

Strangers in Need

The boy, Denny, sat in a window booth of the diner. He stared out at the snow drifts along High Street, brooding about the blizzard that had closed the schools and most of the businesses in Kernsburg that morning. The street was empty except for a group of kids pulling sleds on their way to Bishop's Hill.

When he'd woken up that morning and saw the snow, Denny imagined a day of hunting grouse along the railroad tracks and watching girls ice skate on Findley Pond. His heart sank when his father walked into his bedroom and ordered him to drive into town and open the diner. When Denny had pointed out that there was two feet of snow in the driveway, his father lost his temper and all but kicked him out the door.

He reclined in the booth and thumbed through an issue of *Field & Stream* until customers started trickling in for lunch. He tied an apron around his waist and began taking orders, pouring coffee, and making small talk with the customers, most of whom were old farmers. Dutch Abhau was among them. He bragged that the snow hadn't surprised him one bit. He'd lived in Kernsburg all his life--he didn't need some radio station way off in Pittsburgh to predict the weather. "Snow here has a smell," Dutch said, "kind of like rain, but less salty. Smells like fresh blood."

"Dutch!" Helen Kohler gasped. She'd stopped by to order a piece of toast and a cup of coffee before opening the Dress Boutique. "Don't talk that way. It's morbid."

"Ah, go stitch a pair of underpants," Dutch replied. He and the other farmers laughed.

Helen frowned as she paid her bill. "Denny Flick," she said, "you seem to have forgotten the way to the barber shop."

"Sorry, Mrs. Kohler," Denny said. "I've been busy lately."

"A gentleman is never too busy to look his best."

Denny nodded. "Yes, Mrs. Kohler. I'll go see Mr. Dimitrios first thing tomorrow after school."

"Good boy. You have a nice day, now."

"You, too," Denny said.

After all the customers left he loaded the dirty dishes into a bus pan. He was clearing the last table when two strangers walked in and sat at the counter. They were tall men, dressed in beige overcoats and dark, double-breasted suits. One man looked much older than the other one. They each needed a shave. Denny stowed the bus pan behind the counter and laid clean place settings in front of the men.

"Do you gentlemen need menus?" he asked.

"Why?" the older man replied, "you serving French cuisine or something?" He tossed his hat on the counter and shook off his overcoat.

Denny chuckled. "No, sir. I guess not."

The man grunted. "Roast beef sandwich. Extra gravy. Home fries on the side. How fresh is the coffee?"

"I'll make a new pot," Denny said. He turned to the younger man. "And you, sir? Coffee to start?"

"No thanks," the man replied. "I'll get the fits if I drink another drop of joe." He made a sour face and blew his nose into a paper napkin. "Give me a big glass of tomato juice. Six scrambled eggs, fried ham, sliced onion--raw--and toast with butter."

"Yes, sir," Denny said. "Coming right up."

Denny went away to brew the coffee and heat up a can of gravy. When the coffee was done, he took a cup of it to the older man and filled a pint Mason jar with tomato juice for his companion.

"You didn't tell me we'd be crossing the god-damn Alps," the younger man was saying. He'd made a small pile of wadded-up napkins on the counter. "I'm catching the grippe, thanks to you."

The older man scowled and lit a cigarette. "Shut up, already. You squawk worse than my kids."

The way they talked amused Denny. It reminded him of the movies. He moved a few steps away from them and began filling the sink with hot water.

"And you better put me in a five-star hotel after this crazy adventure," the younger man continued. "Ninety lousy miles in seven hours. I could be home in bed with a girl and a nice bottle of whiskey."

"I swear to Christ, Marty," the older man said. "You gotta stop whining, you're on my last nerve. Take five and go wash up. You stink like a pig's rear end."

"I do?" the man named Marty said and sniffed his underarms. He stood up and glanced around the diner. "Hey, Junior--is there running water in this dump?"

"Yes, sir," Denny replied, and pointed at the narrow doorway that led to the rest rooms. "Fresh towels, too."

"Golly, fresh towels, too?" Marty said. He slapped the older man on the back and said, "Don't get your hopes up for this kid, Cleve. I bet adding two plus two would give him a brain cramp." He walked to the rest room and closed the door behind him.

