

# Coffee, Snacks, Worms

*What would you do if you were  
daydreaming? One young woman  
arms the tables on a  
would-be thief.*

Short Story by

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**S**tephanie took a step backwards, then stopped. She looked behind her and gasped in terror. The cliff edge crumbled beneath her feet, and far below her the sea crashed against the jagged, pointed rocks in an insane fury.

"No!" she cried.

But the terrible form of her pursuer advanced remorselessly. His hands reached out for her throat... She could feel his hot breath burning her cheeks... There was no escape...

"Kate, you dodo! It's your stop. You're home!"

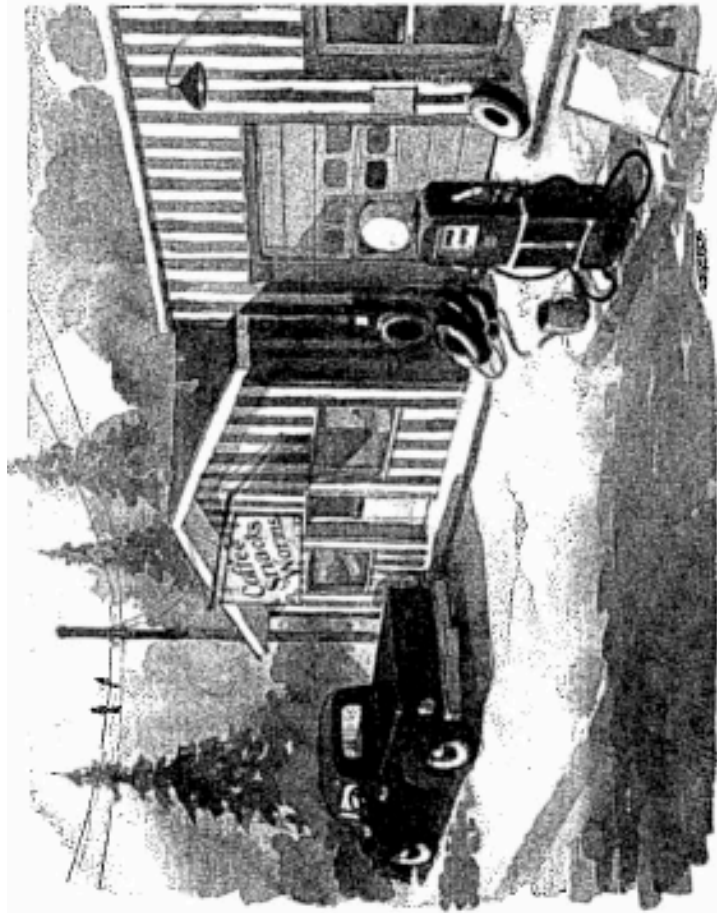
Kate came back to reality with a jolt and grabbed for her books. Flushing, she clambered over her seatmate and struggled along the aisle toward the bus door.

"Bye, Kate!"

"See you tomorrow, Kate!"

The cries followed her.

"Call me with the answers when you've finished the math homework!" Kate gave Jeff Hodges a withering glance. The top math student in the class, he never missed an opportunity to embarrass Kate or put her down. Only that day he had made a fool of her by deliberately drawing the teacher's attention to her when he knew she wasn't listening.



"Daydreaming again, Kate?" Mrs. Richards had asked impatiently.

Daydreaming! She hadn't been daydreaming. She'd been plotting out a fabulous story. For some reason that seemed to annoy Jeff Hodges intensely.

Without bothering to answer him she fought her way through the bus and stepped off onto the road.

She stopped for a moment and looked at the buildings in front of her. Home. A crummy little garage and snack bar, sitting all alone like an unwelcome wart on the side of a dusty Ontario highway. Painted in broad, garish, vertical orange and white stripes. As if it didn't stick out enough already. A stack of useless-looking tires leaned against a drooping air hose that had stopped working months ago. A peeling, creaking sign in front of the snack bar read:

COFFEE

SNACKS

WORMS

Coffee, snacks, worms! That was her whole life? Her whole life had *been* coffee, snacks, worms. Her whole life was *going to be* coffee, snacks, worms. It was the most boring life in the whole world. This was the most boring place in the whole world. Nothing ever happened here. She hated it. With every fibre of her whole being, she hated every single orange and white stripe!

