

# The Potatoland Diaries



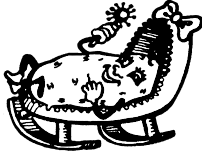
Marla Goodman





# The Potatoland Diaries

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To Wren

*Who ate the heart-shaped potatoes and endured this  
brief phase in our lives with grace and courage.*

and Shawna

*Whose adventurous spirit and support always  
embolden me to try something new.*

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Bozeman, Montana

Cover art:

Spudnik Equipment Co. trademark, c. 1958 (cancelled 2018)

“A View of London and Westminster, etc. from One Tree Hill in Greenwich Park,”

John D. Stevens, 1794

## FOREWORD

In the mid 2000s I left my job as marketing coordinator for MSU Extension to take a graphic design job with an international private label clothing maker. Within days at the new job, I realized that I did not like the management at all, and rather than doing the relatively stress-free graphic design work I had left my other job for, I was being thrust into an uncompensated marketing role. My sister Shawna encouraged me to leave the awful new job by reassuring me that she could help me find enough income through connections in the technical writing and publishing industries that I could get by as a single parent. In the weeks between leaving the private label company and the freelance work heating up, I searched newspaper want ads for temporary work. I came very close to becoming an assistant horse trainer, 20 miles from home, in spite of the fact that I hadn't ridden a horse in at least 20 years. I decided that risk of injury was too high. So it came to pass that I worked for two weeks sorting potatoes.

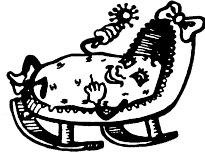
*"The Potatoland Diaries is not a known story, but there is a Mickey Mouse episode called "Potatoland" that aired in 2013. In the episode, Mickey and Donald build a fake amusement park called Potatoland to fulfill Goofy's dream of visiting the real thing."*  
— AI Overview, Jan 14, 2025

### Further Potatoland Reading:

*A look at the history and closure of Potatoland as seen in the Mickey Mouse animated television series, an article by Kenneth Robertson in a series called Fictionland, which chronicles the history of fictional amusement parks created for films and television.*

<https://defunctland.com/2018/07/09/fictionland-the-history-of-potatoland/>

## DAY 0 — MARCH, 2007



### “Countdown to Potato Land”

When Jim\* returned my call about his ad for potato sorters, he didn't know that I had been watching the classifieds for years, wondering about the ads for unskilled laborers like “cheese handler,” “wrangler,” “milker,” “assistant sausage maker” and one of my favorites, “exotic dancer (no experience necessary).”

On the phone, he explained that they have canvas sides on the conveyor that they can pull down to keep it warmer when the wind comes up. He said there would be two coffee breaks and a lunch break. He said that it paid \$10 per hour. And sometimes the girls bring baked goods, he said. I think it's quaint, not offensive, that he calls women girls, but I realize that's because in real life, I have a choice.

At his invitation, I drove out to visit the farm, because unemployed people who quit their desk jobs have time to do that kind of thing. Churchill is a traditional Dutch farming community between Belgrade and Amsterdam (Montana). It consists of a church on a hill, surrounded by farms whose inhabitants take their churching very much to heart.

There was a tall, pink-faced blonde man in the doorway of the house whose Wranglers fit him just wrong enough to make me assume he was hard to buy pants for. He didn't introduce himself, just held the door and said, good naturedly, “You're gonna get grilled.”

This was Jim's brother, Todd, a partner in the business. Jim was sitting at a dark wood table in the immaculate kitchen. I

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*\*The names in my diary have been changed for the sake of anonymity.*

introduced myself and shook his hand, which, predictably, was exactly the size and color of a small ham. His fingers look like Ballpark Franks. I probably stared as I wondered about the size of his wedding ring.

He looked sort of like Donald Trump on steroids. Like a Donald Trump with better hair, who had eaten good healthy food and worked hard all his life and grown big and respectable.

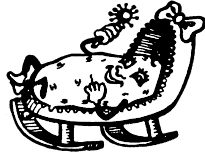
While Jim told me more about the job and asked a few questions, people came and went and asked him questions and the cell phone rang. His wife, a pretty, thin lady named Janice, (I think) popped in and reminded him that the Ag Appreciation Dinner was at 5:30. It was exactly like meeting with the CEO of a large company, except that after Todd took off with someone who appeared to be an electrician, Jim took the time to tell me about each of his kids and show me their pictures on the kitchen sideboard.

