

Angharad

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Echoes and Shadows

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ANGHARAD

ALTHOUGH SHE was only nine years old, she was a very brave little girl, Angharad Hughes, and she tried as hard as she could to prevent her bad leg from being too much of a handicap.

Olwen, her mother, would glance out of the window—when she was home, that is, and not teaching her classes at the university, leaving her daughter in the housekeeper’s charge—and would see little Angharad hobbling briskly up the broad reach of the meadow towards the wood on the top of the rise, which seemed to have become her favourite place to play. Recently her mother had taken to opening the cottage window, calling ‘Angharad! Angharad!’, wanting to call her back, since she had come to feel faintly uneasy about her daughter’s going so often to the wood. It wasn’t a large wood, only an acre or two, but it wouldn’t do for a nine-year-old child to become confused or frightened there—and who knew, these days, what undesirable elements, tramps and layabouts, might be lurking in such places? ‘Angharad! Angharad!’ she would call as loudly as she could: but the thin little figure, its fair hair flashing in the summer sunlight, would only limp onwards more furiously, dot-and-carry-one, apparently not hearing her mother’s voice.

Mrs Hughes, fretfully, would lean back in and close the window, half annoyed with her daughter and half proud of her for so pluckily ignoring the limitations of her withered leg in its brace of iron and leather. She would watch the little bright head bobbing away, dipping out of sight for a moment in the shallow ditch that extended along the front of the wood before springing into view again as she scrambled up the bank on the other side. Her mother shuddered to think what, even

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in the fine dry weather of that long summer, clambering up and down the ditch was doing to those thin cotton dresses. She would turn away from the window, shaking her head, and would say to Leah Jenkins, the elderly housekeeper, ‘Dear, dear, Mrs Jenkins’, (she and the housekeeper always addressed each other by their last names), I don’t know what I’m going to tell her father. I keep telling her not to play in the wood. I’ll have to get him to speak severely to her’; and Mrs Jenkins, fat, red-faced, slow of speech, would reply indulgently, ‘There, there, Mrs Hughes, she’s a lively one, that one; she’ll know how to take care of herself.’ Although her employers had only returned to Wales a few months earlier, after living for several years in England, and although Mrs Jenkins had only been in the household for no more than seven or eight weeks, she had grown extremely fond of little Angharad—perhaps a little fonder, she sometimes thought, than her own father and mother, busy people who were seldom at home except at the weekend—and even then Professor Hughes would often drive down to his office in the college and work all Saturday.

Mrs Hughes and Mrs Jenkins spoke to each other, of course, in Welsh. Their conversation would thus have gone like this. Mrs Hughes: ‘Mrs Jenkins, fach, fach, ‘dwn i ddim be’ ddweda’ i wrth ei thâd hi. Dwi’n dweud wrthi byth a beunydd am beidio â chwarae yn y llwyn. Rhaid imi ei gael o i siarad yn llym efo hi.’ Mrs Jenkins: ‘Rwan, rwan, Mrs Hughes, mae hi’n un fywiog, honna: bydd hi’n gwybod sut mae gofalu amdani ‘i hun.’ While it was perfectly natural that these two Welsh women should address each other in Welsh, within the Hughes household it was not so much natural as obligatory that they should do so. The Hugheses had hired Mrs Jenkins expressly because she was one of the few remaining people in that particular part of north-east Wales who still spoke the original language. When they were at home, the Hugheses, including Angharad, conversed in nothing but Welsh—and outside it as well, whenever possible. They sought out the shopkeepers and tradesmen in the neighbourhood who, like Mrs Jenkins, could speak Welsh, and on Sundays, though privately they were both religious sceptics, they went to the local Methodist

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chapel because the hymns, the prayers and the sermon were conducted in their preferred tongue.

Whereas Olwen Hughes could be called stubborn in her devotion to the Welsh language, her husband was vehement. Most of his evenings were spent away from home, at the University or in village halls, attempting to preserve and propagate the use of Welsh. As often as not his wife accompanied him, sitting beside him on the platform, nodding her head as he spoke and vigorously encouraging the applause.

