

*Strange
Shorts*
Rowena Holloway

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Butterflies

When the butterflies wake her, Annie is dreaming of the lost little girl. The breath of their fairy wings a call to play as they flit and dance at her window. Mother said when she wakes early, when the sun still has one eye shut, she must wait.

Wait till mother comes for you, Annie. Don't go off alone.

But Annie doesn't like to wait. Not today. Today she is a big girl. Ten years old. Old enough for the big knives and forks. Old enough to decide what to do with her day. And for breakfast today there will be pancakes—if she waits. Waiting is hard. Almost as hard as the sums Mother gives her. The numbers never stay still long enough for Annie to know them. *Come on, Annie*, they say, *let's go outside and play*. And they slip away off the page running across the table and out the door and Annie skips after them laughing.

Mother gets angry. And sometimes she gets sad, so sad that big dollops of water fall from her eyes. Once, Annie watched them roll down her cheeks and splash onto the table. That was the day Annie went to the river alone. She stayed until the sun shut both its eyes and then she couldn't find her way home because the white picket fence she'd followed wasn't white enough and she wasn't sure it was the same. After that Mother said she must wait. That she mustn't go outside without permission, that she must never-ever-ever go to the river alone because a long, long time ago a little girl was lost there and her mummy waited and waited, but she never came home.

Annie aches to find that lost little girl.

Wait until mother comes with you, Annie.

Annie thinks all this as she pulls on her dress and buckles her sandals. But the butterflies are calling softly. *Come with us Annie. Come dance with us*. And they are so pretty and delicate and free. And with the butterflies she won't be alone.

Mother hears the back door slam, hears the laughter of her sweet, damaged Annie. She knows it's a dream and pulls the covers higher. Just a little longer. Today is a big day. Lots of Annie's friends are coming and there is much to do, but a few more moments won't hurt. And she likes dreaming of Annie laughing.

Annie's laughing as she chases the butterflies down the path and out the front gate. They dance past Mrs Brown's store where mother buys the apples she likes, past the one-eyed dog sleeping on the post office steps, past the picket fence. The butterflies show her the dew on the leaves. It glistens, like the tears on Mother's cheeks. Mother. For a moment Annie stops dancing. She looks back along the dusty road to the little

house with the rusting roof. A little way up the street Ned kicks up red dust as he pulls the milk cart. She likes Ned. Likes the silken feel of his mouth on her palm when she shares her apple, likes the clip, clop of his hooves when he reaches the sealed road that runs into town.

Wings of red and gold flit across her vision. Butterflies!

Annie turns. They are dancing up ahead, their wings so pretty in the brightening light. Annie runs and runs but she can't quite catch them. She knows where they're taking her. To the big tree with the tyre swing. To the river.

When she reaches the water's edge they dance out across the rippling surface, far out in the middle of the river, out where the water is bluer, where it moves faster.

Out where the lost little girl waits for Annie.

Weylin's Lament

The news came by way of a rare letter from Keith. A single line in a page filled with words about the lad's world so far from his roots: indexes, stock movements, and how the trebled price of commodities and increased demand for steel meant that an earthquake was lucky. Weylin understood the words, it was the sentiment he couldn't fathom.

He set his chisel aside and removed his foot from the pedal of the lathe. Sweet-scented sawdust carpeted the floorboards, and just beyond his workshop doors geraniums quivered in the breeze while in the valley below sunlight brightened the whitewashed walls. Last night the low moon had silvered the gleaming headstones and the ancient Elder standing twisted and proud in the cemetery.

An omen. He knew that now.

Sometimes it was easy to believe he was the last man left in these mountains. Just him and his fine creations, and the dark mass that hovered on the edge of his sight.

Would Keith come when it was done?

He worked the pedal until the piece of two-by-two spun to a blur. Working the timber brought him closer to happier times when Keith loved the woods behind his home and spent his days climbing trees or fishing from the stream. In those days the glen was filled with the boy's laughter. Weylin remembered his lad's easy gait, his generous heart, the way his little face glowed with eagerness to learn the ways of his ancestors. Many happy hours he'd spent teaching his son knowledge gathered through countless generations.

They were lost to him now, those days of delight.

If only they hadn't sent him away to school.

If only the boy had listened.

Weylin pumped the pedal and lifted his chisel. He sensed more than saw the smoke-like tentacles reaching for the timber, but knew if he turned his head she'd be gone. It was only ever a glimpse. A threat. A promise.

