

## Safe is Good

by

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They gave me a fork. I do not use forks. Or knives, or scissors, or tweezers, or screwdrivers, or ice picks. I do not touch sharp things, not even the fresh-cut edge of the SpaghettiOs' lid after I slice it free from the can. Electric can openers hurt my ears, so I use a hand one. Then I have to wedge the lid free with the little clip on the side of the can opener. Sometimes, if it is a good day and I'm hungry, I carefully lick the orange glop from the inside of the lid. But only the spot in the middle. I do not like sharp objects.

I do not have to make my own food here. They make everything for me. This place is not as nice as Kate and Buddy's where I got to stay up late on Friday nights and have popcorn in the living room. Kate and Buddy are my foster mom and dad. They like me, but I can't live with them anymore. I'm too old. I miss them. It's different here. It's too busy. People are going every which way, and they don't see me sitting here with a fork. I am hungry, but I cannot eat. Shelley is not here. I do not know where she is. Shelley is nice. She wears a skirt with tennis shoes and ties her yellow hair back in two pony tails. I look down at my plate. The scent of creamy potatoes and red meat make me poke my nose closer. I lick the top of the potatoes.

"Here now," a voice scolds me. "Eat with your fork." It is the short, fat girl with the squinty face. I do not like her. I tell her I have to have a spoon because I don't use forks, but she doesn't understand my words. I say them again. She smiles and tells me the meat is ham and it is good. I know it is good. It smells good and I am hungry, but I *do not use* sharp objects. I am scared. Forks can hurt. I start to cry. I want to go home.

A person sits down at the table beside me. He has the same plate of steamy potatoes and red meat. He has a fork and a spoon. I reach for his spoon, but he pulls it flat against his chest and leans his chin over it.

“Would you like a spoon, Richie?” It is Squinty-face. I nod my head in a big way to make sure she understands. “You can ask for anything you need,” she sings.

I miss Shelley. I told Shelley I don’t use forks, only spoons. She will make sure this doesn’t happen again.

Shelley is like the mom here. Foster moms are good. I’ve had lots of them, but I’m too old now, so I have to stay here. They call it a “very clean and well-run facility.” It’s hard to go to new places. I do not know everyone’s name. I like to know things. It makes me feel safe. Safe is good.

Squinty-face brings me a spoon and I stop crying. I can eat. “Now, you and Donald eat your supper.” I want to know why this is called supper when Kate and Buddy called it dinner. Mrs. Finnley sometimes called it supper, but Kate and Buddy said it was dinner. How could it be both? Maybe it was like a cat. A cat is an animal, but also a cat. A cat can have a name, but it is still a cat. But there are differences between a cat, its name, and an animal. What is the difference between supper and dinner? I will ask Shelley tomorrow. One, I will tell Shelley I do not use forks, and they gave me a fork. Two, I will ask the difference between supper and dinner.

“Don, Don, Don.” Donald says.

“Hmmm?” I say because I don’t like to say “what.”

“My name is Don.” I get it. Squinty-face called him Donald, but his name is Don. I don’t like it when people call me Richard. It’s my real name, but I don’t like it. Rich or Richie is OK, but not Richard.

“Rich,” I say to Don. “My name is Rich.”

“Don,” he says again.

“Want to be my friend?” I ask. He smiles, and I feel safe. Safe is good.

A boy I do not know sets something down on the table in front of me. It is square and it is brown. I do not know what it is. The boy is talking to a short, spiky-haired girl with black around her eyes.

He says, “Jennifer asked me to clock in for her one time, but I wouldn’t do it. She never does her work. She won’t even answer the phone.”

“Yeah, I know,” Spiky-hair says. “She just runs around and pretends to be busy.”

I try to get the boy’s attention because I do not know what this food is. I wave my spoon at him and ask, “What is this?”

He is ignoring me and I am hurt. Ignoring someone hurts feelings. I stand up and wave my spoon. This gets his attention.

“Hey, what’s the matter, Buddy?” he says. I do not like to be called “Buddy.” It is not my name. It is my foster dad’s name. Calling me that makes me mad.

“Don’t call me that,” I say. “Rich, Rich, Rich.” I say it three times just like Don did. It works because he puts a hand on my shoulder to sit me back down and asks what I need, but I don’t think he heard what my name is.

“What is this?” I say pointing at the brown stuff.

“It’s pumpkin dessert. Give it a try. It’s not too bad.”

