

JIM MEIROSE

BREAKFAST III

JOHN'S WIFE TINA'S IN HER BATHROBE in the kitchen. The cold linoleum presses up against her bare soles. Her large blue eyes and pouty lips dominate her face. She pulls a skillet from the cabinet. John exasperates Tina. He is no longer the man she married. It's true she is demanding, but he does not even come close.

He's better than the man she married. He's the best.

She laughs as she puts the skillet onto the stove.

John is such a good man. He never lets himself be caught in the middle. He will fight his way out of it—will fight to stay on top. He is eager to have her—and makes the effort. He makes the same effort as though they were not yet married.

Tina throws a pat of butter into the cold skillet. John is fearless—a brave man—strong. He'd kill this big-shot realtor, who wants to see her on the side. The realtor calls her repeatedly, and she humours him. She doesn't try to fend him off—she knows that in the end John will take care of him.

The realtor comes to the luncheonette where she works. He is always laden with paperwork. He keeps a huge manila folder in his car. He drives people around to see houses, to walk through them, to look. He treats his clients to lunch at the luncheonette. He sells many houses. He makes much money. He knows how to kiss up—like any salesman must do. Like her husband, there's nothing this man can't do. He is a hard worker. He talks about going in the fields behind his house. He talks about slashing his way through the brush. He talks about swinging the scythe, walking forward, bending, cutting, ripping, tearing, severing the brush; he talks about cutting a swath. It's to clear his land. His land is vast. He has much he could give her. But she wants none of it.

She brings two eggs out on the counter. They lay waiting to be fried.

The air is dry.

The realtor's neat and clean. He calls his wife monkeylike. With arms folded, he mocks her, laughing.

Monkey!

Monkey!

They laugh hard together across the luncheonette counter.

But she has no feelings for him. When she thinks of him, there is a void inside. He is a pain in the ass. A great big wide pain in the ass. But the exercise with the scythe builds up his chest, his muscles—to match those of John, with his proud manly chest and strong hard arms. Lord God, her husband is such a good man.

She cuts a pat of butter into the skillet.

It waits to hotly sizzle once the gas is turned on.

Lord God, John is such a good man.

One by one the eggs will be cracked into the skillet. They will begin to fry. They will take on life, as it were, of a type. They wait on the counter now, though, round and mindless. She steps to the refrigerator to open it—she remembers once John had done this and the tomato sauce fell when the door opened and smashed, made a mess. He ran to get a mop and bucket—Glass, he shouted—watch your bare feet—there's tiny jagged glass everywhere.

Lord God, John is such a good man.

She reaches around in the refrigerator. The refrigerator's cold like the heart of that realtor. Like that skillet and that butter. There's just one thing he wants. The door has shelves holding cold milk more butter and cheese. All the parts of this ice-cold man. She spies a ham deep in the refrigerator.

Ham and eggs.

Yes.

I will make ham and eggs.

She claws the ham out onto the counter and unwraps the plastic wrap. She takes a large knife and a plate from the cabinet and begins to slice off the ham. The cat walks into the room unseen, sniffing the air. It knows there is meat there; cold dead meat that's already been hunted. Meat to be eaten without any effort. Meat that does not have to be pursued. Like the cat, the realtor is an animal. Deep inside, he is a predator. He aims to consume her. The cat meows loudly. It cries for food. But she ignores it. Her husband will save her.

At last she tosses a small scrap to the cat. It pounces and mouths the food. This is what her husband will do. He will attack as though with teeth and fangs. The realtor is a sneak. But he cannot sneak by John.

She now has three big slices on the plate. She tosses them into the skillet and turns on the gas low. The cooking of the breakfast has begun. The

cat chews with nodding head and swallows the meat down fast. It stalks the table for more; it cries for more. Like the cat, when the time comes, when the time is ripe, her husband will stalk the realtor. He will follow him into where it is dark and swing around and grip his neck and dig his fingertips into the soft flesh. With teeth like fangs he will bite the realtor's throat. Her husband is an animal. Like the cat. As she throws the cat another scrap, the butter begins to softly sizzle. The cat bites and rips and tears at the meat. This is a bigger piece this time. The punctures drip with blood and saliva. The swelling and infection will begin. The ham sizzles in the pan. Expertly, she flips it after a while. The sizzling intensifies. She is careful not to get caught in the spatter.

How will the argument between the men go? It will occur outside the luncheonette. There will be yelling out on the sidewalk. Hard words will come from their mouths pushed out by the air from their lungs.

That woman is my wife. Back off you bastard—

But—

Back off. Or I'll hand your head to you—

What? You—

Right I'll hand you your head.

The cat looks up and cries out again for another scrap.

What do you mean? What about your wife, I didn't—

It's the thought that counts, pal.

The oxygen will rush to the realtor's brain as he seeks a way to retort this. Anger will fill him. This husband is much more than a minor annoyance at this point. The cat crouches waiting. At the proper time she flips the ham again; and it is well done on this side.

Time to take it out.

Yes it's the thought that counts.

