

Excerpt from
THISTLE

Walter Wangerin Jr.

Once upon a time there lived a man and a woman in a potato house. The house wasn't made of potatoes. It was called the potato house because that's what the good man did. That was his work. He grew potatoes.

All day long, every day of the summer, he went to the fields and plowed and planted. He weeded and watered potato bushes. And when the leaves turned brown, he dug in the earth -- he dug to the roots where potatoes grow and pulled out bushels and bushels for people to eat.

But every day too, exactly at noon, the man went to his house, threw open the door and hollered, "I'm hungry! Good wife, I am hungry and ready to eat. Let's have potatoes!"

It was a happy life, and they were happy people. There was only one thing that made them sad. They had no children. In the afternoons when he weeded the fields and she made soup in the kitchen, the man and the woman felt lonely for children.

So every night they folded their hands and prayed "Dear God, do you think we could have a baby or two?"

And very soon, they did.

They had a son.

Ah, he was a tall lad! He stood like a tree, slender, straight and proud, his head thrown back, his nose on high, his eyes as green as needles. The man and the woman called him Pine, and they smiled because a family of two plus one is three.

Soon they had another son. This boy was very strong. His legs were like two trunks, his back like the bark of a mighty tree, his arms all hard with muscle. So the man and the woman called him Oak, and they laughed because three plus one is four.

Again God answered their prayer, and here came a daughter so pretty her parents got tears just looking at her. Her skin was like petals, pale and pink. The blush on her cheek was red and rare. And her neck was a tender, bending flower stalk. So they called her Rose, and they wept for gladness. Four plus one is five, and five is such a lovely number.

Then one more baby was born in the potato house. A girl. Not tall, she was short. Not strong, she was round and chubby, clumsy and soft. And plain. This child was as plain as a window weed. The man and the woman loved her very much, but because they were an honest couple they named her Thistle, and they said to God, "Six is a nice number. Six is enough."

So six is where the family stopped, and the man and the woman were lonely no longer. They were smiling. They were happy.

That is, they were happy most of the time—but not when Thistle cried. It broke their hearts when the youngest one cried. And every day, just as the man went out to work in the fields, little Thistle covered her eyes and cried.

Pine said, "Shortness, Shortness, why are you crying?"

Oak said, "She can't help it. Fatness always cries."

"Oh, Thistle!" said Rose. "Can you do nothing but cry?"

But the woman frowned at her older children and took the little one on her lap and whispered, "Thistle, what is the matter?"

Thistle said, "Papa is gone. I miss my papa."

"So that's the reason you are sad," the good woman said. "Well, wait a while and he will be home again."

And soon he was home indeed. Exactly at noon, every noon of the year, the good man stood in the doorway and hollered, "I'm hungry! Family, I am hungry and ready to eat. Let's have potatoes!"

Now it happened one morning that, while he was digging potatoes with a sharp new shovel, the good man heard a groaning under the ground.

"Mmmmmm."

He got down on his knees and listened. "Mmmmmm." He began to dig the earth with his bare hands—and soon he felt a potato, a huge potato, a tuber bigger than any he'd ever met before.

The more he dug, the more he saw. It had rough skin and eyes all over and lumps, one lump on each side and two lumps like legs at the end of it. But this particular potato was enormous! It was twice the size of the man himself.

Suddenly one of its eyes popped open and stared straight at the man.

The man jumped backward. He had never been stared at by a potato before.

The four lumps jerked and started to move. Like arms and legs they kicked the dirt, and the giant potato climbed out of the hole and stood up! Other eyes blinked and opened. A thousand potato eyes rolled around until they were all glaring at the poor man, who was so frightened that he couldn't move.

Then the potato began to talk.

"My name is Pudge!" it roared. "And hungry!" it thundered. "I'm hungry, hungry, and ready to eat!" Oh, what a horrible roaring it made, as thick as brown gravy. "And here is my dinner before me," Pudge bellowed. "Man, I'm going to eat you!"

So that is exactly what Pudge the potato did: ate the good man, shoes, shovel and all.

Copyright © 1995 Walter Wangerin, Jr. Used by permission. May not be duplicated without permission.