

## Good Old John

*Kyle Kimberlin*

Everyone in town loves winter, when the fog rises from the shallow lake and the bald concrete canals, and spreads through the fields of cotton and grapes, through the orchards of almonds and walnuts. It's dangerous to drive, hard to see beyond the hood of a car. Most people don't walk more than a block from home after the fog comes in, for fear of being lost. You can't see across the street.

The fog moves in at night, and everyone goes inside. They watch TV, play cards, or read. John plays chess against his cat. Sometimes they play all night by the picture window, and he watches over his people. Then he sleeps in the afternoon, when the fog burns off and the world is dull.

All of John's people love to sleep in the fog. It gives them good dreams. They dream of work and children, food and cold rain, hot baths, music and sunlight on their faces. The sleeping children dream their mothers call them home for supper. They run home with dogs bounding ahead in clear twilight.

So long as John stays home at night, with his lights on and his fire lit, shovels in the shed and backhoe quiet in its tarp behind the house, his people are happy and content. They call him Good Old John. Every night at one or two o'clock, he sings for them from his porch. He sings Amazing Grace in his deep brown voice, or Shall We Gather at the River. No, it's the color of root beer, and it settles and drifts in the fog.

The rest of the town lives a mile away and no one there knows the life that Good John lives, except his one old friend. John sings soft and low and he lives so alone. They know he mows the grass every Thursday, trims around stones every day. They see he does his digging well and takes the dead flowers away. Some think he's a little bit crazy. They call him Graveyard John.

John washes his shirt in the kitchen sink and hangs it near the fire to dry. He makes a cup of sweet walnut tea, and beats his old cat at a game of chess. Once they tried cribbage but a cat can't roll dice.

At two a.m. he sees the fog has settled thick. It's beautiful and reminds John of his failings in life. He goes out on the porch and sings Just As I Am. It's a favorite with everyone, reserved for when John feels contrite.

*They're dreaming good tonight, he thinks. I picture Daniel dreaming of his horse, the one he had to shoot when it fell in a ditch.*

At six o'clock he takes a bath. He shaves. His shirt is mostly dry. By eight o'clock, the fog thins a little and he drives to town for breakfast. The cat stays home. His name is Ebenezer Snooze.

John has one friend in the living world. Her name is Beneficent Hamm. They call her Bennie. She has a diner called Hamm & Eggs. Omelets and waffles, short stacks and oatmeal. She doesn't do lunch and she closes at one. Says, "I can't compete with the big burger joints, so kiss my ass."

John takes his usual place at the counter, by the window where the waitresses pick up the plates. He doesn't mind the kitchen noise and heat, contrasted with the rest of his

cold and quiet life. He talks to Bennie through the window while she cooks. Sometimes, she comes out to help the waitresses.

She refills his coffee, and stands holding the pot. He adds a teaspoon of sugar and a little plastic cup of cream. He stirs slowly, so not to clink the spoon on the side of the cup.

“Why do you always stir it quietly, when it’s noisy in here already?”

“Just not a sound that I enjoy.”

“Um hmm. How’s all your people out there?”

John wipes his mouth and smiles. “Peaceable.”

“You want to stay in town today, catch the early matinee?”

“What’s playing?” Now he’s smacking the bottom of a new ketchup bottle.

“Lord of the Rings.”

He uses his butter knife to get the ketchup going and smear it across the top of his hash browns. “We saw that, didn’t we?”

“This is the sequel.”

“Oh. Why not.”

Bennie moves down the counter, checking coffee cups. She’s humming Silent Night. A trucker says, “About a month late for Christmas carols, ain’t it?”

John laughs and answers for her, “That’s Bennie’s favorite song, year ‘round. Sometimes she sings it in July.” He peels back the top of a little raspberry jelly and picks up a piece of his sourdough toast. Once again, Bennie put a pat of butter in the middle of each piece and stuck them together to melt. So there’s just a round buttered place in the center. They’ve discussed spreading butter out to the edges several times. *Dang.*

A crash, and one of the truckers says “What the hell.” Everybody jumps up. John looks around for her, but Bennie isn’t there. She’s down behind the counter on the floor, face down in her coffee and broken glass.

He decides to go over the counter, not around. Salt and pepper, cream and sugar fall ahead of him. Down about twenty feet, in the narrow space between the counter and the soft drink fountain, past the glass cabinet with pies on stainless lazy Susan shelves, his feet slide in the coffee and he kneels by her head.

*Some glad morning*

*When this life is o’er*

*I’ll fly away*

“Turn her over! Help me!”

People with cell phones call for help. The cops clear a path for the gurney. Later, John helps a waitress shut the kitchen down and lock the doors.

The moon is down. The fog is thick and Snooze the cat is fast asleep. Bennie’s place is finished, rounded off. Covered with flowers and a wreath with a ribbon. John takes a candle in a glass and leaves the lights on in the house. He hums as he goes through the wet grass, between the stones. So despite the newcomer, no one is sleepless or nervous.

Bennie has gone and found her dog again, a malamute named Eskimo Pie. They drift and dream in the small hours of heaven, as Good Old John sings Silent Night.