His daughter Doreen loved horses, but she was a heck of an athlete, went to state in volleyball and basketball, and just got a job coaching at a high school in California. Her husband is a youth pastor, if I remember right. His other daughter had cancer as a young girl, but was doing well now. She is a hairstylist (or was that his daughter?). One of his sons learned organic agriculture techniques in college that they were now applying to their potato culture. The other one is 29 and not married yet. I also learned a lot about the two exchange students they had hosted, one from Spain and one from Taiwan.

Then he took me to the picture window in the living room, to point out the red potato sheds where I would go on my first day, and his son's place, just down the road. Looking through the glass, I was amazed that the picket fence that signified the end of the potato field and the beginning of the yard was literally an arm's length from the window. Standing in that room was like floating in an ark on a sea of potato fields.

I promised to come at 8:15 a.m. on the first day. I was so excited on the drive home that I had to call my daughter to tell her how much I loved my potato family.

DAY 1 — MARCH 20, 2007



**“Les Pommes de Terre de L’amour” \***

*(The potatoes of love)*

As I write this, my eyes are burning and I can hardly see the computer screen.

I awoke at 6:30 a.m. and selected long underwear that I considered to be the right weight for the day: the dark green ones with a fly. They had been a courting gift from a conservative-minded boyfriend who assumed that I wouldn’t mind that they were lightly used. He was right. Under a two-dollar pair of jeans from the Salvation Army, they completed the ensemble for my first day as a potato sorter at a seed potato farm.

Between scrambling to piece together a hearty working woman’s lunch and mixing my daughter a cup of instant cocoa before school, I snatched my day pack, the down vest my mom gave me for Christmas and a less-favored fleece jacket as an outer layer, incase the work was dirty.

I had stopped the night before to pick up a pair of gloves, at Jim’s suggestion. He said the girls usually used those orange heavy duty playtex gloves, but I couldn’t find them, so I bought a pair of black, latex-dipped fabric ones for \$3.99. They looked like they would be good, and I bought them large enough that I could fit a thin liner inside if it got cold. I intentionally left them in the car so that I wouldn’t forget them.

Twenty minutes after I dropped my kid at the high school, I was pulling up near the farm, wondering where to park my Honda where it wouldn’t get bashed by a potato truck. I sheepishly wondered if anybody would notice my “Save the

Trees, Remove the Bushes” bumper sticker, or my faux chrome Flying Spaghetti Monster emblem, and if they would think less of me as a potato sorter if they knew I was an atheist and a shameless, bleeding heart liberal. Heck, just because they’re Christians doesn’t mean they can’t be liberals. Or does it?

Luckily, just as I was looking for someone to ask about the parking, a woman drove up and parked near the big red potato cellar. Her name was Maureen. She said she’d been sorting potatoes for 20 years, and where I was parked was fine.

I followed Maureen and some other people into a little red shack, where there were two space heaters, a coffee pot, a microwave and a small fridge. I sat down on one of the benches along the wall and got introduced around. My coworkers, AKA “the girls,” included Maureen, Angela and Brandy. Then there were a bunch of Jim’s sons, all recognizable by their blonde hair, pink complexions and giant hands and feet. A quiet college aged boy named Owen sat in the corner. And Doug and Clark, who by their dress and bearing appeared to be seasoned denizens of potatoland, rounded out the crew.

We went over the safety rules, visited the first aid kit, and dipped the bottoms of our shoes in some mysterious pink liquid. The moment had arrived! Without any fanfare, we crossed the gravel lot to climb to our stations on a big white conveyor system called a Spudnik.

It’s a metal contraption rather like the Dr. Seuss machine that put the stars on the star bellied sneeches. Screen printed in red on the side of the machine was a wonderful cartoon depicting a long-lashed potato in a bassinet, rattle clutched in its little fist, with the words “potatoes handled like babies” inscribed below it.

The Spudnik moves potatoes from the cellar through several stages of sorting and loads them up a ramp onto a semi truck. We girls were stationed on either side of a split conveyor belt, and Owen was at a different conveyor, sorting rocks out of the smaller potatoes that fall through the rollers. (I’m not sure yet exactly what Doug and Clark do.) Jim gave us little black squares of foam to stand on to save our legs and told Brandy how to turn

the conveyor on and off.