She was proud of him, proud of the way he refused to spare himself. All the same, she couldn't help wondering, sometimes, about the effect all this might be having on her daughter. Angharad was left on her own so much. She was a good child, well able to amuse herself, and Mrs Jenkins, though elderly and with an invalid husband, was very reliable. Still, she could have wished that Hywel (he had been christened Howell but had early adapted his name to the Welsh form) had agreed to let her go to the local school after they had moved from Manchester. She had already lost several months of schooling.

Privately, Olwen wished he was a little more flexible where Angharad was concerned. Their cottage, though it was set in a glorious piece of countryside, was isolated, and in any case it would have been difficult enough for Angharad, with her wasted left leg, to make friends. At her last school she hadn't been able to join in the usual childish games. Olwyn felt, with a touch of guilt, that the girl must be lonely. Indeed, she was puzzled that the child didn't show it more, didn't mope about with her books and dolls. But no, whenever the weather was even moderately fine, Angharad was off out of doors immediately she had finished her breakfast. On these long soft summer days she would be out from early morning to nightfall, only returning briefly for a midday sandwich. Then it was off again, up the grassy slope to the wood—always to the wood.

Why the wood? Why was the child so interested in it? On two or three occasions her mother, suddenly becoming conscious that the child had been absent for several hours, had put aside the student essays she was correcting, risen from her desk, and made her way up to

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the wood on the trail of her daughter. She would stand on the edge of the ditch and shout, ‘Angharad! Lle wyt ti? Wyt ti yno? ‘Glywi di mi?’ She felt slightly foolish, too much like an over-anxious mother.

There was nothing forbidding or sinister about the wood: nonetheless she wondered why she never choose to venture closer than the edge of the ditch. It seemed odd that her nine-year-old daughter would run eagerly among the trees when she herself was reluctant to approach it too closely. Perhaps she didn’t want to expend the energy it would take to cross the ditch and enter it. However, it wasn’t as if the trees were huddled thickly or darkly together, or as if there was any tangled and brambly undergrowth. The trees were old, admittedly, but the space between them was wide enough to let the sunlight penetrate easily, while the floor of the wood was open and generously carpeted with leaves. If anything, the wood was welcoming. Nor was it large enough for anyone—even a little girl—to get lost in. To call it a wood, indeed, was in fact to flatter it. It was more like a largish grove or coppice—a llwyn in Welsh. It was less a full-fledged wood than the wedge-shaped remnant of a once great forest that had mantled the entire countryside many centuries ago, a forest long since diminished by axes of flint, bronze, iron and steel. Indeed, the triangular ditch that bordered its three sides was described in the County History as dating from the Early Bronze Age, or even from the earlier Neolithic Period. Its banks had been abraded and worn down æons ago, leaving only the ditch; archaeologists could only speculate as to why it had once been thought necessary to surround this small portion of the original forest, which must have lain somewhere near its heart, with such a strangely shaped earthwork or fortification. Soundings inside the ditch and in the wood beyond had yielded no indication of human habitation.

The wood itself was small enough for Olwen Hughes’s voice to penetrate to every part of it. Angharad was bound to hear her. To make sure, she would move backwards and forwards, outside the ditch, repeatedly calling—and, a few minutes later, the little girl would emerge from one side or other of the wood and trot obediently towards her mother. If Olwen was irritated by her daughter’s behaviour, the sight of the small figure, smaller than other children of

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the same age, hobbling down the slope towards her, its stick-like leg imprisoned in the heavy brace, caused her anger to melt away. There was pain in her heart as she watched her lame little daughter bravely negotiating the ditch, and when Angharad reached her, she would kneel in the grass and open her arms wide. Then, hand in hand, they would descend the meadow to the cottage, where Mrs Jenkins had their tea waiting for them, with a special piece of Teisen Fêl or a load of Bara Gwenith hot from the oven.