Heaving a sigh of anger and frustration, Kate slouched around the horrible building and slammed through the back door into her family's living quarters.

"Kate, I have to take Jimmy to the dentist and Jesse hasn't shown up." Her mother was waiting for her with an even more worried expression than usual on her face. "Could you take care of the snack bar for an hour or so by yourself? I hate to leave you alone. Your dad's not here, but he's shut the gas station down so you don't have to worry about that. Can you manage? It shouldn't be for long... Do you mind...?"

What difference did it make if she did. There was no one else. She'd have to take over.

"Sure, Mom," she muttered. Throwing her books down on the couch, she went on through into the snack bar.

There were only two customers there, both almost finished. Kate took their money, shrugged when neither one left a tip, and set to wiping up the tables after them. A trucker came in and asked for coffee. She gave it to him, hardly noticing what she was doing. A scruffy kid came in and asked for worms. Not bothering to hide the disgust on her face she went over to the worm refrigerator and took out a styrofoam tub containing dirt and fifteen guaranteed-fat worms. He and the trucker both left. She was alone again. Absentmindedly, she took up the dishcloth and began wiping the counter...

*Stephanie pressed herself against the wall, straining against the ropes that tied her fast. The tunnel was pitch dark, but already she could feel the vibrations of the approaching train, hear its lonesome, wailing whistle. But, strain as she might, she knew that it was hopeless. There wasn't enough clearance between the wall and the train for a living, breathing body! Frantically, she twisted her hands, feeling the coarse rope cut into her flesh. She reached down to her shoulder and grabbed the rope that bound her there between her teeth. She ground her jaws together desperately...*

"I've got a knife! Give me all the money in the cash register!"

Kate hadn't even heard the door open. She looked up incredulously. A thin, sick-looking boy was leaning on the counter, staring at her. A knife? He had a knife? It suddenly occurred to her that Stephanie had never been

threatened with a knife. The time might come when she would be, and Kate didn't know anything about knives.

"What kind of a knife?" she asked.

"What do you mean, 'What kind of a knife?'" the boy echoed. "A big knife! With a very long, sharp blade! And I'm going to cut you with it if you don't give me all the money in that cash register right now!"

With a shock, Kate realized that he meant it. Then she took a closer look at him.

He doesn't look any older than I am, she thought. And he looks scared silly. I'll bet he doesn't have a knife. No way does he have a knife.

"Why?" she asked.

"Why what? Look—are you going to get that money, or am I going to have to cut you?" He still didn't make any move towards any knife.

"Why do you want the money?"

"Why?" he echoed again. "Because I'm starving, that's why. I haven't eaten in two days."

"Well, that's not very smart," Kate said, throwing the dishcloth back into the sink. The boy's mouth dropped open and he stared at her. "What I mean is... If you're really starving and you steal money from here that's not going to help you much. Like, you're hardly going to steal the money here, then order a sandwich or something and pay me for it, are you?"

The boy didn't seem able to answer.

"I mean. If you steal the money here, you're going to have to light out fast, right?" Then I'll call the police. Then, as far as I can see it, they'll either catch up with you and drag you into the police station—and you can be sure they won't feed you there—or if you do get away you'll have to hitchhike or something and get as far away from here as you can, as fast as you can. Either way, you're not going to get anything to eat, and you're still going to be hungry." As she spoke, Kate turned to the back counter and began slapping margarine onto slices of bread.

"What... What are you doing?"

"Making you a sandwich, turkey. You said you were starving, didn't you?" She tossed the sandwich onto a plate and pushed it over to him.

The boy stared at her.

"Go ahead. Eat it. It's not made of worms or anything." Kate stared back at him belligerently. "It's ham. Worms are for fish. Ham is for people."

