

Rory Dwane

**THE
BURNING
TREE**

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By Rory Dwane

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

It 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.

Ben 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.

Ben 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.

The 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.

Ben had woken from the whiskey stupor in the motel in a sweat and hadn't felt right since.

That night he'd had a troubling nightmare about Johnny. No doubt the news from Ellen must have caused it. He swore to himself that he'd lay off the drink. Or cut down at least.

Walking down the driveway, he passed a couple of cleaning vans. As he walked through the front door he took off his coat and threw it up onto the rack, he frowned as he noticed a tweed jacket hanging beside it.

"Shit..." he muttered to himself.

In the living room he found three cleaners ripping up burnt carpet. The room had been cleared of furniture, the roof was blackened and the wallpaper was peeling from the walls. He turned and walked back into the hallway.

He could see out the kitchen window, a flashback of the trees blowing heavily floated through his mind. He could hear a deep voice coming from the kitchen.

Shit, shit, shit...

Walking through the doorway, Ben saw Ellen's father Gerald leaning against the counter holding a glass of whiskey. Ellen was sat at the table with a glass of wine, she looked tired.

Shit, this can't be good.

"Benjamin, how are you?"

"Good, Gerald, and you?" he gave Gerald the fakest smile manageable.

"I can't complain, although this muck isn't what a man of my taste usually enjoys, if I do say so myself."

"Well if you stayed in Houston you could enjoy whatever kind you wanted, Gerald."

Gerald glanced at Johnny who was sat at the table drawing. Gerald's knuckles whitened as he gripped the glass tightly.

"Yes, well, certain events occur and all."

Ben ignored him and turned to Ellen, "What's going on Ellen, why's he here?"

"Johnny, go to your room please," said Ellen. Johnny stood up and walked out of the room without even looking at him.

Ellen cleared her throat. "Ben, I've been trying. God knows I have, but lately things just aren't working out. I called my dad to come up and take Johnny for a while, until you move your things out at least. Your brother said you can stay with him until you get on your feet." She took a sip from the glass, shaking her head. "Johnny's not coping with our unhappiness well, Ben. I don't think he likes the way I am, I'm snappy, and he hears me crying at night too, look!"

She showed Ben a picture of her lying in bed alone and tears were running down her face. Johnny was stood at the room door with tears running down his face too.

“What, you want me to leave?”

“I can’t do it anymore,” she looked at him. “I never see you anymore; you come home and barely interact with me or Johnny. I’m sick of doing everything around here, I just feel so depressed all the time. This is the only way. I’ve thought it over a hundred times.”

He shook his head, “I’m out working Ellen, that’s what I’m doing. I’m trying to keep a roof over our heads.”

“It’s not enough Ben. I’m tired of just getting by. I found a bottle of rum last week, guess where? It was hidden behind Johnny’s wardrobe. What if he’d of found it and drank it? You need to go to a group meeting, you need help.”

He looked at Gerald who just shook his head.

Patronizing prick, he thought as he looked at the glass in his hands.

“No, I don’t own that Ellen. I’d never be that stupid. I keep a bottle down in the basement alright, but that doors always locked. I’d never put Johnny’s life in danger, you know that!”

“How am I supposed to believe anything you say?”

“You don’t think I feel bad, Ellen? I drink because it’s the only thing that makes me feel like I’m not losing my mind. How many times has something dangerous happened in this house? I feel like I’m the only one who sees what’s going on, there’s something weird going on in this house, with that boy!”

“Don’t try that again, Ben. I don’t want to hear it!”

She took a step towards him.

“Same old Benjamin Wells, I’m tired of your excuses! There’s nothing wrong with the house, there’s nothing wrong with me and there’s nothing wrong with Johnny. It’s you, you are dragging us all down with you, but I won’t let you bring Johnny down with you Ben, I can’t. You need help, all of this paranoia, it’s all in your head!”

“Why do I even bother, honestly? I’m trying to talk to you, but you just don’t listen anymore Ellen,” he took a step towards her.

Gerald stepped in between them, facing Ben.

“Don’t you even think about it, son” Gerald muttered quietly, setting his glass on the table. He was a tall man, well built, but Ben was damned if this son of a bitch was calling the shots under his roof. They stood staring at each, unblinking.

“You forget that this is my house,” said Ben. “Not yours, got it?”

After a few moments there was a knock on the door.

“What?” Ellen said.

“Mommy?” Johnny stuck his head in through the door. “I’m hungry.”

“I know, Granddads going to get you something on the way to his house.”

“I don’t want to go, Ben’s here,” Johnny looked up at Ben. Then Ben remembered what he’d put in his pocket.

You idiot Ben, he thought as reached in.

He pulled out the envelope, “Johnny, do you want to know what I got you for your birthday? Your presents in here,” he walked and gave it to him.

“What are you doing, what is it?” Ellen tried grabbing it but Johnny was too quick, he ripped it open in an instant and pulled out the brightly decorated card.

“Disney world...?” Johnny said staring at it. “I’m going to Disney world?” he began jumping up and down.

Ellen finally managed to take the card from his hands.

“No, Johnny,” said Ben, smiling. “We’re going to Disney World.” He turned around and fixed Gerald with his best *fuck you* stare, “all *three* of us.”

The smells of crispy bacon and coffee began to stir the rest of them from their beds. Ben greeted them as they filed into the kitchen one by one. Johnny ran in wearing a Mickey Mouse t-shirt.

After eating, they'd brought out Johnny's cake and sang happy birthday to him. He blew out the candles and they had a slice each.

"So, I'm going to head on back home, you can drop down whenever you get back Ellen," Gerald said as he kissed her goodbye on the cheek.