Cleve studied Denny as the boy loaded dirty dishes from the bus pan into the sink. "What's your story, son? Playing hooky?"

"No, sir," Denny replied. "School's closed. On account of the snow."

Cleve grunted. "How long you lived in this charming *banlieu*?"

"Sir?"

"The town here. How long have you lived in it?"

"Oh, Kernsburg. All my life, sir."

"Enough with the 'sir,' huh? Save it for the Rotarians. My name's Cleve." He nodded over his shoulder. "My buddy in there is Marty. We're regular working guys, just like you."

Denny smiled and dunked a soapy glass into the clean rinse water. "Cleve and Marty. Got it."

"Good," Cleve said. "What's your name, son?"

"Denny. Or Dennis. Either one."

"Pleased to know you, Denny." He stamped his cigarette butt in the ashtray and stirred a teaspoon of sugar into his coffee. "You must know every soul in town, running this kind of joint."

"Just about."

"How about the Coloreds?"

"Coloreds?"

"Colored people. Negroes. Do you know them, too?"

"Well, there aren't any Colored people in Kernsburg."

"Why not? Is this a hideout for the Klan or something?"

"No. People aren't bigoted or anything. There just aren't any. There are some Greeks."

"Is that so? Hell, son--you folks might have the whole race problem figured out. I'll cable the Grand Wizard and tell him to start handing out bus tickets."

Denny stared at Cleve, his mouth slightly open.

"Son, have you ever seen a Negro, trapped up here in Appalachia all your life? Do you even know what one looks like?"

"Yes."

"Where, at the Bijou? In some old Al Jolson picture? You know Al Jolson is a white man, don't you, son?"

"Yes."

"Have you seen any passing through lately? Negroes?"

Denny wanted to tell him the truth, but he knew the truth would only prove the man's point about Kernsburg, though he wasn't quite sure what that point was. "Sure," he lied, "Just yesterday. He ate supper here at the counter."

Cleve stopped stirring his coffee. "Where was he headed?"

Denny paused. "Harrisburg?"

"Did you catch his name?"

Denny hesitated, then said, "Jim, I think."

"Jim. You sure it wasn't Earl?"

"Yes."

"How do you know his name was Jim? Did he tell you, or was he with somebody who called him that?"

"Sorry," Denny said, "I really can't remember."

"So there was nobody with him then?"

"No."

Marty returned from the rest room and stood next to Cleve. "What'd I miss?"

Denny turned away and fidgeted with the clean silverware, trying to think of how to change the subject. He glanced at the two men in the etched Coca-Cola mirror that hung on the wall behind the counter. The men were staring at each other. Finally Cleve shook his head as Marty smirked and shrugged his shoulders.

"Did he have a last name?" Cleve said to Denny.

Denny turned and faced the men. "Are you police or something?"

"Yeah," Marty said, "we're G-men. Sent here by Hoover himself."

Deep furrows formed above Denny's eyebrows.

Marty laughed. "That's a joke, Junior."

"Oh," Denny said, and smiled.

"Now come on, son," Cleve said. "Did this Negro tell you his last name?"

"I don't remember," Denny said.

"What Negro?" Marty said to Cleve.

Cleve held up his palm to silence Marty. "Could his name be Stokes?" he asked Denny.

"He didn't say," Denny said, averting his eyes from Cleve's. He felt sweat forming on his upper lip. "All he said was Jim." He remembered the gravy on the stove and ran to the kitchen. It had boiled down to a thick brown sludge. He stirred in some water and turned down the flame. "Sorry," he said through the pick-up window, smiling. "Almost burned your lunch."

"Don't sweat it," Cleve said.

Marty had returned to his stool and was adding more soiled napkins to his collection. Between snorts he dumped spoonfuls of salt and pepper to his tomato juice. "Junior boy," he said, "you got some horseradish and vodka in this dump? I could get a nice Bloody Mary going here."

"Sorry," Denny replied. "We don't sell liquor in Kernsburg."

Marty scoffed. "Surprise."

Denny went back to the stove and prepared their food. He regretted the lie he'd told and hoped the episode had passed. When he carried

their plates through the swinging doors, Cleve pointed his spoon at him and said, "Here's another quiz for you, son. You know a man named Larry Sharbaugh? Works on the railroad, a conductor. We think he might know our friend Mr. Stokes. Stokes is a Red Cap on Mr. Sharbaugh's train."