A loud buzzer rang when Brandy pushed the button and the spuds started coming. Jim gave us a quick lesson about what to keep and what to throw out.

I learned the enemies of the potato sorter. The dirt clod. The broken potato. Dry rot. Worm holes. Weird protuberances. Counter to my romantic instincts, I learned that the heart-shaped potato is among the most wanted seed potato outlaws. We were to dump the badly rotted, broken or misshapen potatoes onto a different belt that destined them for a processor. Vines, rocks and clods went off the truck.

After just a few minutes, Jim consigned our further training to Maureen and disappeared. I did my best to hide my initial "I'm a potato sorter!" grin as I faced my first wave of potatoes.

A stiff breeze blew my hair into my eyes, and I put on my red stocking cap. I tried to mimic what Maureen did, picking up a potato here and there and using a wringing motion to crack off a carapace of encrusted mud. Soon I had picked out my first dirt clods, and before long I was snagging heart-shaped potatoes off the belt and pitching them with authority into the metal chute to potato Valhalla.

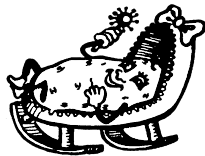
It wasn't hard work, except for stooping over the belt and craning my neck to the right, to view the spuds ahead. Sometimes they would be so thick on the belt we had to dig through them, and if there were bad ones, we certainly missed some.

My gloves seemed to be working fine. As promised, coffee break and lunch time came. The wind picked up in the afternoon, and blew so much fine dirt into my eyes that I had to squint my lashes nearly shut. We did five truckloads. The rest of the crew went to fresh pack, but I had only agreed to work part time, so I left for the afternoon at 2 pm.

But before I took off, I summoned the courage to ask Jim if I could take home a few of the heart-shaped potatoes for dinner. He said, "Let me get you some good eating potatoes! You don't have to take those heart-shaped ones!" It took some convincing for him to realize that I actually wanted them.

On the drive home I tried to wipe some of the dirt off of my face and out of my eyes with Kleenex. Before I picked up my daughter from her piano lesson, I scrubbed the potato valentines and put them in the oven to bake. We ate them with broccoli, cheese sauce and crumbled bacon. They tasted even better than I imagined potatoes of love would taste.

## DAY 2 — MARCH 21, 2007



### “Ugly Potatoes”

Today I learned that there is a whole other conveyor belt to carry away the dirt clods and rocks. Turns out that I wasn't supposed to be throwing them on the ground! It was cold this morning, and I was glad that I had switched up to the next level of long underwear and brought the liners for my gloves. No dust today and my eyes were nearly back to normal. Hooray!

It was another day of “easy sorting” according to Jim. It's true that there were very few seed potatoes to reject, according to his criteria. When Maureen pushes the green button to start the conveyors, I look to my right, where they come bouncing off the rollers. The belts are about 3 feet wide, and the potatoes rush along in an endless stream. Watching them come at me is like driving along a potato highway.

Occasionally there is a broken potato -- now and then a dirt clod. But sometimes, despite my intense scrutiny, everything looks just fine for what seems like too long. I start to wonder whether I'm just not in the game. I hear the “thunk!” of Maureen, on the other side of the split conveyor, tossing out spud after

spud, and I wonder if the rejects are going right by me.

In my mind, I call the reject potatoes “baduns,” in the way that a rustic character in an old book might refer to persons of questionable character. I’m pleased when I see a rock or clod, because they seem to come in little groups and I can look forward to a few thrilling moments of watching my arm dart out, grab, and place the clod on the conveyor to clod hell.

This morning I was alone on the south side of the belt. It was exhilarating, knowing that I alone was pitted against clods and rot. Then, Angela got back from her Bible study meeting and took her place ahead of me. She gets vertigo, so I let her stand closer to the rollers, where there are fewer miles of tater highway in her line of sight.

Sometimes it seems like Angela goes into her own little world, just touching the potatoes dreamily as they go by, or thoughtfully rubbing the dirt off one, while clods and broken potatoes pass her. I’m thankful for this. I feel slightly superior. And if she didn’t let something pass by occasionally, what would there be for me to do?

