

The Boy in the Forest

It was a faraway land in which the boy of our story lived. Deep within a forest all filled with ferns and mist, at the foot of the mountains, he lived. There were no paths to his cottage and only a small stream ran by his home. He had never known another home and he was always a child.

He never grew old. He never grew tall, but he was older than the trees themselves. He had only ever been seven years old; it seemed for an eternity, for such it was.

Hidden deep within the forest; he was what the ancients called an oracle. He carried within his always young heart deep and profound wisdom as simple as the stars and as simple as the turn of each season. As far as he knew, each passing year was the same. He had never known parents, nor had he ever laughed and played with brothers or sisters that he could recall and yet he knew somehow that he was seven. His house, the forest, this world, was all he had ever known. And yet, deep in his heart were other images, other lives, shadows of memories that he could not quite touch, but he could feel them there, buried.

He wondered about this. He wondered why he never grew up and why he was always seven, while the things of the wood gave themselves up to dust, time and time again, for age after age. He watched the turning of the trees, the aging of the forest and the cycle of life, while he was always young, perpetually seven, frozen in time. And with the passing years came the wisdom of life and the deepest knowledge of the truest self. He became a mystic.

The day the stranger came was a day unlike any he had ever known. It marked an end point, a beginning point, and an intersection of worlds. The stranger rode a noble, black war horse and he wore a heavy dark green cape that hid his stature. To the boy he looked enormously strong, but something in the stranger's eyes told the boy there was nothing to fear.

The boy reached out his open hand to the stranger, who dismounted the horse and with heavy steps walked across the clearing, pushing his hood from his head. His ragged, matted hair was almost white and his eyes were steel blue.

A single tear ran down the boy's cheek as he felt the stranger's heart. He saw the pain and the years of anguish that had fallen like giant rocks upon the stranger's shoulders. As he walked towards the boy, it seemed to the stranger that he had never known the joy of being a child, it seemed as though he had always been a man; strong, independent and sure. He had lived through war and famine, he had watched friends live and die by the weapons that men can forge and he had held his wife in the last moments of her young life. He had long ago forgotten how to cry. All he now knew was pain, and it hurt him to live. It hurt him to walk and it hurt him to breathe each breath, knowing that every

heartbeat, every breath and every step carried within it the full weight of all his memories.

The boy could see all of this and his heart broke to pieces. The boy had never seen or known that such sadness and loss was possible. The stranger fell to his hands and knees on the ground in front of the boy as though the burden of his life was too much to carry for even one more step and it had finally crushed him to the earth from which he had come. The boy, whose hand instinctively touched the stranger's shoulder, poured the energy of ageless compassion into the stranger's soul. Into his tired, broken self, the stranger felt the energy flow and he looked from the brown mud of the forest floor to the grey upon grey eyes of the boy.

It seemed to the stranger in that moment that the world stopped still. All of time and space hung in the balance. His only awareness of time was the glowing, almost yellow incandescent life he could feel pouring from the boy's hand into every fiber of his being. The leaves stopped whispering to themselves, the wind stopped too, the sun hovered, unmoving for hours and then days, perhaps even months. All that the stranger knew was the grey upon grey of the boy's eyes and energy pouring through his body from the boy's hand.

No words were ever spoken, no questions ever asked, or answers given.

As the trees looked on, white hair turned dark again, a heavy brow grew lighter and shoulders relaxed. Little by little a young boy began to vanish. Slowly, almost imperceptibly, the boy became translucent, transparent, ethereal until finally he was gone.

Brick by brick the boy's house crumbled into dust from which grew wild flowers that in turn withered and died and offered their seeds to the wind as the stranger knelt on the forest floor.

His shattered heart, unable to carry its burden, tore itself apart and tears poured out like they had never done before. He looked at the scarred palms of his open hands and cried for all the blood he had spilled, for the men he had slain, for the comrades who had died by his side, for the wife who had died in his arms, for the unborn child he never met or raised as his own, for the truths he had betrayed, for honor compromised and for the freedom he had never known. And the little stream from which his horse was drinking accepted his tears and washed the forest with them.

When finally he raised his head and looked about him, he saw the trees were richer and stronger, and that cherry blossom was falling all about in a celebration of new life. He recalled that when he had first seen the boy the forest was full of green leaf, but that was more than a year ago. Full seasons had completed their tasks and it was in a welcome spring that the samurai stood once more and raised his face to the sun, which filtered through the canopy above.

He never could explain how he had been drawn to that place or what had happened to the boy. All he could say was that he lived again. Over the years he aged with dignity and grace, the people of his kingdom knew him to be wise beyond words. His offering had been a life of merit and his people were a people of peace who lived in harmony with the land they served.

In the fullness of time, when the wise and much-loved samurai finally breathed his life's last breath into the crisp, early morning of a winter's sky; the snow fell all around him as wintry tears of absolute perfection. On that winter's day, the snowflakes fell upon and around the knight in silent homage as had cherry blossom done once before, and the silence of the moment shrouded all.

At the edge of the clearing, a boy who looked to be barely seven turned his back upon the dead samurai and quietly, disappeared into the forest. Another age of man had passed and the boy would live by a stream deep in the heart of the forest waiting to go about his work. Once more.

08/07