Denny noticed that the blinds had been pulled down over the windows above the booths and the sign on the door had been flipped from Open to Closed.

"We wanted some privacy," Marty said. "I hope that's okay, Junior."

"Well, my dad is very strict about the business. People will think we're closed. He's been open every day since May fifth, 1919, rain or shine. Excepting Christmas and Easter, of course."

"Excepting," Marty chuckled. "Heaven forbid."

"He won't mind," Cleve said, "not on a slow day like this." He removed a fifty-dollar bill from his wallet and laid it on the counter. "You slip that in the till and he'll never know the difference."

Denny stared at the fifty. He'd only seen a few of them in his whole life. "But we won't make half that today." He set the plates on the counter, not realizing that he'd put them in the wrong places.

"So keep half for yourself," Cleve said. "It's a tip."

"This ain't my order," Marty said, switching the plates. "I hope you cook better than you waitress, Junior."

"It's real nice of you," Denny said to Cleve, "but my father, he's real strict." He stepped toward the gap in the counter. "I'll just flip the sign back. I doubt if anybody--"

Cleve slammed his palm on the money and pushed it toward Denny. "Leave the door, son, take the fifty, huh? Donate it to the Wounded Veterans if you're so goddamn holy."

"Yes, sir," Denny said. He felt a tingling in the soles of his feet as he picked up the fifty and slid it into his pocket.

"Now what about this Larry Sharbaugh? Do you know him?"

"Um, sorry," Denny said. "I told you. I don't know any Negroes."

Marty leaned back on his stool and laughed. "Sharbaugh the Negro! Junior, you're too good to be true." He opened a clean napkin, tucked it into his shirt collar, and doused his eggs with ketchup.

Cleve cut into his sandwich with the edge of a fork. "Sorry, son. I've got you all spun around in circles. This Sharbaugh fellow's not Colored. He's White. White as a preacher's collar. Like I said, he's a conductor on the railroad."

"Well," Denny said, "there are lots of Sharbaughs around. They come down from the Flicks. I'm a Flick. The Flicks and Sharbaughs founded Kernsburg in 1817."

Marty chuckled. "Christ, Junior. The man isn't asking for his family tree. Simple question: do you know some yokel named Larry Sharbaugh who punches tickets on the railroad?"

"No, sir," Denny replied.

Cleve swallowed hard and lowered his eyes at Denny. "What did I tell you about that 'sir' stuff? What do we look like, church deacons? I'm Cleve, and this is Marty."

"Sorry, Cleve."

"We're all pals here, right?" Cleve continued. "I mean, isn't that what small towns are all about? Being friendly, helping out a stranger in need?"

"Sure," Denny said, then added, "Cleve."

"But you're not being friendly," Cleve said. "Not at all. You don't want to help us find these men we're looking for. You're playing tiger-around-the-tree with us here."

Denny glanced again at the sign on the door. "I don't know him," he stammered. "That's the honest truth, Mr. Cleve."

Cleve jabbed his fork at the boy. "You're lying, son. You lied about this Negro, 'Jim,' and now you're lying again. Th Negro's name is Earl Stokes, and he was in this diner last night. You said it yourself. Now, a Negro wouldn't dare come in a cracker box like this on his own. Who was he with?"

"I'm sorry," Denny said. "I--. There wasn't any Negro. I made that up. I'm sorry. Cleve."

"Made it up?" Marty said through a mouthful of eggs. "Who would make up such a stupid thing?"

"Because," Denny said. "I don't know."

Marty turned to Cleve. "Didn't I warn you the kid was thick?"

"But I'm not lying now," Denny said. "I swear it."

"It's downright unfriendly," Cleve said, frowning. "Son, what if I was to tell you these men were thieves, that they stole from people. What do you say to that?"

"I'd say that's bad?"

Cleve nodded his head. "Marty, tell Denny what becomes of bad men who steal."

Marty stopped chewing. "Hold it a second, Cleve," he said, chuckling. "This kid's just a screwball. Let's eat up and get back on the road."

"We don't have all goddamn day to drive around," Cleve said. "The weather's cost us enough time already."

