

## **DAY AT THE BEACH**

by Carol Emshwiller

from *Fantasy and Science Fiction*

**The first Milford Science Fiction Writers' Conference was held in 1956. Among those invited were a number of artists, agents, editors, and publishers in the field. So artist Ed "Emsh" came up for the week—with his family.**

**Carol Emshwiller had then published two or three stories; but she didn't know she was a writer, and the bated-breath humility with which she asked if she *possibly might be* allowed to sit in on workshop meetings has come back to haunt us Older Hands each summer since. Each summer, I mean, when Carol pops out of the playpen-and-baby-bottle laden car, an infant (at least figuratively) under one arm, and her newest manuscript under the other. (Ed carries two kids and his brushes in his teeth—nothing to it when you get the knack.)**

**The first time I read *Day at the Beach* was in one of these workshop sessions. After that, I just waited for someone to print it first, so I could next...**

"It's Saturday," the absolutely hairless woman said, and she pulled at her frayed, green kerchief to make sure it covered her head. "I sometimes forget to keep track of the days, but I marked three more off on the calendar because I think that's how many I forgot, so this *must be* Saturday."

Her name was Myra and she had neither eyebrows nor lashes nor even a faint, transparent down along her cheeks. Once she had had long, black hair, but now, looking at her pink, bare face, one would guess she had been a red-head.

Her equally hairless husband, Ben, sprawled at the kitchen table waiting for breakfast. He wore red plaid Bermuda shorts, rather faded, and a tee shirt with a large hole under the arm. His skull curved above his staring eyes more naked-seeming than hers because he wore no kerchief or hat.

"We used to always go out on Saturdays," she said, and she put a bowl of oatmeal at the side of the table in front of a youth chair.

Then she put the biggest bowl between her husband's elbows.

"I have to mow the lawn this morning," he said. "All the more so if it's Saturday."

She went on as if she hadn't heard. "A day like today we'd go to the beach. I forget a lot of things, but I remember that."

"If I were you, I just wouldn't think about it." Ben's empty eyes finally focused on the youth chair and he turned then to the open window behind him and yelled, "Littleboy, Littleboy," making the sound run together all L's and Y. "Hey, it's breakfast, Boy," and under his breath he said, "He won't come."

"But I *do* think about it. I remember hot dogs and clam chowder and how cool it was days like this. I don't suppose I even have a bathing suit around any more."

"It wouldn't be like it used to be."

"Oh, the sea's the same. That's one thing sure. I wonder if the boardwalk's still there."

"Hah," he said. "I don't have to see it to know it's all gone for firewood. It's been four winters now."

She sat down, put her elbows on the table and stared at her bowl. "Oatmeal," she said, putting in that one word everything she felt about the beach and wanting to go there.

"It's not that I don't want to do better for you," Ben said. He touched her arm with the tips of his fingers for just a moment. "I wish I could. And I wish I could have hung on to that corned beef hash last time, but it was heavy and I had to run and there was a fight on the train and I lost the sugar too. I wonder which bastard has it now."

"I know how hard you try, Ben. I do. It's just sometimes everything comes on you at once, especially when it's a Saturday like this. Having to get water way down the block and that only when there's electricity to run

the pump, and this oatmeal; sometimes it's just once too often, and then, most of all, you commuting in all that danger to get food."

"I make out. I'm not the smallest one on that train."

"God, I think that everyday. Thank God, I say to myself, or where would we be now. Dead of starvation that's where."

She watched him leaning low over his bowl, pushing his lips out and making a sucking sound. Even now she was still surprised to see how long and naked his skull arched, and she had an impulse, seeing it there so bare and ugly and thinking of the commuting, to cover it gently with her two hands, to cup it and make her hands do for his hair; but she only smoothed at her kerchief again to make sure it covered her own baldness.

"Is it living, though? Is it living, staying home all the time, hiding like, in this house? Maybe it's the rest of them, the dead ones, that are lucky. It's pretty sad when a person can't even go to the beach on a Saturday."

She was thinking the one thing she didn't want to do most of all was to hurt him. No, she told herself inside, sternly. Stop it right now. Be silent for once and eat, and, like Ben says, don't think; but she was caught up in it somehow and she said, "You know, Littleboy never did go to the beach yet, not even once, and it's only nine miles down," and she knew it would hurt him.

"Where is Littleboy?" he said and yelled again out the window. "He just roams."

"It isn't as if there were cars to worry about any more, and have you seen how fast he is and how he climbs so good for three and a half? Besides, what can you do when he gets up so early."

He was finished eating now and he got up and dipped a cup of water from the large pan on the stove and drank it. "I'll take a look," he said. "He won't come when you call."