"Johnny," she said, walking to the table where he was sat coloring. "Go get everything ready, were going soon."

"Okay mom," he stood up and left. Ellen finished putting the dishes into the washer and left to go pack.

Ben sipped at the coffee and stared out at the blue sky. His eyes looked around the kitchen, settling on the press under the sink.

The press...

Ben thought about the dream, the box of sleeping pills. He stood up and walked over and opened it.

He found nothing inside.

It was just a bloody dream, stop it, stop being paranoid.

He left the kitchen and went to help them pack.

After pulling onto the freeway, Ellen let back her chair and pulled her hat down over her eyes.

"Just having a nap," she said, stifling a yawn with her fist. After a minute of silence he looked into the rear-view. Johnny was sat in the back watching cartoons on the in-car DVD player.

"So, Johnny, are you excited?"

He looked up, "Yeah, you?"

"Yeah, I've wanted to go to Orlando for years."

"Who's you're favorite person?"

"What's that?"

"My favorite is Jack Sparrow. Who's you're favorite person, that's what I mean."

"Eh, well... don't tell your mother," he said lowering his voice, "but I've always had a soft spot for Cinderella." He winked at Johnny through the mirror.

Ellen nudged him with her elbow, "I'm still awake."

Ben laughed and a minute passed by.

"I wouldn't mind being swept away by prince charming myself, it'd be a first."

"The lady's got jokes!" smiled Ben.

She lifted up the hat, looking at him, "your cooking skills are the only jokes I can see. Damn

bacon was burnt to a crisp.”

He held up a finger for effect, “they were crispy, Ellen, cris-py. It’s not my fault you like your pork still snorting on the plate.”

“Hah! You were never the cook of the house anyway,” she lay back, a hint of a smile on her lips showing as she pulled the cap back down over her eyes.

“Well, I’m trying. That’s what matters, right?” he said, low enough for only her to hear.

They drove on in silence.

It was beginning to feel like this road trip was exactly what they all needed, thought Ben, something to get them all back together.

He’d had it in the works for months and now all the saving had paid off. The smiles on their faces seemed to relieve the stress he’d felt for so long. Besides the odd day trip they’d never done anything major as a family.

Nothing was going to piss on this weekend, he’d get the cheesiest hats and t-shirts he could find and soak up every bit of it.

Maybe a job closer to home wouldn’t be so bad?

He could certainly ease up on the drink for a while too, to show Ellen he meant what he said. She was right in a way because he had been hitting the bottle hard recently.

Those solitary nights spent in the motel rooms, or in the back of his cab, were the only relief from the paranoia that seemed to come over him when he stayed at home.

But it was killing the relationship between all of them. He couldn’t let that happen, he would—

“Did you find the pills you were looking for?” said Johnny.

Ben looked up at Johnny who was staring back at him through the rear-view mirror.

“The sleeping pills you were looking for, did you find them?”

“W- What’s that Johnny?” Ben could see the color in his face drain in the mirror.

“Yes dear, they were in the bottom of my dresser,” said Ellen. “I can’t imagine how they got there,” she lifted up her hat, giving Ben her *I know you did it* expression.

Ben shook his head back at her.

Ellen put the hat back over her eyes, “if you’re having trouble sleeping Ben, just ask.”

He looked up into the rear-view; Johnny was smiling at him.

No he thought, surely he didn’t mean...

They'd gotten to the hotel and checked in at the reception. They were beat once they gotten into their room, so he'd ordered room service and Ellen had gone to take a shower. Johnny was sitting on the bed looking at the park map, circling rides and different areas with different colored markers. Ben walked over and sat beside him.

"See anything good," Ben asked.

Johnny nodded, "this looks like fun," he pointed at one.

After a moment Ben cleared his throat, "Johnny, I was just wondering if you moved the sleeping pills?"

Johnny looked up into his eyes, "No, I saw Mom put them there before she left the house, it was the morning she left to get my birthday cake. She forgot where she put them, so I showed her."

"You're sure?"

"Yes, would I lie to you Ben?"

Ben looked at him.

How the hell could he be thinking something so stupid?

"Okay buddy, that's fine," he stood up, then walked into the main room and sat down on the couch.

Is he telling the truth?

Of course he's telling the truth, he's only a fucking kid...

Then why do I keep going over that stupid dream?

It's because you're nuts, that's why. Ellen's right about you, Ben.

Shut up!

He grabbed the remote control, smacking it against the side of his head, "shut up shut up shut up!"

Ben took a deep breath, calming his mind and switched on the TV. He was flicking through the stations when the bathroom door opened. Ellen walked out wearing a white towel wrapped around her torso, it stopped just above her thighs.

Her long smooth legs reflected the sunlight coming in from the windows. He swallowed a lump in his throat. She stopped in front of him, wrapping her hair in a towel.

"Same old Ben, the whole park to explore and you're more interested in how the Falcons are getting on."

He chuckled and shrugged his shoulders.

"That's me." His eyes followed her curves.

"Put your tongue back in, buster," she turned and walked into the bedroom.

After Ellen got dressed, they sat and ate the food that'd just arrived.

Afterwards they left to make a start on the park. As they got in through the entrance, Johnny ran towards a group of kids surrounding a cluster of performers.

Ben told Ellen he'd be back in a minute. He walked over to a stall where they sold those Mickey Mouse hats. He bought three and walked back to her.

Ben gave one of the hats to Ellen and stuck his on.

"We might as well soak it up, hyuck-hyuck."

She couldn't help but letting out a giggle. He smiled wider and then walked over towards Johnny. Donald Duck was handing out candy. Johnny took one and turned around looking up at Ben.

