

All Your Nightmares Came Today

Johnny TickTock sits on the roof, with his horrible pipe and his sack of dreams. He looks at the stars, and he huffs and he puffs and he blows a smoke ring at each of them in turn, lying on the tiles and dangling his spindly legs over the gutter. One star two star three star four. It is cold tonight, but Johnny TickTock doesn't feel the cold. Johnny doesn't feel much of anything these days.

Once upon a time, people knew about Johnny TickTock. Parents would tell their children about him on stormy winter nights, and those children would make extra sure their bedroom windows were locked tight and the covers pulled over their heads before they slept. Now all the stories are about vampires and bogeymen. Those upstarts have film deals, and poor Johnny has been forgotten.

Johnny's fingers scrabble across the tiles to where his sack is bulging and rippling. Carefully, yet without ever looking, he loosens the cord just enough to shove his hand into the squirming mass. He grips, tightens and brings his hand back out, fastening the cord again as he withdraws.

He sits up and removes his pipe, placing it delicately across his knees. In his hand is his catch; pink and shimmering. It writhes and struggles in his grasp, but neither will do any good. Johnny may look brittle as dead wood, with his broomstick limbs and fingers like pencils, but there's a lot of power in those old bones. Johnny's tortured mouth breaks into a smile. It is a sweet dream. His favourite.

The dream squeaks in alarm as Johnny's mouth draws closer. He ignores it and bites off the end, masticating noisily. The dream, now limp, drips pink ooze onto his jacket cuff. He licks it up before sucking out the remaining nectar, and discards the dry husk to the wind. It floats gently away, dissolving in the night air.

Johnny TickTock likes it when the children have sweet dreams, as their parents always suggest. They taste like sugar-candy.

He roots around in his waistcoat and produces a huge gold pocket-watch. It goes ticktock ticktock, but this is not how Johnny got his name.

His watch carves up time using heavy Roman numerals. Johnny likes the Roman numerals – he can remember when they were new. He does not like the new figures, with their ugly, bulbous curves. He definitely does not like the new clocks put on bedside tables, with the numbers glowing in vile, radioactive green and the seconds rushing past as you watch, as if you need reminding. Even with their complete lack of aesthetic appeal these twists and displays have consigned the Romans and all their beautiful geometry to a few isolated bits of officialdom. Johnny does not think he will ever understand modernity. He likes time you can carve in stone.

Time. It's getting on. He snaps the pocket-watch shut and stretches his joints, his bones creaking and cracking. Tick, tock, tick, tock, but this is not how Johnny got his name either.

He stands, and this is quite a sight. His stick-insect body bends in a spiral and his feet scrabble for purchase on the tiles behind his head. Firm, he unfolds again, a scratchy outline against the streetlight. He slings his sack of dreams over his shoulder and makes his way along the rooftops.

Tick, tock, tick, tock go his patent leather shoes. That's how Johnny got his name.

He sniffs as he walks, drawing into his head the smells of all the dreams that drift upwards from the darkened bedrooms. Metal with a twist of cherry comes from one, where the dreamer is lost in a Dali-esque surrealist twilight. The next room reeks with the hot salt of a teenage fantasy.

Johnny keeps moving. These are not the dreams he is looking for. He pauses just once, when a leap to a new roof brings him straight into the sugar-coated drift of a sweet dream. Drool splashes onto the tiles from the corner of his mouth, but he shakes himself dry and moves on. His sack is already bulging from catches like this.

Johnny does not remember ever dreaming himself. What does a nightmare ever dream about? Though Johnny is not a nightmare as such; he just comes from the same stock. Fear and fright and bumps in the night, that's what little Johnny is made of.

There are still a few people in the streets below. The verylatecomers home, staggering from the clubs and bars. They won't notice Johnny; people never look to the rooftops.

The wind changes, and brings the scent of acid. Johnny's head snaps around. He strides and scrambles, leaps from roof to roof to reach the source before it fades.

As Johnny draws closer, the different scents that blend into the nightmare resolve themselves into individual strands. It's a child, a girl, maybe six years old. She's dreaming of the monster that her older brother told her lives in the cupboard in her bedroom, something with six flaming eyes, bristly black fur and breadknife claws.

Oh, it's good. Johnny can drink this scent right in.

Johnny has smelled four children having nightmares in the last week, and he's killed them all. When today's grandmothers had grandmothers they would be told: be good, or Johnny TickTock will come for you. Soon, Johnny thinks, these stories will be told again.

The air is full of nightmare now. The stench is so thick that tears stream from Johnny's eyes, leaving oily black trails across his face. It wells from the room below and Johnny's teeth chatter in anticipation.

He drops to the window, balancing on the meagre inches of the ledge. It is shut fast against any nocturnal invasion, but there is a hairline crack between the frame and the sill. Johnny holds the sack of dreams between his teeth as he works his fingers into the space.

And what would this child see, should she wake from her slumbers and look to the window? A spidershape, a bizarre stylised M as Johnny crouches to his haunches, his knees higher than his head. But she will not wake. Johnny can see her toss and turn, trapped in a nightmare world.

