

BRAD BARKLEY & HEATHER HEPLER

# scrambled eggs

*at Midnight*



SCRAMBLED

EGGS

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藏书章

★  
MIDNIGHT

BY BRAD BARKLEY & HEATHER HEPLER



DUTTON BOOKS

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scrambled eggs at midnight

*For my family:  
who always believed, even when I didn't*

—H. H.

*For Lucas and Alex and my parents,  
with love and gratitude*

—B. B.

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My mother is a wench. It says so right on her W-2.

She isn't a very good one, though, and that's why we have to move again. This will be the third move since last summer. Delores had miscalculated, quitting her job before we had enough money to make it through to May. We'd spent until after Christmas in a one-bedroom apartment above a bait shop. The sign hanging below my bedroom window read BAIT SANDWICHES AND ICE GAS, and the smell even in the off-season made me swear off fish for life. We left when the manager threatened to lock up our stuff if we missed another rent payment. All of March we spent in a hunting cabin borrowed from the dishwasher at Whole Earth. We had to move out when Delores set fire to the floor with her soldering iron.

We've been camping out here at the Bluebird Inn ever since. I've been helping Delores get the rooms ready for the summer in exchange for our suite. *Suite* makes it sound nice, but it's



really seasonal trash. The addition of a couch and a short wall create our living room. The carpet matches the wallpaper, which matches the bedspread, which matches the stains on the towels, turning everything into Beige World. Even the paintings are of muted beach scenes and dimly lit forests of birch trees.

We pretty much eat whatever we can keep in the mini-fridge or heat in the microwave. Tonight it was organic vegetable soup from a can and hunks of sourdough bread. I do most of the cooking because Delores forgets to eat when she's inspired. She stays hunched over the desk at night, twisting bits of metal and glass into miniature angels or mermaids or fairies. Lately she's been trying some new things, incorporating found objects into her jewelry. Last week for my birthday she gave me a pendant that she made out of a bottle cap. The cap is twisted and folded in on itself, but you can still read the M in MOXIE if you look closely. It's wrapped with filaments of red and orange glass and twisted around with silver wire so that it looks like a folded sun.

Before she gave it to me, she strung it on a piece of cinnamon dental floss. I was mad when first I opened the box, thinking she had no right to go through my stuff like that, taking the cap without asking. But when I glanced over at her, I couldn't stay mad. Sometimes when I look at her I feel like I'm the mother and she's my child, like she's just waiting for me to tell her that I'm proud of her. She looked so small just then that I hugged her and told her thank you. Later in bed I pulled the pendant free from under my shirt and studied it. It really *was*

slide across it in the dark, slipping down in the seat under the tall back window. This has become our tradition, every Sunday night after closing, for the last three Sundays, sitting here, holding each other, not saying much and not needing to. It is, Cal says, our first tradition, and I will find out in the months ahead how much she loves all traditions, simply because she has never really had them—we will carve the deep-fried turkey, and bake pumpkin pies, and cut out jack-o'-lanterns, and lie on the floor in the dark on Christmas Eve, looking up through the branches of lights in the tree, as if at a field of stars. But she likes this one best, she tells me, because it's ours alone. Sunday-night-indoor-paddleboat sitting has not caught on with many people. But here we are, breathing each other's breath, kissing, my fingers in her hair, and then she settles in against me, pressing tight, hooking her leg over mine. We watch the streaks of rain gather on the glass and slip down in tiny rivers, listen to the sound it makes on the panes, on the roof far above us. The best part of these Sunday nights in the boat is when the sky is cloudless, and if we are there on the right night and wait long enough, the moonlight shines in through the window and settles over us in the dark, filling up the floor of the boat just like it did that first night. Only it's different now. We don't have to move, don't have to paddle anywhere. We stay where we are, and the moon finds us.

Idaho had given me food poisoning, and Delores didn't pull the car over soon enough the first time. We spent the night in a truck-stop motel, where the sounds of grinding gears and air brakes kept us up for most of the night, but it was worth it for the shower and a real bed. Camping out is only fun when you know that after a few days you get to go home and take a bath and flop in front of the television. Whenever we hit the road on one of these trips, I'm never sure what is waiting for us at the other end.

