

Family Meals

by John Walker Lee

There were no vegetables left. The weedy patch in the yard failed to yield a single potato, the runner beans had died in the frost. Winter crept up on the unsuspecting town of Colma and peeked into the window of the little bungalow where Doris Richards lifted the pot again and emptied the thrift-store tin of concentrated soup into the water again. The radio announcer said the big war was finally over, but it hardly registered through the dizziness of her thoughts.

She forced herself to stay awake, wiping her mascara across her cheek when she stirred the pot. Her son, John, watched her with his big 10 year old eyes while his brother, Mark, banged his red plastic spoon over the bunny sticker on his high-chair. The place at the head of the table was not

set and had not been for almost a year. Men and their bloody wars, Doris thought.

Doris stirred the soup, thinner each day, lifted the dented steel pot and placed it on the table. John's expression fell when he saw what was in the pot but his face recovered quickly, returning to its usual quiet calm.

"I don't want you to be upset," said Doris in her small voice, "but I've got something to tell you." John's eyes darted between her and the soup while Mark continued to brain the bunny on his high chair.

"Well, your auntie Roselda is very fond of you two, as you know, and times are very hard, so I think it would be best if..."

"When do you want us to leave?" asked John.

Doris looked at her son's bright eyes and her heart genuinely skipped a beat. She would do anything to keep them but she could not let them

get sick because of her inability to find a goddam job.

"Well," she began, her mouth suddenly dry, "I haven't told her yet but if you want to, it is a good place to live and you won't be hungry any more. I know that..."

"I won't go. You can send little shithead, but not me."

"John, don't..."

"I'm staying. I'll help too."

Doris's eyes dropped. "You're very sweet, my boy, but..."

"I mean it," John's voice grew more frantic with each sentence. "I'm staying!"

"John, don't..."

"Don't what, mom? Don't stand up? Don't leave the table? Don't go to bed hungry again? I just want to help but you won't let me!" John eyed the pot one more time and ran to his room.

Doris felt older suddenly, seeing her little boy argue like a young man. Tired, old, at her end. She jumped as the door to John's room slammed. She took a bowl and spooned some watery vegetable soup into it for Mark. Thank God the third had died, she thought, instantly hating herself for it. She could remember the pain, the embarrassment, the long drive to the Rocklands Community Hospital in the back seat of the neighbor's Morris Minor. The doctors and nurses had treated her like a plumbing part, shoving and sighing at her overweight frame. Doris had lost a lot of weight since the war, lots of housewives had cut down on even basic supplies, but they had a man to work and fix things.

The grocer's sweaty armpits made Doris nauseous. She moved around the little shop for an age, hoping that the grocer would not become suspicious and start following her around the meager supply of scrawny potatoes and spinach. There was

something wrong with the light here, spots flickered over the groceries. Behind her Mr Arkit coughed. Doris stepped outside and breathed heavily, pushing against her eyes to make the spots go away. Her pride, or ego, or whatever the hell it was, did not let her do it. I will not become a criminal, she thought. She walked along the unkempt grass sidewalk to the 5 bed hospital to ask for work again. Again the pretty receptionist said there was none. 15 Years experience, 6 years of training, not one damn job in this shitty little town. Empty handed and dejected, Doris went home to face her kids one more time.

Roselda parked her new Ford compact sports car in the street, left the engine running while she and Doris had their little chat.

"It's for the best, you do understand. We will look after them better than... better than you are able to at the moment."

Doris hardly heard the lecture.

"Yes, Roselda."

"Don't be like that, Doris, I'm just doing this because I love you and the boys. And you should put some makeup on, you look..."

"Yes. Thank you."

"Come Johnny," Roselda trilled, "bring your brother."

There was an uncomfortable silence and Roselda pitched her voice higher, "Jooooohnny?"

"He doesn't like to be called Johnny, Roselda."

"Oh shush, Doris!"

Roselda strode from the kitchen to the little living room looking for John while Mark sat on the floor playing with a broken-down truck. She picked up the little boy who pointed a sad hand at his lost toy, moaning at the loss.

"Joooohny, where are you? We're going sweetie!"