She began to eat finally, watching him out the kitchen window and listening to him calling. Seeing him hunched forward and squinting because he had worn glasses before and his last pair had been broken a year ago. Not in a fight, because he was careful not to wear them commuting even then, when it wasn't quite so bad. It was Littleboy who

had done it, climbed up and got them himself from the very top drawer, and he was a whole year younger. Next thing she knew they were on the floor, broken.

Ben disappeared out of range of the window and Little-boy came darting in as though he had been huddling by the door behind the arbor vitae all the time.

He was the opposite of his big, pink and hairless parents, with thick and fine black hair growing low over his fore-head and extending down the back of his neck so far that she always wondered if it ended where hair used to end before, or whether it grew too far down. He was thin and small for his age, but strong-looking and wiry with long arms and legs. He had a pale, olive skin, wide, blunt features and a wary stare, and he looked at her now, waiting to see what she would do.

She only sighed, lifted him and put him in his youth chair and kissed his firm, warm cheek, thinking, what beautiful hair, and wishing she knew how to cut it better so he would look neat.

"We don't have any more sugar," she said, "but I saved you some raisins," and she took down a box and sprinkled some on his cereal.

Then she went to the door and called, "He's here, Ben. He's here." And in a softer voice she said, "The pixy." She heard Ben answer with a whistle and she turned back to the kitchen to find Littleboy's oatmeal on the floor in a lopsided oval lump, and him, still looking at her with wise and wary brown eyes.

She knelt down first, and spooned most of it back into the bowl. Then she picked him up rather roughly, but there was gentleness to the roughness, too. She pulled at the elastic topped jeans and gave him two hard, satisfying slaps on bare buttocks. "It isn't as if we had food to waste," she said, noticing the down that grew along his backbone and wondering if that was the way the three year olds had been before.

He made an *Aaa, Aaa*, sound, but didn't cry, and after that she picked him up and held him so that he nuzzled into her neck in the way she liked. "Aaa," he said again, more softly, and bit her just above the collar bone.

She dropped him down, letting him kind of slide with her arms still around him. It hurt and she could see there was a shallow, half-inch piece

bitten right out.

"He bit me again," she shouted, hearing Ben at the door. "He bit me. A real piece out even, and look, he has it in his mouth still."

"God, what a..."

"Don't hurt him. I already slapped him good for the floor and three is a hard age." She pulled at Ben's arm. "It says so in the books. Three is hard, it says." But she re-membered it really said that three was a beginning to be co-operative age.

He let go and Littleboy ran out of the kitchen back to-ward the bedrooms.

She took a deep breath. "I've just got to get out of this house. I mean really away."

She sat down and let him wash the place and cross two bandaids over it. "Do you think we could go? Do you think we could go just one more time with a blanket and a pic-nic lunch? I've just got to do *something*."

"All right. All right. You wear the wrench in your belt and I'll wear the hammer, and we'll risk taking the car."

She spent twenty minutes looking for bathing suits and not finding them, and then she stopped because she knew it didn't really matter, there probably wouldn't be anyone there.

The picnic was simple enough. She gathered it together in five minutes, a precious can of tuna fish and hard, home-made biscuits baked the evening before when the electricity had come on for a while, and shriveled, worm-eaten apples, picked from neighboring trees and hoarded all winter in an-other house that had a cellar.

She heard Ben banging about in the garage, measuring out gas from his cache of cans, ten miles' worth to put in the car and ten miles' worth in a can to carry along and hide someplace for the trip back.

Now that he had decided they would go, her mind be-gan to be full of what-ifs. Still, she thought, she would *not* change her mind. Surely once in four years was not too often to risk going to the beach. She had thought

about it all last year too, and now she was going and she would enjoy it.

She gave Littleboy an apple to keep him busy and she packed the lunch in the basket, all the time pressing her lips tight together, and she said to herself that she was *not* going to think of any more what-ifs, and she *was* going to have a good time.

Ben had switched after the war from the big-finned Dodge to a small and rattly European car. They fitted into it cozily, the lunch in back with the army blanket and a pail and shovel for playing in the sand, and Littleboy in front on her lap, his hair brushing her cheek as he turned, looking out.

They started out on the empty road. "Remember how it was before on a weekend?" she said, and laughed. "Bumper to bumper, they called it. We didn't like it then."

A little way down they passed an old person on a bicycle, in jeans and a bright shirt with the tail out. They couldn't tell if it was a man or a woman, but the person smiled and they waved and called, "Aaa."

The sun was hot, but as they neared the beach there began to be a breeze and she could smell the sea. She began to feel as she had the very first time she had seen it. She had been born in Ohio and she was twelve before she had taken a trip and come out on the wide, flat, sunny sands and smelled this smell.

