

Breakfast For Two

by Stephen Jones

Granny Emma lived down at the deserted end of Cemetery Road, in a rock-red house that bled with every sunset. She lived there alone with the white-hot memories of my grandfather, memories stoked daily by the presence of the huge bull mastiff he had left to watch over her. The dog was Milt, bought the day my grandfather learned he was dying and named after the man that told him so. Grandfather was buried down at the other end of the road, far from forgotten. I was twelve the first and only time I went to visit my father's mother, and was the last known person to ever see her at all.

On the way to the bus station for that visit, my father laughed going through a yellow light and said hardly anyone in his family had ever gone senile. Then he slapped my leg hard and said that was only because everybody killed themselves first, before they got old like Grandfather had. He said it ran in the family, told me just to go down to the cemetery to see my three oldest uncles if I didn't believe him. I looked hard at my slowly fading black eye in the mirror and asked him if he'd ever go senile, but then we were at the bus station and I was on the bus, trying to get the brown outline of his hand off my leg, trying to forget the smell of stale bourbon in my face.

As the bus pulled slowly out I waved at him through the yellowing glass, but he never saw me. Soon I found my own reflection filling the space where my father had been.

At the other end of the ride Granny Emma was waiting for me at the old drugstore. Milt filled the back of my dead grandfather's truck, and he growled deeply at me as I drew near. I was hesitant, but Granny Emma coaxed me in while telling Milt it was alright, it was only James from down in the city. I settled into the deep bucket seat amidst door bolts and padlocks. As we pulled out, a much worn little leather book fell down from Granny Emma's lap and landed between the seats, open and facing me. I looked down and saw one empty page on the right and a page with the words *I'm having him up for breakfast* centered on the left, written across the lines instead of with them. She sighed violently when she noticed me looking at the book and reached down to slam it shut. The small clap filled the cab and in the back of the truck Milt snarled loudly at something that was already gone.

It was the first time I had seen my Granny Emma since the funeral, fourteen months ago.

We were almost all the way out of the small town before she talked, a deep strained voice that startled me, coming from an old grey widow lady, a grandma. At the time I thought her throat must have been worn out from talking to herself.

"Did you know Milt here weighed one-hundred twenty-five pounds the day your father died? You

bet, James. Outweighed him by twenty-two pounds, he did. And still growing."

I didn't correct her that he wasn't *my* father but just looked out the window and tried hard not to think of him, shrivelled and dying and out of his already decomposed mind, weighing less than a dog.

When we got near the house Milt jumped out and started barking down a pipe sticking out of the ground near the foundations of the house. Granny didn't seem to notice this or think it strange like I did, but ushered me into the house and the room I would be staying in the next week. It had been my father's room, she said, and the first thing I noticed was the desk, uncannily similar to the one Mom had been sanding on for the past month. This one was a half-done job too, started but never quite finished.

We ate dinner then and listened to Milt licking up the bloody meat Granny had given him. When I asked why he had to eat in that little closet she paused for a moment and then led me over behind him, eating, and pointed to what looked like a big metal door laying on the ground in the deep closet. She told me it was an old cellar that my grandfather had built the house on, a cellar she never went into because it was cold and dark and my grandfather had told her rats lived down there. And where there were rats there would be snakes. She said she fed Milt there because the sound of him eating on the metal door kept the rats from coming up the steps and leading the snakes into the house. I looked up at her when she paused after saying this, and her eyes were looking far off, into some indefinite nowhere. As we sat back down I asked how could the snakes get in with those two big locks on the hatch, and she laughed and said she was probably just a scary old lady who was afraid of the dark. And besides, she said, she didn't even have the keys to those locks. My dead grandfather had taken them with him to the grave. I didn't say anything but wondered how they could be so bright and shiny if they'd been there for at least a year.

As we sat back down I asked if I could ever go down there and she immediately told me no, in a voice that meant that was all that was to be said concerning the cellar. But I pretended not to catch the threat under her words and went ahead and asked if it was true what my dad said about him getting locked down there when he was a kid. She turned on me then and almost said something but caught herself and just said boys will be boys. Somehow though, looking back and forth from her to the door I could tell it was true, and that made me feel better. I'd probably want to beat my kid up too if I had been locked down there long enough, with only the snakes and the rats and the dark all around.

