

The Fifth Step

By

Michael Ricketson

Lightning flashed and thunder roared as the SUV pulled off Main Street into the police station. It could have been Main Street in any small town anywhere in America. The bank and City Hall with their columns, the Woolworth's type department store with its lunch counter, the decades unused train tracks running right through downtown and its train station turned into a small museum; a throwback to the 40's and 50's seemingly untouched by time.

Caleb Wilson exited the passenger side and Jim Richmond the driver's. Random raindrops fell as they walked across the parking lot to the front door. It was unusual weather for a Central Florida summer morning, but the lumbering remnants of a tropical depression could not deter the men from the long planned trip from Tallahassee.

Jim opened the door and the silver bell hanging from the ceiling rang against the door and startled the older, uniformed man sitting behind the big wooden desk. The

placard on the desk read “Chief Anderson”. The man pushed up his cowboy hat and rubbed his eyes. His white hair, deep wrinkles, and burst red capillaries on his nose betrayed a man who had probably aged beyond his years due to the stresses of law enforcement and heavy drinking.

“Good morning, Chief Anderson. I’m Jim Richm...”

“The boys from Tallahassee, here to see the Wilson Grove Farm.”

“Yes, and this is...”

“You from one of those ghost huntin’ shows?” the Chief asked. “Had a crew here last year. They didn’t stay the night. Wouldn’t tell me why they left so fast.”

“No, we’re just interested in seeing the property,” Jim said.

“I was twenty-five back then, a new cop.” The Chief sighed. “It was a horrible scene. There were bones and skulls in the ashes. The whole family burned, all of ‘em tied to the pecan trees. Property has been vacant for thirty years now. Nobody will buy it. They say it’s haunted.” Jim chuckled. “Laugh if you will. I had to go out there one Halloween. Damn teenagers. Just say I don’t go there unless I have to. After the State Police investigation they said they didn’t have enough remains to account for all of ‘em. They figured one of the youngsters got away somehow. Poor kid. Must have grown up with some crazy shit going on in his head.”

“Yeah,” Caleb said, “I did.”

Anderson glared at Caleb. Their eyes met for a lingering moment. Neither blinked. Jim shifted on his feet, unsure what to say next.

“Well,” said the Chief, standing and heading towards the door, “you boys ought to get a move on. Weather is supposed to get worse.” He opened the door and motioned for

them to exit. “Just keep following Main Street west. The groves are about 2 miles out of town. There’s a driveway on the right. The farmhouse is about a mile down. Good luck. I hope you find what you’re looking for.”

“That was weird,” Caleb said as they walked to the car. “I could swear he was afraid of me.”

“You’re just nervous about the farm.”

The car bumped and bounced down the potholed driveway towards the house. Caleb put his hand on Jim’s arm. The car stopped and Jim put it in park. Caleb’s intense gaze on the road ahead, his shaking hand still on Jim’s arm, “I can’t do this,” he said.

“Caleb...”

“I can’t. It was thirty years ago for Christ’s sake. I was a kid!”

“Listen. I’m your friend, your sponsor, and your pastor,” Jim said with as much empathy as he could. “You’ve been sober over a year now, right?”

“Yeah.”

“What does the fifth step say?”

“We admitted to God, to ourselves, and another human being the exact nature of our wrongs,” Caleb answered.

“You’ve been through the steps. You’re still having nightmares and visions you said. You’ve told me how close you are to drinking again. Do you really want to go back to that life? Go back to prison? Live in the woods and eat out of garbage cans?”

“No.”

“You were ten-years-old when your family was murdered. You don’t remember anything of your life before that. That’s a pretty normal thing; at least that’s what you said your psychologists told you. Maybe coming back here and facing it we can shed some light on it. I’m here with you. We will get through this together with God’s help. God’s help. Remember that.”

Caleb nodded and Jim put the car in gear. On either side of the driveway stood what was left of the citrus farm. Row after row of orange trees, most dead, some still green, all of them overgrown with weeds and the invading kudzu wrapped the trees like a death shroud. The driveway seemed endless and Jim wondered if the Chief had underestimated the distance just as the groves disappeared and the house stood directly in front of them. He stopped the car and turned it off. Both men grabbed short flashlights as they got out. They stood on opposite sides of the car mesmerized.

The huge house stood two stories with wide steps leading to the front door and a covered porch that stretched the length of the house, around the corner and down the side closest to them. It was the epitome of what Jim thought an old southern plantation home would look like. No paint remained and bare wood splintered out everywhere. Planks were missing in spots on the side of the house and the porch covering. All of the empty, broken windows showed nothing but blackness from within except for one window on the second floor that a drapery miraculously still fluttered.

“Bigger than I would have thought,” Jim said.

“I remember my Aunt and Uncle and cousins lived here too,” Caleb said. “Well, were should we start?”

“The trees.”