"This is cool!"

"Sure is, here I got us these," he stuck the hat onto Johnny's head, his blond curls flattened down sticking out from under it. Johnny's eyes stared back out under the brim, his mouth smiled but the eyes didn't.

A few hours later, they trudged through a densely packed line for a roller-coaster. It opened out onto a platform and broke down into a dozen lines for the different sections of the roller coaster. Ben hadn't wanted to go on any roller-coasters but Ellen and Johnny had, so he went along with it.

"Where do you guys want to sit?" Ben asked.

"I don't mind," Ellen replied. "What do you think, Johnny?"

"Let's sit at the back," he said.

A girl a year older than Johnny had been stood in front of them with her older sister. She had been exchanging a word or two with Johnny since they'd gotten in line. She turned now, looking at him.

"What," she asked, "are you a chicken?" She giggled then and made a chicken noise.

"Cut it out, Claire," her older sister nudged her.

Johnny's face went red.

"No I'm not!" Johnny's fists were clenched at his sides. "Where are you sitting?"

"We're sitting in the front, obviously, we're not chickens!" she made the noise again, flapping her arms now.

Her sister gave her another push on the back, "I said cut it out!"

Johnny turned and looked at Ben and Ellen, the look in his eyes made Ben swallow.

"I want to sit at the front too!" Johnny said in an empty voice.

"Okay honey," said Ellen, "we can line up behind your friends."

"I don't know Ellen, my stomachs a bit weak for sitting at the front," said Ben. He'd never been good with rollercoasters, the front sounded like a living nightmare.

The older sister heard him, "he can sit with us if you'd like."

Ben looked at Johnny, who nodded back at him.

He didn't know why, but right then and there he didn't want to be anywhere near Johnny. His skin felt like it was crawling with a thousand insects, tingles floated through his body as he looked at Johnny staring at the small girl.

"Just be careful," Ellen told Johnny. "We'll cue up further down, if you change your mind come

and find us, okay?"

Johnny nodded and went into the left line for the front car with the two girls. Ben and Ellen went into one further down. They were surrounded by a large crowd of people waiting to get on.

Ben stood on his tiptoes trying to get a view of Johnny, or the girls, but he couldn't see anything. The noise on the platform was near deafening, the chatter of the crowd and the grind of the rollercoasters chain.

Screams were caught occasionally from somewhere in the park, Ben's heartbeat had increased. He really hated rollercoasters ever since he was small, but he wouldn't be made out as a coward.

"Are you nervous?" Ellen asked him.

He looked at her and tried to act confident.

"No, are you?"

"I haven't been on anything like this since I was a teenager!"

"Me neither."

They stood looking at the line in silence until somebody began shouting, "Fire, there's a fire!"

People turned and looked for the fire. A trashcan was smoldering in the far corner and flames were beginning to rise above the rim. A man in a Yankees jersey was stood beside it, pointing. The flames got higher, two men tried in vain to extinguish it with bottles of water. A staff member ran through the crowd towards the trashcan holding a extinguisher, he began spraying it into the bin.

There was a loud rumble and screaming as the roller coaster began its last decent and back into the platform.

Some people turned from the trashcan, towards the noise of the roller coaster as it slid into the platform from the right. The noise of the grinding chains rumbled loudly and the shouts of the staff member putting out the fire were drowned out.

Nobody was watching the front of the line where the two girls were waiting, nobody saw the little girls as they fell onto the tracks, right underneath the cart.

Nobody realized what was going on until they heard the cracking, popping sounds of breaking bones and the deathly screams.

After the accident an alarm had begun going off. Security rushed in and had gotten everybody cleared out of the area. Ben and Ellen had been in a panic, they couldn't find Johnny until they got outside of the line.

He eventually appeared, he was shaken and his face was pale. They'd asked him if he was alright but he'd just kept quiet. After getting back to their room, Ellen sat him down on his bed and rubbed his back and tried to calm him. Johnny's lip quivered as tears rolled down his eyes.

"I saw it mom, they jumped. The big girl grabbed her sister and jumped under the rollercoaster!" Johnny let out a sob as Ellen hugged him. She looked up at Ben, shaking her head.

"We have to report this Ellen, he's a witness!" Ben told her.

"Stop it Ben, he's just a kid."

"I want to go home," Johnny cried, "please, can we go home?"

"Of course honey, we'll head back in the morning, first thing."

Ellen held Johnny until he fell asleep.

Ben was sat on the couch in the main room when Ellen sat down beside him. She sat down and sighed.

"He might need counseling, at least," Ben said after a long silence.

"Maybe you're right."

She sighed again and put her head onto his shoulder. "Why did this have to happen, Ben?"

She began crying so he put his arms around her.

"It's okay," he whispered. After a few minutes the sobs stopped and she fell asleep. He wiped the tears from her face and carried her into the bedroom.

Ben had filled a flask of coffee at the resort that morning before heading back to Atlanta. The caffeine coursed through him as he pulled off onto the interstate, making him feel awake and alert. The roads weren't busy and they made good time. Ben had a warm sensation flowing through his body since they'd set out, he didn't know why but he felt so good.

Halfway through the journey, they turned off the freeway and pulled into a gas station. Ben got out and began filling the tank.

"You guys need anything?" Ellen asked, getting out.

"Yeah, would you get me more coffee, and some doughnuts if they have any?"

"Sure Ben, Johnny, do you want anything?"

Johnny shook his head and she walked into the gas station. He hadn't spoken since the night before.

Ben kept thinking he saw Johnny smiling in the mirror, but as soon as he looked up, Johnny would be just sitting there looking at a comic.