What made Olwen angry was the girl's deliberate disobedience. Again and again she had been told not to go near the wood; there were plenty of places where she could play in the immediate surroundings of the cottage. Yet as soon as they allowed her to go out of doors, within half an hour she would be seen heading away as fast as her legs—or leg—would carry her in the direction of the wood. She had always been an obedient child, and such behaviour was completely uncharacteristic. Why did she do it? What was the attraction of such a paltry little place? Was it the very fact that it was forbidden? Or was it the mysterious sympathy that draws children towards some enigmatic spot? Whatever the explanation, it was annoying, especially when her parents were such busy people, absorbed with important affairs.

Bringing her down from the wood for the twentieth time, tightly grasping her hand, making her hurry a little more than was perhaps necessary, Olwen would broach the matter directly.

‘Cariad, beth sy ynglyn ar lle sy'n gwneud iti eisiau mynd yno o hyd, sy'n ei gwyeud hi mor anodd iti gadw draw?’—‘Darling—what is it about that place that makes you keep wanting to go there, that makes it so hard for you to keep away?’

She would try to prevent the note of exasperation from creeping into her voice, though she couldn't stop herself giving the small hand a shake. She loved her daughter, and felt guilt about becoming so upset about this petty and tiresome business. But her annoyance was only increased—first—by the length of time which it took the little girl to reply, and then by the unsatisfactory nature of the reply itself, which was always the same.

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‘You see, mama,’ the girl would reply, in her light, high voice, taking her time, choosing her words deliberately—‘you see, it’s because of the Shadow Folk.’

Shadow Folk, she called them, Shadow People. *Pobl y Cysgod*, were the Welsh words she used.

‘*Pobl y Cysgod? Pobl y Cysgod?*’ her husband would exclaim when she told him what Angharad had said. ‘*Beth yw’r holl lol yma?*’—‘What is all this nonsense?’

It didn’t occur to Olwen, until what was to be their final walk down the meadow together, that on the last occasion, perhaps deliberately, Angharad had not let her mother hold her hand.



If you were younger than Angharad, or even if you were older than Angharad, you would find it warm and welcoming in the wood. The moment you shinnied up from the ditch, even before you had crossed the narrow strip of grass and got in among the trees, you would feel it. Even if there had been a chill in the wind as you were crossing the meadow, in the wood it would be warm; even if it had felt too hot as you were crossing the open field, in the wood it would be cool. It always felt just right.

Naturally, the wood was at its best when the sun was shining. The sun made each leaf glow till you could see every stalk and vein; it caressed the trunks of the trees so that it seemed that the bark had been stroked with a golden comb. The leaves beneath your feet were the colour of the flame-red gown that Angharad’s mother wore when she went off with her father for some special occasion; they gave off the smell of the scent her mother sometimes used after she had put on the gown.

Why did her mother never notice, when she came to the wood to call for her, how the leaves on the trees seemed to be fluttering and dancing, even on summer days when there wasn’t a breath of wind? There they were, ceaselessly twirling and flickering. Of course, they drooped downwards on the days when it was really gloomy and grey,

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or when it was raining, though those were the days when mama made you stay indoors. Those were the days, the dull and dismal days, when the Pobl y Cysgod would be resting. Even then, on the dreariest days, when the sun was hidden behind a blanket of clouds, the leaves would still be flicking and twisting a little. Even in their sleep, being who they were, they could not keep still, but would be constantly stirring in their slumber.

Restless things; pretty things. It would have taken several visits to the wood before you would have learned about their ways. It was not something you would have noticed straight away. At first the wood was only a place where you came to get away from the house. The house was in the wood, there it was always cold and dark, whereas the wood stood on the hill above, in the broad sunlight. Mother and father were almost never at home, they seldom had more time for you than a goodnight kiss, and though Mrs Jenkins was a sweet old thing, she was fat and slow and far too grown up to play with you.

The Pobl y Cysgod. When did you first become aware of them? A little bit at a time. It hadn't been obvious, right away, that the Pobl y Cysgod were teasing you, frisking with you. It had all seemed a trick of the light, the bobbing, shifting, summery light in which the little wood was bathed.

