

Get away

The forest floor threatened to topple Johnny with every step he took. Thick roots kept tripping him up and a dense mat of fallen, dried leaves obscured the ground. The moon, not quite full yet, hung high in the sky and painted the tops of the sparse clouds in fantastical ways. Bright silver columns of light pierced the canopy and messed with Johnny's perception.

The cool night air made his eyes water as it whipped at his face. He'd been running for hours and his body was starting to give up on him. Sharp, searing pain was shooting through his calves, coursing up his legs, thumping in his joints. His knees buckled every other step, and his lungs were screaming. The erratic, shallow breathing was making his throat feel scratchy and dry as each exhalation condensed in the crispness of the night air.

Not a single coherent thought was able to penetrate the mantle of panic that had taken over his mind. The instinct of self-preservation kept Johnny running blindly, with no sense of direction. Just, away.

Abruptly the trees parted, revealing a clearing. Here, the moonlight was almost blinding; it stung his eyes after having been in the darkness for so long. At the far side of the clearing lay a barn, seemingly solitary in this remote corner of the woods. With renewed vigor, Johnny sprinted, his heart thumping ever faster to be out of the cover of trees. As he ran through the open space, the moonlight seemed to drain the world of color, leaving the landscape a monochrome palette of blacks and grays. Johnny fumbled with the door latch, managing to get it open after a few tries. With a pull, the double massive doors came swinging open, and the stench came. Ever as rotting, acrid and nauseating as it was before.

He stumbled.

"No..." He whispered.

"NO!" The whisper turning to a shout, he called desperately: **"NO! I got away from you! I left, I ran!"**

Swinging around, Johnny grabbed a pitchfork that lay on the ground, and brandishing it like a pike he spun around trying to find the source of the stench. The moonlight was coming through the doors and

the wrecked roof, lighting some parts of the barn and plunging others into darkness.

"Show yourself! Show me what you are! I'm sick of this!"

The laughter came again. Low and menacing, it echoed inside the barn - but it shouldn't echo, there was nothing in here to reflect sound, but still it echoed and it drove poor Johnny crazy. Then the rustling started and Johnny could hear the thing move and it was in front of him and behind him and above him and next to him and on him and - oh God - **inside** him.

The scream that came out of Johnny's mouth was not human. There were no words in that scream.

"Show me! I want to see what you are!"

Tears ran down his face, mixing with the dirt and the blood from his head wound. It couldn't be. He had gotten away, he had run, run for days in the woods, and still the laughter and the stench and the scurrying were there, all of them, gnawing at his mind, gnawing at his sanity, at the fabric of his being. He felt himself begin to unravel and fought - oh how he fought - the urge to keep running. He planted his feet firmly in the ground and closed his eyes, jaw squared against this horror - against *his* horror.

Poor Johnny stood there in the barn, with his eyes closed, and the pitchfork in his hands, fighting a darkness that seemed endless. Then his eyes flung open, his teeth flashed as he snarled, and with spittle dribbling down his chin, poor Johnny said through clenched teeth:

"For weeks you've tormented me. Laughed at me, played with me. You have ruined my life! I can't talk to people, can't sleep, can't function. Even out here you stalk me.

Let's fucking end this!"

The laughter crescendoed along with Johnny's shouts, the scurrying and rustling becoming louder and louder. Then... **silence**. It was broken only by his panting and the pounding of his heart inside his chest.

A small whisper in Johnny's ear went:

"Behind you".

The momentum of Johnny's swerve almost threw him off his feet. A death grip on the pitchfork, his breath caught at the sight in front of him.

His younger self was looking back at him. 10, maybe 15 years younger...definitely in the teens. The clothes were familiar...his favorite pair of jeans as a teen, with that T-shirt that his mom eventually threw out when the holes in it became obscene.

Only now the head was leaning to one side, black blood pouring from the empty eye sockets, from the nostrils, from the mouth, the clothes were tattered and dirty and bloody, and a gurgling laughter was emanating from the sickening, jerking form, which seemed to be choking in its own blood. The arms flew up, like a zombie's (*it's no time to laugh Johnny*) and a voice like sandpaper on glass echoed:

"Why don't you like me?"

No mouth moved, but it was coming from Little Johnny, and all the while, the choked gurgle of a chuckle kept going.

Poor Johnny stood there looking at Little Johnny, the pitchfork now limp in his hands. He tried to say something, but the words weren't coming.

"Why don't you like me Johnny?" resounded the voice once more.

The form then seemed to shrink into the form of a baby, then grow again to the size of a toddler. A Toddler Johnny.

"Johnny, you don't love me. You never did."

It kept morphing, first into a Child Johnny, then a Teen Johnny, until finally, an Adult Johnny. All the while the blood was there, dripping out of every orifice, the head still tilted to one side.

Poor Johnny watched as Adult Johnny lifted his arms and reached for the empty eye sockets.

Poor Johnny felt his own arms lift up, hands reaching for his own eyes. He screamed. It didn't matter. First came the squishing sound or fingernails pushing through skin, then scraping against bone, then

scooping out soft eyeball tissue. Despite the scream, the chilling sound still came, and the searing pain of flesh tearing both from skull and from fingers.

"Do you love me now Johnny? Do you love you now?"

«Ἀπολείπειν ὁ Θεός Ἀντώνιον»

ΚΩΝΣΤΑΝΤΙΝΟΣ ΚΑΒΑΦΗΣ