

The Yellow Butterfly

by Wesley Baines

Let whoever may read this know: I am an evil man, and I have done evil things.

A grief heavy as darkness threatens to swallow what little sanity I have left, leaving me with little but twisted memories that I no longer wish to bear. I sit now, my eyes fixed upon a tall, half-completed painting of an ancient gnarled oak. Its sullen boughs spread wide at the top of the canvas, and its thick, dark trunk burrows down into wet, brown soil. I never finished that painting. I stare at it now because I cannot bear to look upon the thing I hold in my hand. I feel it, light as moonlit dust, yet it is the heaviest burden I will ever bear. With a trembling hand I write this, for I fear I will later doubt my senses and dismiss all that I have experienced—that I will forget *them*. Perhaps someone will one day read my account. Undoubtedly you will think me insane, and I would not think any less of you. My tale is one so fantastic, so horrible, that I would doubt it myself if not for the small dead thing which lay in my left hand, if not for the small shapes I see in the leaves of the painted oak before me, which I stare at even now as I lay down these words into my journal. Oh, how I wish I had never come to Inritus. No, my friend, this no spectre of the imagination, no raving of a man maddened by loss and grief; this is an evil deed, committed by an evil man. For the first and only time, I shall record the account of what I did to that old tree. And to the people of Inritus.

What have I done?

It began, as with many of the best things in my life, with my wife.

I walked the narrow, gravel path to visit her, flowers in hand, a large canvas beneath my arm. I intended on painting with her that day. It was beautiful out and the snows had come early this winter, the flakes like glimmering coins that crowned the trees with white splendor. I brought her roses—her favorite. She grew them in abundance at one time. Each year for our anniversary she would

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select the choicest one and bring it to me, presenting it to me with a small, handwritten poem. There was much I wished to say to her that day, to my beloved wife. In my imagination, the snowflakes lit upon her yellow hair, unmelting and beautiful. I hurried my steps.

I found her at last, at the end of her row. I bent and placed her flowers at the foot of the small granite headstone and kissed the name graven into it. "Sarah Witham", it read.

My wife.

I settled my canvas against a tree, one that grew close to her headstone. This day, I decided to paint the huge old oak which grew here in the back of the cemetery. It lay out of sight in the overgrown graveyard, even with its immense height and bulk, far down the twisting gravel path, secluded behind rows of smaller trees and shrubs. It always struck me to look upon it, from the very first time Sarah and I had come here almost thirty years ago. She would have wanted to be buried here. I had known that.

I brought out the paints from my satchel and was soon set up. I then waited, for this particular tree had unique qualities aside from its gargantuan dimensions. Each winter, for one day this tree would suddenly and inexplicably fill with butterflies. In the dead of winter, no matter how cold or harsh the weather might be, these butterflies would congregate upon the everlasting leaves of the old oak for a day and then suddenly explode from the tree as the sun set. The butterflies would fly out into Inritus in the night and into nearly each home in the little village. They would get in, despite closed windows and doors, and they would stay for the night. The villagers took this as a sacred thing, and never disturbed the small creatures. It had occurred as long as the eldest in the village could remember, although few would speak of it. By morning, the butterflies would vanish, leaving not a trace of their passing.

I had sat before the tree each and every morning for the past week watching and waiting, waiting for the explosion of color to appear on the old leaves. Leaves which never seemed to turn or fall. Winter did not touch this place.

I was about to pack my things and leave when I saw a small flash of yellow from the corner of my eye. I turned to look, but nothing was there. When I turned back to the tree though, it was aflame with color. *Where had they come from?* The tree was heavy with them, butterflies of every color, of foreign and unrecognizable species, and I tell you they were beautiful. I felt as a blind man who had never truly seen color. They flew and dove and crawled along the branches of the old oak, exhibiting liveliness uncommon among such creatures. They seemed to regard me as they noted my gaze, their small bodies stilled and silent, but soon went back to their enchanting dance.

I quickly set my things back out and began to paint. I commented to my wife about how beautiful the creatures were, and about how I would like to touch one. No one had ever touched one of the winter butterflies, as they were called—the villagers were always afraid to do so. I, for one, never had such a fear. I suppose this to be a product of my birthplace, being born in the south rather than as a native of Inritus. Sarah and I, in our youth, had made our way up to this wintry place, enchanted by its strange properties upon finding it. The leaves were browned by the touch of fall, and our carriage plowed through piles of leaves. We were lost, but grew hopeful when we passed a decrepit sign that read “Inritus”. On the outskirts of the village was a farm dominated by a mansion with darkened windows, but we passed this place and pressed on toward the village center—those windows gave us both a chill. At the end of the road the trees fell away, revealing a valley pricked by hundreds of long tendrils of smoke. Sarah started and placed a hand on my shoulder, pointing silently, eyes wide. I looked, puzzled, until I realized what was wrong. The entire valley was a most radiant green. Not a single leaf had turned.

Once Sarah found that her roses grew here even in winter, that life existed despite the death of the year, she fell in love with Inritus. The residents, although quiet and secretive, were enamored of my paintings, and we made enough to get by. And then we discovered the butterflies, although it wasn't until Sarah was gone

that one began to visit our home. The small creature was the only company I kept in those first few lonely years. I once tried to stroke one of its wings, but my finger passed through it as if it were a cloud of dust hanging in a beam of sunlight. I marveled at this, but for what I did with my butterfly, I needed not touch it.

I captured it in paint. My home was adorned with portraits of it. I rendered one each and every year I was visited, and my walls were resplendent with vibrant paintings of the small, yellow butterfly. It would always perch in the same place, upon the small padded bench before the fireplace, the same bench Sarah once sat on when I captured her likeness in the portrait that now hangs upon my wall. There it would sit for the entire night, regarding me in a way no animal should, often hopping about and dancing before me in a joyous little jig.