Ben filled up the car and put the pump back, closed the tank and got back into the car. He began flicking through the radio stations.

"Do you believe me, Ben?" Johnny asked.

Ben looked up through the rear-view mirror at him.

"About what, Johnny?"

"Everything, the pills, the girls, you believe me, don't you?"

"Why wouldn't I believe you, it's the truth isn't it?"

"Yes, it is," Johnny looked back down at his comic, smiling.

"You might need to see someone, just to talk about what happened."

Johnny looked back up at him, "you better be kidding Ben, I'm not seeing anybody."

"Johnny, what you saw... it can affect people."

"Well Ben, I'm not like other people am I?"

"What do you mean?"

"You know exactly what I mean, Ben." Johnny sat forward, his face changing into a dark glare. A dark shadow appeared, hovering over Johnny.

Ben felt tingles shoot up his spine. "I've no idea what you're talking about, Johnny."

"I know you looked for the pills, Ben. Now you know what happens when people mess with me. That girl called me chicken, so she went SPLAT!" as he said the last few words, the sound of his voice changed, becoming deeper, disturbingly unworldly.

Ben felt a lump rise in his throat. He stared in horror at the cold, dead look in Johnny's eyes. He noticed Johnny's eyes were glowing, a faint green glow that seemed to drain the light from the car.

It began to feel unreal, like a dream. He pinched himself, feeling the sting.

“You better stop nosing around, Ben. You’re lucky you’re even getting a warning. Don’t fuck with us.” The dark shadow became so thick that Ben couldn’t see through it.

“Johnny, cut the shit. This isn’t funny!”

Johnny’s lips curled up into a grin that didn’t look right on his face.

“I think it’s *very* funny, Benjamin. Just as funny as when you took a tumble down the stairs, headfirst. Remember that, *Ben*? We enjoyed that.”

“Johnny, are you saying that you did it on purpose?” Ben turned towards the back of the car, looking at Johnny, “you admit it!”

“Of course we did it on purpose, Benjamin. We’d hoped to break your neck, or at least put you into a coma, but no. Well we are stronger now; we do not fear you anymore.”

Johnny leaned closer to Ben, only a few inches from his face.

“We have grown in power, we got that babysitter bitch. Her soul is ours, we got the little girls, and their souls are ours. And soon, Benjamin, your soul will be ours too.”

“You little fucker,” Ben growled through gritted teeth.

“Who do you think Ellen will believe?” Johnny began speaking in a voice that wasn’t his. “Her *perfect* little angel or the deadbeat she can’t seem to shake?”

Johnny let out a maniacal giggle.

“Why are you saying this Johnny? What’s wrong with you?”

“We will have you, your blood will water our seed, and your bones will feed our roots.”

Ben leaned over and grabbed Johnny’s shirt by the collar.

“Johnny, snap out of it!” Ben shouted.

Johnny laughed at him. “What are you going to do old man, beat me like your dad beat you and your brother?”

Johnny dug his nails in deeper and clawed at Ben’s face with the other hand, but Ben’s grip held tight. Johnny swung as hard as he could, slapping and punching Ben into the face.

Ben’s head jerked back slightly from the punches.

Something is wrong a ten year old kid shouldn’t be this strong!

“Shit,” gasped Ben, as he tried to pry Johnny fingers out of his eye socket. He could feel the blood drip down his face and neck from the scratch marks. Ben brought back his arm and punched Johnny into the face, once, twice.

“What the fuck are you doing to my son!” Ellen screamed.

Ben turned and saw her standing a few feet away from the car’s window. Her mouth was hanging open as she watched the struggle going on between them.

“Get your damn hands off him, right now!” she pulled the passenger door open. He let go of Johnny’s shirt and leaned back against the driver’s door.

“He did it, Ellen. He admitted everything! The fire and the rollercoaster, it was all him!”

Ellen pulled the lid off of the cup of coffee. Ben screamed as he felt the boiling hot water splash into his face. She began slapping him, screaming and punching.

“You fucking psycho, I’ll kill you!” she screamed.

Ben thought he heard a giggle from the back of the car.

Blinded, Ben felt around behind him with one hand, trying to ward off Ellen’s attacks with the other. He found the door handle and pulled it open, falling out in a backward somersault and landing on the concrete with a sickening crunch as his arm snapped under his weight.

That’s going to need stitches Ben...

Ben could hear Johnny laughing inside of his mind, the image of a tree bursting into flames appeared in his mind’s eye, the flames licking up the boy’s face as he cackled.

It was just a dream he’d told himself.

Ellen was out on top of him now, punching him into the face, his eyes felt like popping out of his head. The skin on his face felt red raw, it was burned and boiling like molten lava.

Ben reached up with his good arm and grabbed Ellen’s hair, trying to pull her off of him. He heard a clink of glass hit the concrete. Then hands were grabbing him, pulling him backwards.

“No, don’t please, it’s broke. My arm’s broke, please!”

Ben waited for a barrage of slaps and kicks, but nothing came, only two arms held him in a tight grip. He opened one eye as much as it would go and saw a blurred figure standing above him.

“Don’t you move got it?” a gruff voice told him.

“You drunk fucking prick, I knew it!” Ellen screamed.

As his vision cleared up, his eyes focused on the man holding him. He was a large man in a red checkered shirt and cowboy hat; there was a sheriff’s badge on his chest.

“I’m okay,” said Ben, but the cop didn’t let go.

Ben looked at Ellen who was being held against the car by another cop. Looking around, he noticed a bottle lying on the floor.

It was an empty whiskey bottle.

“How could you, Ben?”

“What? No, that, that’s not mine!”