She held Littleboy tight though it made him squirm, and she leaned against Ben's shoulder. "Oh, it's going to be fun!" she said. "Littleboy, you're going to see the sea. Look, darling, keep watching, and smell. It's delicious." And Littleboy squirmed until she let go again.

Then, at last, there was the sea, and it *was* exactly as it had always been, huge and sparkling and making a sound like... no, *drowning out* the noises of wars. Like the black sky with stars, or the cold and stolid moon, it dwarfed even what had happened.

They passed the long, brick bathhouses, looking about as they always had, but the boardwalks between were gone, as Ben had said, not a stick left of them.

"Let's stop at the main bathhouse."

"No," Ben said. "We better keep away from those places. You can't tell who's in there. I'm going way down beyond."

She was glad, really, especially because at the last bath-house she thought she saw a dark figure duck behind the wall.

They went down another mile or so, then drove the car off behind some stunted trees and bushes.

"Nothing's going to spoil this Saturday," she said, pull-ing out the picnic things, "just nothing. Come, Littleboy." She kicked off her shoes and started running for the beach, the basket bouncing against her knee.

Littleboy slipped out of his roomy sneakers easily and scampered after her. "You can take your clothes off," she told him. "There's nobody here at all."

When Ben came, later, after hiding the gas, she was settled, flat on the blanket in old red shorts and a halter, and still the same green kerchief, and Littleboy, brown and naked, splashed with his pail in the shallow water, the wet-ness bringing out the hairs along his back.

"Look," she said, "nobody as far as you can see and you can see so far. It gives you a different feeling from home. You know there are people here and there in the houses, but here, it's like we were the only ones, and here it doesn't even matter. Like Adam and Eve, we are, just you and me and our baby."

He lay on his stomach next to her. "Nice breeze," he said.

Shoulder to shoulder they watched the waves and the gulls and Littleboy, and later they splashed in the surf and then ate the lunch and lay watching again, lazy, on their stomachs. And after a while she turned on her back to see his face. "With the sea it doesn't matter at all," she said and she put her arm across his shoulder. "And we're just part of everything, the wind and the earth and the sea too, my Adam."

"Eve," he said and smiled and kissed her and it was a longer kiss than they had meant. "Myra. Myra."

"There's nobody but us."

She sat up. "I don't even know a doctor since Press Smith was killed by those robbing kids and I'd be scared."

"We'll find one. Besides, you didn't have any trouble. It's been so damn long." She pulled away from his arm. "And I love you. And Littleboy, he'll be way over four by the time we'd have another one."

She stood up and stretched and then looked down the beach and Ben put a hand around her ankle. She looked down the other way. "Somebody's coming," she said, and then he got up too.

Far down, walking in a business-like way on the hard, damp part of the sand, three men were coming toward them.

"You got your wrench?" Ben asked. "Put it just under the blanket and sit down by it, but keep your knees under you."

He put his tee shirt back on, leaving it hanging out, and he hooked the hammer under his belt in back, the top covered by the shirt. Then he stood and waited for them to come.

They were all three bald and shirtless. Two wore jeans cut off at the knees and thick belts, and the other had checked shorts and a red leather cap and a pistol stuck in his belt in the middle of the front at the buckle. He was older. The others looked like kids and they held back as they neared and let the older one come up alone. He was a small man, but looked tough. "You got gas," he said, a flat-voiced statement of fact.

"Just enough to get home."

"I don't mean right here. You got gas at home is what I mean."

Myra sat stiffly, her hand on the blanket on top of where the wrench was. Ben was a little in front of her and she could see his curving, forward-sloping shoulders and the lump of the hammer-head at the small of his back. If he stood up straight, she thought, and held his shoulders like they ought to be, he would look broad and even taller and he would show that little man, but the other had the pistol. Her eyes kept coming back to its shining black.

Ben took a step forward. "Don't move," the little man said. He shifted his weight to one leg, looking relaxed, and put his hand on his hip near the



pistol. "Where you got the gas to get you home? Maybe we'll come with you and you might lend us a little of that gas you got there at your house. Where'd you hide the stuff to get you back, or I'll let my boys play a bit with your little one and you might not like it."

Littleboy, she saw, had edged down, away from them, and he crouched now, watching with his wide-eyed stare. She could see the tense, stringy muscles along his arms and legs and he reminded her of gibbons she had seen at the zoo long ago. His poor little face looks old, she thought, too old for three years. Her fingers closed over the blanket-covered wrench. They'd better not hurt Littleboy.

She heard her husband say, "I don't know."