The boy hesitated for a moment. He was standing, poised, as if ready for flight or attack but even he didn't know which. Then, as if of its own accord, his hand reached for the sandwich. Within seconds he was wolfing it down desperately.

"You weren't kidding about being hungry, were you?" Kate asked. She started to make another sandwich. Cheese this time. She set this in front of him, then filled up a mug with milk.

The boy didn't say a word, just sat down and gulped the food so fast he didn't seem to be chewing at all. Kate cut off a large slice of apple pie and slid that in front of him as well.

When he finished, the boy pushed himself back from the counter and looked up at Kate with slightly glazed eyes.

"You work here all the time?" he asked.

"My parents own the place," she answered shortly.

"They let you give away food like this?"

"No."

Times were even harder than usual lately, and Kate knew that her mother had every bit of food counted and measured. She'd answer for this.

"Who'll pay, then?" the boy asked.

"I will." She gathered up his dishes and almost threw them in the sink.

"But... How...?"

"It's okay. I've got money. I work Saturdays at the mall."

The boy stared at her in silence. Kate was beginning to feel uncomfortable.

"Have you ever done anything like this before?" she asked finally, gesturing towards the cash register. "I mean, you know, tried to hold up a place?"

"No." He sounded sheepish.

"Just as well. You're not very good at it."

"I guess not."

There was another awkward silence.

"What were you planning on doing? After you got the food?" Kate concentrated hard on scrubbing the already clean glass and plates.

"Hitching a ride west. I'm gonna try and find a job out there."

"I don't think you will," Kate said. "My brother Jesse has a friend went out a few months ago—he couldn't get a job anyhow and had to hitch his way back. He got home a week ago, tired, broke, and sick as a dog."

"Well," the boy protested angrily. "What else is there? What am I supposed to do?"

Kate abandoned the dishes. "You know anything about boats?" she asked.

"Boats! I should think so. Been brought up around the stinkin' things all my life. Don't know nothin' but boats!"

"And motors?"

"Sure. If you know boats, you know motors."

"Seems to me," Kate went on, "that a person who doesn't know anything but boats shouldn't be heading out west to the Prairies, of all places."

The boy started to answer, but she interrupted him. "Old Jed, up in town, he's starting to get his boats all ready for the tourist season and he was in here just the other day, saying he needs someone to help him. His place is right on Main Street, just by the river. There's a big sign there: 'Jed's Boats for Hire.' You couldn't miss it." She picked up the dishcloth out of the sink and started to wipe the counter again with it furiously. "We need worms, too. The guy who supplies us left town last week. You know how to pick worms?"

"Sure. Who doesn't?"

Who doesn't, indeed, Kate thought, her nose wrinkling automatically.

"Anyway," she went on, "there's work around here if you want it, I guess." She wiped her way down to the other end of the counter, her back to him.

"What about...About what I said when I came in..."

"Oh, that." Kate turned to face him. "Forget it. I didn't believe you anyway."

"I *could* work then. At least until I got enough to pay you back..."

Kate shrugged again. "Seems to me you might just as well," she said.

"Yeah. I guess I might."

He pulled himself off the stool and headed for the door, then stopped to stare back at her for a moment. There was a strange, unreadable look on his face, but all he said was, "Thanks." At the entrance he paused, took something out of his pocket, and threw it in the trash barrel.

Kate took a step backwards and felt for a chair. Her legs suddenly felt as if they were made of melting lead. She sank onto the chair as the door slammed shut. She'd only had a glimpse of the object as the boy had tossed it into the garbage, but that was enough.

He *had* had a knife!

For a moment she felt sick at the thought of what could have happened, then like an old familiar car clicking slowly into gear, her mind began working again...

*Stephanie looked up, startled, as the snack bar door burst open. There, in front of her, stood a dishevelled, disreputable, totally terrifying figure. He swayed slightly, as if weak from disease or hunger, as he walked menacingly towards her, but she only had eyes for the gleaming, evil-looking, long-bladed knife that he carried in his right hand. It was pointing straight at her heart...*