Roselda saw movement outside the window and found John sitting on the wooden garden chair.

"We're going sweetie. Get your things." Roselda said with an amount of hidden impatience only Doris could measure.

"It's fine, I'm staying." said John, his voice calm.

Roselda almost whispered, "No sweetie, you can't stay here, we have to go now."

"No, I'm fine, I'm staying. Thanks." Roselda felt uneasy under the child's direct gaze. She sighed almost imperceptibly and walked back into the lounge.

"I'm not going to make him go. Call me when you've talked some sense into him." She took Mark outside and packed him into the passenger seat of the sports car with her new luggage.

There was soup again. Thin, feeble. John the Champion never complained about the food. Doris sat with her head resting on her hand, the other hand scratching her arm listlessly. A red patch had formed, as if the skin was allergic to her short, unpainted nails.

"Mom." said John, looking at her hand. Doris looked at him, smiled absently and looked away, still scratching.

"Mom!"

Doris blushed, realizing she was doing it again. She looked at John and what she saw scared her. He had become thin, pale. She hardly recognized him.

"Eat your soup, dear, it's getting cold."

The town ambulance, rusted on one side, let out a feeble 'yalp yolp' as it approached Beacon Valley's only traffic light. It labored up the hill to the hospital and parked outside.

Doctor Phelps was having a bad day. Robbie Roberts's pet pig had kicked him during its pelvic examination, and the sniveling brat belonging to the Krugerwaters had screamed bloody murder after its flu injection and bit his fingers. As Peter wheeled the patient to the operating theater that was really just a room with a curtain, Doctor Phelps was relieved to see that this patient would be human.

"What happened, Peter?" he asked the ambulance driver, pressing against the flesh on Doris's leg only to hear her groan in agony.

"Uh, she got hit by a car or summin', at, uh, Dick Putter's place. Looks like her leg is smashed, nutting too bad, uh, whatchoo think, doctor?"

"Yes, Peter, you're absolutely correct, her leg is, as you so succinctly put it, smashed."

Peter McVicar gleamed at the doctor's agreement with his diagnosis.

"Bring her in, is she conscious?"

"I don' know, guv, I mean, doctor."

Doctor Phelps sighed and walked in to the theater. Peter wheeled Doris into the only operating theater in Beacon Valley and together they lifted her onto the steel bed that occasionally doubled as an autopsy table.

"Get Penny, would you, Peter?" Peter gleamed once more, any excuse to see his secret-crush-since-grade-school was welcome.

Doctor Phelps lifted Doris's skirt to the knee and injected Novocaine. He gave Doris a brief examination and found a few bruises on her shoulder and neck, nothing that couldn't wait. He scrubbed up and started working on the leg.

John's eyes fixed on hers. John had stared her awake since he was a toddler, and he had stared her awake now.

"John!" Doris's voice echoed in the sterile room. She felt uncomfortable, weak.

"Mom, are you okay?"

"Yes, John, I'm fine, just a little woozy. Where is the doctor?"

"Doctor Phelps is outside having a smoke." John's eyes strayed to her left leg. "The nurse was here a little while ago." Doris looked down through the evaporating haze and saw the surrounding supports and clamps. She had seen it often enough at the army hospital during the war and knew what it meant.

"Jesus," she said. John gave a feeble smile and patted her shoulder, trying to make his mother feel better. The chloroform smell lingered in his clothes when he walked past the receptionist, distracted by the antics of the ambulance driver, and went home.

There was soup again. Doris shifted uncomfortably off the artificial limb strapped to her right knee. She ladled John's bowl with two scoops and set it on the table, catching his look of surprise.

"That lovely nurse at the hospital gave us something, she's the daughter of an old friend there from when I was a nurse's assistant."

Doris's eyes never left the pot. John started shoveling mouthfuls of watery leek and meat soup. Doris winced at every slurp, forcing back tears.

Doris woke with sweat pouring down her face, the pain in her thigh above the amputation unbearable. Her ears were ringing. She reached over and opened the bedside drawer, but there was no Mezathol, no Omnidose, no Prosylnine. She bunched the sheets around the sensitive stump and it quelled the ripples of pain for a few seconds, but the pain returned with a vengeance. She rolled to the side

of her bed where the crutches were leaning against the wall, mocking her, and fell out of the bed. She screamed uncontrollably into the night.

