

2021 MCC Creative Writing Contest
First Place – Creative Non-Fiction Category
“Bread and Butter” by Sadie Quackenbush

“Now returning to *Boomerang*, from *Cartoon Network!*”

The T.V. is the only thing that lights up the room. Everything else: dead. Concrete below us and a rickety ceiling fan above us. Supported by a green, corduroy couch, we dared not make a sound. The air is musty, and the smell of rotting water hangs heavy. A wet basement. Everyone looks tormented; drained, like the face of a jester who’s been dancing for too long. Above our dungeon-like containment is an evil, old woman who keeps us quiet and meek. Her voice is tear-jerking, and her touch is blood-curdling. Her crown of hair sits organized and thick on her head. Her stature is menacing, and her face is lined with wrinkles from years of anger and distemper. She reigns over her castle with an iron fist. We only eat what she feeds us, we do what she tells us, and we never, *ever* disobey her. Her name is Deb, well-- Miss Deb to us.

We are the prisoners in her castle. Ranging from a few months old to as old as ten, we live there by day and return home at night. Our parents, unbeknownst to our condition, drop us off on days they’re unable to watch us. They don’t know of Miss Deb’s wrath, they only know what they see when they come to pick us up;

the nice, perfect Miss Deb. It is a total change in personality; she transforms from an evil old woman into a sweet and kind princess.

The sound of her footsteps could be heard over the ambient T.V. We sit up straight and hold our breath. Halfway down the stairs, she stops. Her voice clambered through our heads.

“Snack tiiiime!”

We stand up and march single file-- up the stairs, down the hallway, through the living room and into the kitchen. We take our seats at the dining table, not making a sound. Natalie, six, is next to me, hiding behind her long black hair. She’s the newest captive out of all of us. Across from me is Levi, the oldest. He looks tough. His jawline is sharp for a ten-year-old’s, and his buzz cut compliments his overall presence. Last is Maddie, the same age as me, eight. Her doe-eyes bring us comfort and reassurance. Despite the somber mood that coming to Miss Deb’s castle puts us in, Maddie is always making sure that we remain positive. We all try our best to protect her, as Miss Deb preys on Maddie’s jovial energy.

In front of each of our spots lay a plate with two slices of white bread. The look of it almost makes me gag. I lift up the top slice, hoping it’s not what I fear.

It is.

Atop the second slice of bread is nothing but a knife's swipe of butter. I want to puke. A butter sandwich; the worst snack ever. But I have to eat it. Or I face the worst punishment there is: getting locked inside the dark closet-- the chamber.

Levi had been in there once. He returned to us traumatized. He told us about the monsters in the chamber, the spider webs that caressed his face. He was forced into the closet because he touched the remote to the television. I know refusing Miss Deb's food will earn me the same punishment.

As I watch the others eat, anxiety begins to consume my body. I contemplate what to do. I didn't like bread-- I still don't. It makes me sick. I pick up the cursed sandwich and hold it up to my mouth. Catching a whiff, I gag.

I can't do this.

I ball up the bread and butter in my hands. I throw the plate away and wait at the table for the others to finish. They give me warning glares across the table; their eyes are saying "don't do this." Miss Deb comes into the kitchen and dismisses us into the living room. I keep the bread ball in my left hand, making a fist. She orders us to sit on the carpet while we wait for our parents to come get us. The four of us sit in a straight line, our heads tilted back as the television mesmerizes us once again. However, I don't let it cloud my focus. I keep my hands in my lap and keep my left one shut tight. I'm scared she'll be able to tell.

As the minutes pass my grip remains unfaltering. My hand becomes sweaty and slippery, the grease from the butter now mixing with my own perspiration. Overcome with the rumination in my head, I squeeze even tighter, my knuckles turning white. Suddenly, I see Miss Deb standing in front of my gaze. Her chiseled face and tall stature menaced above me. I startle and gasp, terrified of the look on her face. Her arms are crossed; I must have looked guilty.

“What’s in your hand?” She demands sternly.

My face turns red, and I know she can read me like a book.

“Uhh... nothing,” I respond shakily.

Her eyebrows raise, and her face morphs into an even more terrifying picture.

“Don’t you lie to me,” she snaps through her teeth.

Her eyes pierce through my soul, and dread permeates through my blood.

She grabs my arm and I slowly release my grip, revealing the ball of bread, butter, and sweat I had been holding onto. Her face changes from terrifying to disgusted.

“Is that your food?”

She enunciates every letter, hitting the last consonants sharply. My mouth trembles and searches for words. My heart is beating expeditiously.

“I . . . I didn’t like the bread-- and--”

Her grip tightens on my arm which forces me to stand up. Without hesitation she leads me down the hallway and I know where I'm going. *The chamber*. Just then the front door opens and Miss Deb un-hands me.

“Helllloo! I was just going to get Sadie ready to leave.” I snap around to see my parents standing in the doorway.

Miss Deb had transformed into a kind, do-no-wrong princess again. Her voice shimmered as she carried on talking to my parents. She smiled and relaxed her guard-- she seemed approachable. I was relieved, but frustrated at the same time. Upon exiting her threshold, she gave me a side-hug and wished me goodbye. My parents will never know, but they rescued me from the grip of Miss Deb's wrath every day. And that day, they earned their knighthood, saving me from the irreversible fate of the chamber.