Ellen pointed down at the bottle.

“You could’ve killed us! Here I am thinking you were going to change, but all you still care about is getting shit-faced. I’m done. I’m so fucking done with you!”

“Ellen that’s not mine, I swear! I didn’t touch a drop.”

He thought for a moment, and then an idea formed in his mind.

“It must’ve been Johnny, Ellen! He must’ve slipped it into my pocket, but I didn’t drink any, I swear!”

She shook her head, looking away in disgust.

“If I let you get up, are you going to remain calm, sir?” the sheriff said.

“Yes, of course.”

The cop lifted him up and told him to stay where he was, then walked over to the police cruiser. He reached into a compartment and pulled something out. Walking back, Ben realized it was a breathalyzer.

“Thank god, now Ellen, I’ll prove I haven’t been drinking!”

She just stood there, shaking her head and not making eye contact with him.

“Have you given one before, sir?” the sheriff asked Ben as he put a tube into the device.

“Yes.”

“Please blow until I tell you to stop.” The sheriff put the breathalyzer into Ben’s mouth. Ben blew into it for a few moments.

“That’ll do.”

The sheriff looked at the screen for a moment. The bulb flashed red.

“I’m sorry sir, but I’m afraid you’re over the limit.”

He pulled his handcuffs off of his belt and turned Ben around, then locked them tightly over his wrists.

Ben grunted as he moved his broken arm. The cop sat Ben down in the back of the cruiser.

The cop standing by Ellen reached into the car and picked up Ben’s jug of coffee. He opened it, smelled it and then tasted it.

“Whiskey,” he shook his head at Ben.

“I knew it,” Ellen shouted at him through the window, “don’t bother calling me, ever. I’ll pack your things. I’m finished Ben, I’m so done with you!”

Ben could only watch in horror as they pulled off, he looked over at Johnny who was still sitting in the back of the car.

Johnny was smiling at him.

“Here’s your room key, sir. You’re in room on-two-six, it’s on the third floor,” the receptionist smiled at him as she handed Ben the room key.

“Thanks,” Ben took the key without making eye contact.

“If there’s anything you need, just ask, and please have a pleasant night, Mr. Wells,” she called after him, but he was already walking away before she finished.

The doors shut and he hit the button with the 3.

He listened to the elevator music and thought about the night before, when he’d talked to Ellen on the payphone in the police station.

“I left some things for you inside your truck, okay? Now don’t call me again!”

“Ellen, we need to talk about Johnny. There’s something wrong with him!”

“Oh stop it, please Ben, I’m not listening to your excuses. You messed up, own it, like a real man.”

“He told me that he’d pushed them girls onto the tracks and I think he drugged May. Do you really think I’d be able to make this shit up?”

“I think you’d say anything, you’re an alcoholic who got caught. Don’t try to pawn this off on my son and corrupt my mind with your sick fantasies. I mean, how could he of even of gotten a bottle of rum? It’s not like he has any ID or anything. You know what, I can’t believe I’m even having this conversation with you, I can’t even believe I’m even thinking about what you’re saying! Good bye, Ben.”

“Wait, the autopsy!”

“What?”

“May’s autopsy, was there anything in her system?”

“...”

“Look, this is going to sound crazy, I know it does. But I had a dream, it was of Johnny using your sleeping pills to drug her, then he told me it actually happened. That’s what you saw in the car, it wasn’t me going crazy, not totally, how long have I told you there was something going on? There’s something wrong with that kid.”

“Ben stop, just please stop...”

“Just check, please Ellen. If I’m right and there are traces of the same pills you have, then you’ll believe me!”

“Goodbye Ben.”

Ding

The elevator door opened, he picked up his suitcase and left the elevator. Walking down the corridor, he found his room at the end.

After getting inside, he put the suitcase on the bed. Flipping the switches, he pulled it open and lifted out the bottle of whiskey from inside. Walking over to the cupboard he took out a glass and sat down. He twisted off the cap and poured himself a drink, backed it down and poured another.

It's pointless he thought.

What can I do, I just look crazy no matter what way I put it.

He backed down the glass and poured another.

Yes officer, he spiked my coffee and hid the bottle inside my coat pocket.

No officer, I don't suffer from any mental issues.

No officer, I don't get off on hurting kids...

They'd found fresh bruises on Johnny's torso and blamed him. The little shit must've made done them himself to make him look even worse.

He had to admit, the boy had played him good.

A mind like that can only lead to bad things, evil things.

Ben emptied the glass.

He needs to be put down.

The night before Ellen had spoken to Ben, he'd said he believed there was something wrong with Johnny and that Johnny was responsible for May and the girl's death. She'd hung up in anger.

But how could someone make up something like that?

She'd picked up the phone today a number of times to prove him wrong. After three glasses of wine Ellen had finally worked up the nerve to dial the number.

A man's voice answered, "Atlanta Morgue, how can I help you?"

"Hi, I'm wondering if the results for May Parse have come in."

"Are you a family member?"

"Yes, I--", she pretended to stifle a sob. "I'm her sister. I live in California and my mother just told me the news, I'm hoping you can tell me if there was anything in her system, she was going to be sober for a year next week. I think our fight might have pushed her over the edge..."

"I'm sorry ma'am, but we can't give out that type of information. You'll just have to wait until they inform your mother. I'm sorry."

She broke down crying.

"It's my entire fault, why did it have to happen!"

He listened to her sobbing.

"Look, I'll see what I can do, just hold on a minute."

She wiped her eyes and took a sip of wine.

After a few moments he came back on the line.

"Ma'am?"

"Yes, I'm still here."