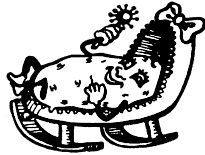
Sometimes, when there have been too many good potatoes for too long of a time, I start touching them, too, just to make sure I don’t glaze over altogether. Other times, when I hear too many thunks on Maureen’s side of the belt and none from mine, I sacrifice a potato. Jim said, the first day, that they’re okay if they’re just a little skinned or knobby, or creased where a root passed through, but if one is just “plain ugly” we can toss it. This led to soul-searching on my part.

Who am I to judge potato beauty? By human standards, one might seem plain, but by tuber standards, it might be Audrey Hepburn. If I chuck it, it goes to be processed into God only knows what. If I keep it, it has a chance to pass its unique personality to future generations as a seed potato. If I were a potato, what conveyor belt would I end up on? Am I too knobby? Too lumpy? Just plain ugly? Isn’t it what’s inside that counts?

But the pressure of Maureen’s persistent thinking is too much for me. I grab one that’s fetus-shaped, or looks just a little too like

a kidney and purposefully pitch it in the metal chute on my right with a resounding clang. And, in my mind, as if I'll be questioned later by some potato cop in mirrored sunglasses, I rehearse the same defiantly guilty phrase, "I just didn't like its looks."

DAY 3 — MARCH 22, 2007



**"Good clean seed"\***

What are the chances that my underground blog would coincide with the Bozeman Daily Chronicle today? Is it just me (read as: a single, 43-year-old woman thrown into close contact with a bunch of burly Dutch farmers) or is the quote from today's story, "Montana has a reputation for good clean seed" really funny?

Another day of easy sorting. No wind, good spuds. Hardly any rocks on the conveyor today. Only four of the expected ten trucks showed up, so we got off at noon. Jim told us to write down an extra hour on our time sheets to make up for the trouble and gas that it took for us to come out for a half-day. Each day he has thanked us each personally for coming, and he frequently tells us we're doing a good job. Instead of paying money to go to PowerPoint obsessed leadership seminars, corporate middle managers should be required to spend a day sorting potatoes for Jim.

Yes, what Jim said about the girls bringing baked goods is absolutely true. I thought he meant the girls on the crew (and while dreading it, I mentally promised to do my part) but it's actually his daughter, wife and daughter-in-law who pony up with the treats. Today, Jodi brought brownies, still warm from

the oven. Yesterday at coffee time, Matthew's wife, whose name I'll remember next time (maybe), brought freshly baked chocolate chip cookies.

Matthew met his wife at the Dutch-Reform college in Iowa. (I think it's in Iowa). She's from Winnipeg, where there is a sizeable cache of Dutch Christian farmers, like here in Montana. She and their two boys, whose ages I would peg around one and three years, come every day to bring Matthew a hot lunch served with a spicy dash of hen-pecking. He eats it out of re-used food tubs and drinks water out of an apple juice jar. That impresses me.

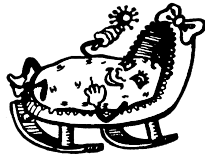
The boys are blonde, adorable and very sweetly behaved. I noticed that even though the toddler has vestiges of baby talk in his dialect, he whispers grace over his little bit of home-baked bread with all the solemnity of a true believer. The menfolk entertain themselves by feeding the kids Cheetos and M&Ms to get a rise out of their nutrition-conscious mom. It raises the tension in the lunch shed just a notch beyond my comfort level, but I'm unusually sensitive.

Part of me is a little scared of these people, their faith and their traditions. If I could turn the head of that big fellow in the ill-fitting Wranglers, how would I like a life of cleaning, cooking, praying and child-rearing? (Mind you, it's all just conjecture.) I'm a bit awed by the sheer practicality of their family system, comforted by its predictability and fearful of its rigidity, all at once. I get the feeling it's kind of like the Spudnik, chugging those spuds out by the ton -- mighty powerful, but where do heart-shaped potatoes fit in? Maybe if I hang around long enough and ask the right questions, I'll find out.

We girls on the crew are all here for different reasons. On the first day, Maureen asked us each, over the conveyor belt, if we were married. No, I'm divorced, with a teenaged daughter. No, Angela just graduated from college in Wyoming and she rooms outside of Livingston with a friend who has two kids. No, Brandy is separated from her incarcerated husband, but is engaged to someone new. She has two or three kids, including a 3-month-old baby at home.

Brandy left early the first day and hasn't returned. My speculation is that after a morning of spud sorting, she might have calculated that the \$10 per hour doesn't quite cover daycare. Likely, she doesn't have the luxury of figuring the value of baked goods and philosophical stimulation into the deal.

