

(Work in Progress)

Joe Barbieri

Merkner

Fiction Workshop

10/5/18

Part 2-Lost in the Woods

“Josie, you’re crazy. There’s *no* way I’m swimming in that lake, especially not *naked*,” I said over the campfire. We were lazily cooking hot dogs, not always eating them, but cooking them nonetheless. Ashley smirked at Josie.

“I told you, Becca’s a bitch. Yeah, I said it! B-i-t-c-h!” Ashley laughed. I tossed an uncooked hot dog at her which she narrowly avoided.

“I mean, why won’t you go?” Josie asked as she speared another hot dog on her long camp fork.

“Why would I go? We have no reason to act like silly stereotypical college girls in the woods! Besides, it’s dumb, and I think you two know it’s dumb,” I said back. Josie rolled her eyes.

“That’s always been our thing Becca! We do dumb shit like, all the time. Remember when we got Todd to eat a spoonful of black pepper? Or when Josie and I hid in the back of your mom’s truck?” Ashley said.

“Yeah, Todd threw up and Mom was pissed, and guessed who got blamed for *both* things? You got it, that was ME!” I huffed.

“Don’t worry, if we drown or something, I’ll be sure to come and blame you from beyond the grave,” Josie said with a smirk.

“Oh, shut up,” I retorted.

Ash and Josie had been on this kick for the past day or so. They’d heard some stupid stories about a goat man that roamed the Pinewood Forest or something, and the two of them being the dorks they are, obviously wanted to find him. I’d told them time and time again that it was no better than snipe hunting, and all we’d find were lousy trails and annoyingly long hikes back to camp. One particular legend that had aroused their childish interests was the one where skinny-dipping girls in the nearby lake somehow summoned the goat man from the woods.

It sounded more like a stupid thing a couple of perverts came up with to try and fool idiotic teenage girls into stripping, but they simply wouldn’t listen to reason. If it even was real, why would we want to meet someone who apparently has a penchant for murder? I had no idea what our plans with this so-called goat man were, but I certainly hoped he liked hot dogs, because we’d made far too many.

(Work in Progress)

“Come on Becca, it might be fun, even if there is no goat guy or whatever he’s supposed to be,” another friend, Michelle called from inside her tent. I grumbled. Michelle could be an angel or a devil in times like this, and for this dumb idea, she was Satan on my shoulder.

“It’s not like we haven’t seen each other naked before,” Josie pointed out. I shook my head.

“That’s not the point, but on that note, I’d prefer not seeing any of you clowns coated in algae anytime soon,” I said back.

“Come on, I hear mud baths are healthy!” Ash said. I snorted.

“Yeah something like that,” I mumbled to myself.

“Well, are we going or not?” Michelle asked, emerging from the tent already in her bright blue swimwear. I let out another sigh.

“Fine, but somebody needs to make sure our favorite imaginary friend *goat man* doesn’t steal our clothes,” I said. Josie’s smirk became a full smile.

“Fine, but you’re going in after me,” she said, pulling her shirt off and grabbing a nearby umbrella.

“What? No, that was never part of the deal. I’m taking this lawn chair and this book and we’re going to the goddamn lake, so you idiots can act like high schoolers all over again.”

“You’ll see, once we go, you’ll want to jump in too,” Michelle said, tossing my swimwear at me. I caught the top but quickly let it drop with the bottom; I had no intention of swimming in the stupid lake today.

“I think I’ll pass, but maybe I’ll go streaking at the next soccer game or something to really cause a scene,” I said. The girls laughed.

“Don’t tempt me, I’d do it just for the laughs,” Ash said. I shook my head and grabbed my stuff as we headed down the small trail leading to the lake.

...

It was every bit as ridiculous as I’d thought it would be. Ash, Josie, and Michelle swam circles in the surprisingly clean looking water, laughing and occasionally shooting insults at me. They were surprisingly easy to ignore, as the surrounding scenery was pretty nice.

