

**The  
Burning  
Tree**

**By Rory Dwan**

For Ava and Melanie,  
Blood of my blood

**“Monsters are real, and ghosts are real too. They live inside us, and sometimes, they win.” – Stephen King**

## Introduction

**I**t was a regular day at the park. A single white cloud crept slowly over the green expanse as the picnickers lounged on the rising hill.

The playground below was filled with creaks and groans as the rusty joints twisted and turned. The children chased each other through throngs of families in a widespread game of manhunt. An ice cream van pulled off and headed down the road, towards its next destination, tolling its anthem once more for the children's amusement.

Seated near the crest of the hill sat a couple. They doted on a little boy sat in a pram. The baby kicked his chubby legs in delight as he licked the ice cream from around his mouth.

"Johnny's so adorable, I love it when he makes that face," the woman said, lifting her sunglasses over her forehead to get a better look at him.

"Yeah, well..." the man said quietly, peering around as he leaned towards her. "I hope he doesn't get the squirts!"

"Ben!"

"Just saying, I remember my brother Larry once ate a whole tub of ice cream, shit himself right on the couch when the folks caught him."

Ben blew on his arm for dramatic effect.

"Stop it with your filth! I know how you Well's boy's eat so it's no doubt he gobbled it down in one bite."

She shook her head, smiling at him.

They'd been together for nearly a year now, met at a mutual friend's party and hit it off straight away. He still had the trousers she'd spilled a glass of merlot on by accident.

*It's a bit early to be trying to get in my pants,* he'd joked.

Ben had fallen in love with her instantly, and she loved him more because he hadn't been scared off in the least because she had a kid.

He'd been the perfect gentleman, even if he was a bit rough around the edges.

"So, what you want to do later, get something to eat, see a movie?" said Ben, stroking her leg.

"A movie sounds great."

"And maybe get some food to bring home?"

She lay back putting her head on his lap. "Ummm, sounds yummy."

Ben rubbed her head and they lay there enjoying the silence until a series of coughs and splutters emerged from the pram. Looking over, Ben could see Johnny vomiting up ice cream.

"Ellen he's choking!"

Ben lifted Johnny out of the pram, tapping and rubbing his back gently. Ellen got up and wiped Johnny's face. Ben saw something inside Johnny's mouth. Wiping his finger, he opened Johnny's mouth carefully and felt around inside.

"I think there's something in his mouth, but I can't... wait, ah!"

Johnny bit down on Ben's finger, he tried to pull it out but the sharp teeth held tight, digging in deeper.

"Ahh!" Ben was red in the face. "The little man's got a grip!"

Ellen grabbed Johnny's mouth and pried it open.

Ben slid out his trembling finger and saw that the flesh on the index was torn from knuckle to nail. Blood trailed down his hand in rapid streams.

Taking Johnny from his arms, Ellen put him back in the pram. She pulled some cloths out from a bag and wrapped them around Ben's finger.

"Keep applying pressure, hold it here. We have to go to the hospital Ben, that'll need stitches."

Ben could feel the sweat forming on his forehead. He looked down into the shaded enclosure that was Johnny's pram and saw blood dribbling from the baby's lips.

"That's not nice Johnny, you can't bite!" he snapped before he could help himself. Johnny's lip quivered and he began wailing, reaching up for Ellen.

"Stop it Ben, you're upsetting him!" She frowned. "It was a mistake, that's all."

Ellen crouched down and rubbed Johnny's head, soothing him until the crying stopped.

Looking around, Ben noticed the eyes watching him. A few changed direction, but most didn't.

"It was just an accident, nothing to worry about." He gave the best smile he could manage, but the eyes seemed to fill more with disdain.

An old woman sat nearby shaking her head at him.

"Ben look, my pearl earring was in his mouth. How the hell did it get in there?"

Ben turned to see Ellen crouched in front of the pram, holding a small ball in the center of her palm.

It was reddened with blood. Ben bent down to get a closer look.

"Poor thing could have cut his gums open!"

*Poor thing my ass* thought Ben, looking at the blood soaked cloth wrapped around his finger.

As he squinted at Johnny, the pram was momentarily silhouetted against the blue sky as the sun emerged from behind a cloud. But before Johnny was fully hidden in the shade of his pram, Ben could've sworn the baby was grinning at him.

**B**en slid a cigarette from the pack on the dash with one hand, controlling the steering wheel with the other. The truck rumbled as it passed over the bridge.

