

Snap, Crackle Pop

By Courtney Sirotin
A Short Story

Piper adds a box of frozen burritos to her cart and consults her shopping list. She scans the glass doors and reaches for two macaroni and cheese dinners and three French bread pizzas. That will get her through the week.

A cart carrying a rosy-cheeked toddler pulls up beside Piper, and a woman about her age begins reading the labels on the frozen pizzas. The child is smiling and waving at Piper, trying to get her attention. Piper lowers her eyes to avoid the child and catches a glimpse inside the woman's cart. She immediately regrets it. The chicken breasts and portabella mushrooms make her think of Chicken Marsala, one of Ryan's favorite dishes. She used to make it for him on date nights. She remembers the last time they ate Chicken Marsala together, a week before he died. She hasn't cooked a thing in the two years since. Chopping and dicing, sautéing and frying, ovens and aromas are too happy for her. Those are memories of Ryan. Piper shakes her head and fights back the tears. She will not cry today. She will not. She consults her list again. She needs cereal.

Kent's long legs propel him through the automatic doors. It's hot outside and the rush of cool air revives him. He

glances at the clock on his cell phone; he's in a hurry. His tractor broke down in the middle of Mr. Garrett's fifty acre estate and of course it would happen on a day the Garrett's are throwing a party. Kent curses under his breath. He put everything on the line to start his own landscaping business and running off to Wal-Mart on his first day of working for the richest family in town is no way to build his reputation. He scans the overhead signs looking for the Lawn and Garden section. He'll buy the part he needs to fix his tractor and get the hell back to work.

Kent breezes past the produce and makes his way along the food aisles. He glances down the cereal aisle and his feet stop moving without his permission. He laughs despite his hurry, because he is so damned predictable. What is wrong with him that he can't stay focused when a girl with a beautiful butt crosses his eyeline? He pauses to appreciate the girl staring at a box of Cap'n Crunch. He is about to move on when he notices she is crying. He studies her face and is certain of only one thing: she is far too pretty to be crying alone in the cereal aisle at Wal-Mart.

Piper is lost in a memory of Ryan. She has no reprieve. Everywhere she goes, there he is. Cap'n Crunch was his favorite cereal. He used to eat it before work as they sat together at

the kitchen table. She would drink coffee and check email. He would slurp cereal and try to make her laugh. She wants to throw the box and run but she can't; she's frozen in the vortex of her sadness. And then somebody is talking to her.

"I used to work for the Captain. He's kind of a prick. Used to make us swab the deck with a toothbrush. Count Chocula, now he's a good guy. Obsessed with bookkeeping, but has a good sense of humor."

Piper keeps her eyes fixed on the ground and tries to force the stranger to leave using the power of her mind. The last thing she needs is some guy with cracked teeth and a mullet trying to cheer her up. She dares a glance at his feet. Work boots, faded jeans. She smells grass, sweat, and a lingering trace of Ivory soap. Something inside her stirs. Her eyes climb a little higher. A plaid shirt, faded, and rolled to his elbows. She braces herself and looks at his face, prepared for the letdown. Her breath catches. No mullet, no missing teeth; just a strong, rugged, brutally handsome face and gleaming white teeth. Two soft lips are smiling down on her and talking about cereal. She has an urge to reach inside her purse and put on lip gloss.

Kent is bewildered. For a man of few words, he is rambling like a teenage girl. "The Snap, Crackle, Pop guys are okay, but kind of flamboyant," he is saying, the words bypassing his brain

and pouring out of his mouth. His cell phone vibrates in his pocket and he ignores it. Mr. Garrett is wondering where he ran off too. He needs to hurry, he knows, but he is still talking. The girl is staring at him now, her doe-wide eyes puffy and red. He trails off in the middle of a sentence as she separates her lips and licks them gently until they sparkle. He's overcome by the urge to bend down and taste them.

"Have you had breakfast?" she asks quietly.

He's so taken aback he hardly knows what to say. "No," he lies. "I'm half-starved."

"Me too," she says, looking away shyly.

Kent's cell phone vibrates urgently. "How about you and me buy that box of cereal you've been considering and a gallon of milk and have us some breakfast. I'll tell you all about my days in the circus with Tony the Tiger. He was great."

Piper smiles at the box of Cap'n Crunch she's been clutching to her chest and sets it back on the shelf gently. She regards Kent from under her eyelashes. "I'd rather make you breakfast, if that's okay. How does blueberry pancakes, scrambled eggs, and thick cut bacon sound? I feel like cooking."

Kent slips his hand into his pocket and turns off his cell phone. "That sounds like heaven."