The trail we’d taken had led us to a sort of clearing in the forest before it dipped down into the lake. The place was beautiful; it was like something you’d see in a fantasy movie, or maybe in one of the video games my brothers played back home. The small lake sat in a circlet

(Work in Progress)

of trees, which just so happened to be providing great cover for my three senseless friends. Sometimes I really wondered how I managed to stay successful hanging around them. They seemed so... Carefree—maybe that wasn't the word—loose? They certainly weren't as uptight as I was, and maybe that was a good thing. It might help if I let myself go every now and then. Although skinny-dipping in the woods still seemed like an incredibly asinine idea in my book.

A scream came from below my perch, but I passed it off. They were probably trying to eat a living fish or something at this point.

Another shriek.

“What're you guys screeching about down there?” I called to their backs. I saw Michelle pointing at something on the cliff in front of them. I took off my sunglasses and squinted a bit... There was definitely something in the trees. A shape—low the ground—it was moving through the underbrush. I briefly saw a brownish looking snout appear from the leaves. Was that a deer? No, the shape wasn't right. From this distance though, I was sure it was nothing dangerous.

“Ash don't scare us like that, it's just a little doe,” I heard Michelle say.

“They say that the goat man is a shapeshifter,” Josie said.

“Hey, maybe we should go back. You know, I'm not scared, if anything, I'm just hungry,” Ash said, though I could distinctly make out the tones of fear in her high-pitched voice.

“Great! Those hot dogs aren't going to eat themselves, right?” I called cheerfully, glad that this escapade was ending.

Yet, my curiosity was piqued. I moved past my friends as they got dressed and began moving through the trees to where we'd seen the animal. Funny how quiet things got when I

(Work in Progress)

wasn't near those loudmouths anymore, yet in this case, that maybe wasn't a good thing. I knew I was psyching myself out over nothing. There were no goat men, in fact, there probably weren't even regular goats here.

Finding the shrubbery that the animal had been in wasn't hard; I found it with my nose alone. The smell here was awful... This deer definitely needed a bath. It smelled like all the worst parts of the petting zoos I'd been to. Alpacas and llamas smelled bad, but I would've recognized one of them standing in a bush. This scent... Was it a pig? It certainly smelled bad enough.

The only problem with that was that there are no wild pigs in these woods. At least none that I knew of. There were random houses here and there, but I'm pretty sure there were no ranches.

"HEY! BECCA, WHAT ARE YOU DOING?" Michelle called. I waved my arm out.

"NOTHING, BE RIGHT THERE," I shouted back. As I turned to leave, I yelped in pain and quickly smacked my arm where I'd felt the prick. Evidently I'd missed, as I saw a fat black fly buzz off, and a little stream of blood pumping from a wound on my arm.

"Damn bugs," I muttered before heading off.

...

"So that was the first time you saw the pig?" I asked, now pacing around the room. Rebecca nodded, a distant look in her eyes.

"And you think that was the Pig Man? On all fours? Trying to trick you?" I asked, my brain working overtime to try and connect the stories.

(Work in Progress)

“It had to have been... Those flies... He controlled them.”

...

“I don’t know about you, but I certainly feel refreshed.” Josie yawned.

We were sitting around our campfire once again, not cooking anything at all, and instead lazily lounging about. Josie stretched her arms out, still in her sports bra, and slumped over on the bench she was on. I’d always been privately jealous of her looks. Everything from her natural black hair to her tan skin, even her lean albeit fit body was something to be admired. Her experience in relationships though, was another story. Sometimes her blunt nature acted against her, but she would never admit it.

“So, Becca, what did you find back in those trees?” Michelle asked, wrapping her gray sweater around herself. Her bushy brown hair honestly could’ve passed for one of the shrubs I’d picked through. The thought made me smile.

“Nothing but a stinking pile of shit... Literally. Whatever was there took a big dump, maybe to protest the water being abused, and then it left. Not too sure what it was though, smelled like a pig,” I replied, rubbing my arm where the fly had bitten me.

