

The Stranger

By Sean Michael

for you, friend, my thanks.

I didn't know his name, so I'd taken to calling him the stranger...

I watched from my window, looking down into the valley, as he accumulated bamboo stems and piled them beneath an old tree that stood about seven feet with two sturdy branches stretching in the same direction toward the opposite slope of the canyon.

It took two days of digging with a broken tree branch, snapping the bamboo to proper sizes and meticulously placing the stalks before he completed the structure. On the third day when I saw the stranger leave the canyon, I hiked down into the valley to see what he had built.

Bamboo placed closely together rose from the earth in four walls with a small opening left on one side as an entrance. The ceiling was comprised of more bamboo woven through the branches of the tree. Foliage placed around the hut provided camouflage. It looked like it might even provide decent shelter in case of a spring rain. Inside, the ground was smooth. Rocks and a small mound of dirt lined the base of the bamboo walls for support. There was even a love seat couch that folded out into a bed. I was surprised--impressed, actually.

As I turned to leave, I noticed a Top Flight composition book--the same kind I'd used in college while working on my MFA in creative writing--protruding from the cushions of the love seat, standing upright so that I could see the cover. In the white square, listed as subject was, "Search For My Mind." The date was entered as "Endless." I was tempted to grab the book and leaf through its pages, but somehow I thought the stranger would know if his notebook had been messed with, and I wouldn't have wanted anybody snooping through the diary I'd kept as a teenager or the composition books I'd collected in college. As a writer, I'd always considered my work personal until I decided to share it. So I left the composition book there untouched.

As I hiked back up the canyon toward my house, I wondered: Who is this vagrant in my backyard? How many of my neighbors have taken notice of his presence and how do they feel about his moving into the canyon below? And how the hell did he get that sofa down there?

I was wary, but intrigued. I thought of the words on the front of the notebook: "Search for my mind... Endless... I could definitely recall a time in my life when those sentiments rang true. You probably can too, right?"

I decided that the stranger was okay but my curiosity wasn't sated. From what I could tell, he was average height with careless hair. He appeared to be young, no more than 18. What was it that made him think he was losing his mind? Surely sanity hadn't really slipped his grasp. Had it? For some reason I wondered about his eyes.

I was 31 when my husband, the painter, died five years ago from a burst aneurysm. It was the most difficult thing I'd ever had to live through. I even considered following him a few times. In the end, I decided he died happy and this helped me to accept the loss. The way I see it, there's probably no better way to die than in the throes of doing what you love. I still have the painting my husband was working on when I found him collapsed in the studio, a red streak down the center of the canvas, paintbrush still clutched in his hand.

When I made it back to my house I stood on the balcony to see a beautiful sunset gracing the sky. I imagined my husband up there somewhere with his paintbrush. Because of him, I fell in love with sunsets and now anytime I watched one I thought of him.

"Sunsets," he'd said, "were God's art; the sky his canvas. The closest thing to perfection that this world has to offer," and upon seeing my raised eyebrows, "Except for you, of course, my dear."

We'd had a good laugh.

I stood there on the balcony for a while longer, gazing out at the sunset and feeling nostalgic. I saw the stranger return to the valley from wherever he'd been. He was carrying a plastic grocery bag. Well, at least he wasn't starving. I watched him disappear into the bamboo hut, then went inside for something to eat. After that I read for a while and dozed off.

It was unnaturally hot that night and I wasn't sleeping well anyway, so I got up at about midnight and went out onto the balcony for some fresh air. Outside I heard a faint singing coming up from the canyon. The voice wasn't spectacular, neither was it horrible. My eyes adjusted to the darkness, and I was able to see the silhouette of the stranger sitting in the canyon. Suddenly, he quit the song mid-verse and looked up toward my house. I stepped back into the shadow; the stranger retreated into his hut.

The following morning I neither saw the stranger come or go as I sat on the balcony with my MacBook and worked on a third collection of poetry and short stories, which was on schedule to fall behind. I hadn't found that one thing yet that would make it complete. With this in mind, I opened a new document and typed "Search For My Mind" at the top of the page, then hit tab twice. After that, as quickly as words appeared on the page I deleted them. Finally, I got rid of "Search For My Mind" and replaced it with "The Stranger." Those two words taunted me until the screen saver came on. I turned off my MacBook without saving and went inside.

I crawled into bed that night feeling perturbed and uninspired. But that comes with the territory of being a writer. Sometimes you are just at a loss for words. In the end I decided that I need this stranger to inspire me, but maybe I was asking for too much. I left the window open but the night was quiet, no singing.

When I woke up it was already past 9 in the morning. I'd slept in and didn't feel much like writing. I decided to go to the grocery store, walking distance from my house, and pick up brunch. I was due for a walk anyway--sometimes it helped me to clear my mind. I took a shower, then threw on some jeans and my sneakers.

