

Grandma

by Wesley Baines

It was a subtle change. Jeffrey's grandmother was never graceful. Her figure was like a garbage bag filled with rounded masses of leaves and the unexpected angle of the odd stick, the entire shambling affair draped in soiled and yellowed hand-knit clothing that belonged to some bizarre era that never was. But as her black silhouette crossed the faded red carpet that smelled of wet earth and dark places, there was something smooth in her movement that made Jeffrey sick. In the dusty moonlight, he watched her, wakened moments before by a nightmare, eyes barely open as he lay across the plastic-covered couch. Everything was the same. The limp. The slight downturn of the left shoulder. The crooked sort of way she held her head—a little to the right. But she stood at the filmy window, looking out, just staring at the nearly full moon, cocking her ear to the sky as if listening. A shiver ran through Jeffrey's back and his scalp tingled. He willed the plastic of the couch to not betray him with its shrill voice. At once, the enormous figure turned and limped back, footfalls making slow, dull thuds upon the carpet long after her bulk disappeared into the darkness of the hallway. There was a creak and a heavy click, and Jeffrey knew that the door of grandma's bedroom had closed. He loosed a breath he hadn't known he'd held and relaxed, finally allowing the couch its faint screeching cry. He didn't close his eyes again until the moon rose above the window, plunging the room into humid darkness, and he slept fitfully.

Jeffrey woke to the smell of frying eggs and moldering walls. Sounds emanated from the kitchen, clangs and thumps. He rose, moving toward the peeling white kitchen door—one of four in the tiny house. The other two were in the large living room, one leading outside, the other, to the one bathroom. The last, a heavy, oaken door that did not match the rest of the house, rose from the carpet at the end of a short, unadorned hallway. He tensed when he looked upon its countenance, for it seemed a thing of great age, out of place

in the shabby, 1940's era cinderblock building. His hand had never touched the great, black wrought-iron handle for the three years he had lived with grandma, and he had never seen the inside of that room.

He pushed the swinging door aside and found grandma at the gas stove, slowly stirring a batch of scrambled eggs with arthritic fingers. She turned and looked at him as he entered, her lids heavy and leaden as usual. But there was something different in her eyes this morning—something that belied what cheerful sunlight filtered in through the small window, something that seemed more in league with the peeling white paint of the walls or the slowly creeping rust of the wide, squat stove than the sun and the grass outside. In fact, the two seemed wholly juxtaposed, and Jeffrey's appetite quickly disappeared.

Without a word, she slowly scooped the eggs from the pan into a chipped, white plate, and set it on the table, a disproportionately large and heavy thing for the small kitchen. Jeffrey sat, and his grandma sat opposite, her wrinkled lips drooping into the caricature of a frown beneath the shadow of a moustache. Her head was a massive thing, too big, the fat oddly formed, as if there were no skull beneath the flesh to help it hold its shape. Her eyes regarded him beneath those long lids with a burning intensity as he took a small, first bite. Into her own plate, she shoveled the remainder of the huge pan of eggs—enough to feed a family. Over the last years, Jeffrey had watched his grandma age rather badly, but one thing had never changed. Her appetite was enormous. They ate in silence. After a few moments, Jeffrey spooned the remainder of his breakfast into a bowl that he set in the refrigerator and walked from the kitchen. Silence reigned. As it had for three years.

Jeffrey picked up a limp, green backpack and left the house, making his way along the long, gravel path that led through drooping pines and knotty oaks, finally opening up onto a desolate back road after many minutes of walking. There, he sat, waiting. Hoping. The bus hadn't come in years. He had once walked as far as he could along the old road, with its broken pavement and deep,

weedy ditches where things unseen writhed and breathed. He found nothing but those same trees on either side, bending inward like long-dead sentinels of a forbidden path. The darkness of the woods had frightened him, and he ran the whole way back.

The sun had risen high in the gray sky before Jeffrey gave up on the bus. He trudged back down the gravel path, his feet crunching upon the stone. The sound of birds rang in the far distance, faint and small, as if they were a mere memory in this place. Jeffrey hadn't seen any lately.

The house rose up before him, a white cinderblock rectangle with a stained, gray roof. The windows were dark, made translucent with ages of oily filth. It reminded Jeffrey of a dead crustacean, its outer shell still functional, but, inside, it rotted and stank. He missed school. Even when he was harassed for his sallow skin or his short build, he liked the crisp brightness of the building better than his grandma's house. He wanted to hear the sounds of *people*, and, as he reached the door, felt the edges of a sort of panic that should never touch a ten year old boy.

