

## GIVE US THIS DAY . . .

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She was afraid of *bread*, for Christ's sake. It was something she was afraid to talk about even with her friends, so how was she supposed to explain it to some friggin' counselor? Casey could imagine the session already: Ms. Burgess sitting behind her cluttered desk – Casey had been to see her earlier in the year for a scheduled career counseling, and remember wondering how she could keep track of the emotional lives of fifteen hundred kids if she couldn't even keep her own desk organized – the compassionate smile painted on an understanding face, notes scribbled absently on a yellow legal pad without looking down, half-glasses pushed down to the tip of her nose so she watched as you spoke like some kid peeking over a neighbor's fence, smiling and nodding . . .

And all the time thinking to herself: *This little girl is a nutcase.*

Casey wondered if there might be a button or something under the corner of Ms. Burgess' desk; something she could push surreptitiously during a session to summon help – beefy fellows, Casey imagined, with smiles and restraints, to take her away somewhere for 'observation.'

Casey couldn't blame her, of course, she'd push the button too if someone came to her with the same kind of problem.

It wasn't just that Casey was afraid of *eating* bread, oh no, she could've dealt with that, no problem. Lots of people didn't *like* bread – or peas, or milk, or cabbage or whatever – and that

was pretty normal. Everyone had things they didn't like, and if they didn't like those things strongly enough, well then that was the same thing as being afraid, right?

Casey's mom was like that with dirt and germs, just like *her* mom before her, a realization that led Casey to briefly consider her problem might be genetic: the same irrational fears her mom had, only directed at baked goods instead of bacteria.

Her mom was a classic germaphobe, always worried that something had been left open or out too long or kept in the refrigerator too long or ... and on and on and on. Casey remembered describing her mom once to a friend: "You know how some people see half a glass of water and think of it as half-full, and some people think of it as half-empty? Well, my mom sees half a glass of water and thinks, '*Gee, I wonder if that's safe to drink?*' "

But even her mom wasn't afraid of germs like Casey was afraid of bread, and so she had filed 'genetic predisposition' theory away under 'way too easy,' instead focusing her search on finding some *real* answers.

Right now, though, Casey was sitting alone in the living room, staring into the kitchen. She had just come in from school and was eyeing an unopened loaf of sliced bread, a Pepperidge Farm Soft Oatmeal Loaf, wrapped safely in its sleek plastic cloak, as it leered at her from beside the refrigerator.

No way she could tell anybody about this.

The behavior change, noted by her parents, had begun with a polite but insistent 'No, thank you' to bread offered around the dinner table, but had degenerated faster and faster as the 'bread thing' interjected itself increasingly into nearly every aspect of her life. When her grades began to plummet, her parents were worried, but Casey was unable to offer any explanation ... how could she tell them what the problem was, when she didn't know herself?

The effect had been to compound their concern, until they finally agreed that the first step – it bothered Casey that they had actually described this as ‘the first step,’ and she had begun then to fantasize about the smiling men with the physical restraints – was an after-school appointment the following Thursday scheduled with the school counselor.

Sitting there in the living room, lights out so as not to attract attention, and nervously sweating under the stony gaze of the Pepperidge Farm Soft Oatmeal Loaf, Casey wondered what she would say.

She thought back to when all this had started.

Five weeks ago Casey Spencer was as normal as any of her friends, with the same concerns, same interests and same insecurities all of them shared. She was fourteen and just starting ninth grade. High school. New friends. New boys. Dating.

Hell, if she *hadn't* had insecurities it would have been abnormal.

But insecurities were one thing; this was different. Fears and insecurities, she could talk about with her friends, but who was she supposed to go to with something like this? Who would take even take something like this seriously?

Her first indication that something was wrong was a little over a month ago, in the school cafeteria, and it had begun with a biscuit. Might have been a roll, but she was pretty certain it was a biscuit.

She'd been sitting across from her best friend, Rachel Cunningham, already lamenting early math scores only weeks into the semester, when she noticed the biscuit – yep, she remembered it clearly now, *definitely* it was a biscuit – had turned just slightly on Rachel's plate. Not much, and Casey was pretty sure Rachel hadn't noticed. Just a slight turn, like someone eavesdropping on their conversation. Casey had been startled, but decided not to say anything

out loud, although even now she wasn't sure if it was because she'd been afraid of looking foolish or to keep from tipping off the biscuit.

At the time, Rachel was in the middle of another of her cyclic attempts at Atkins, which was the only reason the bread was still on her plate in the first place: *Carbs*. Damn, Casey suddenly realized, if Rachel had been fifteen pounds lighter, the biscuit would never even have been there in the first place. Never would have been a problem.

But that begged the question, explaining only why the biscuit was on the plate; it didn't offer a clue about why it had seemed so interested in their conversation in the first place.

The incident stayed with her all that day, nagging at her throughout the afternoon, and the first thing she did when she got home from school was log onto the internet and Google "*fear of bread*." The computer was a wonderful tool, and Googling those three simple words had netted Casey fifteen hundred *thousand* possible hits ... not one of which helped in even the slightest way.

The closest thing she found was a medical term that seemed to describe her anxiety. The word was *sitiophobia*, but referred more to a fear of food in general, and closely related to the 'fear of eating': *phagophobia*.