"You're not going to get any cleaner," Delores shouts from the other side of the bathroom door. I've learned to lock her out. "We need to get *going*," she says. I can almost see her through the door, tapping the toe of her purple Chuck Taylors or twisting her hair into a bun at the nape of her neck. "We can get doughnuts," she calls. She must be getting desperate. I decide to push my luck.

"Lemon filled?" I ask, my hand poised over the faucet. Silence. Finally a sigh and a mumbled "okay." Delores hates fast food, so I know this is killing her. I leave the water running for an extra moment or two before shutting it off. My red hair falls nearly to the middle of my back when it's wet, and I can feel it shedding streams of water down the backs of my legs. I wrap one of the huge towels around me and struggle to pile my hair up on top of my head. I wipe away some of the fog on the mirror before baring my teeth at myself. They are one of my best features, straight and white. I had my braces removed only a couple of months before all of this mess started, back when we

still had medical insurance. I can hear Delores bumping around in the next room, and I hurry to get dressed. The last time I left her alone too long, she tossed most of my books in the Dumpster and I spent the better part of an hour knee-deep in garbage trying to sift them all out.

“Try to keep it down to that duffel and one box,” Delores reminds me before carrying another box out to the car. As if I needed reminding. Delores has few rules, but one of them is that all that we own has to fit in the car, which isn’t easy considering we own a two-door Datsun hatchback.

I push my down vest into the duffel, making the sides bulge.

“You’ll never zip it up,” Delores says, lifting the red tackle box from the bed. “Can’t you leave some of that stuff behind?”

I look over at the mound of jeans and cords that threatens to spill from the top of the dresser. An equally tall stack of books teeters beside it, quivering with some unseen energy. I’ve made some deep cuts in my inventory already. Delores stands, watching me, as I push two tank tops into my sneakers and change the alignment of my nesting dolls.

“Got it,” I say, pulling at the two halves, willing them closed.

“Want some help?” she asks. For her that means helping me get rid of more stuff. I shake my head.

“Suit yourself,” she says, carrying a plastic grocery bag full of our bathroom things to the car. I hear her start it up, gunning the engine once to keep it from stalling. I pull a sweatshirt from the top of the pile and yank it over my head. Light one item,

the duffel zips easily. I shove my arms into the sleeves, heft the bag from the bed, and take one last look around for anything I might have missed. I pull the door shut hard, hearing the lock catch, and turn toward the parking lot. As I limp toward the car under the weight of my bag, I pray that Delores won't notice that I have on three sweatshirts, one layered on top of the next.

Delores's jewelry business, if you can call it that, used to be named Earthly Delights by Delores. I made her leave off her name and stop dotting the *i* with a tiny peace symbol. "Hippies don't have money for nice jewelry," I told her, "and you'll scare off the real buyers with your politics." Her response was, "Peace isn't political," but I noticed she started finishing the *i* with a regular dot. Boxes full of her stuff take up most of the space behind our seats. The cord from one of her soldering irons has slithered out of its box and flaps against the metal side of one of her rock tumblers. I tuck it back inside before shifting the tackle box under my feet so that I can stretch my legs. Delores has pushed the seats way forward to accommodate all of our stuff. This isn't a problem for her. She's tiny. But I've got my dad's height and already tower over her by nearly eight inches.

"Don't forget we need to stop at a post office today," I say, staring through the windshield. "If we don't get that stuff mailed, we'll have to pay a penalty." I've been trying to get our taxes together, but it's hard when we're moving so much. Delores tells me to forget it.

"It's not like they're going to catch us," she says, and she's probably right, but somehow filling out all the official forms that I picked up at the library makes me feel like I'm part of the system, part of the machinery, not just some random particle bouncing off everything it hits.

"Post office," she repeats, but I know I'll have to remind her again later. "So, what do you want for breakfast?" Delores asks this without turning toward me.

"Don't start," I say.

"How about some nice fruit and maybe some yogurt?"

"Doughnuts," I say. "Lemon filled."

"I know a good organic market in Blue Hill that is only a tiny bit out of our way."

"I know a Tim Hortons that isn't out of our way at all."

"Maybe they'll have organic coffee," Delores says, pushing the button on the radio. Static fills the car. Then jazz.