A queer feeling stole over Jeffrey. A bravery and curiosity born of desperation. One side of the house disappeared into thick shrubbery, trees, and undergrowth—the side that housed grandma's bedroom. He decided that he should like a peek into the one room of the house that he had never before seen. With leaden feet, he crunched past the door, the darkened windows, to the right side of the house. With cold hands, he pried at the undergrowth, pushing past supple vine and stiff trunk, making his way slowly and painstakingly. Until a great, flabby, yellowed hand suddenly clamped onto his arm like some pale, toothless beast from prehistoric times.

Jeffrey screamed, a short, high keening. He looked directly into the face of his grandma, her expression unchanged, a heavy mask that drooped. But there was anger in those eyes that did not hide. She drug him from the foliage with a feeble, shaking, sickening strength, and his stomach roiled at the smell that arose from her

mountainous body. It was the smell of dead things. Jeffrey could never grow accustomed to it.

She led him back into the house and softly shut the door, staring at him. She pointed a crooked finger at the couch.

"No, grandma. Please," he pleaded.

From behind the door, the old woman drew forth a thin branch, studded with tiny burrs and growths. She pointed again at the couch.

"No," he said, his vitals shaking invisibly.

With a movement that was a little too fast, she had him by the back of the neck, her sweaty palm pressed against his skin, forcing his head down. The other hand brought up the switch, brought it down across his legs, over and over. Jeffrey thrashed suddenly, the fear and the stink and the flabby palm inspiring a rage and a fear in him that conveyed to him a bravery that he had never known. He pushed at the heap of flesh as hard as he could, bracing himself against the couch. There was a great rolling thud and a sharp crack as she hit the ground, and, when her mass finally lay still upon that wretched carpet, she loosed the only sound Jeffrey had ever heard escape her fetid mouth. It was a low, throaty bellow, like a man's, full of agony and hatred, a bellow that quickly dwindled into nothing as those penetrating eyes rolled back in their sunken sockets.

Jeffrey felt no remorse as he looked upon her. The abominable creature that he had been entrusted to after his parents' disappearance had never garnered so much as an ounce of affection from him. She wasn't even his real grandmother, but a distant relative of some sort—the only one willing to take him in. What was supposed to be a blessing had instead become a curse, a living nightmare. Three long years of silence and decay and occasional whippings with the switch, sometimes for no discernible reason. And now this decrepit thing lay before him, helpless, silent, incoherent.

He felt a surge of triumph that quickly fell to dread. He had nowhere to go. There was no phone in the house. What few yellowed bulbs worked threw little light. At least the full moon

would keep the total darkness at bay when night came. In the morning, he would start out on the road and walk till he could walk no more.

Jeffrey shuddered at the thought of sleeping on the couch next to the grandma's form. Her breathing came now in short, ragged gasps and her mouth drooped open, a thin line of drool flowing down one heavy cheek. As he stared at her, his eyes lit with a sudden thought.

"Grandma's bedroom," he mumbled.

The sun beginning to set, he walked down the short hallway, the lone corridor that led off from the living room. The door loomed large and solid before him, and when he grasped the handle, he found that it would not budge. Puzzled, he found no keyhole, no latch or locking mechanism. He tried the handle again, jiggling it. He stopped suddenly. There was a noise from the other side of the door. It sounded like a truck driving by in the distance. He pressed his ear to the old wood. Nothing. Brows drawing together in puzzlement, he turned and walked back through the living room, scurried past grandma's prone body, and exited the house.

He had about an hour of sunlight left. With renewed determination, he dove into the underbrush at the right of the house, pushing and clawing and squeezing his way through the filthy, ever-dying foliage that surrounded that side of the house. When he finally squeezed through, it was into near darkness, all around him a surrounding mass of brown plant life. Feeling in his pockets, he drew forth the pack of matches he used to light the stove, and lit one. What he saw horrified him.

There, before him, was the other side of the door to grandma's bedroom. His feet sank into a putrid, black muck composed of dead vegetation as he slowly walked toward it. There was the black handle, the heavy, dark wood. Upon its surface were many markings and carvings, worn shallow with age. Jeffrey could not understand them, and they made him uneasy. With shaking hand, he grasped the handle. It turned silently. The door opened with the faint groan

of ancient iron hinges, and Jeffrey stood looking down the short hallway that led into the living room of the house.

