

The Burning Oak

By Ally Howard

“You have to be back before nightfall. You know I hate you being outside in the dark. Who knows what kind of creatures lurk in those woods at night?”

“Yeah, yeah mom. I know. I’ll be back within an hour,” I said, smiling. She was such a typical mom but I loved her.

“Oh, and honey bear don’t forget your coat. It’s almost winter now,” she said, hurrying over and tugging my arms through the sleeves as though I was a little kid again.

“Ok, ok mom. I gotta go. Fergus will be waiting.”

“Of course sweetie,” she whispered, kissing my forehead. “Stay safe.”

“I will. Bye, mom.”

“Bye, Lily.”

I stepped out onto our porch, closed the door and immediately noticed three things. One, the smell of decomposing leaves that filled my nostrils on the first breath. Two, the chill in the air that foretold a freezing winter, and three, a shrill whining sound coming from the right side of the house. I pulled my toque down over my ears before racing towards the sound. Slowly, I unlocked the gate to our back yard. I eased it open, peeking around the corner and was immediately pummeled by a small, black, furry thing.

“Hey, Fergy baby,” I laughed, “Did ya miss me?” Fergus yipped and licked my face. I laughed again and wiped his saliva off. “Gross, Fergus. You ready for our walk? Huh, boy? You wanna go for a walk?” He barked and then tripped over his own feet in a hurry to get to the garage. Fergus knew the routine.

Fergus was *my* puppy. My mom had bought him last year as a present for my fifteenth birthday. The little baby had only been around two weeks old at the time and he’d had to sleep with me so he wouldn’t freeze. I remember I would stay up almost all night to make sure I wasn’t squishing him. He was my precious bundle of fur and I had vowed to never let anyone take him away from me like they’d taken my dad. Ever since that birthday a year and a half ago, Fergus was the one I talked to when I was sad. He was the one I buried my face in when I was crying. He was the one that could always make me laugh or smile. And he was the one that got me outside every day to go for a walk.

Fergus whined, pawing at the garage door. He wanted that walk now. I punched in the code for the garage doors and ducked under before they were done opening. Fergus ran around in circles, barking and knocking things over, an old hockey stick, a bike and multiple cardboard boxes before finally finding his favorite tennis ball.

“Oh, Fergy. You always make such a mess,” I chuckled. “Well, there’s no time to clean up now. Just don’t tell mom.” He struggled to bark around a mouthful of green fuzz, his tail thumping

against a discarded chair. I smiled and grabbed his leash that hung on a hook by the door. "Let's go, baby," I called to Fergus. He chased me outside and I clipped the leash to his collar before closing the garage door. Fergus tugged on the leash. "Whoa, whoa, baby. You wanna run?" He pulled harder. "Ok then let's go!"

I ran after him in the direction of the woods. Fergus' little legs pounded on the pavement. The weather was nice today, but definitely not perfect. There was hardly a cloud in the sky but it still seemed darker somehow, as though part of the sun had decided not to rise today. I pulled my coat up higher.

I could see the edge of the forest now, about 200 meters away. I would be relieved once we reached the familiarity of the woods. It always seemed warmer in there, even though it was in the shade. I started breathing harder. Weird, I could usually get all the way to the forest without having to slow down at all. I wiped my forehead and was surprised to find sweat there. I focused on counting my steps. 1, 2, 3, 4...

55, 56, 57 steps later we reached the trees. I took a few deep breaths with my hands on my knees before unclipping Fergus' leash. He dropped the tennis ball to pant, and rested a few seconds longer than usual before running ahead down the trail. I followed more slowly behind him. My legs felt like Jell-O, as though I'd run a marathon rather than a few hundred meters.

My boots crunched on the dry, leaf-covered path. I loved that sound. I loved all the sights and sounds and smells of the forest, almost as much as I loved Fergus. Suddenly, as if he'd read my thoughts, Fergus ran back and then sprinted up the trail again barking madly, anxious to get to our clearing to play catch. It wasn't actually *our* clearing. There were always other people there, but I hadn't seen anyone else out today either. That was strange. Right then Fergus stopped barking.

It wasn't like he'd just stopped but more like he'd been cut off mid-bark. My heart pounded. There had been rumors of bears in these woods. Had Fergus been caught? I had to find him. I tried to run but I was so tired that I could have curled up and slept in the moss so I trudged forward slowly. As I neared the clearing I noticed that the coniferous trees that surrounded it had begun to lose their needles. I shook my head at myself. What a silly thing to notice. Of course they were losing their needles. It was the middle of autumn. But didn't evergreens stay evergreen? I couldn't think straight. I shook my head again to clear my thoughts and stomped on. That is when I came to the edge of the clearing.

I froze in place, goose bumps appeared on my skin. The clearing that had once been so familiar had become a living nightmare. I stood, frozen in place, taking it all in. The surrounding trees, deciduous and coniferous alike, had been stripped of leaves and bore large, black streaks running through their bark. The grass had turned brown and the whole clearing was littered with animal carcasses, ranging from insects to deer. But the most awful and beautiful thing was the ginormous oak tree that had sprouted dead in the center of the clearing. Its bark and leaves were jet black, its huge branches blocked the sky. Whenever the wind blew, parts of it would turn red like an ember in a fire.

I stared at it in horror. It felt as though the tree was leeching away my energy. But it was so horribly beautiful. I wanted to touch it. No, I had to touch it. I stumbled forward, my hand stretched

out in front of me. I tripped over the decomposing body of a rabbit and then something caught my attention out of the corner of my eye. That something was a small, black bundle of fur...

A blood-curdling scream filled the air and I was surprised to find that it was me who'd made it. I raced over as fast as my dying legs could carry me and tried to pick the small thing up, but it was too heavy or maybe I was just too weak. I collapsed on the ground beside the ball of fur.

"Fergus!" I screamed, pummeling the earth beside his head. "Wake up, Fergus! Wake up! No! Bad dog!" I buried my face in his fur, sobbing, and whispered, "Bad dog." Fergus, my baby, was dead.

I didn't have the strength to get up. Or maybe I just didn't want to. Instead I enveloped my baby in my arms and lay down beside him. Fergy would protect me. He always had. I knew he wouldn't let me get hurt. My Fergus. My Fergy baby. My baby... I closed my eyes for the last time in the shadow of the burning oak.