

The Divine Diner

by

Janet Hise

The year was 1947. I was nineteen years old, and the landscape of my life had suddenly narrowed with the death of my mother. Mom was the most honest person I'd ever known. "I promise you this, Gretchen," she would say. "I will always tell you the truth." And she did. Even when she was dying, and the truth became torture, she did not lie.

I found salvation in my work at The Divine Diner. I would have given my heart to have my mother back, but in the stillness and solitude of dish washing and baking, I came to understand her promise of truth and find peace.

Some days were worse than others. My mother lived within the murmuring voices in my mind, but she also lived in the music played on the radio, in the quilt covering my bed, and in the smell of dish soap at the diner. It was shocking to fill the sink with suds and feel her presence so strongly.

On the day that Mr. Rubenstein walked into The Divine Diner, I had just squeezed a generous amount of dish soap into the sink and let the water rise, the smell of it filling the howling space in my head. I felt dizzy for a moment and sick to my stomach as thoughts of her churned in my head.

Losing myself in the hidden world of my own mind made me miss the fact that Patti was talking to me. Patti was the waitress. She was petite, like me, but about ten years older and had cocoa colored hair—always pulled into a tight bun—and black, cat-like eyeglasses that rode down to the end of her nose.

"Hey...Gretchen. You sick or something?"

I pulled my hands from the suds, dried them on my apron and dismissed her with a wave.

“I’m all right.”

“Do you see that man out there?” My mind had cleared enough to follow her finger to a nice-looking, older gentleman in a dark suit. A tweed bowler hat lay on the bar beside him.

“What about him?”

“Will you take him this chicken dinner?”

“Why can’t you?” I asked, still wiping the smell of the dish soap from my hands.

“I’m just...busy.”

There was something she wasn’t telling me. She could have easily walked it over to him. I turned my palms up in puzzlement and reluctantly took the plate while she headed into the depths of the kitchen.

“Chicken dinner,” I said as I placed the plate in front of the man.

“Thank you,” he said, moving his hat aside and assembling his silverware. I turned to leave, but he stopped me with a question. “Say?”

“Something else I can bring you?”

“Want to see something you’ll never forget?”

“I don’t think so.” My face grew warm. I understood why Patti didn’t want to serve this louse. I disappeared before he could prod further.

“He’s all yours, Patti,” I called as I reentered the kitchen. I had too much to do today to bother with him.

My specialty at The Divine Diner was making fortune cookies. The fortune cookies were a unique draw to the diner, the only place I’d ever known that gave out the little treats at the end of each meal.

Each batch of batter I whipped up lifted my thoughts away from the restaurant and helped ease the pain. Nobody, not one single person, disturbed my concentration as I pressed the tiny papers inside the flat wafers and folded each one once, then again on the edge of the bowl. The air smelled of flour and butter as I worked, removing the overpowering scent of the dish soap.

I wrote the fortunes too, plucking the words out of thin air and typing them so fast that the typewriter dinged for a carriage return every few seconds. Under the spell of writing fortunes and being lost in thought while making cookies, it was as though I made contact with something beyond this world, something that walked the rim of my consciousness. I believed it was my mother's way of passing her promise of truth to the rest of the world.

Those who received their fortunes at the end of their meals would often comment on how eerily accurate the slips of paper were. Some were vague: "Good news is headed your way!" or "You will receive advice from a stranger." But some were more specific: "Watch the kites on Sunday." This was delivered to a man who was indeed debating whether or not to go kite-flying with his kids on Sunday.

The fortune cookies gave The Divine Diner its claim to fame and drew people in from places like Carlsbad and Socorro, even as far away as Albuquerque and Lubbock. How strange and wonderful to feel like I belonged to a place. I had a purpose here.

I had finished up my dishes and was preparing to start a batch of cookies when Patti nearly crashed into me. "Why do you write those things for the fortune cookies?" she asked.

"What?"

"The man out there."

"The louse?"

"Yes, him. His name is Rubenstein. His fortune says, 'Beware the men in black.'"

I had typed that one out several times, along with others that left me wondering how these ideas pinged into my brain. “Your lucky number is 51.” “Believe the first story.” “Gray is the new green.”

“What does it mean?”

In a blast of clarity, I simply said, “It’s a promise of truth.” Patti looked puzzled. I didn’t fully understand it myself.

“Do you know what else he said?” she asked, her glasses sliding to the tip of her nose. “He said, ‘You know the stories about little green men? Well, they’re not green. They’re gray.’”

A chill ran down my spine. My mother’s presence moved over me like a song. The truth was more important now than ever—to the diner, to me, and to the whole town of Roswell.