Her hands make quick movements. A plate goes down. The plate she will eat from. The ham slides out of the skillet onto the plate. She stands behind the counter at the luncheonette wiping the counter with a white cloth. The cat crouches hopefully, eyes half closed. Her husband enters the luncheonette where she works, after the argument on the sidewalk. He gave that damned realtor what-for. He put him in his place. He sits in a booth in the back. He watches Tina in her crisp white apron.

Toast pops down. Crumbs are strewn across the counter.

The realtor enters the luncheonette. He eyes John sitting in the back as he comes in the door. God damn it I have a right to be here, he thinks. I

will show him I have a right to be here—the eggs are cracked into the pan. The gas is turned up.

I have a right to desire this woman.

I have a right to desire breakfast.

Tina's husband sits up straight in the booth. His bloodshot eyes pop. God damn, he thinks—God damn.

The eggs are flipped. They start to sizzle. Tina nudges them with a fork. They float loose on a skim of ham grease. The smell rises. She sniffs the air. The cat watches. The realtor takes a stool at the counter. To be close to her. To be able to watch her sway back and forth as she works. Lord God, he wants this woman. Lord God.

Tina moves to wait on him.

The realtor sits next to a great bullet-headed man in a red flannel shirt. The man is wide. The two almost touch.

John watches from the shadowed booth, biting his lip.

God damn it what will happen now God damn.

The eggs are done fast. They are slid onto the plate beside the ham. A drawer slides open. A knife and fork come out and are laid beside the plate. The lower drawer opens and paper napkins come out. She steps up to the table and lays down the napkins.

Tina is just doing her job.

She holds the pad before her and writes on it as the realtor speaks.

I will take ham—

Her husband cannot hear what the realtor is saying. What he must be saying to her, thinks John. Even though he's been told—he was told out on the sidewalk—that woman is my wife. Back off you bastard—

—and eggs—

But—

Back off. Or I'll hand your head to you—

—and toast—

The coffee has been waiting hot all this time. She gets a plain white cup out of the cabinet and pours herself a cup of black.

—and coffee. Yes, a hot coffee would be nice—

Tina sits down.

—for breakfast.

She eats.

The eggs go into her mouth and she chews and swallows. The taste fills her mouth. She is suddenly lightheaded. Her eyes half close.

The cat watches enviously.

The realtor rests his hands on the counter. He has said all he is going to say.

There, he thinks. I have told her.

I have said it.

I want breakfast.

From her.

A man comes in and sits at the counter beside him wearing a jacket with SOFTBALL DISTRICT 15 CHAMPIONS sewn across the back.

She walks away to bring the order to the kitchen. She walks away to do as she was told. John sees this from the booth in the back—he cannot take it.

He cannot.

She should not do as that horrid man tells—

The ham follows the eggs into Tina. The coffee washes it down hot into her gullet. She drinks. She swallows. She wipes her mouth and fingers and sits a while idle.

John rises to stop her from doing wrong. John rises to stop her from doing as she was told. How dare he tell her, he thinks. How dare he speak to my wife that way.

He makes his way toward the realtor.

The cat noses about the floor seeking scraps.

Tina gets up from her chair. It rattles pushing back across the linoleum. She goes to the sink. She shoots a shot of lemon-scented dishwashing liquid onto the stainless steel and throws on the hot water.

The steam rises warming.

The steaming water comes up.

The skillet is washed with the aid of a Brillo.

The realtor turns on his stool and faces John angrily coming at him from the back of the place. He turns and raises his hands, shakes his head no, as he speaks.

Now listen—back off—don't come any closer. I have a right to be here, he says. I am a customer—

The hell you are, says John. His hands form to fists.

The steam rises, hotter now.

—I just want breakfast—

The plate is washed.

—the hell you do!

The memory of a woman in John's life from years ago hovers in the

corner. She watches in amusement. This is not the man she knew. The man she knew would not come at another man with fists formed and ready to use. The man she knew would not curse and swear at a total stranger; the man she knew was a wimp. She smiles, dissolving.

Deep down inside John is a wimp.

He remembers this; he swallows hard to forget.

The steam rises; the soapy water foams up.

The sharp knife is washed.

The sharp fork.

The realtor stands his ground on the stool.

Back off—back off now—I'm here for breakfast. I have a right to be here for breakfast. Anyone can come in here and have breakfast—

John raises a hand to the realtor.

Lord God Lord God Lord God what—

Tina takes a red checked dishrag from the drainboard and wets it and squeezes it out and wipes the table and John dissolves into thin air before he can lower his fisted hand and the luncheonette's no longer about her. She's in her kitchen with her children. John is nowhere to be seen. And the realtor greedily eats his breakfast when it comes, continuing to eye Tina, continuing to desire, in the luncheonette that's gone.

The children sit about the table, there because it's mealtime not because they're hungry.

I'm not hungry! I'm not hungry! cry the children.

The realtor greedily eats and eats until every scrap of his desire is gone. The cat gets nothing, though it sits waiting, waiting, for something sweet to drop. Tina switches off the light and leaves the room. The dishes begin to air dry on the drainboard, wet and hot in the sudden dark. One by one the children leave the shadowy room, following as they are taught to do. The hungry cat crouches in the black under the table.