I didn't say much else through the whole meal, just concentrated on chewing and swallowing and trying not to choke.

The following day after breakfast I went outside to look around. Down the hill in back of the

house I found the livestock pen, small but well-constructed. The grass was grown up high all around it, but inside nothing had had time to take hold yet in the packed dirt. I slipped through the rusted pipe fence and unintentionally scared an armadillo off of what looked like bones in the middle of the pen. It scuttled away quickly, soon becoming nothing but moving grass and distant rustle.

I edged over to the bones slowly and quietly, the way I figured a person ought to, and picked up a cow skull that still had bits of hair around the base of one of the horns, the one that had somehow curved around and grown deep into the dull beast's right eye socket. I knew this had to have happened while it was alive too, but couldn't yet understand how. Looking into the bad eye I could see the old cow out here all alone, going slowly blind and crazy from the pain, not able to do anything to escape. Just waiting, waiting for the pain and the loneliness to end.

As I tenderly turned the skull around to look at it better I noticed something small and pink fall out. I bent over to see a baby mouse, dead and too small to have ever opened its eyes but old enough that its teeth were already very large and out of proportion. Looking into the back of the skull then I saw five other babies, all dead for lack of something. I gently laid the head down where I had found it and was turning around to leave when Granny's voice speared me in place. I could suddenly feel Milt's uncanny presence too, and became sickly aware that he had been there all along, watching.

"Well James, I see you found poor old Jenny. Yep, old girl. It's too bad. She died about a year after your grandfather did. Starved. All the way to death--she was crippled anyway though... But you shouldn't mess with stuff like that, James. No, it'll --get on you. I guess you're just like your father though. Matt, right?" I looked up, confused, and slowly nodded yes. She continued. "He used to always be getting into stuff he shouldn't be getting into. But you got to be more careful out here, hun. *He* learned that." She paused for a moment then, as if just noticing my almost faded black eye. "And you will too. You'll find it's not like your city at all out here. No, not at all. You come on inside now so I can wash you up. Come on now."

The next couple of days I tried to make myself as inconspicuous as possible. Not that that was very hard. Granny Emma fed me and all, but that was about as far as it went. I wasn't even sure what she did with the rest of her time, but I think she knew what I did with mine. At least Milt did. He followed me everywhere, never close but always close enough. At night he slept on the cool kitchen floor between my room and Granny Emma's, and when the rats or snakes would get to stirring below him he would let out a bellow that would sometimes integrate itself into my dreams for a split second before waking me in a wide-eyed fear. I didn't sleep very well there at Granny Emma's. And she didn't either.

Instead of sleeping she sat up most of every night and wrote in her little leather journal, mumbling under her breath the whole time. I could hear her in the room next to mine, a steady rhythm of meaningless words accompanied by the incessant scratching of her pen. Knowing this was how she spent her nights worried me for some reason, but it also helped me to understand why she seemed so barely awake every day, why she was just sitting there in the kitchen drinking coffee every time I came in and felt awkward, like I had just interrupted a conversation.

One of those times when I came up to the kitchen screen, barefoot because my shoes were wet, I actually did at least catch her talking. When I tiptoed in she was reading the Bible aloud, but louder than necessary. When I asked her why, she looked at me calmly and said she was reading to Milt, if I must know, and what was I here for anyway, wasn't I supposed to have moved out years ago, with all my brothers? Before I retreated back to my father's room I replied I didn't know, I had just been put on a bus. Once on the bed I tried for some reason to cry but found the tears wouldn't come with Milt watching.

Two days later I got sick with throwing up and diarrhea. Granny Emma said it was probably from swimming in the dirty stock tank by the windmill, way back on her land. I didn't agree with her, but didn't argue either. It didn't really matter anyway though, I'd be back out there as soon as I was well again. I liked it a lot out there in the stock tank. It was far away from her and Milt couldn't see me when I was in the water. It was the only place where I really felt alone. Even in the bed where I slept my dead grandfather stared down at me watchfully from the wall, with eyes as cold and lifeless as Milt's.

