

Oatmeal

by Ted Laramie

She found herself suddenly awake at five. She laid there in their bed while downstairs the coffee maker waited for her to press its button so it might gurgle and hiss, filling the pot with wakefulness.

The dishwasher waited too, waited for her to throw its latch and unload it, to dry the tops of the glasses, to scratch the dried spinach from the forks, to stack the plates in the cabinet as quietly as she could so as to not wake the baby. In the pantry, the canister of oatmeal waited for her to scoop its contents into the shallow white bowls, to which she'd add boiling water, raisins, and cut strawberries. Everything waited.

She knew that she should get up and get going if she wanted a few minutes to herself, but down the hall, the baby was still asleep, silent in his crib. She'd heard him in the night, laughing and playing by himself before settling back down. He'd probably sleep a bit late.

She tried to get up, but the warm blankets weighed her down, so instead she laid there with her eyes closed to all the waiting.

Her mind wandered. She thought of the stove, boiling water on the stove, the gas burner hissing blue flame. She could drop a dish towel on top of it and then take the baby out of his highchair, to the guest room, where she would put him in a new diaper and wait until the smell of smoke filled the downstairs. By then, the flames would have engulfed the cabinets, spreading up the wall, as the black smoke stained the ceiling. It had happened to her mother, though in that case it was a pot holder and her mother extinguished the fire with a pan of water before it had a chance to spread. They had to repaint the ceiling and her father called it irresponsible. It wasn't irresponsible, though, if it was on purpose.

The morning before, as her and Edward sat at the breakfast table, him dressed for work and gobbling his oatmeal as he read the paper,

she had told him about the rut.

"It's the same thing everyday," she said. "I wake up, start the coffee, unload the dishwasher, and get the baby. The whole day goes on like that, over and over again, always the same."

He looked up from his paper, smirking like she was weak, and said, "you always eat oatmeal for breakfast."

"Well, with Simon's egg allergy, what else is there?"

"You could make pancakes, with the flax meal instead of egg, like we did Sunday."

"A baby shouldn't eat pancakes. Oatmeal is better."

"Make him a meat platter, sausage, bacon, a steak."

"That sounds healthy."

"Variety is healthy."

"Changing the breakfast food isn't much variety."

Ed lectured her, "that's life, right? You can't change much, but you can make a tweak here and there. We could get up a little earlier, or sleep later. We could have cereal instead of oatmeal. We could go swimming. We could skip lunch. We could learn Spanish. The only limit is your imagination."

He was right, sort of.

Her thoughts drifted back to the fire. The flames would be too much for her to handle. She'd run out of the house with the baby, over to the neighbor's place where she would call the fire department. The

trucks would come, lights flashing, sirens blaring, men in yellow leaping out to unfurl hoses and pull down ladders, their captain shouting at the new recruit who was invariably doing something necessary. Simon would love it. He loved his book about firetrucks and they'd even taken a tour of the fire station. He might recognize some of the firemen, who'd smile and give him one of their helmets to wear after the fire was out. Then, of course, there'd be the matter of insurance. They'd have to stay at a hotel while everything was fixed. And with the money from the payout, they could finally remodel the kitchen. Get rid of that horrid floral border, pick a livelier color of paint, put in a stainless steel sink that didn't stain so easily. There'd be all sorts of things to consider, decisions to be made.

Not even the toaster would survive. If the flames didn't get it, then the water would. She'd have to pick a new one, along with a lot of other things, which would mean catalogs and visits to showrooms. You had to consider even mundane things like microwaves and toasters, because once you picked one, it stick around forever, indifferent to whether you liked it or not.

Simon had been so needy lately that there was little time to think of anything else.

At dinner, the night before, she'd told Ed, "Let's go on a trip somewhere, to Florida, the beach."

"We could've," he said, "if the car hadn't needed new head gaskets and the garage door hadn't fallen apart and the water heater wasn't about to quit. The emergency fund is gone. I bought groceries on the credit card last night. We've burned through the reserves."

She knew they were broke, with her not working and staying home with Simon.

"Let's go camping, then. It wouldn't cost anything. We could roast hot dogs, burn marshmallows, eat cheap."

Ed shrugged.

"He's still so little. I don't think he'd sleep in a tent. Wouldn't he smother in a sleeping bag, if he got turned around?"

He was right, sort of.

In bed, she imagined the hotel they'd stay in after the fire, with daily maids and room service and all costs paid. They could pick one with a pool so Simon and her could float while Ed worked. They could eat at an actual restaurant again. She loved going out for breakfast, though Ed thought it was ridiculous to pay ten dollars for scrambled eggs and toast. He was so tight. But even if the insurance company wouldn't pay for it all, what choice would they have, with the house in ruins and all?

It sounded delightful, like the only plan they could afford.

Under the covers, Ed's hand gripped her hip. Like a coffee pot, or a dishwasher, or a canister of oatmeal, she settled herself on her side, raised her knee, and bunched her pillow beneath her arm. Ed slid behind and began to rub against her. His hand open and closed on her breast. His hips moved back and forth. Like a coffee pot, a dishwasher, a canister of oatmeal, he waited for her. So in the darkness, she reached into the drawer of the bedside table and took out the lubricant. It was supposed to be a warming gel. She'd been excited to come across it at the store, with the flames on the box, but the dollop felt cold on her fingers.

"That feels so good," he whispered.

He was right again, sort of, though she waited.