And then there had come the moment when you had thrown yourself down at the foot of a tree, panting with the effort of toiling up the meadow; not just your leg but the whole of your body aching. You had closed your eyes; the sunshine beat upon your lids. On the pink screen between your lid and your eye you were aware, after a minute or so, that delicate shapes were moving. Slowly and sleepily opening your eyes, you could see that the tender green leaves on the boughs above you were shimmering sympathetically, their shadows stroking your face like a mother's soft fingers stroking the face of a child. You lay there, in a drowse, on your bed of leaves and mosses, the shadows embracing you, enfolding you, gently, solicitous, petting and fondling you. . . . It was warm, it was welcoming. . . . And when you roused yourself, drawing up your leg in its heavy brace, levering yourself to your feet with the aid of the friendly trunk of the tree

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behind you, then came the time to play. Your slumber in the tremulous cradle of leaf and shadow had refreshed you; you were ready to accept their invitation to romp and gambol. . . .

. . . Hide-and-seek . . . Follow-my-leader . . . Kiss-in- the-Ring . . . Tag . . .-these were the games the Shadow Folk loved to play. . . . They would skip and shimmer all around you, encircling you, linking their filmy arms as they capered around you. You would laugh and giggle and whirl about, your withered leg forgotten. Forgotten too was the refusal of the children at school to be friends with you, for now you have as many friends as you can desire. They skim, they prance, this way and that, on every side; they touch you with fingers that are lighter than any feather, brushing you with their fluttery tips. You cannot really see them: sun and shadow do not melt together into clear outlines, into definite shapes. Yet you see something . . . you can make out something against the darker columns of the trunks and boughs. . . .

When was it, then, that you heard them start to whisper to you? Was it a palpable voice? Was it a murmur in your blood, your brain, running along your veins, insinuating itself throughout your body? Whatever it was, was there any real need to make it out, to understand it? What if it didn't mean to be understood, only to beguile you? It was, you see, a language that neither you or anyone close to you could have understood—not even your mother or your father. . . . For if the language was Welsh, then it was a Welsh that was older, far older, than any Welsh you had ever heard, far older than the Welsh spoken by the earliest poets, or scholars, or holy men. . . .

. . . Angharad, aros gyda ni . . . aros gyda ni am byth . . . yn gwydd . . . yn cynnes . . . yn heulwen . . . dedwyt y bodlawn . . . syberw a kyuan . . . un ohonom ni . . . tra gwae a gouit dy ryw dynawl. . . .

. . . Angharad, stay with us . . . stay with us for ever . . . in this wood . . . in the warmth . . . happy and contented. . . . healthy and whole . . . one of us . . . beyond the woes and troubles of your human kind. . . .

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. . . Pobl y kysgawd . . . hyn na'th bobyl dynawl . . . byw ar daear kyn no daear daear . . . byw pan nad oeddd daear dim ond nydden tarth, gweilgi a chysgodion . . . legweilgi crwdr a chysgod ton . . . annrhefn dechreu petheu . . . teruysg a gwakter . . . hen pan godwys mynyt e penn . . . hen pan gelei gwydd y tiroedd . . .

. . . Shadow Folk . . . older than your human folk . . . living on the earth before the earth became the earth . . . living when the earth was nothing more than a smear of mist, a blur of seas and shadows . . . a place of wandering oceans and drifting waves . . . the chaos at the beginning of things . . . the tumult and the void . . . old when the mountains raised their heads . . . old when the forests mantled the continents. . . .

. . . Gwdd . . . in gwydd pryduerth . . . bwyall a llif . . . yn y gyrru'nol . . . bellach a phellach . . . llei ac yn llei. . . .

. . . Forests . . . our beautiful forests . . . the axe and the saw . . . driven back . . . farther and farther . . . smaller and smaller. . . .