That first night after I got sick a fever came down on me hard, and I spent the whole night sweating and getting stuck in my dreams, stuck to where I couldn't tell anything for sure. About what I figured to be three in the morning, I heard Granny Emma get up from her desk and come in to check on me, as I must have been moaning or something. She felt my head with the back of her hand and quickly drew away. I heard Milt glide in from his kitchen haunt and felt his huge muzzle pushing at the sheets of my father's old bed, inhaling, violating, smelling hopefully for the scent of death.

After some indefinite passage of time that could have been hours or no time at all my fever worked itself up to the point where I couldn't even tell if she was still there or not. I figured she wasn't though, as I could hear what sounded like a voice in the kitchen. But then while turning my head in slow motion towards the door Milt growled deep in his chest and I heard Granny rustling quickly out of the room, armadillo like. From my bed it sounded like she opened the outer basement door, and I could hear lost keys rattling at the locks of the second. Milt's growl was a steady thunder, echoing throughout the rock-red house.

I heard the old cellar door being thrown back then, and heard Milt clawing and snarling, sounding for all the world like he was fighting something there in the kitchen. I wanted to get up to go see what, if anything, he had torn into, but found myself suddenly too weak to rise from bed. And too scared.

I began to fade away then into fevered dreams riddled with teeth and fur and scratching sounds and disconnected voices talking about nothing.

And right as I slipped away, or maybe after, in my dream, I don't know, I heard Granny's voice, shrill and out of control, shrieking over and over, "Is this what you want? I'll let him. Is this really what you want?" As of then I had never heard a voice with so much hate in it, never heard a voice that white-hot. Even at home I hadn't. I disconnectedly felt my bowels let go and then felt nothing else.

Two days later I was mostly well, although feeling a few pounds lighter. But even if I hadn't lost weight I still think I'd have felt different. In the days I had been sick I found myself developing a strange affinity to the rhythm of Granny Emma in the kitchen, talking and sometimes reading from the Bible. I found I liked to hear her read, liked having her break through into the darkness of my fevered dreams and force food and water down my cracking throat. And when I listened to her reading I figured it was just to Milt, like she said, until one day I heard him out front barking into the smoke pipe at the same time I was listening to her read violently out of Revelations. I didn't understand then, but thought she was going senile like my dad said he never would.

Afterwards I snuck out and looked down the pipe myself, but saw only blackness, blackness that smelled of things better not seen. I put me eye right up to the pipe then to look deeper, but drew away when I could feel the tangible weight of someone's stare upon me. I turned to the house but nobody was there, not even Milt. I looked all around, but saw no one.

That night I dreamed I could remember black liquid dripping down there at the bottom of the pipe, at the bottom of the cellar, and imagined there was a little pool of brackish water reflecting my face back up at me.

The next day was unusually still, and the stock tank had become low because the windmill wasn't pumping into it. The water was down about six inches altogether, enough that the tips of the long strands of moss that grew from the bottom were bunched together at the surface where the sun could get to them directly, making a burning smell so decadent I thought something might have died in there. After a few moment's hesitation though I closed my eyes and stepped in, telling myself they had been there before too, I could just see them better now, that's all.

As I rested against one of the cool concrete sides I saw some writing on the far side of the water from me and went to inspect. As I waded through the moss I made out the words *Matthew's Place* carved deeply in the concrete, just below the waterline. I was looking around for more writing when I heard the truck start up, and stood up to see Milt take off running towards the house only to catch himself when he was almost out of sight and turn back towards the windmill and me. His duty I suppose.

It was early in the afternoon and I figured Granny Emma had arranged her shopping around me not getting back until dinner, so I jumped out of the tank and began hastily rubbing the strands of moss off so I could put my clothes on. I took off running then and Milt loomed behind and above me like a malevolent shadow, always one step behind and looking where I was going.

I got to the house in no time and opened the screen door to the kitchen. I went through the kitchen and stood there at Granny Emma's door. Milt placed himself solidly in front of me, filling the doorway. Her leather journal was there on the desk where she had left it.