He took a tentative step in. His foot sank into the old, musty carpet, leaving a black, muddy footprint. Something was different. A quality of the air. Of the light around him. Everything felt more substantial, more real. He tiptoed his way silently to the living room and, with a terrible shock, realized that grandma was gone. He stood very still for a few moments, his horror broken only by the sound of a vehicle in the distance. He looked out the window. Yes, it had been a vehicle on the road. And there was more. He heard birds. He heard frogs and crickets and the sweet, living songs of animals of all kinds. He burst from the front door and breathed what felt like the first breath of fresh, sweet air he had taken in weeks. A plane droned by overhead in a blue sky. But then he heard it. A long, low moan. And then, his name. It was grandma.

The sound came from the open door at the end of the hallway. It was one of pain. Devoid of the panic he had felt earlier, guilt rushed through him for the old woman. She was badly hurt. Jeffrey had heard the snap of bone when she hit the ground. Several snaps. Had she managed to somehow make it outside the house? He went back through the house, through the door he once thought led to grandma's bedroom. Nothing. Just the dense foliage. He picked his way through it, coming out into the yard once more. He gasped.

The sky was iron gray and the world silent once more. The air was stifling, smelling faintly of rot. The sun had begun to dip below the sagging trees and the air was chill and moist. The moan sounded again.

He approached the closed front door. Hadn't he left it open? He slowly turned the greasy knob, and opened the door to see grandma lying on the floor where he had left her. He jumped as her head snapped up, her eyes glaring at him. One of them looked off in a strange direction, and a part of her face seemed to have dropped, giving her a monstrous appearance. She spoke the first words Jeffrey had ever heard from her, her voice creeping into his ears, soiling them with its filmy fingers.

"Help me, child. To the window."

She spoke in a strange accent. It didn't sound like anything Jeffrey had ever heard. Compelled by those eyes and by his own sense of guilt, he took the hand she extended. It was clammy, and gripped too tightly. He pulled, helping her inch her bulk a few feet, coming to rest beneath the narrow window.

"Open it," she croaked.

Confused, he did as she asked. The sun was going down and night was coming. The moon was full and beginning to rise. He didn't like the look of it. The moon looked like death tonight. Suddenly, he stiffened. A memory had come slinking back to him. A dream. He had been asleep on the couch, when strong hands picked him up beneath the light of a full moon. They carried him down the hall, through the dark door to grandma's bedroom, and outside. He had woken in sweat and fear, the couch wet with urine. That was the day the bus stopped coming. The day the birds stopped singing.

He felt the cold edges of panic. Grandma looked up through the window, a small and hideous smile breaking her features for the first time. He raised a hand to the sky as the moon began to clear the treetops. He looked to the couch. His pillow lay there. His heart began to pound. The moon continued to rise, grandma continued to smile. She would trap him here somehow. In this hideous world of hers, through which the door to her bedroom was some unholy portal.

He took up the pillow and, with a scream, brought it down upon her face. She tried to shake him off, but was too weak. The fat fingers gripped his right wrist, but still he pressed. Only when they had gone slack for many minutes did he withdraw the pillow. She lay there unmoving, although the smile had never left her face. It was done.

Turning, he ran back the way he had come, following his own muddy footprints, going out the door, through the foliage, and out into the night. He waited for the sounds of frogs, of crickets and wind and the world. But there was nothing. A tension began to grow in his belly. A tension that would soon turn into an all-

consuming fear. He ran to the front door, opened it, and saw grandma there on the floor. He felt like he couldn't breathe. Again and again he ran through the door to grandma's bedroom, and still, the air remained stale and the world silent.

He stopped, at length, when his heart could no longer fuel his tired legs. He turned, intending to pass through the door the other way, into the house. Tears ran down his cheeks. He approached the door in the darkness, and was struck with a sudden desire to see it. Passing through the hole he had worn in the foliage, he struck another of the long, thick matches, and looked upon oaken face. There was something different about the carvings now. He gasped as he realized that he could read them. His lips moved silently as mumbled the words carved beneath a depiction of a full moon.

"Beyond this door lies unending life. Only the sinless may pass it, and only the sinless may take the gift away. Only on paths of moonlight might the deathless walk the earth again."

When morning came, Jeffrey walked the road beneath an iron sky. He passed beneath the trees in the silent gloom. The trees that never changed, would never change. He walked for hours, finding nothing. When he walked back, it did not surprise him that he reached the gravel path in only a few minutes. He sat by the road, placed his face into his hands, and sobbed.

Somewhere, a bus pulled up to a gravel road, and its driver thought he could hear the sound of a child weeping. But it wasn't a sound, not really. It was more like the memory of a sound, heard from within. Shaking his head, he closed the door and drove off down the country road.

