

# Fear Itself ; Retribution

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When two teenage boys attend the execution of a child killer who brutally butchered their best friend seven years earlier, they watch with fear, revulsion and anticipation as their greatest nightmare is finally put to rest. But a fear greater than the man himself...is the fear that the evil within can never really die.

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The two boys dropped down in the hard seats. The air inside the small room was thick and clogged their windpipes, filling their lungs like liquid tar. Their eyes pulled to the front of the room. A large pane of glass looked into an even smaller, cubicle room beyond. A central object in that little room demanded their attention — and got it. A single thought came to both boys at the same time; *I don't want to be here*. But they had to be. Not just for Dustin, but for themselves as well.

Still, sitting there shoulder to shoulder with his friend, Lonny Payne was sure if he suggested they back out...Johnny wouldn't argue. Lonny held his peace, suggested nothing. But by the ashy pallor of Johnny Hanson's face, and the nervous working of his throat warning he wasn't feeling well — not feeling well at all — Lonny wondered if maybe he should make the suggestion. Still, he said nothing.

The storm outside pummeled the high brick walls of the massive structure and Lonny thought — *I'll huff, and I'll puff* — of the three little pigs tormented by the big bad wolf. Their story, though, had started out with four little pigs. But by the time the big bad wolf had gotten through with them...there were only three. Dustin had been the fourth, the one eaten. Except the wolf hadn't eaten him so much as skinned him alive.

Lonny clenched his fists in his lap and squeezed his eyes shut, sucking in a deep breath. He didn't want to think about Dustin right now. Or Willie, who had been too afraid to face the monster of their childhood, even under these circumstances. Lonny just wanted this to be over.

The night swelled with fury and Lonny wondered what would happen if the electricity went out. Would all this be postponed? Did they have backup generators for such emergencies? He couldn't do this again. He could never come here a second time. This was it.

— I feel sick. — Johnny groaned. His voice was thick, as if he might vomit at any moment.

Nerves. Lonny felt them too. — Just hang on, man. — He told his friend, leaning Johnny's way. — It'll be over soon. —

Johnny's arms wrapped around his upset gut and held tight. To look at him, one would surmise he could wrap those long arms around his lanky frame twice over. — Willie should be here too. —

— I know, man. — Lonny whispered. — But... —

— He was too scared? — Johnny finished.

Lonny released a low sigh and leaned forward. — Yeah. — He couldn't take his eyes off the object behind the large pane of glass. He had the creepy feeling it was alive, playing dead, waiting quietly for its next victim.

— You know. — Johnny started again, his young voice shaking. — Willie...he was so fucking scared of the Tommyknocker man. —

— We all were. — *The Tommyknocker Man*. Lonny couldn't remember just when they started calling him that. Whether the title had materialized from the killer's own name — Thomas Narker — or from some

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dark regions of a Stephen King novel, Lonny didn't remember. But somehow it fit.

Johnny shook his head. His long arms tightened around his lanky teenage body. "Willie came up to me a couple days after Narker was taken away." He sniffed and cleared his throat anxiously. "He said...he said Narker wasn't a man. He said he looked in his eyes and he saw the monster."

Lonny said nothing. He stared at the dirty floor, at a hard dark clump stuck to the floor that might once have been bubble gum. He nudged it with the toe of his Nike. How could someone sit in this room and chew gum? He wondered for no apparent reason.

"Willie said he was evil." Johnny shifted in his seat. "Not human."

Lonny shook his head and straightened in his chair. "He seemed that way to all of us. But he's just a man, Johnny."

"Willie didn't think so." Johnny rasped. His face was white as a sheet, his eyes drawn. He looked terminally ill, like he had cancer or something. Maybe in a sense he did. Maybe Lonny did too. And Willie. A cancer called fear. Fear in its darkest, deadliest form.

*Nothing to fear but fear itself.*

Yeah, well, Lonny had heard that one before. How many times do parents tell their children there's nothing to be afraid of? It's just your imagination? But Lonny had found out different. They all had. Dustin most of all. Nothing to fear but *fear* itself? Bull-fucking-shit!

"That night in the basement of the butcher shop." Johnny whispered. "That's when he saw the *thing* behind Narker's face."

"He was traumatized for fuck's sake!" Lonny hissed loudly, then clamped his mouth shut when the other occupants in the room turned to stare at them. He wish Johnny would just shut the fuck up. This kind of talk was giving him the fucking creeps. Tom Narker was an evil man. A sick, twisted motherfucker. But he was still just a *man*.