I took a step forward and Milt growled menacingly, turning his muzzle my direction and pulling his lips back. We were almost eye level. I stood there trying to stare him down for what felt like forever but he wasn't budging and I knew I was going to lose. I was just turning to leave when I heard my dead grandfather's truck pulling up in the driveway. Milt ran for the driveway and I stepped over to the desk.

The next day found me in the stock tank again, with the page that had fallen from Granny Emma's notebook when I had opened it the day before. I had tried to cram it back in wherever it had came from but couldn't find where and so I stuffed it in my pocket out of desperation when I heard the truck door shut. I was so sure Milt would be able to smell that page on me, that Granny Emma would be able to see it in my eyes. But somehow neither noticed, and I made it through the day without incident.

Although I cannot recall the exact words carved deeply there in her very small and precise hand, I can distinctly recall how they made me feel, sitting there in tank that day. Cold. Cold even though the white sun reflected back up off the water into my eyes.

The little page was dated exactly one year to the day after my grandfather died. Written under the date was a detailed description of that day; Granny Emma had gone into town early to get Milt more dog food because he was eating so much then. She had also meant to ask Carl at the feedstore what to do about Jenny. On the long ride there she had become distracted though, and almost ran off the road thinking of the last twelve months, of the countless times she had set the table for two and eaten alone, after waiting for so long and having nothing happen. She thought about Milt too, she wrote, and how he had become so much like my grandfather in the little time they had together. She said it was comforting to

have him around, it was like her husband wasn't quite gone yet. Her shopping quickly done with, she headed back home then, stopping on the way to stand for a moment at the tombstone of the man who's existence she had loathed but who's presence she now missed. She quietly thanked her dead husband for leaving something, no, *someone* behind to watch over her. When she pulled into the driveway of the rock-red house, she was surprised when Milt didn't bound out to meet her like he always did. Stepping inside, she found out why.

He was at the second door to the cellar, which was open although she hadn't opened it. He was going mean-crazy the way big dogs will do, and there was blood all over his head and splattered all around him. Granny Emma wrote that as she made her way over to him she glanced into the living room and saw it all in disarray, as if it had been turned over for some reason. Looking over Milt's shoulder all she could see was black, but nonetheless she thought she could see movement there in the black. Then it came to her; there had been an intruder in the house, and Milt had found him (it surely had to be a *him*, she wrote) when he went into the cellar, looking for more to steal.

Not hesitating even a moment then she ordered Milt out of the way and slammed the hatch shut with her broom. She said there was beating at the hatch at first, but when Milt growled the noise ceased. Towards the end of the page she began speculating as to what to do with this man, *her* man, but then her writing was broken mid-sentence to be continued on the next page, which I didn't have.

When I got back to the house things were altogether different. Everything seemed to exist in relation to the cellar door, with all its bolts and chains. Milt seemed more watchful than ever, going back and forth from the smoke-pipe to the cellar door and growling. Granny Emma was in an odd mood too, and fixed me grilled cheeses with jalepenos, my father's favorite she said. I didn't much care for them, mostly just because my dad liked them and I was terrified of being anything like him. During lunch, to add to the all the strangeness, Granny Emma somehow managed to tap into my fear, telling me how much I looked like my dad when he was my age, how much I acted like him. I ate only one of the two sandwiches, and had to choke that one down.

Afterwards, when she was washing the dishes and whistling and I couldn't handle any of it anymore I went outside and walked in the direction of the stock tank, and for the first time Milt didn't follow me, as he was eating an early dinner on the cellar door.

Once beyond the trees, I took a quiet left and scuttled quickly around to where I could see the house but it couldn't see me. I wasn't there for five minutes before Granny Emma came out and looked around carefully, slowly, like some sort of cat. When she didn't see what she was looking for, me, she

went back in and came out with a small toy bucket. As she walked around the house she reached in it and pulled out what looked like last night's chicken and held it to her wrist the way she does to see if stuff is warm. She went over to the butane tank then and unravelled the skinny rope I had seen laying there but never thought about. She tied the rope to the bucket handle and eased over to the smoke pipe where she stopped to look carefully around again. When everything around looked still enough for her, she lowered the bucket down into the pipe and held it there for a what seemed like forever. At some time I suppose only she could tell, she raised the bucket back up and put the rope back on the tank.