. . . Goroeswn fyth . . . ers gwawr pell . . . disylw . . . diameu . . . oedi . . . parhau. . . .

. . . Still we survive . . . from distant dawn . . . unheeded . . . unsuspected . . . lingering . . . abiding. . . .

. . . Angharad . . . gwranda . . . gwranda ar deil . . . gwylia'r cysgodion . . . pam aros gyda'r bobyl dynol? . . . aors gyda NI! . . . byw gyda NI! . . . dawnsia! . . . llamsach! . . . nwyfus yn heul a gwynt byth a beunydd! . . .

. . . Angharad . . . listen . . . listen to the leaves . . . watch the shadows . . . why stay with human folk? . . . stay with US! . . . live with US! . . . dance! . . . skip! . . . sport in the sun and the wind for ever and ever! . . .



Olwen, working on her mid-term set of papers, did not notice her daughter's absence till it was nearly time for supper. The child hadn't come home at teatime, either. Then she remembered: Mrs Jenkin's

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husband had taken a turn for the worse and she had asked if she could go home after lunch.

Almost seven o'clock, and the sun was slanting its rays through the study window. Angharad must have been away for nearly six hours.

That girl! Olwen dropped her pencil on the pile of papers and hurriedly got up, limbs stiff from so much sitting. She went into the hall and called 'Angharad' in case the girl had slipped back into the house without her hearing her. She went across to her daughter's room, on the ground floor, because of her bad leg. She opened the door.

'Angharad?'

The room—empty.

She glanced at her watch. Five past seven! . . . Now she was worried.

She ran to the front door, hurrying out just as her husband was driving up in the car, braking abruptly as she ran out suddenly in front of him.

'Olwen! Bron iti wneud imi dy reged ti drossodd! Be' sy'n bod? Be' ddaru?'—'Olwen! You almost made me run you over! What's the matter? What's happened?'

A few quick words, the briefcase thrown on to the passenger seat, then the two of them hastening up the slope towards the wood. Hywel Hughes, tired after a long meeting with yet another committee, toiling a step or two behind, fuming, loosening his tie.

Neither of them, in the weeks they had lived there, had even crossed the ditch. Olwen, in a panic though she now was, nevertheless found herself pausing on the brink. She waited until Hywel came floundering up before she plucked up the courage to plunge down the tussocky grass of the bank.

The wood was not large; you could see daylight on all three sides of it; nonetheless it took them almost fifteen minutes to find her.

She was lying in the topmost corner of the wood, the apex of the triangle, where the ground was highest.

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At first, Olwen didn't see her. The dappled shadows were rippling across her body in a way that made her hard to distinguish from the carpet of leaves on which she lay. A fitful breeze was blowing, and leafage had drifted over the body, providing a kind of coverlet. Beneath the veil of the leaves the small white face seemed no longer pinched and sickly; it looked tranquil and serene.

Olwen gave a moan and dropped on her knees beside her daughter's body. Even in the first moments of anguish she noticed, incongruously, the beautiful effect made by the tremulous motion of the leaves and boughs; the breeze shook them; the sun struck through them. It was as if the girl was lying on the bottom of a stream, beneath the placid water, her yellow hair gently undulating.

Olwen put out a shaky hand to brush the leaves away from the child's face. When Hywel came up, a little short of breath, she saw that he was holding the brace that Angharad had worn on her leg. Before she died, she must have unbuckled it and thrown it away—although why it was found on the other side of the wood, a long way away from the place where she herself was lying, was a mystery.



Olwen would sit in the window, looking up the meadow towards the wood. She would sit like that for hours.

She would never mention it to Hywel, but sometimes—when the late sun was slanting through the tall old trees—or when a soft moon hung over the wood—she was sure she could catch a glimpse, if only for a moment, of a small figure. It would emerge from the darker background of the trees and stand, a wavering shape without a firm outline, on the far side of the ancient ditch.

Olwen would lean forward, then, certain that something like a small hand had lifted itself for an instant, before the little figure turned around and ran back nimbly into the shelter of the wood.