

“Do you got any more of those shaving razors?” a stranger asked, poking his head into the kitchen. I’d been absorbed in my task—*Wash the dishes, dry the dishes*—like a copier pumps out hot faxes, and when he spoke, he spoke right in my face.

“Wha?” I sputtered when I collected myself.

“Shaving razors?” he asked. He was missing one of his front teeth, blond hair bristling around the mouth—no more disheveled than his other dinner companions. I must’ve looked a bit dumbfounded because he smiled—retreating back. “You know where I can get ‘em?”

“Oh—right—sorry,” I blundered, hoping I hadn’t embarrassed him—overreacting as I did. “Cynthia can find you some in the storeroom back. She’s the lady down there,” I pointed out of the kitchen, down to one of the metal tables where a lady in a bright pink tee-shirt sat, chatting with usual diners—friends of hers—over coffee. “Pink shirt. Short gray hair.”

“Thanks.” He smiled again. The teeth he had were crooked and discolored. I hoped my cringe didn’t show through my face. He was all discoloration and blotches—blue bags under his eyes, red stripes around the irises, and starry-yellow teeth: a real American dream. “Sorry for startling you,” he said, and I realized I must’ve been staring at the wrong parts of his face.

“Oh, y-you didn’t,” I bluffed. “I just didn’t—hear you.”

“No big deal. Thanks.” He nodded, the orange-knit beanie flopping at me and left, a lingering smell of unclean body, smoke, and musty cardboard trailing after him.

My comfort zone was pretty small and very well defined. Haley told me (and anyone who cared to hear), “Dolly’s a baby; if a stranger talks to her, she falls right into the fetal position.”

That brought about my career in the kitchen while Cynthia and her volunteer team socialized with the people we served, gave them blankets, hot meals, directed them to the physicians who came some nights; I stayed in the kitchen and washed and dried dishes all night every Tuesday. There were fights among the folks who came to eat there and the looks, gestures, movement of some made my easily frightened self-shiver with tenseness.

This was the cause of my flat refusal when Beth came and said Hal and she wanted me with them on the front grills. We were throwing a Labor Day party for the people, we were using paper plates and forks, and so I was out of a job if I didn't take theirs. My flat-out refusal withered into resignation because Beth could make anyone do anything with that guilt-inducing frown of hers. "I thought you wanted to serve."

"I do—I mean—I want to help—" And that settled it.

As with my absorption in the dishes, the cooking of burger patties became my safe-place where I wouldn't have to try and speak to anybody. Just like when first he'd appeared, my friend, the smiling orange beanie, startled me into awareness for the second time.

"Wha?" I asked again, very nearly burning the soft of my arm on the grill.

"You usually work in the kitchen," he said again. He held a paper plate of food, but he didn't seem to be there for a patty.

We were outside for the barbeque—just behind The Kitchen—and Hal and Beth were somewhere else—refilling lemonade or something. I realized, in time, it was my turn to speak. "Yeah, but they didn't need me there tonight." I turned back to my task, not knowing where to look.

"You come here a lot," he said.

"Yeah. Sometimes. But—in the kitchen."

He laughed, and I stared at him. "Sorry—I wasn't—it's just... It's a modern world. What're you doing—"

"I don't work in the kitchen because I'm a girl," I answered defensively. "I'm a freshman at Harvard. I'm going to be a lawyer, actually."

"You don't seem like the type." To explain, as he seemed to feel a need to, he added, "I-I mean, the way people talk about lawyers—How do you tell the difference between road kill and a lawyer?—That kind of thing."

I didn't understand what he meant, but his difficulty with words helped my utter lack of ability to speak; so I spoke. "When I graduate—if I don't go on to get my masters right away—I want to work for Mr. Schurter's firm. He's one of our benefactors here—"

"I know who he is." He grinned again. "That big airbrushed picture of him in the hall we wait in every Tuesday. But hey," he lifted up his hands, "if that's what you want."

For the record, if you ever needed to—you could go into the plastic-ware polishing business. The guy before you came wasn't nearly as good—I could eat off plates he cleaned and get two meals at once.”

Somehow, I was laughing at that. Not forced to make him feel welcome at The Kitchen but just because it was sort of funny. “That was my dad,” I said.

“Tell him not to take it too hard. Far as I know, my old man wouldn't know what to do with a dish that wasn't full of pork.”

Then I made myself say, with considerably less courage than I thought it would take, “My name's Dolly.”