“Pig man sounds a lot grosser than goat man,” Ash sighed from her nest of blankets. There was no sign that she was sitting in a chair, but I knew it was someplace under there. I could barely see her blonde hair peeking out from the nestles of blankets.

“Does it? They both sound pretty bad to me, and both seem incredibly fake,” I said.

“Are there even wild pigs in these woods?” Josie asked, her eyes now staring at the dying light of the sky.

(Work in Progress)

“Probably not, but I’m also not Steve Irwin or anything, so don’t quote me on that,” I replied. We sat around for a while longer, sharing stories from high school, dreaming about achieving all our goals, and attempting to tell scary campfire stories. Most just ended in laughter, as we began making fun of them before any of us could even finish a full tale. Josie joked about dropping out of college and getting into sales, and the rest of us agreed that this was the most frightening of the scary stories that was told over the dancing orange glow of the campfire.

Before we knew it, night was upon us. Despite Ash’s dramatic castle of blankets, it really didn’t feel cold. A warm summer night in the woods... This was what life was all about right here. For once I could sit back and breathe. No college, no family, no responsibility. A miracle in action if I’d ever seen one.

“Becca, if I kissed you *right now* what would you do?” Josie asked. I could barely see her in the shadows of the slowly dying fire, but something in her voice told me this was more than a joke question. My stomach turned uncomfortably.

“I’d look for the nearest mental asylum and tell them that you’d lost your mind,” I said. Ash and Michelle chuckled at this.

“Really?” Josie asked.

“I dunno, look why do you care?” I asked. There was a moment of silence, filled only by an occasional breeze rustling the trees in the distance.

“I guess—I don’t know, would you ever go out with a girl?” Josie asked, her voice small compared to the usual gusto she held.

(Work in Progress)

“I dunno, is the goat man real?” I asked, hoping to take the edge away from the answer. No one said anything.

“Look, I think you’re getting tired or something. Let’s clean this shit up and go to bed. We’re hiking tomorrow, right? Don’t wanna be the traveling band of zombies by the time the sun rises, so let’s get some rest, yeah?” I said.

“Yeah, fair enough,” Michelle said, her voice distant. I nervously began cleaning up our table and moving stuff under the rain tarp we’d set up. Josie avoided my gaze as we stumbled around guided by our flashlights. *Why is she asking these things?* I thought it might be the elaborate set up to some prank the others had planned behind my back, but something about the way Josie was talking made me doubt that.

I wanted to talk to her, but maybe that would be easier tomorrow morning. Right now, we were all tired and needed some rest. As I settled into my navy blue sleeping bag though, I could’ve sworn I heard Josie crying from her tent, but I told myself it was something else.

Little did I know that there would be no asking them tomorrow morning; there would be no seeing them ever again.

...

Rebecca was crying now. I had retaken my seat and was writing notes I’d surely throw out later. I knew this already, and though my heart ached for the poor girl, the details of her possibly lost love weren’t going to clear her name. The next part of her story was key. In fact, this is the part where reality shifted into her twisted land of visions and the supernatural. This is where the “goat man” became more than just a story.

(Work in Progress)

“That night was the first time you saw the Pig Man then, correct? Aside from the lake?” I asked carefully, not wanting to upset her more than I already had. Rebecca nodded wordlessly before continuing, her voice barely more than a whisper.

...

Something was pinching me. I groaned, hoping it would stop, but it *just kept going*. My bleary half-asleep brain assumed it to be Ash or Michelle, poking me in the night as a joke. When the pain got worse, I slowly sat up, my vision blurry and teary. I pulled my arms from the sleeping bag and looked down.

Flies. Four, maybe five quarter sized flies were there biting me. I groaned again and began slapping at them. Two were crushed immediately, spurting juices all over my now bleeding arm.

“Ugh, yuck,” I mumbled, fumbling about for the can of bug spray in my bag. I spritzed it around the dark walls of the tent, hoping that it would ward away the now airborne insects. Their wings buzzed loudly against the stark silence of the forest, and it made them all the more disgusting.