#### DAY 4 — MARCH 23, 2007



#### **"Jim's Birthday"\***

Angela made a special "older than dirt" cake today, in celebration of Jim's birthday. He turned 58. It consisted of a large bowl of instant butterscotch pudding with crumbled nilla wafers on top. I hope she will excuse me for saying I don't have very fond memories of it.

The spuds were about the same today, mostly good, with a few rocks, the occasional heart-shape, and a fair amount of rot. We filled 11 semi-loads, plus a farm truck. I'm going to ask, one of these days, just about how many potatoes that might be. I expect it's a lot.

Toward the end of the day, there was a bit of tension in the air because we had to stop the conveyor several times. Apparently the buyer fines heavily for any rocks found in the load.

After we four "girls" have done our part, a fellow named Barry checks the spuds over again as they cascade off of the conveyor. Then two men (usually Jim and a young guy whose name I don't know) keep watch on either side of the ramp that goes up into the semi. (Actually, for all I know, there may be other sorters ahead of us on the front end of the machine, but

I've never had a chance to investigate.) Each time a rock gets by us and hits the metal roller on its way to Barry, we hear a disappointing ping. If he misses it, and it makes it all the way to the loading ramp, they stop the conveyors to search it out, rather than risk its sneaking onto the truck.

Spying rocks among all those racing potatoes takes concentration -- because guess what ten zillion muddy potatoes ALL look like? (Yes, they all look like dinosaur poo, but that's not what I was getting at.) It's not at all like seeing the blue duck among all the yellow ones floating in that perplexing circular river at the carnival. Every time you snag out a rock, you feel like you've saved a life, or something.

Barry ribs Angela, who is ahead of me on the belt, for missing the rocks. She ribs back, but I can tell her feelings are a little hurt. As usual, I tend to blend into the scenery, so they sort of pretend like I don't exist, which is good by me. I use my best Taoist thinking in order not to worry too much about the missed rocks.

"Each of us is doing his best," I think to myself, "and if we do that, it's the best we can do." Then I sometimes add, "This is only potato sorting, for Chrissake." I don't expect that's textbook Taoism, but it's what I can muster, under the circumstances.

The rocks might not have gotten me down if it hadn't been for the migraine headache. Imagine having a headache that feels like someone drugged you, removed your left eye and the area behind it with an oversized apple corer, and then left you to gradually recover from the anesthetic. Then imagine looking at ten zillion racing potatoes, trying to discern which ones are actually rocks in potato disguise, while the sun shines and the breeze blows through the hole left behind by the apple corer. Then imagine doing all this without the aid of life-giving coffee, but with a lump of butterscotch flavored "older than dirt" cake in your gut.

It's probably my own fault that I got the headache. I got distracted answering e-mails in the morning. By the time I realized it was time to go, rather than making my cute little farm girl lunch of waxed paper wrapped sandwiches and a slice of

blueberry pie carried in a Karo syrup can with a wire handle, it was all I could do to grab the jar of almond butter and a loaf of bread and run for the door.

I didn't have time to fill my (deadly?) nalgene water bottle or swill down a cup of coffee. At the red light on Durston and 19th I located a plastic spoon in the glove compartment. While stopped by Smith's grocery, hastily and regrettably, I managed to spread almond butter on a piece of bread, and snarfed down the dry, yet sticky result while speeding down the interstate to the Belgrade exit.

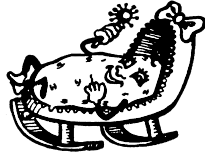
I was very thirsty when I pulled up at Sortingville, but I could hear the conveyors running. I had donned my \$3.99 gloves as I drove down Cameron Bridge road, so I charged straight to spudland without any further delay. And you already know the part about the apple corer.

The rest of the day was spent in a rather reflective mood. I alternated between focusing wanly on the dizzying potato highway, sucking down quarts of water and watery farmer coffee, mindlessly stuffing myself with a variety of "Jim's birthday" food offerings and lying down on the ground.

It's a shame, too. This was the best food day, ever. Barry cut up fresh potatoes and French fried pan after pan of them over a propane stove, serving them up with salt out of a big tin shaker and all the ketchup you could want. "Janny," Jim's wife, brought ice cream and peach cobbler in the afternoon. That's also when the wife of that burly fellow I'd taken to be single showed up with at least part of their brood. (Maybe his fingers are too big to fit inside a wedding band.)