At the grocery store I bought a container of fresh potato salad from the deli and found a bottle of Chardonnay in the liquor aisle. On my way home, I saw the stranger. He was sitting on a bench outside of the store, his notebook in his lap and a pen perched on his ear. He wore a distant melancholic expression and the same black tee shirt and blue jeans from four days ago. Even so I decided that the stranger was handsome.

As I walked toward where he was sitting I wondered if I should just leave him alone. But

before I could decide, I said, "Hey, you alright?"

He gave me an odd look and answered curtly, "Yeah, fine.

A moment passed without words and I said, "Okay, take care of yourself."

As I walked away I heard him mutter, "It doesn't matter."

I went home and sat on the balcony with my potato salad, a tall glass and my bottle of wine. I ate brunch and drank until I was well tipsy. I thought about the stranger. Why would he think that his life didn't matter? I wanted to scream down at his little hut, It does matter! Instead I went inside and took a warm bubble bath.

I left my bedroom window open in case the stranger decided to sing. He did not, but I was awakened in the middle of the night. I went out onto the balcony and saw the stranger standing in the valley and screaming curses at the sky.

He's going to wake the whole neighborhood, I thought.

The stranger was spitting mad, screaming at the top of his lungs, "Why the fuck did my pen die? You killed my pen! Are you trying to kill me too? My fucking pens aren't supposed to die when I still have things to say! I'll tear every page out of this book and throw it all away!"

He tossed something, which I surmised to be the empty pen, and walked back into his bamboo hut. The rest of the night was quiet.

When I got up in the morning I found a brand new four pack of Bic pens in one of my desk drawers. I didn't know if the stranger would find it or not but I went out onto the balcony and threw it as hard as I could in the general direction of his hut.

Sometime around noon, I saw the stranger leave and I hiked down to the valley. He hadn't found the pens so I moved them a little closer to the hut. I was turning back when an overwhelming feeling came over me. I'm just going to see if he left the notebook behind, I told myself. Had he torn out all the pages, ripped them to pieces in a moment's frustration, later to regret it?

The Top Flight composition book was there stuffed between the cushions of the love seat. I hadn't really gone into the hut just to see if he'd destroyed the notebook. I wanted to

Writing Raw

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read it. Before I could stop myself, I grabbed the book and opened it to the first page. In the top right corner was the date, 0/0/00. He wrote:

“I had a dream last night. Well, I don’t really know if it was a dream. More like a vision. It was me I had the head of a bird, and wings, but the body of a man. I was standing in a nest of fire and I heard the word “Freedom” whispered like a gale through the trees.”

I closed the book and put it carefully back where I had found it. The stranger had inspired me. Suddenly ideas inundated my mind. I hurried back up to my house, found a steno pad and pencil in my desk drawer and began jotting my thoughts the old-fashioned way. I felt good. For the next two weeks I did all of my writing by hand, a couple of hours each morning--a lot of crumpled papers had accumulated on my balcony during that time--and I watched the stranger come and go.

One night he brought a girl down to his hut. She had locks of curly blonde hair and they were holding hands. Good for him, I thought, but in the morning blondie left alone and I never saw her again.

The stranger had found the pens I’d left for him and continued his writing in the middle of the night. There were no more angry curses spewed at the stars, but every now and then, he sang. I left my bedroom window open every night. Things were going well for me and I thought for the stranger too.

Then one morning I was sitting on the balcony finishing up the final draft of my book when I smelled the stench of smoke. I surveyed the valley and saw dark plumes billowing from the bamboo hut. All at once it burst into flames. The conflagration danced around the old tree. I sat paralyzed by shock and disbelief, then I realized the stranger had not emerged from the burning hut. I rose hastily, knocking over my MacBook, and ran for the valley. I made it halfway when I realized there was nothing that I could do.

A group of my neighbors were already at the hut. One was using an extinguisher on the fire and another, with an apparently long garden hose, was wetting the ground around it and expelling the flames that were trying to extend its destructive path up the slope of the valley. I

heard the wail of sirens approaching in the distance. By the time the trucks arrived, the fire was already out. But it wasn't just a fire.

I stood halfway down the slope of the canyon, tears stinging my eyes, as they pulled the stranger's lifeless body from the ashes. I remembered the entry from his composition book... "I was standing in a nest of fire... 'Freedom' whispered like a gale through the trees..." I turned around and stumbled back up the canyon toward my house. That jerk! That damn jerk, I thought.

The reporters showed up a while later knocking on doors and looking for information about the stranger. I ignored them. The story was on the news, of course, but I didn't pay much attention to it.

I spoke with the fire marshals when they conducted their investigation. I learned that the stranger had poured gasoline around the perimeter of the hut, presumably so he would be trapped by the flames, then doused himself in the flammable liquid before starting the fire.

Sometimes, now, I look down into the valley at the charred tree and ask myself why he did it, but I will never know the answer.

I can only hope the stranger has found his freedom with the whispering wind.

The End

Sean Michael bio: Sean Michael is 28 years old, currently incarcerated in California and writes to retain sanity. He is holding on by a string. His grandmother manages his blog which you can visit at www.madpoetenchained.wordpress.com.