Marty's eyes narrowed as they darted between Cleve and the boy. "Go in the kitchen, Junior. Me and Cleve need to talk about something."

"Stay where you are," Cleve said. He stood up and reached behind his back. When his hand reappeared, it held a snub-nosed revolver. He put his thumb on the hammer and pulled it back. Denny flinched and raised his hands when it clicked into place.

"I'll open the register," Denny said. "Take all the money!"

"Whoa," Marty said, grabbing Cleve's arm. "Cool it a second, Cleve. This wasn't the plan. The kid's just screwy, okay? Obviously he don't know Sharbaugh or the jig."

"He does," Cleve growled. "Everybody knows everybody in these goddamn places." He pulled his arm free from Marty's grip and aimed the gun at Denny's chest. "Talk, you stupid bumpkin. Where is Sharbaugh hiding Stokes?"

"I don't know," Denny said, tears welling in his eyes.

"Cleve--" Marty said again.

Cleve pointed the gun at Marty. "Shut up. I've told you all goddamn night to shut up, now shut up. Will you shut up?"

"Okay," Marty said. "Okay, Cleve. Take it easy."

"Out with it," Cleve said to Denny. "Larry Sharbaugh--where does he live?"

"I don't know," Denny whimpered. "Honest to God. The only Sharbaugh I know is Hal Sharbaugh. He runs the Dairy Dale."

"What the hell is a 'Dairy Dale'?" Cleve said.

"Cleve," Marty said, "take it easy. Don't do anything nuts here."

Denny said, "The ice cream parlor, around the corner on Cambria Street. He's the only Sharbaugh I know."

"Where does he live?" Cleve said.

"I don't know. Please don't hurt me, mister. I don't know any Larry Sharbaugh, I swear to God I don't. I don't know anything."

Cleve glared at him. "You're a liar," he said, and squeezed the trigger.

The bullet smashed into Denny's shoulder. A cloud of blood sprayed against the mirror as he stumbled backward. He leaned into the wall and tried to steady himself against it as his knees collapsed. Looking up, he saw Cleve appear in the gap between the two sections of the counter.

Marty was in the aisle behind the stools, clutching his head. "Son of a bitch, Cleve!" he shouted. "Didn't I tell you this would turn into a goddamn holy mess?"

"Don't get moralistic," Cleve said. "You've done worse."

"Never anything this crazy," Marty said. "God almighty, Cleve, we don't know a soul in this place."

"These bumpkins," Cleve said. "Always playing it so goddamn close to the vest." He leaned down and grabbed Denny by the neck of his apron. "I could tell you the guy won a million dollars, you'd stay just as tight, wouldn't you? Wouldn't you? What the hell's the matter with you people, huh? What do you care about other people's goddamn business?"

"He's just a dumb kid, Cleve," Marty pleaded. "He don't even understand what you're talking about."

Cleve dropped the boy onto the floor. "You got one last chance, stupid. Where does this Larry Sharbaugh live?"

Denny shook his head and began to weep.

"Suits me," Cleve said. He stepped back, aimed at the boy's heart, and fired. He turned to Marty. "Do something with him."

"This had nothing to do with him," Marty said.

"Shut up and do what you're told."

"Not a goddamn thing!"

Cleve shoved Marty against the counter. "I'm supposed to let the little bastard go blabbing and have every State Trooper in a hundred miles on us, is that it?"

"This wasn't the plan, Cleve. Come in, grab a bite, ask a few questions. That was the plan."

Cleve wiped the revolver with a napkin and tucked it into his belt. He draped his coat over his arm and walked to the door. "Marty, this is the business you're in. You chose it. You've made plenty of money in it. You used to be good at it. But it doesn't seem to sit right with you any more."

Marty stared at the dead boy lying on the floor. "No, Cleve," he said. "It don't. Not at all."

"Then I suggest you find yourself another line of work when you get home," Cleve said. "Until then, do something with the kid. I'll be in the car." He turned, put on his overcoat, and walked out of the diner.

Marty lifted the boy's feet and dragged him into the kitchen. He covered the body with a tablecloth and stood there for a long moment watching it, half expecting the boy to sit up and rub the sleep from his eyes after awakening from a short but terrible dream.

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