

The Lady's Bread
Emily Hoff

The lady is quite grey. Both in appearance and mood. She rolls about, looking as if she is a big, fat sandwich bun. She squats like a sandwich bun too, squatting over her breakfast and squatting over her ovens and squatting over her customers, who, by the way she squats, become quite alarmed upon entering the bakery. They lift their noses, first, to the smell of baking bread and second, to the dirty bread boy who stands behind the counter. The dirty bread boy tends to lurk as opposed to squatting, and can't help his shabby appearance. He was dumped by the harsh city, taken in by soft dough. Dough that sticks to his hands after pummeling it for an hour. Dough that flattens and becomes pliable under the pressure of his trusted rolling pin. The flour he sleeps beside, lightly dusts his hollowed face, and it is often, when the bakery lights are out, and the boy goes into the dark street to wipe the exhausting day from his hands, that he is mistaken for a ghost. And still he lurks about, creeping behind the counter with intense head jerks that intimidate the customers and often frighten them into buying a loaf of bread. The bun like lady does not converse with her customers; it is the dirty bread boy who will, after playing his part as the lurking ghost, smile mischievously and tell the gents and their ladies the special of the day. Some customers that try the lady's bread will never have another kind of bread ever again.

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Ellen seated herself on the edge of a windowsill and regarded the shops and their owners. The street was subdued and shadows crawled sluggishly from storefront to storefront. A dirty little boy, with a pale face came up behind her and looked down disapprovingly. "M'am, You're sittin on d'shop windowsill. Missus'd prefer you t' move along."

Ellen sprung up and laughed quietly to herself, a thing she was found to do when embarrassed, then started to walk aimlessly up the street. The boy called out, "M'am, if yuh pleez, there's fresh batch just come out, free samples we've got."

Ellen squinted at him from up the street. She straightened her overcoat, laughed quietly, and followed the boy around the corner.

The bell fastened over the bakery's door jingled as Ellen and the boy entered. The lights were on low and a soft haze hung over their heads; steam and smoke from the ovens. The lady was squatting in one corner, regarding a chunk of yellow bread. She held it out and the boy took it, sniffed it, and tossed it into a woven basket covered with dark rags. The chunk of bread looked like it was glowing lying in the dark shade of the rags. The squatting lady grunted and stood up. She disappeared behind the red cloth separating the counter from the kitchen, letting in a blast of yeast enriched heat. Ellen looked around awkwardly, wishing for a spot to sit. Ellen really liked sitting. She would go for groceries and end up on the curb in front of the shop, regarding the women that went in and out. Sitting was pleasant and comfortable. It wasn't so pleasant when she wanted to sit and could find nothing to sit on. The boy lurked to the back of the counter. He handed Ellen a fingernail size piece of brown

bread. She looked at him strangely, then took it, laughed quietly, and popped it into her mouth.

It tasted of fried chicken and melted butter. She could see a feast spread out before her, smell baked potatoes with gravy, see the decanters of red wine and fountains of chocolate. She held a leg of lamb and devoured it in a single bite. Ellen swallowed and looked at the little boy. He was standing still and quiet. His head jerking intensely every few seconds. He handed her another nail size piece of bread. It was white and covered in sesame. She was watching people watch her. She could see thousands of eyes looking up at her, she could feel the silk gloves covering her hands, smell the nectar sweet perfume wrapped like a scarf round her neck. She imagined herself laughing and everybody nodding their heads in approval. Ellen swallowed. She reached out her hand for more and the boy gave her a tiny piece of bread, golden and warm. She put it in her mouth. She was floating in a tub of gold coins. They were cold and made the hair along her spine tingle. The weight of the coins suppressed her breath and ate her thoughts. She swallowed the bread and thrust out her hand. The boy gave her another piece which she hurriedly pushed into her mouth. It was dark, but humid. Red blurred the edges of her vision. She felt naked, but very comfortable. Her nipples perched atop her breasts like the cherry on top of a mound of soft ice cream. She heard soft moans in the darkness. She felt fingers lightly touch the nape of her neck, her thigh, the outline of her lips. She outstretched her neck and fluttered her eyelids. She spread her legs. Ellen opened her eyes and lurched toward the counter. She reached out desperately; demanding silently for more bread. The boy smiled and motioned to the empty counter. Ellen turned frantically, searching for the bread. The yellow chunk glowed from its nest of darkness on the floor. She grasped it and forced it down. She jerked and rolled around on the walls and floor. She felt hatred and pain and fear. She wanted to rot into the floor. She wanted to smash her fist into someone. Ellen couldn't breathe.

The bun like lady came out of the kitchen and squatted beside Ellen, twitching on the floor. The dirty bread boy locked the door and turned out the lights. The soft thwack of pummeling dough could be heard all night.