That’s when it hit me; the stench from yesterday’s bush investigation had returned in a horribly pungent fashion. *Did that stupid pig wander into the camp looking for food?* There was a good chance he’d found a stray hot dog that we’d missed.

Outside my tent, a twig snapped. I stopped moving and listened hard. The animal—or whatever it was—was close to my tent. The incessant buzzing of the massive flies seemed to be getting worse, and I wondered for a second if maybe I’d set my tent up under a tree housing a

(Work in Progress)

beehive. I'd never heard flies buzz like this before. Just as I began to worry about bee stings, more movement sounded *right outside* my tent.

Staying still as I could, I managed to shift my gaze to my right. There was something there, and *it wasn't a pig*. No... This was a person. Unless a tree had magically grown right next to me, the black shape outlined outside the wall of my tent was a person standing there. They were being as still as I; perhaps they'd heard me moving. *This isn't funny anymore Ashley*.

I moved my still bleeding arm silently to the emergency bag my dad had forced me to pack and retrieved a flashlight from it. The figure outside made a sound, but it wasn't anything I was expecting. Were they... Sniffing?

Without warning, the unmistakable sound of a pig's squeal nearly made me cry out, but I kept my lips sealed shut. The figure *stomped* away, snapping sticks with each hulking step. I waited in dead silence for a few minutes. The flies... They were leaving. The bug spray was finally hitting them, and this was a lone positive in a current sea of negatives. None of us, not even big strong Michelle, was that bulky. We weren't alone in our camp tonight.

It's just a camp employee, or a farmer, they're out trying to catch this pig. That's all. I kept trying to reassure myself, but something about this all seemed *off*. Quietly as I could, I slung my emergency pack over my shoulders and grabbed a bowie knife from the side pouch. I dressed quickly before exiting the tent, each crunch of the zipper being undone making me flinch.

I was met with an incredibly dark campsite. Funny how much our eyes get used to the lighting of a city or a suburb. Even late at night there's bound to be a street lamp, or a neon sign, or maybe a lone car with overly bright headlights. Out here, there was nothing but the moonlight

(Work in Progress)

and our puny flashlights... None of which were currently on. *Maybe they just don't hear him. Josie, she's a heavy sleeper.*

I was on the leftmost tent in our row, and when I clicked my little silver light on, the scene I saw nearly stopped my heart.

Open. They were all open. Every tent's door flap was down. No signs of a struggle though. Maybe they were out by the bathrooms? *All at once though?*

"Josie? Michelle? Ash? Hello?" I called, my voice much weaker sounding than I intended it to be. The chirps of the crickets and the faint buzzing of the flies were the only things to respond to my call. I walked forward, taking note of the massive footsteps in the mud, and began looking inside each tent. Josie's bag was neatly folded, as if she had been getting ready to pack up and leave. I saw a small hole near where her head would've been. Odd... There'd been a similar hole in my tent's roof that hadn't been there before.

I began walking forward, stopping only to try and listen for the pig. Sweat began to form at my brow, as I found each tent in a different state. Ashley's was a mess—like usual—but it made me nervous that it was now, because they were all gone. Michelle had her bags open. I saw bottles of perfume on the floor of the tent, and her bag of hair ties was sitting on her zipped-up sleeping bag. It was like she was getting ready to go somewhere and simply *disappeared*.

"No, they're not gone Rebecca. They're just... Out someplace," I muttered. I refused to believe they were missing. Getting kidnapped in the woods only happened in shitty horror flicks...

The pig squealed again, but this time, it was more of a scream. I whipped around, my light acting as a sort of shield. Panicked, I shined the white beam left and right, looking for any

(Work in Progress)

kind of movement. The sweat was dripping freely now. My breaths quickened, and the dinner from last night began swimming in my stomach.

A rustle followed by a snap.

The pig screamed again, but this time, I saw him—*it*. In that moment, I lost any sense of assurance I'd built for myself.