"Not yet," he said. "Not yet." It had to be done right.

Likely the lad still denied the truth of what happened that day in the woods. Likely he wasn't troubled by the horror that Weylin relived nightly, tortured by the drip-drip-drip on the black earth. That sound filled his dreams, sometimes his days too.

This was his last chance to set things right.

He'd known the day was close even before he visited that fancy doctor. As soon as he'd returned from the city he'd gone into the woods and found the place where it had happened. The scars hadn't healed. The doc had reeled off a list of twenty-dollar words but when Weylin saw those scars so deep in the trunk he knew the shadow on his lungs had nothing to do with smoking.

That day in the woods Keith had accused him of being a 'culchie'. It was a word Weylin hadn't understood until Keith had sneeringly explained.

"A culchie, is it?" Weylin cried. "Have you forgotten you're a culchie? You're a country lad all the way through to your bones. Just like me and your dear Ma. Or aren't we good enough for you now? Two years with city folk and you're too good for your own people, are you?"

The boy stayed mute and kicked at the mulch beneath his large feet; at fifteen he was already a hulking lad. Weylin had feared he'd throw more than insults.

"Go find yourself a good strong branch,' he'd told Keith, 'something with a bit of flex. And remember what I taught you."

Keith had stomped off, scuffing up the earth, a sure sign he'd forgotten all he'd been taught. Weylin hadn't recognised the signs. Instead he'd found himself a sturdy branch and was halfway through his ritual when there came a howling through the trees. The following shrieks were enough to put his heart crossways. His lad appeared clutching a thin branch that was still so green and moist its ragged end bled upon the earth.

Weylin stared in horror as rotting leaves and twigs whirled around them. "Boy, what have you done?"

Keith threw down his makeshift fishing pole. As soon as the branch hit the undergrowth leaves whirled up, faster and faster, until it seemed like the world was made of them. They whipped at the boy, smacking his face and clothes as he ran for the edge of the woods, yelling, his arms flailing as he tried to protect himself.

With a last pump of his foot Weylin blew the dust away and caressed the spinning leg until it calmed beneath his touch. The final piece was ready. He set to work marking and chiselling the voids so that the pieces fit together like a jigsaw. As he worked, the shadow trembled. She was growing, reaching out to him. A sense of unease niggled.

"It's got to be done. The boy needs reminding."

All these years the dark mass he'd glimpsed from the corner of his eye hadn't just hovered. A piece of it had taken root in his lung. All his efforts to make amends had

been wasted. Yet he'd returned from the city determined to set things right, hoping it wasn't too late for Keith.

He fitted the last piece and stepped back. He'd made a fine job of the sacrificed Elder tree, but as he admired his work the looming mass swirled around the crib.

Perhaps he was going too far.

As though sensing his uncertainty, the dark apparition reached out and curled around his face, stoking his cheek as Mary once had in their most tender moments. Then it disappeared into the timbers of the crib.

If only Keith had asked permission that day in the woods.

"You've always got to ask, lad," he'd warned. "You never take even a twig without allowing the tree to give it to you of its own free will."

"How do I ask?"

"You tell the tree your need and then you wait."

"For what?"

"For silence. You'll know soon enough if the tree takes umbrage."

"What happens if I take it anyway?"

"Then the Tree Witch'll come for you. You 'specially don't want to take from the Elder tree or Hilde-Moer will cause you no end of trouble until you set things right."

Few believed in the Tree Witch now. They looked at the Elder tree and its tangle of branches and saw something ratty to be removed from gardens. Perhaps that was the cause of the world's ills—no one asked permission anymore.

That day in the woods he'd tried to make it right. He'd begged forgiveness for what Keith had done, asked her to heap vengeance on his own weary head.

It was Keith she wanted.

He packaged up the crib and its dark passenger. Young Frank from the village would be by to pick it up. It was all arranged. There was nothing more he could do but hang on to his faith that the man who had once been the joyful boy who'd gobbled up his teachings would remember the ancient lore and set things right, as he should have done all those years ago. Keith had a responsibility now to teach his own boy and continue the ways of his people.

I'm very sorry, the specialist had said. Best get your affairs in order.

Waylin took one last, loving look at his workshop, at the carpet of sawdust and the well-used lathe. Then he turned his back on all he'd held dear and shuffled toward the woods.

Not for him the slow disintegration in a box in the cold earth.