Before she went back inside she stopped at the rusted faucet to wash out the now-empty bowl.

That night I slept very little, listening to Granny Emma doing things in the kitchen with the pans and the dishes. When my watch read two o'clock I crept towards the door to look in on her. As I peeked my head around the corner though, I found myself looking deep into Milt's lifeless eyes. I pulled back, startled, and in that moment caught a glimpse of the table, bedecked with a white lace tablecloth and candles, haunted by my Granny Emma leaning over it. I went back and crawled deep into the covers, where I fell into a dream about my dad as a little boy, carving into the side of the stock tank, and me there with him, watching quietly. After a while he turns around and smiles, starts to wade over. But the moss wraps around him quietly like a shadow and pulls him under while he thrashes. He holds his hand out to me and I grab it but he only pulls me in with him. Under the brackish water I lose him and somehow find the surface myself, but he never comes up out of the tank. Only I do. Then the moss rises slowly from the water in two long dancing strands which braid in and out of each other, forming a rope which burns away in the midday sun.

I woke at exactly ten thirty-seven the next morning. I remember because the first thing my eyes fixed on was the clock. I immediately rushed to my closed door which I had left open the night before and listened intently. I heard nothing.

Slowly turning the brass knob I expected Milt at any moment, but he never came. Slipping into the kitchen the first thing I saw was the cellar door, open wide. The bottom side of the hatch was rusted an ugly rough red from the blood that had seeped through from Milt's feeding. It looked like the rock the house was built from. Without turning my back on the door I absorbed the table, still immaculately set but obviously used. There was still a piece of dried toast there on the serving tray, and one of the two glasses still had a little cranberry juice left in it.

I desperately called to Granny Emma then but she didn't call back, her old deep used up voice

didn't fill the house. Milt didn't come gliding around the corner either, his face caught in a knowing growl that looked so much like the picture of my dead grandfather.

Going slowly over to the pantry, I got the broom out and eased the cellar door shut, slipping the bolts into place, securing the chains. Stepping into Granny Emma's room I could feel the emptiness. There were no clothes on the chair, nothing. Through her window I could see the vacant driveway. Even her journal was gone.

I wandered back into my room then and sat there alone, not needing the stock tank anymore, and thought about how I would get back to the drugstore to catch my bus home tomorrow, and if I even wanted to go home at all.

Now, all these years later, I have still never looked in the cellar. Yes, this rock-red house is where I live and breathe, what I live and breathe, but the cellar is its own place. It has its own life. I still hear things down there.

Three days after Granny and Milt disappeared, my father showed up in the empty driveway, mad. He stormed in and screamed for his mother. Not finding her he screamed for me. I could hear him all the way down at the stock tank. When he found me he roughed me up a bit and then took me home and nobody ever asked about Granny Emma. It seemed everyone, at least my dad and his two remaining brothers, was glad she was gone. But something inside me had shifted, fallen, and I couldn't feel as they did. I wanted more.

I wanted to know if she was in down in Mexico, with her cellar man and Milt to watch over him. I wanted to know if she was buried in a shallow grave just outside of town, her bones merging with those of a very large dog. I wanted to know if there were merely rats in the cellar, eating the food and making noise, if Milt had been the one to tear the house up that day.

A few months later I ran away. Twice. Three times. Each time to this rock-red house. Every road seemed to lead here. The fourth time they didn't come to get me and I remained, waiting for the sunset to come everyday, waiting for the house to bleed into the ground.

I sleep alone now in my father's old room, with the memories of Granny Emma running wildly over and over my mind, denting it and tearing it. Some nights I walk in my sleep too, and always wake in front of the cellar door, shaking, wanting so badly to go in and wanting at the same time to be the man down there in the dark, getting his food from above, hearing a faceless voice read me the good book, sleeping in my own waste.

I think there is an errant gene in the family like my dad said, but I don't think all of us kill

ourselves. Some of us, like me and Granny Emma, just wait, wait patiently for something to enter by the back door and change our lives forever.