"I wouldn't count on it," I say, shifting lower in the seat, scrunching up one of my sweatshirts against the window. I lean into the door. One more year and I can drive. Not that I hope we have anywhere to go in a year. Most kids can't wait until their sixteenth birthday so that they can drive away. Go someplace. I'm hoping that by then we won't have to leave. Maybe by then we'll have found somewhere we can stay.

The inside of Tim Hortons smells exactly the way a doughnut shop should. Too sweet with the scents of maple and chocolate and powdered sugar. Delores insists that we go in instead of

doing drive-through. “I want to actually *watch* them make my coffee,” she says. I stand back as she quizzes the counter girl, asking her how fresh it is, whether it’s made from certified organic beans, if they use purified water. The girl looks frightened by the tiny woman in front of her. Delores can be a little intense sometimes.

“What she means to say is that we would like two tall skinny lattes and two lemon-filled doughnuts,” I tell her. The girl seems relieved and turns to plunge the heated tip of the frother deep into a pitcher of milk. Delores started on this organic kick right after she left my father. She told me she was trying to detoxify her life. No chemicals, no preservatives, no artificial enhancers, no dyes. We eat free range, all natural, certified, 100 percent pure, nothing added. One thing about Delores is that whenever she makes her mind up about something, it stays made up. No matter what. Even on that first drive from Texas to Des Moines, I can remember stumbling behind her in tiny markets scented with patchouli and overgrown with wheat-grass, filling our basket with things I had never seen before. Tofu, miso, kale, sprouted-wheat bread. It was lucky I couldn’t eat anything then.

We drive down the coast, squinting into the sun and shivering in the cold air swirling in through the broken back window. “It’ll be warmer in North Carolina,” Delores says, as if that could be enough to make me look forward to the summer. I hold the spiral-bound Rand McNally in my lap, flipping pages

as we pass through each state. We slip through them, five in one day, too fast to get more than a brief sense of them. Maine seems populated more by trees than by people. Stone buildings huddle against the rivers in New Hampshire. Giant warehouses advertising state liquor stores flank the highways in Massachusetts. Connecticut will forever stay in my mind as the place with the truck stop where I had the best piece of lemon pie ever and a man exposed himself to me while I waited outside the restroom for Delores to come out.

Sometimes when I'm waiting like that, I have to fight the urge to go find her. When I can't see her, sometimes I wonder if she's just disappeared again. I've gotten to the point where I keep the keys when we stop. I tell Delores it's because I am afraid she'll lose them, but it's not that. If I have the keys, she can't drive away.

We push through until we find a campground with full facilities just inside the border of New York. Too tired to even change, I crawl into my sleeping bag without taking my clothes off. I feel Delores shift once before she presses her back against mine, trying to find warmth in the cold air. It's the first time she has touched me all day. That too had changed on that rainy Saturday in Texas. While trying to rid herself of chemicals, preservatives, and my father, she had also lost something else. I still hug her sometimes, like when she gave me the necklace, but it seems to hurt her when I do. Like something about the way I touch her burns her skin.



I sigh into my sweatshirt, trying not to wake Delores. She's already edgy, snapping at me for accidentally pumping the wrong gas, popping my gum too loud, and even once for sighing. "Calliope, sighing isn't going to make it not so." Maybe not, I think, but it makes me feel better. I sigh one more time before twisting my sweatshirt around my neck to keep warm. I only have two wishes for tomorrow. The first is that Delores's boss won't be a jerk like the last one, thinking that wenches are actually prostitutes with long dresses. The second wish is that there will be somewhere nice for us to live. Two summers ago we got to live in a bed-and-breakfast owned by one of the jousters. I'm not hoping that high, but something other than our tent might be nice. There is a third wish, but it's one that I have carried for too long to even let myself think about. It's not fully formed, a vague sense of wanting something or someone or somewhere. I don't let myself try to figure it out. I just push down into the flannel of my sleeping bag and close my eyes. Tomorrow things will be better, I think. Tomorrow we'll be there.

The letter was printed on paper with a watermark of a shield and crossed swords. This should have been enough to make Delores think twice about taking the job, but she was determined. "We need the money," she said, and I thought, *Thank you, Dr. Obvious*. "Besides," she continued, "I'll bet they'll hire you this year." Like that was just the thing to seal the deal. I sigh and stare out the window. Delores estimates that we will be in