He'd been back smoking for nearly five years now, just shortly after landing the job. It wasn't the stress of the long trips that made him do it; it was the thoughts of coming home.

He'd been promoted from beer to scotch right before he quit at the plant, at home their marriage was falling down faster than a camel on roller-skates.

When Ellen had asked him why he quit the manufacturing plant, he'd said that he'd always loved trucking ever since his dad first brought him along as a kid.

It wasn't a down out lie, but it came pretty close.

Ben couldn't understand how their relationship had begun failing so badly, it seemed as if a toxic cloud hung over their home, because often times when the two of them went away for a weekend they got on just like old times.

He missed the good times, and so it was high time he did something to try to get them back on the same level. But that wasn't today though, today he would drive until his eyes cried out for sleep and then drink in the motel until he passed out. This was the only way he could sleep without having that bloody nightmare.

Lighting up, he threw the lighter back on the dash.

Ben loved being on the open road, there were no expectations. Out here there was no waking up and wondering what the hell to do for the day, besides getting shitfaced of course.

It was awful hard to get shitfaced at home. Whiskey had a tendency to stick on his breath and Ellen had a nose like a bloodhound. He didn't understand why she was so bent out of shape, just because he

would have a little nightcap while away, he could stop anytime he wanted.

At that thought the bottle of scotch slid sideways under the seat and made a *glug glug* sound. He looked over and saw the sun beginning to set behind the hills. Leaning over, he pressed the G.P.S.

*BEEP*

“Motels,” said Ben.

“*Searching,*” spoke the monotonous voice. “*Carson Motel, in 500 yards, turn right.*”

In the reception a small weasel of a man glanced up at him. Ben paid with cash and went to the cramped, foul smelling room. As he sat on the bed with the bottle o scotch, he scratched the scar running up his arm. His eyes took in the jagged line and scattered dots.

A few weeks after he’d gotten the trucking job he’d been walking down the second floor of his home, towards the stairs. As he got to the first step something rolled under his feet, making him lose his balance. Down he went, feeling every bump and landing sideways on his arm with a sickening crunch. It had been broken in three places, his ankle sprained and two ribs broken.

Johnny’s marbles had been scattered on the top of the stairs.

*Johnny.*

Now there’s a kid prone to disaster. Like the time he’d put a large bowl full of silverware into the microwave, with his pet hamster going along for the ride too. Or the two kittens they’d found in the crawlspace.

He shuddered at that memory.

But Johnny’s tenth birthday was soon and Ben had gone all out on his present. He’d be back in a couple of days and he’d surprise them all. And boy would they love it.



The steam rose from the hot water, making the sweat drip from Ellen's forehead like a river. Ellen wiped it away with her apron and looked over at Johnny who was sat at the kitchen table drawing with crayons. Ellen finished putting the food onto his plate and walked over to the table.

"Put that away honey, it's time for dinner."

He slid the paper across the table as she put the plate down in front of him. She walked around to look at the drawing.

Johnny was playing fetch in the front garden. Ellen was standing up on the porch, waving down at him.

"Where's Ben?" she asked.

Johnny shrugged, "I dunno."

"Well, on a nice day like that," she pointed at the sun in the corner. "I'm sure he'd be out there playing with you."

"Maybe," Johnny began to eat.

*Even if Johnny isn't Ben's son, thought Ellen. It would be nice if he helped out. Showed more care for him. Was she wasting her time with him, were all of these years gone to waste? He seemed so right at the start.*

Ellen closed the dishwasher too hard and it slammed. She took a deep breath, wiping the hair from her face.

*It's going to be fine. We'll just have long talk and work things out.*

"Mom, are you okay?"

Ellen turned around, Johnny was staring at her.

"Of course, just tired from cooking, that's all. It's really warm, isn't it? How about we have some ice-cream for dessert?"

"That sounds great!"

Johnny finished eating and went into the living room with a bowl filled with vanilla scoops. Ellen walked over and picked up the wall phone to book May, the babysitter, for tomorrow.

She desperately needed some R&R.

\* \* \*

The next day she ordered the birthday cake, then drove to the hair salon. After getting inside and checking in with the receptionist, she sat down and started reading a magazine. A few minutes passed by, she was halfway through the relationship advice section when the phone behind the desk began to ring.

“Hello Beauty Boutique, how may I help you?” the receptionist answered. “Uh-huh, yes she is... Ok one moment please.”

She stood up, “Mrs. Wells, there’s someone on the phone for you.”

Ellen put down the magazine and stood up. She took the phone from the receptionist, “Hello?”

