

**First Place, Prose**  
**Grades 7-9**

***“The Witch and the Oven--Hansel and Gretel Retold,” Malachi Gross***

As she stumbled and tripped along the rocky, root-covered forest undergrowth, she was not thinking about her family, whom she lost many weeks before in these treacherous woods. She was not thinking about the cuts and bruises that covered her arms and legs. Only her primal instincts drove her. Hunger was her only thought.

Hours passed, and she shuffled along the forest, the canopy of trees seemingly endless, blocking out any view of the sun, leaving her oblivious to her surroundings. And then, she heard it.

\*Crack\*.

She swiveled her head and saw a rabbit and her kits standing directly in front of her. All she had to do was grab them in this vulnerable state, and the pain in her stomach would finally go away. Right as she was about to launch herself at them, she heard a voice in the back of her head telling her to stop. She looked at the kits snuggling up to their mother, and she knew she could not bring herself to take them. She sank to her knees in despair, falling to the ground with a dull, constant pain in the pit of her stomach.

Sometime later, she awoke, lying on her side. She woke up in a haze. Slowly her eyes cleared, and she began to make out the outline of a shape in front of her. She then realized she saw the trees opening up, and a small cabin lay in the center. As she slowly got to her feet, she realized it was not merely a cabin, but one built of bread, with a roof made of cake as well as transparent windows made of sugar. She started walking towards the house, breaking out into a jog, then running, running as fast as her legs would take her, tripping over the roots of trees, getting up to start running again.

While running to the cabin, she heard the voice in her head, urging her not to go, to turn back. She slowed down momentarily as she thought to herself, “I could have sworn there was nothing there before I went to sleep.” However, this

moment quickly passed, and she silenced the voice in her head, picking up her pace once more.

As she reached the cabin, she tentatively ripped off a square of bread and bit into it. Then another. And another. And another. Soon she was tearing out chunks of the cabin, until at last, the pain went away. Suddenly feeling tired, she found a patch of grass and fell into a deep sleep.

When she came to, she looked to the cabin--suddenly rebuilt, all signs she had been there erased. Curious, she went around to the other side of the cabin and saw a door. Right as she reached for the handle, she felt that same voice, telling her to forget her curiosity and turn around. While she hesitated for a moment, she turned the handle and swung the door open.

Inside, the cabin was a husk compared to the outside. As she made her way through the home, she noted that every room was dust-filled and covered in cobwebs, as if the cabin had been abandoned for decades.

Finally she reached the house's grandest room, a kitchen with a massive brick oven in the room's center. Disinterested now, she started to turn away to make her way out of the cabin, when suddenly she froze in place. It was as though a snake was wrapping itself around her, squeezing the life out of her. Then she heard it.

"Hello."

She struggled, fighting, trying anything to get out of the hold the voice had on her. Cackling, the voice spoke to her.

"Why are you trying to escape?" , the voice questioned innocently.

She let out a little scream as she started walking towards the oven, as if she could not control her limbs. Face almost pressed up against the stove now, she could feel the heat radiating from it, burning her face. The oven did not feel warm and inviting whatsoever. Instead, it radiated a heat that would burn and inflict pain given a chance.

She managed to squeak out, "H-h-how, how are you doing this?"

Immediately she felt the grip over her throat intensify. She struggled to breathe at all.

“Shhh,” the voice hushed her, soothing its voice. “I am not here to fight you. I can help you. You will never go hungry again, and neither will I. For so long, you have struggled to survive, but now your struggles are over. Give in to me, and all your pain can end.”

The voice started to lull her to sleep as she started closing her eyes, thinking to herself, “That does not sound too bad. Maybe I will just go to sleep for a little while.” Just then, she heard that voice one more time in her head, and she knew she had to leave.

“I will not join you,” she whispered to the voice, almost as if she was scared to say it. She felt the heat flare up, and she closed her eyes, hoping for a quick end. And then, nothing. She slowly opened her eyes.

“So be it.”

She felt the invisible grip loosen from her, and she sucked in a deep breath of air, coughing violently from the strain on her throat. She wondered if this was some sick trick. She started to back away slowly and met no resistance. She ran as fast as her feet could carry her out of the cabin, and she did not stop running until her legs gave out beneath her.

Weeks passed. Weeks turned into months. She had no food and no water. She was abandoned to the harsh realities of the woods, subject to attacks from wolves and tigers. Every night, she sat miserably under the trees, the temptation to return to the cabin almost overpowering her. Nevertheless, she managed to hold off, listening to the guiding voice in the back of her mind.

One day, as she was traversing through the woods, she came across a rabbit and her kits. She could not hold back anymore. She silenced the voice in the back of her mind and feasted on the animals. When she rose, something of a twisted grin rose to her face. She walked back the path she had all the months ago, entered the cabin, and marched directly to the kitchen.

“I am ready,” she said.

For a moment, the room eerily hung in silence until she felt the sensation she had when she had come to the room the first time.

“Excellent.”

Immediately, her injuries healed, the pain in her stomach disappeared, and the dryness of her throat was gone. She looked down and saw she did not recognize her own hands. They were the hands of an old woman, calloused and dirty. She paid no attention. For the first time in a very long time, she smiled. She noticed that the irritating voice in the back of her mind was gone.

“In a few moments, you will find two children will arrive at our cabin. Do you know what you have to do?”

“Oh, yes, I do.” The woman looked almost gleeful as she went outside to meet the two young children.

*The moral of this story is that temptation can corrupt even the best in people.*

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