Casey had entertained a fleeting hope that the 'Rumplestiltskin Effect' would kick in and her problem overcome simply by giving it a name. But Rumplestiltskin was a fairy tale, while the bread – Casey glanced over at it again, beside the refrigerator, waiting – was real, and she found naming it did nothing at all to defeat it. Besides, she didn't have an eating disorder, she was being *stalked* for Christ's sake.

Something drew her attention back to the Pepperidge Farm: was it just her imagination or had it shifted its position slightly, angling around the fruit bowl just a bit to get a better view?

Her mom and dad wouldn't be home yet for another couple of hours and Casey was alone. Well, except for the Soft Oatmeal Loaf and a plate of left over dinner rolls ... which, thankfully, didn't seem to be much interested in Casey at the moment. The rolls were content in their little corner of the counter, safely covered in Saran Wrap and minding their own business, evidently having decided they didn't have a dog in this fight. No, this one would be between Casey and the Oatmeal Loaf.

Casey wasn't surprised, though, the Pepperidge Farm was a bit of a bully. The Pepperidge Farm had an attitude.

In the hall earlier, Ms. Burgess had stopped Casey and smiled – it was a ten dollar Rolex smile that none of the kids believed for a minute – reminding her of the conference scheduled with her parents the following afternoon. Did Casey have any questions?

Casey flirted with the notion of dumping everything right then and there, in the hallway as the current of kids between classes flowed all around them. Hell, if counseling was going to stand a chance at all, then a timely 'heads up' might be just the thing.

In the end, though, Casey decided to wait. She was pretty sure her particular problem wasn't one of the case studies Ms. Burgess had studied in school, dutifully scribbling sightless notes on her legal pad while she stared blankly at professors over the half-glasses and developing her professional demeanor even then. Oh sure, they probably covered eating disorders *and* stalkers pretty thoroughly, but where the two overlapped ... Casey was pretty sure the counselor was about to find herself in virgin territory, and unlike the 'Great and Powerful Wizard of Oz,' Casey didn't think this was a problem Ms. Burgess was going to be able to pull an answer for out of her little bag of counseling tricks.

No, Casey suddenly decided, the television playing as a distraction in the dim light of the living room where she was hiding from a loaf of bread, if there was going to be a solution, this was something Casey would have to handle herself, before her appointment the following afternoon, and preferably before her mom and dad came home.

Standing deliberately, Casey turned off the TV and stepped into the kitchen. The bread was out near the very edge of the counter now. She was sure it hadn't been there earlier, because she remembered having to lean around the corner to get a good look at it.

But now it was right out there in the open. Staring at her. Cheeky bastard.

She walked up to the edge of the counter, purposely invading its space.

The desire to take back her life overcame her fear, and as she grabbed the bread firmly by the back, she could feel it struggle under her hand and was struck by the sudden smell of yeast – the smell, she realized, of *fear* – filling the kitchen. For the first time, she noticed the feel of the bread beneath her hand was soft, weak; so different from the façade of strength forced on her earlier as it tried to appear stronger, braver, than it was.

It was only an act, she could see that now.

She shot a warning glance over at the dinner rolls, but they weren't paying attention. Not like they were looking away or anything, it was more the way they were sitting there, canted just slightly, just so, watching but not watching; their feigned disinterest just a little too obvious... not watching just enough for her to tell they were nearly hypnotized by what was about to happen next.

The Pepperidge Farm was feeling it too, finding himself suddenly abandoned and surprisingly alone. Mr. Tough Guy. Mr. Whole Grain. Not so brave anymore without your little biscuit buddies, are you?

The smell of fear emboldened Casey, and she glanced up at the clock over the stove. Her mom would be home in about forty-five minutes, and her dad maybe half an hour later. That was okay, she nodded, finding herself in control for the first time in weeks. This would be over well before then.

She crossed over to the cutlery drawer and, in full view of the Oatmeal Loaf, drew out a knife. Long and thin, sharp and serrated. She walked back slowly, the knife held casually, and placed it down on the counter. Right in the open. Right where he could see it.

The light played off the subtle shifting of the cellophane as the bread trembled at the sight, and then seemed to draw into itself, no longer belligerent as he had been only minutes ago. Not having much to say at all anymore, aware now of the writing on the wall: *He was toast*.

Casey was feeling better already, empowered enough to leave the knife there on the counter, within easy reach – *daring* him to take it.

She flashed a wicked smile, “*I’ll be back.*”

Okay, it wasn’t the Terminator, but still it was enough to make her point. There were a few more things she needed, and then she and Mr. Pepperidge Farm Soft Oatmeal Loaf were going to have themselves a little chat.

*Soft*, she thought, *Yeah, no shit ‘soft.’ Soft and weak.*

When she returned, it was with a jar of Skippy Smooth N’ Creamy in one hand and Smuckers Strawberry Jam in the other.

She smiled when she saw him shudder, aware now that the tables had turned.

Yes sir, this would all be over in just a minute. She would talk to her mom and dad when they got home, but already Casey felt sure they wouldn’t be needing that appointment.

No, she thought, the rasping sound filling the kitchen as she unscrewed the top of the peanut butter, by this time tomorrow everything should be back to normal.

THE END