"They found a high alcohol content, among a high dosage of sleeping medication."

"Y-You're sure?"

"Yes, I'm sorry."

"Thank you."

The line went dead.

How did Ben know, he couldn't be right about it. There had to be another reason, didn't there?

"Who were you talking to, Mom?" Johnny was standing at the sitting room door, watching her.

"J-Johnny, I didn't see you there," she cleared her throat. "I was just talking to... to grandpa."

Johnny nodded, he looked down at the phone and then at her wineglass. "Well, I'm off to bed."

"Okay honey, goodnight."

"Night," he turned and walked up the stairs.

She thought about ringing Ben.

No, I'm not letting him play with my head. There must be another reason...

Ben was just about to pour another glass of whiskey when there was a knock at the door. He stood up and stumbled towards it. He opened the door and saw it was the receptionist from the front desk. She was holding an envelope.

“Yeah?” asked Ben, a bit too roughly.

“Sorry to disturb you so late, sir. My shift was just ending when a boy came into the lobby. He said there’d been an accident and he’d to deliver this envelope to you. I looked at the name and address and when I looked back up the boy was gone.”

Ben took it from her hand, trying to focus on the writing.

“Thanks,” he looked back up but she was already walking down the corridor. Ben walked back into the room, closing the door behind him. He sat at the table and opened the envelope.

We know what you’re thinking of doing...

It’s not going to happen you’re too weak!

We know you told about that other thing that happened, that was a bad decision...

We’re going to make you pay... your all going to burn like she did...

If we can’t have her, no one can...

Ben put the letter down and walked over to the phone. Picking it up, he dialed their house number. It rang a few times until the answering machine clicked on.

“Ellen, it’s Ben, I’m coming over.”

He put the phone down and put on his jacket, then shoved the letter in his pocket. He took one last drink and left the room, slamming the door shut behind him.

* * *

The taxi-cab pulled up outside of the house. Ben paid the driver and got out. Ben pulled the jacket over his head as he ran through the heavy downpour of rain. Trying the front door handle, he found it locked.

He checked the rock in the garden, but it didn’t have the spare key in it, so he picked up the rock and smashed in a pane of glass. Reaching inside, he felt around for the lock. It clicked open.

The house inside was in darkness. Closing the door behind him, he shook the rain off his jacket.

“Ellen,” he called out, “Ellen, are you here?” There was no answer.

Ben tried the light switch but the storm seemed to have cut the power.

Pushing the living room door open, he saw an empty bottle of wine and a glass on the table.

Ben expected Johnny to be standing by the counter, but the kitchen was empty. The house’s old timber frame creaked and groaned, he looked outside and saw that the trees outside looked as if they might uproot and take flight. A bolt of lightning flashed outside, filling the empty kitchen with a strobe

of white light.

He walked over to the drawers and pulled the top one open, reaching in he pulled out a knife.

Am I really doing this?

It's either him or Ellen. You know he'll kill her.

As he opened the backdoor the wind and rain blew him back a step. He shielded his face with his hands as he ran down the garden, towards the small gathering of trees at the far end.

He ran through a deep puddle, soaking his feet. Leaves and sticks were being torn from the branches and hurled towards the house like kamikaze missiles, a handful collided with his face or hands.

Reaching the trees, he looked around, letting his eyes adjust to the dark woods. The swing wasn't hanging from the tree anymore. He could see some streetlights glowing in the distance, the power cables in the garden rattled, threatening to come loose at any moment. A car alarm began screeching somewhere.

“Ellen!” screamed Ben.

Something blunt hit him in the back of the head and then his world went black.

“Mom, mom,” someone shouted.

After some time she began remembering things, like Ben, and Johnny. It all came flooding back to her.

“W-What is it Johnny?”

“Mom, I’m scared. Ben was just on the phone. He said he was coming over, he sounded angry, and then the lights went off!”

“What honey?” Ellen looked around at the dark sitting room. “He said he was coming over, you’re sure?”

“Yes, please don’t let him in. I don’t want him to hurt me again.”

Ellen stood up and walked over to the fireplace. She picked up a log.

“It’s okay honey, it’s okay. I’m here. I won’t let anything happen to you.”

She pulled him close and hugged him. He was shaking. Headlights appeared out front and came up the driveway.

“It’s him!” Johnny whimpered.

Ellen grabbed his hand and ran into the hallway, pulling open the cupboard under the stairs.

“He won’t look in here, quick get in and be quiet!”

They stood in the dark cupboard. She could hear the rain and wind thumping against the front door, making it rattle on its hinges. Then the door handle was forced up and down as Ben tried to open the door.

Hopefully he thinks were not here and just goes away.

It was silent for a few moments and Ellen began to relax, when there was a loud smash and glass fell onto the floor. The lock clicked and the door handle turned, the door creaked open as the hallway filled with the full roar of the storm. Footsteps entered the hall and the door closed.

“Ellen,” she heard Ben call. “Ellen, are you here?”

The footsteps came up the hall. They were cushioned as they entered the living room. After a few moments, they returned to the hall. Ben passed them by, heading towards the kitchen.

“Stay here,” she whispered.

She turned the handle slowly, willing it not to creak. It opened quietly and she slipped out of the closet. She shut the door behind her and crept towards the kitchen. She could smell whiskey in the air, which worried her more than anything. Something moved, it sounded like-

No, god please no...

Peeking around the doorframe, her fears were confirmed. Ben was stood reaching into the cutlery drawer. He pulled out a large knife and held it up, turning it in the moonlight. He shut the drawer and walked towards the backdoor.

He opened it, stumbling back and then ran out shielding his face. She tip toed over the kitchen floor, towards the door. Looking out the window, she could see him running at speed down the garden.