"Oh, Ben," she said, "oh, Ben."

The man made a motion and the two youths started out, but Littleboy had started first, she saw. She pulled at her wrench and then had to stop and fumble with the blanket, and it took a long time because she kept her eyes on Little-boy and the two others chasing.

She heard a shout and a grunt beside her. "Oh, Ben," she said again, and turned, but it was Ben on top attacking the other, and the small man was trying to use his pistol as a club but he had hold of the wrong end for that, and Ben had the hammer and he was much bigger.

He was finished in a minute. She watched, empty-eyed, the whole of it, holding the wrench in a white-knuckled hand in case he needed her.

Afterward, he moved from the body into a crouching run, hammer in one hand and pistbl, by the barrel, in the other. "You stay here," he shouted back.

She looked at the sea a few minutes, and listened to it, but her own feelings seemed more important than the stoic sea now. She turned and followed, walking along the marks where the feet had swept at the soft sand.

Where the bushes began she saw him loping back. "What happened?"

"They ran off when they saw me after them with the other guy's gun. No bullets though. You'll have to help look now."

"He's lost!"

"He won't come when you call. We'll just have to look. He could be way out. I'll try that and you stay close and look here. The gas is buried under that bush there, if you need it."

"We've got to find him, Ben. He doesn't know his way home from here."

He came to her and kissed her and held her firmly across the shoulders with one arm. She could feel his muscles bunch into her neck as hard almost as the head of his hammer that pressed against her arm. She remembered a time four years ago when his embrace had been soft and comfortable. He had had hair then, but he had been quite fat, and now he was hard and bald, having gained something and lost something.

He turned and started off, but looked back and she smiled and nodded to show him she felt better from his arm around her and the kiss.

I would die if anything happened and we would lose Littleboy, she thought, but mostly I would hate to lose Ben. Then the world would really be lost altogether, and everything would be ended.

She looked, calling in a whisper, knowing she had to peer under each bush and watch behind and ahead for scampering things. He's so small when he huddles into a ball and he can sit so still. Sometimes I wish there was another three-year-old around to judge him by. I forget so much about how it used to be, before. Sometimes I just wonder about him.

"Littleboy, Littleboy. Mommy wants you," she called softly. "Come. There's still time to play in the sand and there are apples left." She leaned forward, and her hand reached to touch the bushes.

Later the breeze began to cool and a few clouds gathered. She shivered in just her shorts and halter, but it was mostly an inner coldness. She felt she had circled, hunting, for well over an hour, but she had no watch, and at a time like this she wasn't sure of her judgment. Still, the sun seemed low. They should go home soon. She kept watching now, too, for silhouettes of people who might *not* be Ben or Littleboy, and she probed the bushes with her wrench with less care. Every now and then she went back to look at the blanket and the basket and the pail and shovel, lying alone and far from the water, and the body there, with the red leather cap beside it.

And then, when she came back another time to see if all the things were still there, undisturbed, she saw a tall, two-headed seeming monster walking briskly down the beach, and one head, bouncing directly over the other one, had hair and was Littleboy's.

The sunset was just beginning. The rosy glow deepened as they neared her and changed the colors of everything. The red plaid of Ben's shorts seemed more emphatic. The sand turned orangeish. She ran to meet them, laughing and splashing her feet in the shallow water, and she came up and held Ben tight around the waist and Littleboy said, "Aaa."

"We'll be home before dark," she said. "There's even time for one last splash."

They packed up finally while Littleboy circled the body by the blanket, touching it sometimes until Ben slapped him for it and he went off and sat down and made little cat sounds to himself.

He fell asleep in her lap on the way home, lying forward against her with his head at her neck the way she liked. The sunset was deep, with reds and purples.

She leaned against Ben. "The beach always makes you tired," she said. "I remember that from before too. I'll be able to sleep tonight."

They drove silently along the wide empty parkway. The car had no lights, but that didn't matter.

"We did have a good day after all," she said. "I feel re-newed."

"Good," he said.

It was just dark as they drove up to the house. Ben stopped the car and they sat a moment and held hands before moving to get the things out.

"We had a good day," she said again. "And Littleboy saw the sea." She put her hand on the sleeping boy's hair, gently so as not to disturb him and then she yawned. "I wonder if it really *was* Saturday."

## **HOT ARGUMENT**

**by Randall Garrett**

**from *Fantasy and Science Fiction***

Willy and his girl-friend, Bea,

While working for the A.E.C.,

Got in a fight and failed to hear

The warning of a bomb test near.

Their friends were sad to hear, no doubt,

That they had had a falling-out.

**Proofed by FishNChips. "Fried food and fast food is good for you."**