His mouth contorts; his teeth are clenched; his bones crack and pop as they squeeze further under. Even his twisted joints complain against a crushing like this. But there, his nails click against the far side of the frame. He stands, and the window rises with him. He steps into the room. Carefully, so as not to make a sound, he puts the bag of dreams down and picks his way across the floor. It is a minefield of spiky hairclips and discarded toys. Johnny casts a critical eye around as he creeps toward the bed. This room is a tip. Parents these days are nowhere near strict enough with their kids.

He bends over the girl's sleeping form, his tongue snapping up some stray drool that would otherwise have splashed her face. Then, bending so low he is almost kissing her ear, he begins to sing.

He may not look like much, but Johnny, he has a beautiful voice.

Time was when Johnny would give dreams instead of just taking them. He would charm out the sweet dream with his lilting song, then retch up a nightmare into the sleeping ear. But bringer-of-bad-dreams wasn't enough for the scaremongers; they wanted blood. Johnny will give them something to talk about.

The first child he killed was almost identical to this one. Another girl, dreaming of a monster. It tasted almost exactly the same. She had woken with relief from the horrors of her dream, only to find those horrors bending over her bed. She hadn't even had time to scream; her little heart thumping so hard in death that it carried on even after she had gone, bouncing once or twice on its own momentum.

The second had screamed. She had dreamt her parents were dead, and woken to the sight of her mother hanging from the bedroom ceiling. By the time her mother really had entered the room her daughter was dead from the shock. The nightmare had vanished with the mind that had created it, the mother had cried until she ran out of tears and Johnny, clinging to the bedroom ceiling, well, it was all he could do not to chuckle.

Something black and oily is oozing from the girl's ear, pushing and squeezing and shlugging its way out, drawn by Johnny's song. The girl twists and turns, her sleep disturbed. Johnny coos her nightmare into moving slower. He does not want her awake yet. If she woke now she would see Johnny bending over her – and that's a sight, to be sure, all sticks and stones and razor-edge joints – but not, he feels, as frightening as whatever she has cooked up in her own little head. Johnny never did think he could really put the shakes on a girl.

The nightmare falls from the girl's ear, and she sleeps visibly easier already. It tumbles, one end over the other, with a noise like tar and toffee. Johnny makes a grab for it, but it slips from his grasp, splats onto the floor and scuttles under the girl's bed.

Johnny curses and drops to the ground, one hand outstretched and rooting. His fingers creep over assorted junk, and he wonders how a girl can have so many things under her bed with so many things already strewn across the floor.

He prods something squidgy, and there is a noise than can only be described as a chump. Johnny's face twists and his eyes water with the effort of not yelling. No wonder the girl was restless; it's a vicious one. He draws his hand out and the nightmare is clamped on to two of his fingers.

He yanks it off and sucks his bleeding hand. It snaps at him and Johnny snaps back. Then, ignoring its squealed protests, he squeezes it as small as it will go and stuffs it into his pipe. He huffs, and he puffs, and he blows out a huge cloud of thick black smoke, which hangs in the room as if too heavy to fly.

Johnny leaps into the shadows in the corner of the room and watches. The black cloud is condensing. Collapsing in on itself, it forms tooth and claw and sharp-furred muscle. Piggy red eyes that burn to the touch. A twisted parody of a dog.

Fully formed, it sees the girl's body, and it growls.

The third child Johnny killed did not die of fright. He screamed and screamed, but did not die until the monster his mind had created raised one paw and slit him open from throat to groin. The nightmare dissolved as the bloodstains grew.

The girl stirs. Johnny grins. She's waking up.

The blankets move and she raises her head. The beast glares at her with real hatred, revealing rows of tyrannosaur teeth. The girl blinks, staring at it with curiosity and something like annoyance.

Now, this gives Johnny pause. But then, that's one of the things he loves. Every death is different. There is such wondrous variety.

The beast raises its claws, but the girl gets out of bed before it strikes. She walks out of the door and the nightmare follows. They love to chase.

The fourth child was chased. She ran screaming to her parents' room, but her parents were too wrapped up in each other and their door was locked. When it saw she was cornered it had pounced, and left her a bloody mess.

Johnny follows the beast and the girl at a safe distance. He sees the back end of the nightmare disappear into the living room as he tick-tocks down the stairs. Hurrying, so he doesn't miss anything, Johnny sees the beast chase the girl into the kitchen.

Careful not to be seen, Johnny pokes his head around the door. He is just in time to see the beast prepare to pounce, and to see the girl reach for a frying pan. The nightmare growls, a sound from before there were houses, when people had cause to be scared of the dark. The girl rolls her eyes, raises the frying pan, and proceeds to beat the hell out of the creature on the kitchen linoleum.

Job done, she returns to bed, dragging the frying pan behind her. Johnny presses himself to the wall as she passes.

Hearing the click of her bedroom door, Johnny creeps into the kitchen. His mouth droops like an inverted U. The monster is still there, slowly bleeding black across the floor.

In a fit of rage, Johnny kicks it and beats it and pounds it with his sack of dreams. He screams and he yells words no mother should know. Johnny is really quite upset.

There is a sound from the kitchen doorway. Johnny turns to see the girl. She is still carrying the frying pan and looks extremely annoyed her sleep has been disturbed a second time.

Johnny TickTock realises he is cornered.