Caleb nodded and started walking to left of the house. It had stopped raining but the tall grass soaked their pant legs. As they walked, the house drew Jim's gaze. *It is creepy looking.* It reminded him of the Bates house in 'Psycho'. *Ok, I get the haunted thing now,* he laughed to himself. His attention focused on the fluttering drapery in the second story window and wondered how it could have lasted thirty years. The rhythmic flapping in and out of the window entranced him until a bright flash of lighting over the house snapped him out of it.

He ran to catch up to Caleb and as he rounded the remains of the barn he slowed. Caleb stood about ten feet from three large tree stumps. They protruded from the ground about four feet and it was evident that they had been burned, even thirty-years later. He came up behind Caleb who stood motionless, staring.

"I watched it from over there." He pointed to the backside of the barn. "They had the men tied up to one and the women to the other and the little ones, where I would have been, on the end." Caleb said monotone. "They were yelling things at them. Calling them witches and murderers. My Dad and Mom and the grownups just smiled back. The little ones cried. They started splashing gasoline from cans all over them. I was crying real hard, but I had to be quiet so they didn't find me. Dad said to run when they started coming, but I just hid. He said I had to get away, but I couldn't leave. Julia saw me and smiled at me. I could see the flames from the torches reflecting in the gas on her face. She blew me a kiss with her lips. Then they threw the torches and they all screamed, even my Dad. Julia screamed as her clothes and hair burned. Her skin started to bubble and crack and I saw her ear fall off. She looked right at me and I swear she told me to run and I

did.” Tears flowed down Caleb’s cheeks. “I hear those screams every night when I sleep. Everyday when my mind is quiet. I see Julia everywhere.”

Jim said nothing as Caleb headed back to the house. He had never described what happened that night, only that it had taken place and Jim had never pushed for anything more. He knew they had been burned and could never know how it felt to watch your family die that way at only ten-years-old. He only wanted to help his friend find an end to the torment. He wiped a tear from his own face and followed Caleb to the front of the house.

“Julia was your cousin?” Jim asked as they stepped up to the front door that stood open, hanging from the top hinge that looked about to break.

“Yeah,” Caleb smiled. “I had a thing for her. She was 16.”

The space inside was immense. They both pulled the flashlights out of their back pockets. Furniture for the most part recognizable, though falling apart, had been arranged appropriately for a living room. Some obviously had been added recently; a mattress, some webbed lawn chairs, milk crates, all set haphazardly around and surrounded with empty beer cans. Spray-painted graffiti covered the walls. A curved staircase rose along the right wall to the second level.

“I’m going to go up and find my room,” Caleb said.

“Want me to come?” Caleb shook his head. “Well be careful. This place is thirty-years-old. I don’t want you falling through the ceiling.”

Floorboards creaked as Caleb tested each step down the long hallway. He entered the only open door and saw the dressing table along the wall with its oval mirror covered

in decades of dirt and dust. The tattered remnants of the drape fluttered. He ran his fingers across the warped tabletop, flaking pieces of half-moon shaped varnish.

A mist rolled up from the floorboards behind his feet. Long tendrils of grey, white, and black vapor spread across the floor, covering nearly the entire area of the room. With sudden speed it coalesced at the spot behind Caleb, pouring on top of and over itself as a fountain, reaching in a column to the back his head. It drifted outward from the column until its form resembled that of a person, a woman. Its assemblages of hands and head leaned into Caleb's shoulders and inched up to his ear with the grotesque shape of a mouth and whispered, "You wanted me."

Caleb sucked air, sharp and deep. The room flashed bright. He saw himself in the mirror, clean now, but he wasn't forty. His brown straight bangs hung above a child's face, his face. His ten-year-old face looked back at him from the mirror frightened, begging for him to stop what they both knew was about to happen. He pulled his gaze from the mirror only to see his child-self sitting on the bed next to sixteen-year-old Julia who wore nothing but a long t-shirt. She took his little hand and placed it on her thigh.

"No," Caleb said, standing in the damp, dirty room staring at nothing, tears rolling down his face.

He watched as Julia moved the boy's hand to the inside of her thigh and under the white t-shirt. "You can still have me," the shifting, semi-transparent form said into Caleb's ear. "All you have to do is finish it."

"No!" Caleb spun and ran for the door.

The apparition dispersed and then reformed, rushing the door. Caleb pulled the door shut and took two steps before collapsing on the floor. The door bulged. Caleb's

eyes and mouth opened wide with disbelief as the wood splintered, pieces falling and flying outward. The door swelled in and out until it exploded, sending wood sailing past his face. He screamed and ran down the stairs where Jim shouted, “What the hell was that?”

“We gotta get outta here!” Caleb grabbed Jim, dragging him towards the door. Blue lightning flashed inside the vast room. Ozone stung their nostrils. Wind kicked up dust and every loose piece of trash. In one rapid, thunderous movement, all of the furniture slid across the floor and piled up, covering the front entrance.

“Holy God!” Jim said.

Caleb pulled him across the room and through a swinging door into what used to be the kitchen. The windows went black and a door on the far end slammed shut. They both stood in the center of the room, heaving, out of breath, eyes wide. Jim ran to the swinging door, but it wouldn’t budge. A slow creaking like fingernails on a chalkboard filled the air as a door on the other end of the kitchen swung open. An orange, flickering light poured up the stairs and into the room.