This was really happening, but it wasn't like the movies. He was rushing towards me in anything but slow motion. I felt my mouth moving, but only a stream of incoherent sounds escaped me. He was horrible—indescribable. Matted black fur, coated in flies, towering above me. Torn clothes, scarred arms, and his face... Was it a mask? I couldn't tell, but I was running. Faster than I'd ever run before. I felt rocks trying to trip me, and branches slicing my face. The squeals wouldn't stop; they shook the trees, the very air *moved* with the wild shrieks coming from him. I ran wailing into the woods, calling for help in a language I can only describe as raw fear. He snapped branches out of his way with his massive hands. I shot glances back when I could, but all I could see was a black shape coming after me, its' gait awkward and terrifying all at once.

The buzzing of the flies coupled with the squealing of the pig/man into an orchestra of madness that drove me off the trail. Before I knew where I was really going, my feet fell from under me and I began spinning. Soon I was airborne, my vision becoming dizzy and red. In the distance, I heard bells ringing. Or maybe I didn't, my head hurt too much. I clutched my flashlight like a lifeline, each impact on the hill threatening to knock me out. When I finally stopped moving, I knew I was dead. There was no way my body could be in this sort of pain and

(Work in Progress)

still be alive. White hot knives stabbed me from every angle. Tears poured from my eyes, and I couldn't seem to catch my breath. Somewhere above me, the pig wailed again.

...

There had been no trails. No footprints in the mud. Though Rebecca's description of the state of the camp was spot on, her details of the escape still failed to add up. She'd been gone for months, and this gave time for the prints to fade and disappear. I tried recreating her experience in my mind's eye, and one obscure detail stuck out.

"Rebecca, you mentioned that you'd seen holes in the tents, correct? What made you notice them?" I asked, opening the folder in front of me and retrieving pictures of the eerie abandoned campsite. The police had provided me with pictures of it all, including shots from inside the tents.

Though small, the holes were there—right where Rebecca had described them.

"Oh... I dunno. I just know that we looked over all our stuff before we left. Nothing was damaged like that, it's something we would've noticed. Especially Josie," Rebecca said.

"You said the Pig Man controlled, er, a swarm of flies, is that right?" I asked, trying to keep the disbelief out of my voice. Suddenly Rebecca's eyes widened.

"That's how he found us! The blood... His flies ate through our tents," Rebecca said to herself. She looked shocked at the revelation. I took note of this in my crowded pad.

My pocket buzzed, and I checked to see if Rebecca had heard, but her eyes had clouded over. She seemed to be reliving parts of her experience with the new knowledge in mind. I took

(Work in Progress)

the gap in our session to check my phone. A cryptic message stared back at me. It was from the Director. He'd been speaking with Hector Ramirez today.

Adrian, Ramirez knows Rebecca. In fact, he claims he was looking for her. We need to talk. This guy says he's an FBI agent, but there's no trace of him. FBI doesn't know him, his DNA isn't in any system, the guy's a ghost. Meet me after your session finishes up.

Ramirez had driven himself to a local hospital in Louisiana before they sent him to us. From what I'd heard, he was severely injured. If he was looking for Rebecca or her friends... Louisiana wasn't exactly Colorado was it?

"Doctor?" Rebecca asked. She looked concerned. I shoved my phone in my pocket.

"Sorry. Work stuff, nothing to worry about. Okay, I have a few questions. We'll need to speed things up Rebecca, we're running out of time. Your emergency bag, you said you took it with you. What happened to it?"

"I—I don't know. It must've fallen when I fell down that hill."

"So, after you woke up, you didn't go back up the hill? Instead, you wandered further into the woods, and found the Pig Man's house. Is that correct?" I asked. The little color that Rebecca's face had drained quickly. The memory seemed to be overtaking her.

"Y-yes. T-that's where I—it's where I shot him."

Silence.

"I had no choice. He was horrible... Didn't even seem human. What kind of person—who would do that? He was a psychopath, a-a freak. When I found his h-house, I thought I was safe. No. No, I was lost. Lost in the woods with a monster."