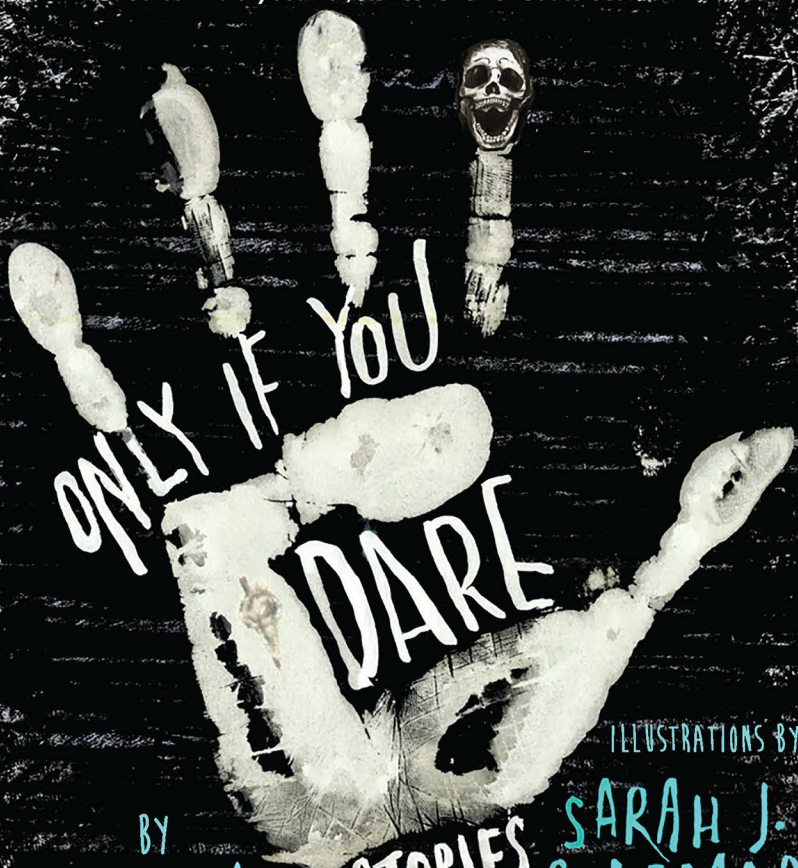


★ "A top-notch thrill-ride of creepy, crunchy horror.
This collection belongs on every young horror shelf."
—*School Library Journal*, starred review of *Out to Get You*



BY
JOSH
ALLEN

13 STORIES
OF
DARKNESS
AND
DOOM

ILLUSTRATIONS BY
SARAH J.
COLEMAN

ONLY IF YOU DARE



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Printed and bound in June 2021 at Maple Press, York, PA, USA.

www.holidayhouse.com

First Edition

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Allen, Josh, author. | Coleman, Sarah (Sarah Jane), illustrator.

Title: Only if you dare : 13 stories of darkness and doom / by Josh Allen ; illustrated by Sarah J. Coleman.

Description: New York : Holiday House, [2021] | Audience: Ages 9–12.

Audience: Grades 4–6. | Summary: A collection of thirteen short stories showing how horribly wrong food, dating, jobs, and even a bed pillow can be.

Identifiers: LCCN 2020035167 | ISBN 9780823449064 (hardcover)

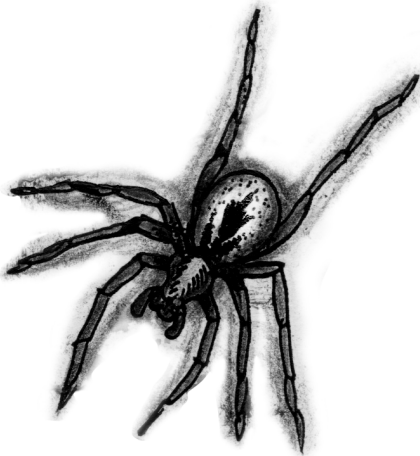
Subjects: LCSH: Horror tales, American. | Children's stories, American.

CYAC: Horror stories. | Short stories.

Classification: LCC PZ7.1.A4387 Onl 2021 | DDC [Fic]—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2020035167>

ISBN: 978-0-8234-4906-4 (hardcover)



LUMPY, LUMPY

THE thing about oatmeal is . . . I hate it. And I don't just hate it a little bit. I hate it with all the force of a thousand exploding suns. When I have to put even one spoonful into my mouth, I gag.

Seriously.

I retch, and the back of my tongue comes up. I have to fight just to keep from puking everywhere.

It's the texture.

Lumpy, lumpy.

Like eating mud. Or paste. Or cow droppings.

I know what you're thinking. Have I tried it with brown sugar? Strawberries and cream? Chocolate chips? Coconut flakes?

Well, the answers are *yes, yes, yes, and yes.*

I've tried oatmeal every which way you can make it, and I don't care what's added to it. It's still gloopy and gross.

I mean, if you told me to eat a spare tire and then sprinkled it with chocolate chips, would that make the spare tire any more delicious? Of course not. It would still be a spare tire. It would still be disgusting and inedible. Just like oatmeal.