“Jack,” he said. “Jack Calkson—today. Ask me again tomorrow. I think I'll be a Schurter myself.” Then, in thought, he started musing, “Jack Schuter...Jack Shuster...”

Despite the fact we called ourselves a soup kitchen, “The Kitchen” rarely served it—especially in the summer. Soup was soup, and if Cynthia stressed anything to her chiefs it was that repetition and boring food drove people away. If we didn't have people eating what we cooked, there wasn't a point in cooking it.

It turned out I had a hand with the grill, and I'd no more loyal a “customer” than Jack. Every night he'd tell me his new name—“Jack Stein,” “Jack Dutton,” “Jack Fortuna,” or his more typical “Jack Hungry,” “Jack Eat,” “Jack Feed.” And every night I'd tell him, “And my name's still Dolly.” Then I'd serve him his food—a little extra than normal, sometimes.

It wasn't very funny an exchange, but it grew ever funnier to me the longer it went on. One night he asked, when I told him my name was still Dolly, “Is that from Dolores?” I confessed it was, although I'd always hated the name, and he laughed because he thought I was joking. “Dolores, as long as you're Dolores, I should tell you Jack Cibus is especially hungry tonight.” That was the same night I started giving him secret second-helpings, but he kept calling me Dolores.

“Dolly, why don't you take a break for a few minutes and eat dinner yourself?” Chad, one of the older volunteers, asked. It wasn't as though I'd been working hard without food, because, admittedly, I mentioned a few times how little I'd eaten all day.

Despite everything, my stomach filled with nervousness just as soon as I accepted, and I lost all the appetite previously consuming it. It was really remarkable how hot and dark my face felt, gathering food, and turning to sit down with the people I'd been serving for so long—all the other regular volunteers did it all the time, but I never had. It was worse than the first day of school at lunch without a friend—which was funny because I had friends there.

“You're not eating here, are you?” Jack asked me from the drink table. Before I answered, he went on, “C'mon, Dolores, if we bite Dr. Steve” our physician volunteer “can get you a shot.” He smiled at me, adjusted his beanie over tufts of dirty hair, cleared his throat a couple times, and gestured for me to go before him. “Lady—if I may lead you to a table.”

Jack was good at making friends—not just among the people who came to The Kitchen to eat but with anyone—regulars as well as one-time helpers. He didn't mind showing his teeth or shaking his head and laughing. More than once, The Kitchen saw him settle feuds between the old man in the brown parka and the woman with green streaks in her white hair; and he, whether because he knew them better or understood them, would be last to need the police's involvement. Even paranoid me thought the staff as a whole was a bit quick to whistle for the blue coats.

Around that time, if not before, my normal Tuesdays turned to Tuesdays and Thursdays—then Saturday and Sunday brunches—and by mid-July, I was there five times a week. My friend of indefinite identity took to staying later and helping us clean. One warm night, while I was making him repeat a card trick—I was determined to figure out how he did it—he told me Cynthia was giving him a job in The Kitchen's kitchen.

“You're not,” I declared.

“Yes, I am. She gave me a job. I start tomorrow. Your Mr. Schurter will be paying me to wash my own dishes.”

“Well, since you're going to be my coworker and legally employed, my name is Dolores Maria Parker. That's the name on my birth certificate, that's the name my parents gave me, and that's the name I didn't just make-up.” I held out my dark brown hand for his (unusually) washed, light pink one—my cheap manicure for his dirt-under-

the-nails—my cucumber lotioned palms for his stiff calluses; we shook hands like friends. “Now—what’s yours?”

He laughed, but when he saw I meant it, he stifled it. “I’ve told you my name a thousand times.”

“And every time you change it. Let’s pretend this is strictly professional. Go ahead.”

He rolled his eyes. “I see—I see—Harvard’s turning a pencil sharpener.” Then, in a forged, straight, sharp voice, “I was born October 21<sup>st</sup>, 1990. My mother’s name is Janice. I have two brothers: Frank and Benjamin. I live at 10082 Hoghton Drive which I share with about a hundred-fifty very mean, stray cats. And my name,” he taunted, rising from his seat—his daily provisions from Cynthia in his hands—“I will tell you tomorrow, Dolores Maria Parker.”

That “tomorrow” he mentioned came, but he didn’t. And the day after—that Tuesday—some perfect number of weeks since we met, I read this in the paper:

“Jonathon Douglas, 22, found dead. Shot numerous times in chest. Suspect drug-violence.”

I never did learn that card trick.