Dr. Phelps examined the wound under the ascetic operating light. "Looks like there's a secondary infection above the patella, the whole site's caving in."

Peter yawned, unimpressed at being called out at 2:30am to see to another hit and run. Two in a month was just annoying, especially if it was the same person, she should really be more careful walking around at night on crutches like that, he thought.

"Is her boy outside?" Peter asked, timing the question between the doctor's jabs and frowns. "He's in the waiting room trying not to fall asleep, poor kid."

Dr Angus Phelps injected Topozine into the thigh and waited.

"Help me put a new blade on the grinding saw."

"Jesus, doc, really?" Peter hated the sight of blood, but it was the only job in town for a young, undereducated man whose father had gone off to war.

"Do you want help with those packages, Missus Richards?" Penny asked, breaking herself away from Peter's gaze for a second. The old lady had recovered a little, enough to go home, but was obviously in pain at every step.

"No, thank you. They're just some personal things."

Weird, she hadn't seen the kid bring the plastic bags. A friend must have dropped them off. She ignored the old biddy struggling with her crutch and went back to Peter's story about how he had rescued Mr Tickles from a snarling Doberman.

"I've made some nice stew, John." John eyed the pot with skepticism. The pieces that floated in the watery pot looked less like frank and beans and more like Frankenstein.

He put down the lid. "I don't think you've been honest with me."

Doris jerked her head around in surprise.

"I think you've been stealing." Doris's face flushed and she wiped the cooking sweat from her brow.

"I've had to do some... things to feed us, John, but I'd never steal, never! You know that."

John nodded, his mom was the most benign person he knew.

"What are we eating, anyway? It isn't beef."

"Just some odds and ends from the butcher. We can't afford prime steak, you know."

"How is your leg? Um, I mean the wound?"

"Okay, I guess. I'll get by, don't you worry. Dr Phelps said I have a very good chance of making a good recovery."

"How could I not worry!" John shouted. "You've lost your leg! We have nothing! We're starving! I want to get a job and..."

"No John, you concentrate on your schoolwork. You don't want to end up like me, struggling to make ends meet. Have you done your homework?"

"Don't change the subject! This is serious, mom. What are we going to do?"

"I... don't know Johnny. Something will come up. God will provide."

"Mom?"

"Yes?"

"Why are you calling me Johnny?"

"When I was your age I wanted to be so many things," Doris sounded lost and further away than the dusty-smelling kitchen in the little house at the end of the road, "but I could never focus long enough to get anywhere, just kept flitting like a butterfly between dreams. Your father was the opposite, that is what drew me to him, I suppose. He was strong and straightforward."

John took the cup of hot, bitter tea his mother had made from the fallen leaves of their neighbor's tree. She brushed him aside when he wanted to help, insisting that she make the tea herself and in doing so almost tipped over the pot.

Doris looked down, stopping her right hand from scratching itself raw. The stump of her left arm was tender; the bandage had lost its softness and scratched the fresh stitches. She felt so weak. "Stupid people nowadays, never look where they're driving. Anyway, time to make some food."

John stood up, the cracked plastic chair raking across the greasy floorboards echoed against the bare walls where once hung their possessions.

"I'll make the food, mom, sit down and rest." John could not raise his eyes to look at his mother.

"No! I will manage, it gives me something to do, please leave it, Johnny."

"I'm going to help! Your hand is gone, how are you going to cut anything?" John grabbed the package from the counter and started to unwrap the green plastic.

"No! John! Leave it!" Doris stumbled against the table as she lurched towards her son, fell against the chair blocking her path. Slowly and painfully she pulled herself into it.

John unwrapped the plastic and stared at the contents. His eyes felt suddenly dry and he could not breathe.

"I just wanted you to be healthy, John. Don't hate me." John's body started convulsing and he began

retching, trying to get himself to the sink. On
the counter the red meat and bone glistened in the
hospital gown.

END