

***Shepherd's Pie* by Helena St. George**

I was recently invited to a neighborhood progressive dinner. For those unfamiliar with the concept, each course is served at a different house, which sounds charming until you remember that our neighborhood consists of five-acre lots and a homeowners association that believes walking between houses counts as loitering.

Most people drive. A few neighbors walk, usually the same ones who bring up property values in casual conversation and wear reflective vests “for safety.”

The evening follows a strict and cheerful order: appetizers, salads, main courses, and dessert. Each host assigns guests a dish, which is framed as collaborative but functions more like a compliance test. The event also provides an opportunity to exchange pleasantries, revisit neighborhood watch guidelines, and pretend that everyone is equally invested in “community.”

The main course was hosted by Butch and Roxy Feryll. They owned a German Shepherd named Lobo. They also owned multiple pickup trucks, a flagpole situation no one discussed openly, and a well-earned reputation for being difficult.

I was asked politely, but firmly to bring a casserole dish.

Because the dinner was scheduled for late October, I chose something hearty and seasonal. Shepherd's pie felt appropriate. It's warm, comforting, and designed to feed people who pretend not to judge you while absolutely judging you.

Two days before I planned to shop for ingredients, Lobo made his appearance. He roamed the neighborhood freely. Despite multiple HOA emails titled *Friendly Reminder*, *Following Up*, and *Final Notice*, he continued to escape. He barked at joggers, lunged at dogs, and once stood in the middle of the road as if daring someone to bring it up at the next meeting.

That afternoon, I was standing in front of my lawn with my labradoodle, Susie. Susie is affectionate, nonconfrontational, and emotionally unprepared for conflict. She represents the best of us.

I noticed Lobo when he was about twenty feet away. His posture was unmistakable. Susie yelped and tried to hide behind me. I tightened my grip on the wooden walking staff I carried—not because I was paranoid, but because experience had proven preparation was frowned upon less than bleeding on the sidewalk.

When Lobo charged, I shouted and raised the staff in warning. He ignored me. The situation escalated quickly and resolved itself just as quickly, in a way that was deeply inconvenient for everyone involved.

When it was over, the street was quiet. Susie barked. I stared at the dog, waiting for this to turn into a misunderstanding. It did not.

Calling Butch and Roxy seemed unwise. Our relationship had deteriorated after someone, not me, obviously, reported Lobo to animal control. I briefly imagined the next HOA meeting and decided discretion was the better option.

I handled the situation efficiently and without drama. My house is tiled throughout, which I had previously considered a design choice but now recognized as a lifestyle advantage.

I grew up on a ranch near Petaluma, California and butchered my share of sheep and goats. Lobo would be no different. I know how to compartmentalize. I focused on practicality, avoided unnecessary reflection, and reminded myself that this neighborhood valued solutions.

I only needed a few pounds for my Sheperd's pie. The haunch would do. Anything more would have been excessive. I dragged what remained of Lobo to where I had collected tree trimmings, fallen branches, and leaves over the summer. I transferred the burn pile on top of Lobo. After lighting a match, he went up in smoke.

By the time I finished, the problem had been addressed, the evidence had been managed, and my kitchen was ready for cooking. I lit a candle, *Autumn Harvest*, and moved on.

Below is my recipe for Shepherd's Pie. You may substitute beef or lamb if your HOA is more functional than mine.

Shepherd's Pie

For the Potato Topping:

1 1/2 pounds russet potatoes

1/4 cup half-and-half

2 tablespoons butter

3/4 teaspoon salt

1/4 teaspoon freshly ground black pepper

For the Meat Filling:

2 pounds ground Lobo

1/4 cup olive oil

1 cup chopped onion

2 carrots, peeled and diced small

2 cloves garlic, minced

1 teaspoon salt

1/2 teaspoon ground black pepper

2 tablespoons all-purpose flour

2 teaspoons tomato paste

1 cup chicken broth

1 teaspoon Worcestershire sauce

2 teaspoons freshly chopped rosemary

1 teaspoon freshly chopped thyme

1/2 cup fresh or frozen corn kernels

1/2 cup fresh or frozen English peas

Peel the potatoes and cut into chunks. Fill a medium saucepan with water, cover and bring to a boil. Add the potatoes, return to a boil, then decrease the heat to simmer, and cook until tender,

10 to 15 minutes. Place the half-and-half and butter into a microwave-safe dish and heat in the microwave until warmed for about 35 seconds. Drain the potatoes and then return to the saucepan. Mash the potatoes, add half and half, butter, salt, and pepper, and continue to mash until smooth.

Set your Instant Pot to saute. Coat the stainless-steel inner pot with olive oil. Once the bottom is hot, add the onion and carrots. Saute until browned, 5-6 minutes. Add the garlic and stir to combine. Sprinkle the ground Lobo with the flour and toss to coat. Add to the pot. Season with salt and pepper and cook until browned. Add the tomato paste, chicken broth, Worcestershire, rosemary, and thyme, and stir to combine.

Set the Instant Pot to pressure cook for 10 minutes. Release the steam and add the corn and peas to the mixture. Spread evenly into an 11 by 7-inch baking dish. Spread the mashed potatoes on top, smoothing with a spatula. Place the casserole on a baking sheet in the oven and bake for 25-30 minutes at 350 degrees or just until the potatoes begin to brown. Remove from the oven. Let set for 15 minutes before serving.

My shepherd's pie was a huge success. Guests complimented the texture. Several people asked for the recipe while nodding thoughtfully, as if evaluating both flavor and character. Butch and Roxy went back for seconds. Roxy said it was "surprisingly tender." Butch asked what my secret was. I didn't say. In the end, everyone loved Lobo.

A few days later, flyers appeared on mailboxes and community boards: **MISSING DOG. GERMAN SHEPHERD. ANSWERS TO LOBO.** Of course, he was never found.

The HOA sent an email expressing concern, followed by another reminding residents not to post unauthorized flyers. Someone replied all to suggest installing more cameras. Someone else replied all objecting to cameras.