So when I sat down at my spot at the breakfast bar one

morning and Mom slid my favorite yellow bowl in front of me, I kind of couldn't believe it.

Because it was filled to the brim with—you guessed it—oatmeal. Colorless, clumpy oatmeal.

"Hey," I said, "this is—"

But Mom interrupted me.

"Yeah, Elena," she said. "Deal with it."

"But—" I said, and before I could go on, Mom scooped up a handful of blueberries from a bowl on the counter and dropped three of them into my favorite yellow bowl. She popped the rest into her mouth.

"Try it with blueberries," she said, munching, not understanding the whole spare-tire-chocolate-chip thing. "Just eat it, Elena. You can't live on cold cereal forever."

Mom thinks I'm a "picky eater." But is it "picky" to not want lumpy globs of goo shifting around in your mouth? Is it "picky" to think food should be something you have to actually chew before you swallow?

"Besides," she said, "I can't afford to throw away any more food, Elena. I just spent two hundred dollars on that." She pointed to where our new microwave hung over the stove. Our old microwave had stopped working, so Mom had saved for weeks to buy this one and spent an entire Saturday afternoon installing it. "So let's be smart and stop throwing food away, okay?"

"Fine," I said, and I picked up a spoon.

But don't think for a second that I ate any of that putrid oatmeal. While Mom fussed around the kitchen, I stirred it and poked at it and tried not to smell it. As soon as Mom walked down the hall, I jumped up and scraped it into the garbage. Then I shifted the trash around so the dumped oatmeal would be hidden under a crumpled piece of plastic wrap, a gum wrapper, and an old rubber band.

Quickly, before Mom came back into the kitchen, I swiped two granola bars out of the pantry and tucked them into my backpack. I planned to eat them on the bus to school so I wouldn't starve to death.

And I thought that'd be the end of it.

It should have been too.

But that night, long after Mom and I had gone to bed, something happened.

I woke up because I heard something. It was a kind of *whirr* or *buzz*. My room is the first one down the hallway, and the *whirr* was coming from the main living area. I could tell.

I checked the clock by my bed.

It said 3:13. What could be whirring and buzzing at 3:13 in the morning?

I stood up and stumbled, groggy, into the hall.

The house was completely dark except for a strange blue light glowing from the kitchen. When I got closer, I could see that it was the new microwave. It was on. And there was something inside it, spinning slowly.

“Mom?” I said. I figured she was making a late-night snack.

She didn’t answer. I checked for her in the chairs at the table and at the breakfast bar. It didn’t seem like she was in any of them. There was no movement. No dark shadows.

The microwave kept whirring. The blue light shifted as whatever was inside kept on spinning.

It was eerie, the house dark except for this one microwave light. The whole kitchen seemed to be bathed in a strange radioactive glow.

“Mom?” I said again.

Nothing.

The microwave counted down.

Seven . . . six . . . five.

What was happening? Was the microwave malfunctioning already? Coming on in the middle of the night all by itself? We’d only had the thing three days.

The countdown hit two . . . then one . . . and the microwave dinged. Its inside light went off and the kitchen went pitch-dark, except for the microwave’s screen, which said End.

I switched on a light and squinted against the sudden brightness. Then I opened the microwave door.

There was my favorite yellow bowl.

It was filled to the brim with . . . oatmeal.

Steam rose up from it. I lifted the bowl out, slowly, and the sides of it almost burned my fingers.

“What on earth?” I said.

The oatmeal had blueberries in it. Three of them.

Weird, I thought. *Too weird*.

“Hello?” I whispered.

No one answered. I looked around.

This had to be Mom. She must have found my dumped oatmeal and decided to teach me a lesson.

“Okay, Mom,” I said. “I get it. I’m not supposed to waste food. I’m sorry.”

I waited for her to answer, to step out of the pantry and laugh.

She didn’t.

Then I noticed something.

There weren’t just three blueberries and oatmeal in my favorite yellow bowl. There was other stuff—a crumpled piece of plastic wrap, a gum wrapper, and even a thin rubber band.

It was like this was the same oatmeal I’d dumped that morning, like someone had scooped it right out of the garbage and caught up bits of trash with it.

The hair on my arms prickled. Quickly, I dumped the oatmeal into the trash again.

Then I put my yellow bowl in the sink, switched off the light, and practically ran back to bed.



Mom didn’t say anything about the oatmeal the next morning. She even let me eat cereal for breakfast—Yo-Ho-Ohs, with pirate treasure marshmallows. My favorite.

I figured she thought I'd learned my lesson and everything was fine.

Then night came.

For the second night in a row, a *whirr*, or a muffled *buzz*, woke me up. I opened my eyes and checked my clock.

It was 3:13 a.m.

I stumbled out of bed, and it was like *déjà vu*. There was the eerie blue light coming from the microwave, and there was the spinning bowl inside. There was the countdown, three . . . two . . . one, and the *ding*, and the green glowing word.

End.