“Mrs. Wells, this is Officer Jacob Hammond. First of all let me tell you your child’s safe”

“What?”

“I’m afraid there’s been an accident at your home. Half an hour ago smoke was seen coming from the front of the building. Ms. Parse received multiple burns and she’s at the hospital right now, I’m told it’s still touch and go.”

He let it sink in. “But as I said you’re sons unharmed. He was in the backyard when the fire broke out. I have him here now at the station, can you come over?”

“Of, of course... c-can I speak to him?”

There was a ruffling noise as the phone was handed over.

“Mom?”

“Johnny, are you okay?”

“Yes mom.”

“You’re sure?”

“Yes.”

“I need you to stay there with the policeman, okay? I’ll be right over.”

“Okay mommy.”

“I love you, Johnny.”

“I love you too.”

She hung up the phone and handed it back to the receptionist, her hand was shaking.

“Is everything okay?”

“No, there was a fire. I-I have to go,” she left the hair salon in a daze and got in the car.

Closing the door, she saw in the mirror that there were tears running down her cheeks. Mays face floated through her mind. She switched on the ignition and drove to the police station.

**B**en was halfway through the bottle when his phone had begun ringing.

*There was an accident!*

Ellen had filled him in about what'd happened. The babysitter must've fallen asleep with a cigarette in her hand. He'd never liked her much, but he wouldn't have wished it on her. Then he thought that he was being too easy on her, she could've burned Johnny, too.

*Would that be such a terrible thing?*

Ben pushed that thought from his mind, he wasn't evil. Even if he and Johnny didn't get on, it didn't mean they couldn't learn to love each other. Weren't there mothers out there that hated their children for years after the birth? Maybe he was just going through the same kind of thing.

"Ben, you still there?" Ellen's voice brought him back out of the daydream.

"Is there much damage to the house?" Ben stifled a hiccup.

"House, are you kidding me? She's dead and you ask about the house! They both could've died, do you even care?"

"Look, I'm sorry about your friend, Ellen. I really am, but," he stifled another hiccup.

"Keep your fucking apologies, Ben. I just thought you should know," she paused, "and Ben?"

"Hmm?"

"I know you've been drinking, we need to talk when you get home."

Then she hung up.

He looked at the phone and dropped it onto the floor. Lifting the bottle, he swallowed some back and collapsed onto the bed.

Unconsciousness came to him swiftly.

An image of a fire floated through his mind's eye. The logs crackled in the open range, the flames were reflected in the welling tears building in Ellen's eyes.

Ben stood up and took a step towards the door.

“I told you, I don’t want to talk about it!” there was mascara running down her cheeks now.

Ben thought about wiping it off, but decided not to. Instead, he balled his fists. “We’ve never talked about it. I know you’re hurting, I can see it. You have to stop pushing me away, Ellen.”

He shook his head, “Look, I’m just telling you that I’m here to listen, nothing is going to change. I want you to know you can trust me.”

“I said I don’t want to talk about it!”

“That’s fine, Ellen. But I need to go for a walk.” He stopped at the door; his hand hovered over the handle.

Ben turned back and looked her into the eye, he thought of saying something, something reassuring, not wanting to leave just yet, but the right words didn’t come to mind.

He decided that it would be better to say nothing than the wrong thing, so he walked over and grabbed his jacket.

Ellen stared into the fire.

He turned and walked towards the door.

“Wait, I want to tell you, I just don’t want you to think differently about me,” Ellen dabbed her eyes with her sleeve.

He turned back and saw the hurricane of emotion spiraling behind her eyes.

“It was my twenty-first birthday, well something happened. It was near the end of the party, I’d had a lot to drink, I mean *a lot*, so I went to my room to lie down for a while, to try sober up, clear my head.”

Ben waited for her to continue. She cleared her throat and wiped her eyes with the back of her hands, taking a deep breath.

“It was after I’d gotten into bed, everything was spinning. I remember my dad’s friend came into the room. I couldn’t stop him Ben, I couldn’t even sit up! I kept telling him to stop, then I tried calling for help, but he put his hand over my mouth... the fucking bastard!”

She was silent for a long moment, before going on.

“Everyone said I should just have an abortion, my dad was furious when I decided to keep the baby. It’s not its fault after all, I thought. And now I have Johnny, that’s how I had him, I chose life Ben, understand?”

Ben took a step towards her, his face had gone blank. He felt a wave of bile try to push its way up. Ellen began to sob. He rushed over and held her, holding her until she’d fallen asleep.