Some days the bloom is off the tater rose.

DAY 5 — MARCH 28, 2007



### **“Russet stampede”**

My sister, Shawna, thought that potato sorting sounded fun and interesting.

I knew that Jim was looking for more people, since Maureen would be in South Dakota visiting her grandkids during the week that we were going to have to sort “those big russets,” an event to which Jim referred in a tone that made it sound like russets were something you might release, red-eyed and snorting with fury, from a heavily reinforced corral. So I asked him if he wanted me to bring my sister, and he said yes.

I had some fun, after that, dreaming up what to tell Shawna she needed to bring.

“Obviously, bring your cutlass. They get dull after awhile, so it might be good to bring two...” I told her.

But you have to get up pretty early in the morning to fool Shawna, so I gave up on the idea of trying to dupe her into coming dressed in pirate attire.

I did tell her to bring gloves and goggles. Her imagination had already supplied the rest of her ensemble: The worn (but clean) calico frock, topped off by a pair of men’s overalls... The dotted kerchief tied over her curls, with one or two locks venturing out to cling to her careworn cheek... And, of course, a homemade Karo tin lunch pail with the wax paper-wrapped sandwiches.

We met in Border’s Books parking lot at 8am, and she actually was wearing overalls, I think, but the rest of the agreed-upon vision was only imagined. She had a shopping bag lunch, and

from the loaf of bread and jar of peanut butter peeking out, I could see we belonged to the same school of lunch preparation.

It was cold, with flakes of snow blowing in a northeast wind. The russets were stomping and kicking up dust. Our task was to sort for rot, misshapen potatoes, rocks, clods... Oh, and to remove every potato that was larger than 10 ounces, which turned out to be nearly all of them.

My memory blurs. I don't even remember who pushed the green button on the conveyor that first time. But somehow, 500,000 potatoes came thundering off the rollers, choking us with dust. Our arms moved in fast motion, just like in that "I Love Lucy" episode that I have often used as an example of what my perfect job might be. But Lucy got to eat the chocolates. Those big, dirty russets didn't hold quite the same appeal.

It was probably pretty disappointing for Shawna that we didn't get to sing the banana boat song with substituted potato lyrics as she had imagined. She was too busy grabbing oversized spuds off those rollers to look up, or think. They went by so fast, it was like trying to empty a river with a tablespoon.

When, finally, the last potato rolled into the last truck, Shawna went into the break shed to fill out a W-4 form, so she would get paid for her day's work. The day probably equaled about an hour and a half of her professional wage as a technical writer. And it certainly won't be enough to cover the massage work it is going to take to erase the memory of the russet stampede.

**DAY 6 — MARCH 29, 2007**  
**"Russet stampede, continued"**

Oh, God.

**DAY 7 — MARCH 29, 2007**  
**"Russet stampede, continued more"**

What was I thinking?

DAY 8 — APRIL 2, 2007



### “Lunch boxes”

The men folk all have the same kind of lunchbox.

They are dark green, plastic coolers, about the right size for going on an overnight camp-out with three or four friends. And they have a really neat lid that holds a manly-looking metal thermos on top. The lunch boxes are often brought to them by their wives, well before coffee time, which happens after two or three loads of potatoes, around ten o’clock.

I never get tired of Jim saying “coffee time!” It’s not just the promise of respite from the rumbling hoard, or the thrill of the carbohydrate-laden delights that Janny might serve -- I also like the way he says it. “Coffee time” sounds so 1950s to me. It’s kind of refined, in a way. It implies a nice little home-baked spice cookie and a bit of innocent gossip.

It sounds like maybe I should fix my hair a bit (not that such a thing would be possible, since, A. I learned after the first day that you may as well wait to shower until AFTER you are caked in potato dirt and, B. for the past two hours my hair has been plastered down under a hat that I made out of a boiled wool sweater).

Anyway, “coffee time” sounds nice. “Break time” might imply cigarettes, small-scale gambling, going to the can, and possibly even sneaking a beer, but “coffee time” adds a layer of pink gingham to my world of dirt clods and tuberous aberrations.