Ellen looked down at the log in her hand, she wondered if a knife would be more suitable.

No, it's not going to come to that.

She ran after Ben. The wind blew her hair against her face. Her nightdress was instantly soaked and clung to her.

As she got came to the end of the garden, she slowed, creeping through the rain. The small woods loomed above her, glimpses of a thousand eyes stared out from between the bushes when the lightning flashed.

Ducking under branches, she tried to avoid the puddles and large roots. Ellen could make out Ben's silhouette up ahead. She crouched lower, raising the log over her head.

"Ellen!" he screamed over the storm.

The emotion in his voice almost made her reply, she wanted nothing more than to run to him and hug him, but that time had gone. She could see the knife glinting as the bolt of lightning arced through the sky.

She brought the log down as hard as she could against the back of his head. He went limp and hit the mud, face first.

"See mom, I told you he was coming!"

Ellen jumped.

Turning around, she saw Johnny standing there. She couldn't see his face as he had the hood of a rain jacket pulled up.

"Don't do that! Don't sneak up on me!"

"Sorry."

"Here, hold this," she gave him the log. Crouching down beside Ben, she turned him over.

"He's out cold," she muttered to herself. "Let's get him inside, we can tie him up and call the police."

"You think you can move him?"

"We have to try. He'll get ammonia out in this storm."

"Bad decision," she heard Johnny say.

"What?" she turned and looked up at him, the log came down hard, hitting her in the side of her head, knocking her unconscious.

The loop was slipped over Ben's head and tightened.

Ben stared up at Johnny with as much hatred as he could muster. If it hadn't been for the rag stuffed in his mouth, he'd be spitting and cursing at him right then.

If my hands were free I'd strangle you right now...

Ben had tried standing up, but the rope had been tied so tight between his neck and legs that he was virtually hogtied. He knelt there, staring into the dark face of Johnny, he felt utterly helpless.

"Nice and tight, Benjamin," said Johnny.

Johnny checked to make sure the rope tied around Ben's hands and legs was secure, and then threw the rope over a thick branch. He climbed the tree and tied the rope to a large barrel that was balanced on the thick branch, and then got back down.

Johnny looked down at Ellen, he was about to check her hands and legs too, but she swung up her head, nearly hitting him.

"Who's that, Johnny, is that you? What are you doing?" she looked up at him.

He was hidden beneath the hood of a rain jacket, looming over her like some grim reaper. Ben could hear the fear in Ellen's voice.

"You'll find out soon, you both will." There was that voice again. It wasn't Johnny's at all. Ben thought he saw movement above them in the trees.

He walked over to Ben, kicking him into the ribs.

"How does it feel, Ben?" he pulled the knife Ben had taken from the kitchen from his belt and waved it in front of Ben's face. He sliced the knife across Ben's cheek, "How's it feel, hmm?"

"Johnny, I know you don't want to do this," Ellen called over to him.

"Don't you beg!" he shouted at her, punching Ben into the face with each word. "Not yet anyway," he slid the knife back into his belt.

Johnny pulled the rag out of Ben's mouth.

"Any last words, Ben?" he slapped Ben into the face.

"Stop it!" Ellen screamed.

Johnny turned to look at her, "really, you're going to side with him, after what he done to us?"

Johnny took a step towards her, but he was still within reach.

Ben leaned forwards, trying to stretch the rope, he pulled and pulled.

The rope gave slightly. Ben stood up and head-butted Johnny, connecting with the side of Johnny's skull.

Johnny stumbled backwards.

"Take that, you little shit!" Ben shouted at him.

Ellen moaned.

Ben stepped back letting the rope slacken, waiting for the next move. He tried fumbling his hands out of the knot but they wouldn't open.

Johnny stood up, shook himself and stumbled over to Ellen.

"And he's the reason you're here," Johnny mumbled.

"What?" Ellen said.

"You chose him," Johnny pointed at Ben, "instead of us!"

"I didn't choose anybody, I loved you both equally!"

"Don't make me sick, you never loved him!" Johnny into her face, he slapped her.

"How could anybody love a psycho like you?" Ben shouted across to him.

Johnny turned and walked towards Ben, "Don't call us that..."

"You killed May, and the girls at the park. You told me it all in the car, didn't you? Admit it at least!"

"And... so what, it doesn't matter now, does it?"

Johnny took the knife out and paced back and forth in front of Ben.

"Why Johnny?" sobbed Ellen. "Why would you do such a thing?"

Johnny turned and looked at Ellen. "Johnny's not in charge anymore bitch. That May needed it. Deserved it... I couldn't have that whore ruining things, bossing us around. Who did she think she was? And the girls, they made fun of us! And no one makes fun of us!"

"Why do you keep saying us, Johnny?"

Johnny pointed above them, into the dark trees. As the lightning flashed Ben though he saw something up there, he thought he could still see two green eyes watching them.

Johnny pointed the knife at Ben.

"It doesn't matter anymore, none of it. We've got it all worked out. We'll get Ben out of the picture and then you'll love me."

"You're a fucking lunatic," spat Ben. "You're just a psychotic little mistake. That's all you'll ever be!"

"There you go again," Johnny leaped forwards, the knife sliced into Ben's face.

Ben tried dodging the attacks, but the knife sliced across his cheek, then his nose. Blood spilled down his face, the taste of metal filled his mouth. He went to kick Johnny but was pushed back onto his knees, the rope tightened around his neck as Johnny pulled down on the rope.

Johnny stood back out of reach, leering at Ben.

"We got you good there, Benjamin. We are too strong for you." Johnny started laughing maniacally.