This is all I wanted to know. I use my spoon to test it, and it’s true. It’s not too bad. That means it’s good. Some people say “It’s not too bad” instead of “It’s good.” Mrs. Finnley used to say it and sometimes Buddy, maybe Mrs. Conway, but I don’t remember her very well.

Don and I finish our desserts. I want to know the boy's name, so I stand up and wave my spoon at him again. I smile so he knows I'm not mad this time.

"I'm Rich," I say still standing up at the table. I can smell his aftershave. It is sweet like Old Spice. When a person says his name, usually the other person will tell you his.

"You're rich!" he says. "I wish I was rich."

"No, I'm Rich, Richie, Rich. That's my name."

"Richie Rich, Huh?"

"Rich," I say. "What's your name?" He still hasn't told me.

"Pete," he says, "and that's Becca." He means Spiky-hair and not Squinty-face. I like Pete. He smells good.

I get to watch TV after supper (or dinner). Everyone is excited because there is a new show on. It is a "special." I wonder if it is a show that's different than all others and that's why it's "special." Some people say that's what I am, but I know it just means I'm different than most people. Different is good.

The TV is big here. We can all see it. I sit by Don on the brown couch because he is my friend, and he smiles at me. I smile back. I feel safe when I have a friend sitting next to me. Safe is good.

The show is a magic show, and I am excited. I want to learn magic tricks. I know a card trick where a person can pick any card in the deck, look at it, put it on the bottom, and then cut the deck in half, burying the card in the middle. Then, I turn the cards over one by one until I reach the correct one. I always know which one is right, and the person is amazed. Buddy says not to tell anyone how I do the trick, but I can't help it. They want to know, and it is fun to tell

them that I look at the bottom of the deck before it's cut. That way, I know their card is next after the card that was on bottom turns up.

I want to show Don this card trick—and Shelley. When I see Shelley tomorrow, I will have three things for to her. One, I do not use forks. Two, I want to know the difference between supper and dinner. Three, I would like to show her a card trick if she could get me a deck of cards. The TV special has started now, and I tell Don that I like magic. He smiles at me. I smile back.

The first few tricks are silly. Then, the magician says he is going to cut his arm off. I get a little scared. Even though I know it is just a trick, I do not like what he is doing. He has rolled up his sleeve to his shoulder and has a saw in his hand. I cannot help it. I start moaning. I am shushed by someone in the room, but I do not know who. Now, the magician is cutting himself. It is a trick. It is just a trick, but I do not want to see it. I do not like sharp objects, and I am scared.

“Ohhhhhh,” I moan. I put my hands to my forehead and push them deep into my hair, pulling a little.

“Are you scared?” says Don.

“Scared,” I say.

“It's OK,” he says. “It's magic.”

Soon, it's over, and the magician is whole again. I watch the rest of the special show without making any noise, but I do not feel safe.

That night, I have a dream that a man is chasing me. The man has a saw and wants to cut off my arms. I wake up scared. I think for a while before I get up. There are three things to tell

Shelley today. It feels like there is something else too, like I don't feel safe. If I told Shelley this, she would ask why, and I do not know why.

I find out Shelley is not here today. It is her day off. Where do people go on a day off? Buddy would go to work when he was not home. Kate would tell me where she was going when she left. Squinty-face is here, but I do not want to talk to her. Pete isn't here either, but Becca is. I do not really want to talk to her either.

"When will Shelley be back?" I ask Don at breakfast.

"I don't know," he says. "Tomorrow." He does not smile even when I smile at him, and I feel sad.

I decide to ask a very important question to Becca when she walks close to me.

"Becca," I say. "Do you know where a deck of cards is?"

"What?" she says.

"Deck of cards. I want a deck of cards."

"Just a minute," she says. I do not know if she understood my words, but I am happy when she returns with a deck with pictures of flowers on them. I push the syrupy egg-smeared dishes back from the edge of the table and ask Don to pick a card. He does.

"Now put it on the bottom," I say after I peek at the bottom card. It is the Queen of Hearts.

"Cut the deck," I say. He does. I place the bottom half of the pile on the top half and start flipping over cards. When I see the Queen of Hearts, I flip over one more card and I say, "Is this your card?"

He looks at the card close, like he is not sure. Then, he looks up at me and smiles. He nods his head and says, "Yes." I smile back at him and I feel safe. Safe is good.