Usually, like clockwork, one of the wives arrives doubly laden with a thermos-topped green lunch box and a steaming plate of cookies or something. (Do they use some instinctive wifely

storm-sense to know which of them is bringing the baked goods, or do they call each other on the phone the night before?) But on the occasion when providence doesn't offer baked goods, the guys dig in their green lunch boxes for a piece of leftover cake, or whatever.

At lunch time, I watch the men get out their sandwiches. They usually look like the traditional construction worker style sandwich -- salami and the like. (All except for Matthew, who, as I explained, receives a hot, three course meal served family style, in clean pickle jars.) Tom eats his sandwich on a hoagie bun.

I try to grab a spot on the bench that will provide enough space for the arrival of the Jason family, and delve up to my armpit into the red mesh bag that serves as my lunch courier. The rat-chewn looking hole in the bag's side is evidence that I had been too impatient to open it from the top when it had first entered my life as a sack of oranges. My sandwich is pepper jack cheese on some gnarly specialty bakery bread. From its looks, I could have baked it myself, but it probably doesn't fool Joyce or any others in the "just baked it" family.

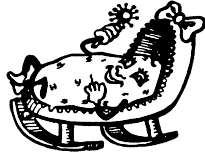
#### AN ABRUPT CONCLUSION, MAY 7, 2007



**"What happened?"**

The potatoland diaries were cut sort in their starchy prime. Sadly, I got a real job (sort of) so my potato sorting life, along with the free time that its takes to blog about other people's lunch boxes up and dried on the vine. But hey, eight days. That's a hell of lot of potatoes.

## AFTERWARD



In retrospect, I have to confess that my potato-strewn path of glory ended on an ugly note.

I was horrified when I realized that some of the people I was working with were racists. The truck drivers who took our spuds away to distant fields were sometimes Hispanic, and one guy was Black. I didn't think much about it, of course. I thought so little, in fact, that it took me days to realize that I was amidst some world-class xenophobes.

I was working away on the conveyor belt, and something was said. At first it completely went by me, because it was so unexpected, it just came to my ears as nonsense.

One guy, I think it was Barry, the guy who looked out for rocks on the rollers, occasionally shouted out, "I'm gonna get a whip." Busy as I was with potatoes, and as much as Barry chattered, I just figured he was giving Angela a hard time or something. I thought it was a weird, abstract thing to be saying, but I'd always thought he was a bit odd, so I just ignored it.

Then later in the break shed, something else was said. At first, again, it nearly escaped my notice. Barry and some of the other guys started talking about the truck driver, referring to him as "Sugar Ray" and saying something about him coming to work in his pajamas.

I hadn't paid much attention to the truck drivers. They were usually pretty far away, doing things I didn't understand to their big, scary trucks. But I had noticed that the Black truck driver

wore a black doo rag on his head and long red basketball shorts. That's not clothing you see every day in Bozeman.

If you don't live in Montana, you have no idea what it's like to live in a place where practically everyone is white. Bozeman and the surrounding sprawl is home to about 50,000 white folks. Statistically, as of this writing\*, it's 95.3% white, 1.5% Hispanic, 1.4% Native American and 1.2% multiracial, which leaves people of African descent sharing the remaining .5% with everyone else who falls into the "other" category. In other words, the entire Black population of Bozeman could probably fit in my living room.

So Barry and a couple of the other guys were talking, and I realized, suddenly, that they were talking about this Black truck driver, calling him Sugar Ray. It irritated me, but they have a culture of picking on everyone, so I lumped it with the way they called one truck driver Tumbleweed, because of his puffy hair. Then suddenly, to my nausea, I realized that when Barry had been yelling "I'm gonna get a whip," he hadn't just been having Tourette's outbursts. He had been taunting this truck driver. It all started to piece together and I realized that that, and other things I had been tuning out, were classic, shitty, cowardly racism.

Needless to say, the minute I put it all together, I felt like strangling Barry. Obviously, he was afraid to face the man and tell him "I don't like you because you're Black," so instead, he shouted taunts under the protection of the loudly running conveyor belt. He followed up with the stereotyped nickname, and other little jabs that could be swept away with a two-faced "we're just kidding you, can't you take a joke?"

The worst part was that while Jim, the father figure in our Family Affair, gingerly steered Barry from the subject, he didn't send Barry packing. I wanted him to stand up and punch Barry in the jaw, like John Wayne. I wanted him to defend the honor of this isolated community with ways that I had worked so hard to respect, despite their strangeness.

