

"Open Hands"

Sirrah's wife was Bev--she was the head cook. She was fifty-ish and looked like everyone's favorite aunt. She made apple pies out of Ritz crackers and smelled like a home perm.

"Open Hands" wasn't a busy place and on my first day I washed three coffee cups, one plate and a rusty, scorched pie tin.

And so I spent my summer days working and the evenings chatting with Sirrah and Bev about their dog that was dying of rabies. We would laugh until our stomachs were sore as Dodger tried again and again to eat his dry dog food, only to throw up a mass of food, foam and blood. "Oh, Dodger," Bev would chortle as she went back into the restaurant to take another burning Ritz cracker pie out of the oven for no one to eat.

One time Bev and Sirrah and I took the afternoon off. Bev decided to show me a new trick Dodger had learned. "Watch this," she said and clapped her hands twice. "Dodger, lunch time!"

Instantly the beast leaped towards Sirrah, leaving a trail of muck and slime in his wake.

"Dodger is going to be our new guard dog," Bev said proudly. We both clapped as we watched the poor, tortured animal playfully trying to sink its foamy fangs into Sirrah's neck as the two wrestled on the grass together.

Late in August the "Open Hands" became a hot spot. Bev made me her assistant cook and we'd dump grade D hamburger into the skillets until our arms were covered with grease. We baked enough Ritz cracker pies to fill a warehouse. It became too much for me and I started taking long breaks at the picnic table behind the restaurant. Sometimes Sirrah sat with me and we would both giggle as his neck bent in one of his customary convulsions, caused by his nervous disorder.

One Friday afternoon Bev came out and looked at the two of us. She held a gristly, raw deer steak in one hand and a tub of lard in the other. She looked so tired. And old. I wondered what she looked like when she was younger. She sighed and shook the steak out over the grass then went back to work.

I stared up at the gray sky and wondered what school would be like in the Fall. I looked to Sirrah, whose hands were now twisting into convulsions from his seizure. It normally would have brought me to tears of

laughter but I found that I could only smile politely and look up at the sky and continue to wonder. I felt distracted. I excused myself from Sirrah who was bent over the table now and banging his head repeatedly. I left the restaurant on a bogus errand to get some kerosene and rubbing alcohol for the dinner shift.

I fell in love with one of the waitresses. Bobbi was in her mid-forties and coughed all the time. She taught me how to smoke and got me addicted to Bev's stale coffee. I think she would have had sex with me, but I didn't know what sex was then. Bobbi had a nice figure and large breasts. Her hair was black but she always had gray roots. She wore a lot of make-up. She used to tell everyone she couldn't have children. One time we took a smoke break together and she said, "Well, better get back to it, although I don't know why I'm hurrying. My clock isn't ticking anymore." Sometimes I wonder whatever happened to her, but I'm not sure why.

Rain came. Then it left again. I found myself growing bored and not sure if I cared who I was, where I was going, or even who would collapse first between Sirrah and Dodger. Bev tried to cheer me up by making me a pie, charring the edges the way I liked. Sirrah gave me a drink of his home-made moonshine, which he called

"The Wrath of God". Twitching, I felt I had gained insight into the cause, or at least the nature, of Sirrah's nervous disorder. I knew I was going to quit the "Open Hands" soon.

I gave my notice after the lunch shift on a Monday. For some reason I was anxious about telling Bev and Sirrah. I dipped the last of the dishes into the brown water of the pre-rinse basin, taking my time. My hands were shaking as I scrubbed the food and grease off of them with a cube of lye. Bev was cutting the heads off of birds for the dinner special that night and Sirrah was chuckling, reading in the paper about a little girl who had been locked in a refrigerator until she passed out. I drank a glass of Bev's spoonable, home-made milk and told the two of them it would be my last week. They understood.

On the way home that night I rode my red ten-speed bicycle into a ditch and ended up breaking both of my arms. The surgery they had to perform left me with two scars on the insides of my forearms. The scars run from my wrists to my elbows. To this day everyone is convinced that I tried to commit suicide. I've never denied it.