Then there was me, lifting out my favorite yellow bowl. It was filled with steaming oatmeal—again—and three blueberries. Mixed in, there was a gum wrapper, a crumpled piece of plastic wrap, a thin rubber band, and now, a paper clip and a bit of orange peel.

Once more, I scraped it all into the trash.

"I get it, Mom," I said. "Point made. I won't waste food."

She had to be hiding in the pantry. I threw the door open.

She wasn't there.

I checked in the coat closet and under the computer desk.

She wasn't anywhere.

Shivering a little, I shuffled down the hall. At the door to Mom's room, I turned the doorknob and peered in.



She was curled up in bed, eyes closed, hands tucked in front of her. She wasn't snoring exactly, but her breathing was heavy and regular, as if she'd been asleep for a long time.

A lump rose in my throat.

Before I could think too hard about things, I darted through the house, turning off lights.

I slid into bed, pulling the covers all the way over my head.



It happened the next night. And the next night. And the night after that.

At the exact same time.

3:13 a.m.

I tried to ignore the microwave and sleep through the *whirr* and *buzz*, or at least stay in bed at 3:13 a.m., but I couldn't. The microwave seemed to have some strange power. The *whirr* was like music, calling to me. Like the Pied Piper.

Within a week, bags had formed under my eyes.

I kind of stopped sleeping at night. My head drooped in school, a lot, and I even fell asleep in math class.

One night, I decided to throw away the oatmeal somewhere other than the garbage, somewhere it'd be hard to find. So when I lifted out my favorite yellow bowl, I carried it to the back door. Even though it was cold outside, I slid

the door open, stumbled into the bushes by the side of the house, and scraped the garbage-y oatmeal into the dirt by our hydrangea bush.

It didn't work.

The next night, at 3:13 a.m., I woke to the sound of a *whirr*. The oatmeal was back in the microwave, back in my favorite yellow bowl. Now it held three blueberries, a gum wrapper, a crumpled piece of plastic wrap, a paper clip, a bit of orange peel, a few dirt clods, a weedy-looking leaf, and a dead black beetle.



It kept going. I stopped sleeping altogether. I would just lie awake, in bed, waiting for what I knew would come.

Whirr. Buzz. Ding.

End.

In the mornings, I'd stumble into the bathroom, groggy. Before showering, I'd sit at the edge of the tub with my head in my hands.

I started napping during lunch. I found a quiet spot in the library between two bookshelves, and I used my backpack as a pillow.

More and more junk kept getting mixed in with the oatmeal. A sucker stick. An apple stem. A used, crumpled Band-Aid.

After two more weeks, a crust formed on top of the oatmeal, and then bits of mold appeared. They were small spots at first, but they grew a bit bigger each night.

Here's a question for you:

Do you know what it's like to be haunted? By a microwave?

I'll bet you don't.

I'm probably the only person in the whole long history of the world who understands what it's like to be called out of bed each night—each and every night—by a whirring microwave and have a bowl of oatmeal—the exact same bowl of oatmeal—shoved in your face again and again as it slowly grows dirtier and grosser and moldier.

After more than a month, my eyes ached with exhaustion. Red veins spiderwebbed through them. I started falling asleep in the strangest places—at a restaurant, in the dentist's chair, on the bus.

“What's up with you, Elena?” Mom asked one night at the dinner table. “You seem so tired. It doesn't make any sense.”

“I'm just not sleeping well,” I told her. “That's all.”

Then one night, I stumbled out into the strange blue light, and my arms felt heavy. So heavy. When the microwave dinged and my favorite yellow bowl stopped spinning, I knew it was time to do something.

Unless I did, this would keep happening every night for the rest of my life, at exactly 3:13 a.m. I would keep growing more and more tired as the whirring, buzzing microwave kept returning my nasty, steaming, putrid bowl of oatmeal, which would be, each night, a little bit smellier, a little bit dirtier, a little bit nastier.

It was time to eat.

I knew that was the deal.

I had to eat it to end it.

This oatmeal wasn't going to get any better with time. Those mold spots weren't going to start shrinking. And that crust on top wasn't going to go soft. The mixed-in dirt and Band-Aid and dead beetle weren't going to disappear.

If I kept dumping it, the oatmeal would just keep getting nastier and nastier. It would turn completely green and fuzzy, and it would start to seep and smell like the bottom of our garbage bin.

If I didn't do something soon, it might even become infested with maggots.

It was time.

Eat it, I thought. Eat it and end it.

I reached into the microwave and lifted out my yellow bowl, which, I realized, wasn't my favorite anymore. Slowly, I pulled a spoon from the drawer. I caught a whiff of the oatmeal then, like a sewer drain, and I gagged. I flicked on the kitchen light and immediately wished I hadn't, because I saw everything that had piled up in the oatmeal—the gum wrapper, the dirt, the beetle, the rubber band, the paper clip, the plastic wrap, the Band-Aid, the orange peel, the sucker stick, the wilted weed, and the spots of mold, which were now the size of quarters.

But I was tired.

Can you understand that?

I was so, so tired.

So I took my place at the kitchen table. I held my breath
and plugged my nose. I gripped my spoon.

I counted to three.

And I ate.