Still, something had convinced Willie otherwise. And that's why Willie wasn't there with them. He didn't believe the Tommyknocker Man could be killed.

Lonny Payne didn't want to know the facts. The *real* facts that Willie knew. He didn't want to know what Willie had seen. And he would never ask.

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SSA Paul Gordon, the FBI agent who had fought for the fifteen year old boys' admittance, had tried to prepare the teenagers for what they were about to see. But when the door behind the glass opened, Lonny knew right then that Gordon's words were just that "words". Meaningless syllables. Only personal experience could relay the reality of something like this.

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Lonny stared â not at the shackled man shuffling into the little room â but at the object that had held his attention from the moment he'd dropped into the hard seat next to Johnny. *Old Sparky* they called it in Florida and Texas. But most people just knew it as *The Chair*.

Lonny glanced at his friend. The other boy's eyes widened as he watched the shackled man being ushered to the center of the small room behind the glass. Fear bulged Johnny's eyes and slackened his face. Lonny could see Willie's words ricocheting through Johnny's mind. Or was it Lonny's own head that was bouncing them around?

The prison guards removed Tom Narker's shackles. Lonny stared wide-eyed at the Tommyknocker Man; his black hair had been shaved down to his scalp. His face was clean, void of whiskers. *Smooth as a baby's butt*. But that was the only difference about him. After six years, that was the only difference.

His head bowed, Narker's eyes lifted slowly and rested on the two boys. Rested comfortably, Lonny thought with no amount of comfort himself. As comfortably as if he could spend the rest of eternity just looking at them.

Lonny shuddered. Johnny whimpered and Lonny could feel the fear that had trapped and tormented them for the last six years pressing in around them.

The Tommyknocker Man's restful gaze didn't waver from the two fifteen year olds as the guards sat him down in the heavy oak chair. Lonny had read or heard somewhere that the reality of a condemned man's fate came to him from the ankles up, or something to that effect. But as Tom Narker's ankles were cinched tight to Sparky's oak legs, Lonny didn't see even a shadow cross the man's face.

He's not afraid, Lonny thought uneasily. Shouldn't he be shittin' bricks right about now?

Johnny's fear and tension hit Lonny like a heatwave. He wondered if his friend would make it through this, and prayed Johnny didn't leave him here to face this alone.

A hand squeezed Lonny's shoulder and he jumped hard, the rubber soles of his shoes screeching against the hard floor. Paul Gordon had dropped into the seat next to him without Lonny even noticing. A look of uncertainty darkened the agent's face. Was he rethinking his decision to get the boys admitted? Lonny was sure as hell having his doubts. In fact, he kind of wished they had been turned away.

â If you want to change your mind about this.â Gordon said quietly. â Now is the time.â Something in the agent's voice told Lonny the agent was wishing they would change their minds and leave, before they had to witness something so ugly and disturbing at such a young age. But hadn't they already witnessed the ugly and disturbing? And at a much younger age? At nine years old, the Butcher of Black Moon County had shown them Hell in its purest form.

Still, Lonny was tempted; no one would blame them if they left now. He could feel Johnny urging him to take the escape route. But as he watched the condemned man, he knew this was something he had to see. He had to face his fear and prove Willie wrong. He had to watch the Tommyknocker Man die right before his eyes.

â I'm staying.â Lonny said thickly. â I have to.â

Paul Gordon nodded in resignation. â I understand.â He squeezed Lonny's shoulder again. â It takes a lot of courage to face up to something like this.â

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Not everyone in the room agreed with Gordon's belief that he and Johnny had a right to be there. They could only see that two minors were about to witness an execution. They didn't consider what he and Johnny had been through, what they had already seen. What the Tommyknocker Man had put them through in forcing them to watch him kill their best friend in the worst possible way.

Lonny still wasn't clear how he and Johnny had escaped the butcher shop. Willie hadn't escaped with them. He'd spent the short time it took to bring back help...alone in the basement with the killer as Tom Narker finished off Dustin. And it was in that time that Willie became convinced that the Tommyknocker Man was the monster of every child's worst nightmare.

*What if he's right and you're wrong?*

Lonny shook his head and licked his lips; he didn't want to think about that. Because if Willie was right...

He let the thought slink away and didn't attempt to draw it back. Let it go, for fuck's sake.

Tom Narker's arms and legs had been secured with thick leather straps. As Lonny watched, one of the guards shoved up his left pant leg and attached an electrode. The electrodes, Lonny had read, helped direct the currents of electricity so they didn't just go haywire throughout the body, slowly burning the condemned alive.

