lips go real thin in a straight line, then turns her back to us and starts chopping at the big chunks of potato in the pot. When she has them all mushed down smaller, she starts to stir in a circle. Just a slow small circle at first, but when the butter melts in and the milk gets blended better, she speeds up. Pretty soon she's going so fast that her arm looks like it's flying, and that's when her butt starts going. It starts shaking in the same direction that she's mashing in, and I think that if her butt didn't move like that she might just take off through a window, or through the door if we forgot to close it. Dad says Mom has a butt nobody can do nothing about.

He smiles at me and we keep on watching until she bangs the masher on the side of the pot and covers them up to keep them warm. He reaches into his back pocket, pulls the long wallet, along with the chain, onto the table in front of him. His big thumbs undo the snaps, flip through credit cards, pictures of some dead horses and twenty dollar bills.

"See this here," he says, and flicks me the picture of him and Mom when they got married.

"All this other shit is nothin. I don't own anything else."

I flip my thumb over one corner, where the edge is starting to come apart.

"You hear me?"

"Yes Dad."

"Let's go wash up then."

My Dad has really skinny bowed legs and I guess they're skinny because he has to work them a lot harder to move the rest of him around. His belly hangs over his belt in kind of the same way that the loose skin under his chin hangs over the top of his shirt.

The skin on the outside of his knees is pinker than the rest of the skin on his legs; everything else is white-white under the brown hair that's thick on his calves, but not so thick on his thighs.

"Come on Chubs, lift up the seat like I showed ya."

I lift it just the right way, like he taught me. I put two fingers under the very front edge of the plastic ring and raise it up real quick, but I always make sure not to let it bang against the back of the toilet. So I slow down just before it's about to touch the tank until I hear a little click that lets me know I can let go. Sometimes I do it so good I don't hear anything at all.

"Good job girl, now what're you gonna do?"

I still haven't learned to do this part right, and Dad says that I better keep trying until I get it exactly right but I don't know when that will be. I mean, the last time he taught me, he kept saying, "Move your fingers under a little bit more there Chubs, that's right. Just like that. Now squeeze Dad just a little bit. There you go." So the next time, I try to do the same thing, but he always tells me to do something different, so I guess maybe I'll never get it right.

The skin that hangs down between his legs, the thing he has me squeezing now, is a darker pink than the skin on the outside of his knees even. It's kind of rough and wrinkly and reminds me of chicken-killing time.

When it's time for the old laying hens to die, or when we have a couple too many roosters, then Mom gets the thick block of wood from under

the workbench in the barn and brings it, with the hatchet, under the trees at the very edge of the woods by our house. It's my job to catch 'em with my long stiff wire—bent into the shape of an "L"—so that when I carry it like I would normally walk, hands swinging straight down by my sides, the curved part almost touches the ground, but not quite. There's a little hook on the very end so when I sneak up on the right chicken and slide that end around one leg, I can yank 'em off their feet before they know it. Not that chickens are all that smart but I don't like getting pecked or scratched.

Anyway, after Mom chops their necks and we pluck them we take them into the kitchen to pull their guts out. The skin on their necks is long and loose and has big bumps just like what Dad has under his thing, except the chicken's is on the wrong end and, after all, it's dead.

I can't think of anything else to do except to do it the same way I did it last time, so I try to hold all of this part of my Dad in my hand, even though it's way too big.

"You best not have any mashed potatoes tonight girl, otherwise you gonna be outgrowing your clothes faster than me and your Mom can afford to buy more."



"Uh huh."

I like potatoes though, and think I can probably go get some after he and Mom go in their room tonight.

"No gray, you hear me?"

"Yes Dad."

I start to move my fingers one after the other, like my Mom does sometimes when she rests her arms on the table and clicks her nails down.

"Right here girl."

Dad moves my hand a little more toward the front of his chicken neck with one hand and takes the end of his thing in the other.

"Here comes the river Chubs, watch now."

He likes to say that almost every time.

Sometimes when we're sitting on the couch after the chores are done, he takes my hand and pulls me up after him and he says, "Time to go piss a fair river."

Just a little comes out at first, but makes a really big splash anyway, then just stops. He moves his fingers back toward mine a little and then pulls them out toward where the water comes out. All of a sudden, it is like a river.

Not like the streams that run through our back field after the snow melts, but a really fast yellow gush that sinks into the clean water in the toilet like it's heavier. Like the blood that drips from the plates into the dishwasher when we have pot roast for dinner.

Dad lets out a big breath and rocks sideways to move his feet further apart. The pink skin that's stretched tight over the outside of his knees, so tight that I can see some bones in there, brushes my arm and all of a sudden I can smell what we're having for dinner.

Fresh fried chicken rolled in flour, wishbone, leg and gizzard for me. Potatoes mashed with butter and milk, thick gravy with black specks of pepper floating all through. Green beans, yellow beans, wax beans and new potatoes cooked down with chunks of bacon and celery. Yellow squash dipped in egg, rolled in cracker crumbs and fried brown. Hot buttered rolls. ✨