As he sat there he felt sicker and sicker, until the feeling became so intense it threatened to spew out like a volcano.

\* \* \*

Ben twisted in the bed and smelled the vomit. The room was spinning as he opened one eye. He tried to sit up, but just got a cramp in his back. As he tried to move his arms, he realized he was holding something.

Looking down at the blurry object in his hand, he remembered why he felt so sick, as the bottle of whiskey from the came into focus.

He lifted it up, a drop doused his lips. He let his head drop onto the wet pillow, and thought he saw something standing in the corner of his room, something black with green eyes that pierced through the shadows, but before he could figure out what it was, he fell back into the abyss.

\* \* \*

Ben walked further into the dark hallway. He tried a light switch, but it didn’t work. Walking down towards the kitchen, the house creaked against the stormy wind outside.

He could see the trees swaying in the backyard through the kitchen window. Johnny was standing at the kitchen counter. He was facing away from Ben and seemed to be mixing something.

“Johnny, what are you up to?”

Ben walked closer. He noticed Johnny was stirring something into a bowl.

It was a bottle of rum.

Johnny opened the press under the counter. Reaching inside, he moved some tubs of detergent and empty cartons and pulled out a small white box. Ben thought he recognized it. Johnny put it onto the counter beside the bottle of rum. Ben stood closer, squinting to read the print to make sure.

It was labeled to Ellen Wells; it was a box of her sleeping pills.

Ben went to grab the box of pills, but his fingers passed through it as if it were a projection. A strong wave of dizziness passed over him, he wobbled on unsteady legs.

“What the..?” He tried grabbing the bottle of rum but the same thing happened.

Johnny opened the box of pills and took out one. Popping it open, he poured the powder into the bowl and then poured another two in after it.

He put the empty capsules back into the box and returned it to the press. Standing back up on the step, Johnny stirred the rum and powder together and then grabbed a bottle of cola from the fridge. He poured some in, stirring it together.

Putting down the spoon, he grabbed a glass from the press and poured the rum and coke into it.

Johnny turned and walked out of the kitchen, holding the glass. Ben followed him into the hallway, then into the living room, where he saw May sat on the couch.

She had the house phone in one hand, a cigarette in the other. Johnny put the glass of rum onto the table in front of her and picked up an empty one.

“Thank you sweetie,” she put the cigarette into the corner of her mouth and pinched his cheek.

Johnny walked out of the living room. Ben stared at May for a moment before following Johnny back into the kitchen.

He was beginning to sweat, the house felt like an oven.

Johnny walked out through the backdoor, closing it behind him. Ben tried to open the backdoor, but his hand passed through the handle.

“Damn it!”

He looked out through the window and saw Johnny walking down the garden, towards the trees at the back of the property.

Ben closed his eyes. Sweat dripped from his forehead onto his shirt. He took a deep breath as he stepped forwards.

When he opened his eyes, he was stood just outside the back door.

He ran down the garden after Johnny but couldn't see him anywhere. In the woods the silence was crushing. That's when something above him caught his eye.

Johnny was sat on a thick branch that was ten feet high in the air and had his back to Ben.

The rope swing Ben had made had been cut and was tied around Johnny's neck.

Johnny turned around and looked at Ben with crooked smile.

“What's wrong, Ben, are you afraid?”

Johnny threw back his head and let out a manic giggle, his voice was different, deeper, filled with darkness, and it made Ben's skin crawl with icy pinpricks. Flames licked out from Johnny's mouth and spread up his face, engulfing it.

The fire spread, down his neck and body and onto the rope. Johnny lurched forwards, falling and then jerking wildly as the rope went taught.

He swung back and forwards just above Ben, smiling down at him.

The tree he was hanging from burst into flames, knocking Ben backwards. Ben's head landed on a rock and his vision went black.



**T**he thin lumps of meat lay twisted and blackened.

Ellen threw the last of the burnt rashers onto the plate, then finished cooking the last pancake and flipped it onto the pile. She poured the thick maple syrup over it and sprinkled some sugar onto it.

Johnny smiled as she put it onto the table. She was about to start cleaning up when a mark under Johnny's collar caught her eye.

"Oh my god!" she gasped, as she pulled down the collar and saw a thick mark surrounding Johnny's neck.

She grabbed Johnny and turned him around to face her.

"Johnny, what happened, who did this?"

He shrugged at her.

She stood up and was filled with horror as she noticed what he'd been drawing. She picked up the page with the crayon marks on it.

It was a picture depicting somebody hanging from a tree and the tree was on fire.

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