"Johnny, honey, you don't have to do this. I know how much of a sweet boy you are," Ellen pleaded with him.

"He was, wasn't he?" Johnny smiled, turning the knife over in one hand, looking at the flecks of

blood covering it.

“But it all changed. He got the taste for it, and nothing tastes sweeter. But you could never know... never understand.”

He slipped the knife into his belt.

“Say your goodbyes.”

Johnny walked over and picked up a smaller rope.

“Johnny?” said Ben.

“We are not Johnny.”

“I never fucking liked you, you little piece of shit.”

Johnny pulled a rope attached to the barrel, the bottom of the barrel grinded forwards then dropped from the branch. The rope attached to the barrel went taut, slowly pulling Ben up into the air.

“Ben,” cried Ellen. “No, please Johnny, stop!”

Johnny walked underneath him.

Ben kicked his legs, swinging back and forth. He couldn't help but shake his head wildly, trying to escape.

“That's it, Benjamin,” Johnny let out a giggle.

“Don't fight it, Ben. It's okay,” said Ellen.

Ben's eyes found hers and he stopped fighting it. His throat was burning. It felt as if it were swelling on the inside.

He calmed down and tried to conserve oxygen. He looked down below him. Johnny was stood below, a black silhouette against the moonlit trees. He had a flashback of the black pram, that day in the park.

A bolt of lightning illuminated the face hidden under the hood, the green eyes watched him.

As his vision began to fade, Johnny smiled.

Ellen had been twisting the rope tied around her wrists since she'd awoken, but in the last few minutes they'd begun to loosen to the point where she could get it to just below the knuckles of her thumbs.

Ben had stopped wriggling minutes ago. She willed the ropes to give way, she guessed it was too late to save him, but she had to try.

The rope burnt into her skin as she pulled, pushed and twisted. Her hands were sweaty and after a few more moments of pain her hands slipped out, free at last.

She reached down and began untying the ropes strapped around her legs. When they were untied she stood up and crawled over behind Johnny, who was staring up into the trees.

Ellen was almost within reach of him, when she crawled onto a stick, snapping it.

Johnny turned, reaching for the knife in his belt. She jumped towards him, reaching for the knife too.

Time seemed to move slowly as he pulled it out of the belt. Johnny began turning the knife towards her. She grabbed his wrist, trying to wrestle it from his grip.

Ellen put her weight behind her as she came down on top of him. They landed on the floor, Ellen wasn't sure if the blade was after piercing into her organs. She waited for the pain, her eyes were shut tight.

"Mom..."

She opened her eyes. Johnny was looking up at her. His eyes were wide, afraid.

"It... hurts..."

She leaned up off him and looked down; the knife handle was sticking out from between his ribs.

"No... god, no, what have I done?" She felt around the knife, touched the handle, Johnny moaned in agony.

Ellen jumped in fright as a burst of orange light filled the woods. She looked up to see Ben and the tree he was hanging from covered in flames.

Johnny didn't seem to notice.

His eyes moved past her, looking up into the trees. She lay down beside him, sobbing. The clouds above them cleared, a handful of white specks were visible through the treetops.

Ellen held him tightly, even after his chest had stopped rising and didn't let go until dawn began breaking through the trees. The surrounding woods had caught alight and the fire seared against her flesh, she stumbled as she tried to drag Johnny out of the trees, shielding her face with one hand.

She stood up and looked around, and then something caught her eye.

Up in the tree was a figure watching her. Ellen stumbled backwards, covering her mouth in horror at its deformed appearance.

Its skin was black and its arms seemed too long for its body, its green eyes bulged out from its

gaunt face in hatred. It crawled through the branches overhead, its arms reached out towards Johnny's corpse and the flames seemed follow its direction.

"No!" she screamed. "You can't have him!"

Ellen grabbed Johnny's legs and pulled, but they weren't getting anywhere, the flames were growing with every minute. The creatures fingers were inches away from them, the heat was unbearable.

She tried to pull Johnny away but he didn't budge, and then she noticed something wrapped around Johnny's neck. As she leaned over him, she gazed in horror at the roots struggling to pull him back. Ellen's gaze followed the root back over the ground. It led right to the tree that Ben was still hanging from.

The flames covering the tree seemed to be different. They were bright red and seemed to leave the bark and branches of the tree unscathed.

There was an explosion just ahead of her, the force lifted her from her feet and she flew backwards through the air. The grass cushioned her fall and she struggled to lift her head up.

She saw the creature in the trees. It dragged Johnny back into the woods. Ellen stood up and took one step towards them, but then the flames billowed out in a backdraft and a curtain of fire swallowed them up forever.

* * *

She stood on the sidewalk, gazing at the house that had once been her home. The fire had spread from the woods and was now engulfing the entire property.

It stood in stark contrast against the dull grey sky, like a looming ghost of her past. There were so many memories, but that's all they were now.

As she shut the car door behind her, Ellen noticed her nightdress was stuck to her from Johnny's blood. There was blood on her hands and in her hair.

She screamed and started punching the dash, shaking the steering wheel. She screamed until her throat hurt and her voice was hoarse.

Tears filled her eyes as she took one last look at the burning house. And just for a moment, a fleeting moment, she thought she saw Ben and Johnny standing in the window, looking back out at her. But then it was gone, pulled back into the inferno.

She switched on the ignition and started the car.

As she pulled off and drove down the street, she never noticed a long stream of red smoke rising from behind the house. She kept her eyes on the road ahead, that monolith of pain growing further away in the rear-view mirror.

The red smoke from the burning tree rose high into the sky.

THE END

What Did You Think of The Burning Tree?

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