The metal skull cap pressed down over Narker's shaved head and the chin strap cinched tight. He was offered a moment for any last words.

Lonny leaned forward without thinking and whispered, "What are you?" He flinched at the sound of his own voice and straightened in his seat. Don't answer that, he thought quickly. Please, God, I don't want to know. Just let the fucker die.

A creepy smile curved the prisoner's lips as he stared back at Lonny. His lips moved and, though Lonny knew he couldn't possibly have heard the man's words "Ask Willie" from where he sat, an icing of pure terror laced his heart and sent chills rushing through his veins like blood.

The Tommyknocker Man's piercing gaze and unnerving smile was suddenly covered with a leather face mask. *To prevent his eyes from bursting.* Feeling nauseous, Lonny remembered hearing of an incident where a man's head caught on fire as he fried in the electric chair, due to some malfunction.

The guards stepped away from the condemned man as all eyes turned to the circular clock high on the wall. Lonny didn't look at the clock. He could feel the eerie smile on Narker's face behind the mask. *Ask Willie.*

As the second hand swept past the witching hour, every eye in the room dropped to the prisoner as the fatal switch was thrown. Johnny flinched hard as Tom Narker jerked violently in Sparky's lap, his body straining outward against the leather straps. Smoke and steam poured out from beneath the metal skull cap.

Lonny's stomach *flip-flopped* as Narker's fingers clenched the end of the armrest then shot out straight in spasmed reflex, snapping like chicken bones. Every muscle in the man's body seized up.

"Oh god." Johnny moaned sickly when Narker's eyes suddenly burst behind the leather mask and oozed out the bottom in filmy, sizzling blobs. Johnny swung around, nearly stumbling out of his chair, his right foot striking out blindly and disheveling the empty chair in front of him as he vomited a wreaking, stinking mess on the dirty floor.

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Lonny's hands squeezed into tight fists at his sides, a throbbing ache crawling up his forearms to his elbows. A pulsing thumped in the center of his forehead, as steadily as if someone were tapping him with a hammer.

Narker's feet tapped out a rapid, rhythmic jitter on the floor like some macabre tap dance. It was a dark, eerie sound that would haunt Lonny's dreams for years to come.

A dark stain spread through Narker's crotch as the electricity cut short and his body and internal organs relaxed. As quickly as it began, it was over and they were staring at a motionless, smoking corpse. A medical examiner appeared and checked for a pulse with a stethoscope. He stepped back and pronounced the man dead.

That's when Lonny saw it. Or *thought* he saw it; a faint *twitch* in the Tommyknocker Man's pinky finger. He stared at that finger as Johnny â white as a ghost and the scent of vomit pouring off him â stumbled from his chair and left the room on shaky legs.

*Just a trick of the eye.*

Yeah, Lonny thought. Just a trick of the eye.

A distant, rancid stench of burning flesh, mingling with the strong putrid odor of Johnny's puke, clogged his nostrils. His stomach flip-flopped again and lurched dangerously, but he determined not to puke his guts out. Not here, anyway. Not just yet.

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He found Johnny outside on the steps, head between his knees.

The storm had calmed and now a steady drizzle was all the dark night had left to drop on them.

Johnny's long, sandy bangs hung down in damp strands, stray bits of hair glued to his cheeks. â Sorry, man.â He whispered tightly. He raised his head and spit out a lingering remnant of foul vomit.

â Forget it.â Lonny sighed and dropped down on the wet concrete step beside his friend.

â He's dead, right?â

Lonny licked his lips anxiously and leaned forward. He stared down at the steps. A cold wetness was soaking up through his faded jeans, chilling his ass and thighs. â Yeah.â

*His pinky twitched.*

*Just a trick of the eye.*

Johnny rubbed his palm over his mouth and sucked in a deep, rattled breath through his nose. â What did he say...there at the last?â He looked sideways at Lonny through a veil of stringy wet hair. â Did you hear?â

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Turning his face up to the dark sky, Lonny closed his eyes as the light rain wet his feverish face. When he dropped back down, he shook his head. "No, man." He said quietly. "I couldn't hear."

The two boys stood up off the wet steps together. Johnny stuffed his hands deep into the front pocket of his jeans. "You were right, man." He sniffed. "He was just a man. A dead man now." There was a relief in Johnny's voice that hadn't been there before.

Was I? Lonny wondered uneasily.

"Nothing to fear but fear itself." Johnny grinned shakily.

*And monsters that can't be killed.* Lonny kept that frightening thought to himself.

Johnny chewed his thumbnail as they walked down the sidewalk. "Let's not do that again."

"No fucking way."

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