Of course, it occurred to me that Jim might think Barry was an idiot and an asshole who did deserve a good John Wayne punch,

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\*c. 2007

but weighed that knowledge against the shortage of experienced potato sorters available. Still, there was a raw spot in my mind that wondered if Jim was actually a racist, too. How could it be? A man so deeply faithful... I don't know much about religion, but if I understand Christianity at all, it's not supposed to make people hate their fellow man. Granted, I know it backfires a good share of the time, but I had hoped better of Jim's clan. I still do hope.

Still, I was sickened and saddened. I felt unwelcome and outnumbered. I didn't know whether to leave in a huff, confront Jim and insist that he have a talk with the group about racism and set down some ground rules for appropriate conversation, confront Barry personally (possibly by busting his car windows), or just remove my personal feelings and continue a passionless observation their foreign ways. Worse yet, I didn't like what my wishy-washyness said about me. If I wanted so much for Jim to stand up and be a hero for my ideals, why was I too small and too scared to do it myself?

The whole experience stripped away the magic fog from Potatoland. I saw that ignorance is never so isolated that it is harmless. I saw it, but I still didn't know what to do about it.

So, to my shame, instead of standing up and being the person I wish I were, I took the easy way out. I quietly culled myself from the load. I'd like to think that I'm worthy of being among the heart shaped potatoes.

But I'm not so sure.

## POST-DIARY ENTRY, FEBRUARY 22, 2008



### **Dutch Supper: A Missing Chapter from the Potatoland Diaries**

Last year, about this time, I was chucking seed potatoes with Jim and the girls. Though I still vividly recall the migraine and gut-ache that I associate with Jim's birthday and that horrific pudding dessert that Angela concocted, I'm half tempted to get out the Playtex gloves, the long underwear, the dust goggles, the sack lunch, and get back on the Spudnik that threwed me.

What's more, it will soon be Eastertide, which means time for the Dutch Supper -- an episode from Potatoland that I apparently neglected to relate right after it occurred. Possibly my energy was low.

It was just after the russett stampede. Shawna and I cleaned up after work and showed up at the Manhattan Christian school just in time for our boss, Jim, all scrubbed and rosy, to pay our admission to the gymnasium-full of wonders. Dutch folk music echoed over the murmur of community as plump children in wooden shoes performed proud, embarrassed clomping dances. We followed Jim's lead and ferried our divided plastic trays around a staggering gauntlet of mashed vegetables.

In folding chairs at long tables, we tucked spoonfuls of mashed rutabaga, mashed potatoes, mashed carrots, mashed something green (wasn't there something green?) into ourselves until it hurt to breath. Duty-bound, driven by some unspoken familial challenge, we soldiered through pigs in a blanket, black bread with butter and piles of firm little black beans that looked like rabbit droppings covered with brown sugar and bacon

drippings. I felt for all the world like an overfed Dutch baby, who, approached by another spoonful of mashed anything, might just relax my jaw and let it fall back out onto the plastic tablecloth.

We sucked at coffee in styrofoam cups and ventured back into the fray to fill a plate with desserts. What was the name of that Dutch exchange student who made the little pancakes? Riet? Something like that. What were those crazy little pancakes called? I'm sure they'd be good, with coffee, if you were pretty hungry. But their appeal was defeated by the unruly compost of starch-based muck that preceded them.

After all but composting ourselves in the heaviest food I have ever encountered, Shawna and I drove on to the Norris Hotsprings to stand in the scalding water and listen to a bluegrass band. We arrived around dusk, and nipped into the chilly changing room to stretch insufficient black swimming suits over our distended guts. (Well, I'm speaking for myself -- for all I know, Shawna considered her swimming suit sufficient -- and I'm just making a guess as to the state of her gut at the time.) As I descended the wide wooden stair, I noticed that the entire pool was lined with men. It was like being in some steamy meat market version of Cinderella.

After us came more women -- women in bikinis, women bearing beer bottles and big boobs, but that didn't deter a few lonely and persistent fellows from trying to pick Shawna and me up. It's a very strange feeling, having an apparently virile, if apparently unstable, man come onto you with unabashed hope while you secretly know that you are not only uninterested, but you are filled to the chin with mashed rutabagas. It was sad and funny at the same time.

If anybody wants to be my date for this year's Dutch supper, let me know. I'll be the one packing an insufficient swimming suit.