“A basement? Who builds a basement in Florida?” Jim said. He walked over to the opening. “Is that a fire? We have to put it out.”

“We have to get out of here,” Caleb said.

“Well, it doesn’t look like that’s happening at the moment. If that’s a fire we could burn to death like your family.” He realized what he had said. “I’m sorry.”

“We are not going down there!”

The wood table and chairs in the corner slid to the middle of the room where the men stood, forcing them to move out of the way. Jim's eyes darted around as fast as his body twisted in circles. His chest heaved. "Oh God, oh God, oh God!" he said.

The furniture lifted into the air in unison and began to spin around each other in a delicate ballerina dance, dipping and rising as each piece made a circuit. They spun faster and faster and the wind grew as each piece moved past the men outward from the center. Each orbit pushed the men closer to the doorway until Jim stood on the second step and Caleb brushed against him trying not to enter further. The furniture shattered against the walls and doorframe sending both men plummeting down the stairs.

The dirt floor kicked up dust as they collected their bearings and stood. Their shadows danced together on the wall as the light flickered. A rectangular fire pit with three-inch stone borders arranged in the center of the room took up most of the space. A wood table with a book and a knife stood against the far wall. The small fire popped and crackled as small sparks floated up into a makeshift vent hood.

"What is this place, Caleb?" Jim asked.

"Somewhere we shouldn't be."

"Oh, Caleb, you knew you would always be back." The voice came from the table. Smoke and ash flowed from the pit and gathered at the table, spinning and whirling about as it formed the shape of a man. Jim made the cross gesture across his chest. "Oh please pastor, you're not Catholic. Caleb, surely you knew it would all work out this way."

"No, father, you're all dead. I watched you burn," Caleb said, crying.

“But we’re all here; Julia, your mother, the others. We’ve been waiting for you to finish the journey, to follow the path that lead you back to us to finish what Adramelech had promised.”

“Adramelech? I’ve heard that name,” Jim said, “when I was in seminary.”

“A fleeting reference, I’m sure.”

“And did you burn children to sacrifice to Adramelech too?” Jim asked as he inched his way around the pit, getting closer to the table.

“And how many millions have been sacrificed in the name of your God?” the words spilled from the apparition like thick vomit. “What are a few children here and there? Besides,” it said glancing at Caleb, “Caleb rather enjoyed the little ones. Isn’t that right, Caleb?”

Tears flowed from Caleb’s eyes like rivers from a mountain. His chest rose and fell with each sob. He fell to his knees. Fists clenched, he pounded the sides of his head and screamed, “I was a child! It was all I had ever known!” Jim eyed the book on the table as he glanced between Caleb and his father.

“Remember your squeals of delight as you pulled the blade through the soft bellies, reaching in, pulling out the insides and tossing them at the feet of the mothers? How you gave honor to your God, Adramelech, as you held the squirming infants over your head, blood dripping down, covering your face and throwing them into the fire.”

“Stop it!” Caleb sprang to his feet and closed the distance to his father. His father’s smoky essence reached out to engulf Jim as he reached the table and pulled him close.

“You see, man of God,” the vapor said into Jim’s ear, “Caleb, here, has kept a naughty little secret from you. He remembers everything. He just thought it was all over when the townspeople murdered us.”

“I won’t do this, Father.”

“This is the fifth and final step of a five-thousand-year journey! You are the purest blood of Adramelech’s line! We stand with him *over* Satan and God!”

“It’s not right,” Caleb said.

“Where was *their* God when you called out to him, begged him for mercy? Where was he when you ate molded bread from the trash? Where was he when you lay in your own vomit, begging him to end your suffering? Finish the step by sacrificing his servant!”

Fear glazed Jim’s eyes. “You’re right, Father,” said Caleb. He smiled. He reached for the table and grabbed the knife lying next to the book. He held the knife with both hands over his head. “He left me to rot for thirty years. Left me to live in torment. Left me to wallow in my own filth. What kind of god *is* Adramelech?” He brought the knife down hard and pierced the book through to the table.

Blue bolts of energy shot out from the blade. A bright flash burst outward, sending both men through the air to opposite walls. The fire pit erupted as a tornadic firestorm engulfed the room. Caleb and Jim hid their faces against the walls. Both screamed as the heat and wind and sand felt like a million needles pricking their skin. As quick as it began it ended.

Caleb and Jim were alone in the room. They exchanged glances and looked at where the table had been. The table, book, and knife were gone. Jim stumbled over to Caleb and helped him sit up, leaning him against the wall.

“How did you know that would work? You know, with the book?” Jim asked.

“I didn’t. Usually works in the movies.” They laughed.

“Ha. That’s why I was going for it.” More laughter.

“Well,” Jim said, grunting as he sat down next to Caleb, “this is definitely the most interesting fifth step I have ever done with another alcoholic.” He brushed sand from his knee. “Caleb, God forgives you. Remember that.”

“I believe He does.”