Now, here in the cemetery, I captured them all. Shades of orange, green, violet, and red appeared in slashes across my canvas, those and every shade in between. Throughout the day I worked, until the sun began to melt into the horizon like a coin in a furnace. My painting reached the base of the tree. As I looked out upon its gnarled trunk, my eyes began to follow the roots to prepare their shapes on the canvas. I began to mention something to my wife, but my voice died away as I noted something. Something wrong.

The roots.

There were too many of them, though I had always been aware of that particularity. Now though, I really looked, following them with my eyes. I got up and slowly walked over to that old oak, walking along one of its thicker roots, following it out some way, meandering between smaller trees and gravestones. The root finally ended, plunging suddenly straight down.

Into a grave.

With mounting horror, I followed more roots. Each and every one led, in some roundabout way, into a grave. It was deceptive, as the roots seemed to lead in random directions. Only through the most careful tracking was I able to determine the roots'

ultimate destinations. I made my way back to the oak, and its boughs suddenly seemed twisted and black to me—unnatural.

Evil.

I spun about, overcome with horror at what I had discovered. What sort of demon tree was this that its roots fed upon the dead? A sudden shock passed through me as a thought struck me. I ran to my wife's grave, and sure enough, not a foot away from it, a bundle of thin tendrils plunged into the ground toward it.

My fear turned to rage. I looked up into the tree, the butterflies swirling and dancing. Their dance seemed suddenly sinister to me—a hypnotic jig whose design was to entrance and ensnare. I ran from that place, making my way to the old shed in the center of the graveyard where the old grave keeper kept his tools. I found for myself a shovel, and turned to run back. I paused though, noting another instrument in the corner of the shed, its handle wrapped in red cloth.

An axe.

I secured it and ran back to my wife with both instruments in hand. I had to save her from whatever the tree was doing to her remains. I set about digging where the root plunged into the ground near her grave. I dug for what seemed like hours, finally coming up against something solid. It was the stone tomb in which my wife was buried. The roots dug into the side of it, burrowing straight through the rock. I pulled my hair with grief, turning suddenly to the huge oak. I cast aside the shovel, hefting instead the axe and strode determinedly toward the old tree.

With a cry, I swung my axe, the head biting deeply into the soft flesh of the trunk. It was surprisingly easy to cut. As I swung, I began to fancy I heard voices. Faint and tiny, I could not make them out. I slowed, angling my ear toward the tree. I brought my head closer, pressing my ear against the moist bark. *The voices were coming from inside the tree.*

They were incoherent—babbling. Whatever demon spirits infested this tree were obviously afraid of me, so I continued on, chopping, chopping, *chopping*.

There was a sudden rush of wind, and I looked up. The butterflies were scattering out into the village, flying in every direction, still strangely beautiful in the failing rays of the sun. I turned back to my work.

I cut for hours, taking small breaks when fatigue forced its heavy hand upon me. All I could think of was that tendril, cutting into my wife's grave, garnering whatever terrible nourishment it took from my beloved.

All the while the voices became louder, and more distinct. Some seemed familiar, as if the demons within sought to trick me into complacency. In my rage and fatigue, I paid them no heed.

As the old oak neared the end of its life, the voices began to fade. I drew strength from this, and raced on, forcing my aching limbs to obey, trying to convince myself that I was not insane. Morning was nearing, and I was nearly through.

I noticed a few of the butterflies had returned, and they fluttered around me almost angrily. Fearful at first, I soon found that they could do me no harm. I did pause, however, when I recognized my little yellow butterfly land on the axe head mid swing. I stopped as it regarded me with that feeling of familiarity. It sat more still than any insect should when facing a man, and extended a spindly arm in my direction. It carried some small object in its legs, but sun had not yet broken the top of the valley, and shadow obscured it. With but a moment's hesitation, I continued my chopping, heedless of the fate of the yellow butterfly that never moved from the axe head. It was gone when I withdrew the axe.

Sometime just before the sun broke, the tree lay dead on the mossy ground, the voices finally silenced. My wife would be tormented no more. I dropped the axe and made my way wearily through the streets, seeking rest in my bed.

As I travelled though, I began to hear the wailing. I ventured close to an unshuttered window and listened. From it, issued the sound of weeping, and I hazarded a quick peek into the window. There on the floor sat a small boy, cradling something small and dead in his hands.

A grey butterfly.

Similar sounds of shock began to reverberate through the village as the people woke. I felt badly for them, but knew secretly that I had done them a great service. I had rid the town of the demons which rode out from that cursed tree in the night to commit unseen atrocities. They must have been demons, for no good thing would ever feed upon the dead. I continued home.

As I reached my door I began to feel uneasy. My night had been a mad delirious rush, and I had yet to truly think upon its events. The door creaked inward and I entered my home. I lit a lamp, for clouds had obscured the rising sun, and it was dark once more. I felt a sudden pang of fear in my gut. I turned, and headed toward the room where the yellow butterfly would come and perch on those cold, wintry nights.

I entered the room, the lamp slowly pushing back the darkness like a fragile bubble rising through water.

And I found it.

There, lying on the small bench. It lay with wings outstretched, dead.

Then I noticed what the butterfly held in its legs.

From that moment on the tears came, and I wept—I wept and wailed like a madman. I clawed at the walls and pulled my hair and tore my clothes to shreds. I sank down to my knees on the dusty floor and screamed, a piteous, thin sound. I looked up upon my wall, upon two paintings which hung side by side. Yellow hair beside yellow wings. I wailed again, pressing my face to the ground. In its small, stiff legs, the butterfly held a rose petal.

Somewhere in the north, in an isolated valley, the leaves began to brown and one by one, fell to the earth for the first time.

