

the guest

By

karen dales

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A pall hung over the temple. The white votive candles flickered brightly beneath the statue of the Buddha, but their light could not eliminate the heavy presence of death. Deep resonant voices chorused from the saffron robed monks seated in double rows facing one another before the statue. The sound vibrated the air with their united breathing until it filled the hall, slipping around and between red painted columns that held crimson rafters high above.

The chant did not have the same energy it usually held. Mindful meditation was threatened by distraction from within. Normally, this would not be tolerated, but forgiveness under the circumstances was necessary, compassion over-riding expectation. Occasional glances at the empty position of the Master belied concentration slips. These too were overlooked by elders resigned to the sadness of their juniors.

A bell rang. A rustle of cotton and a subtle shift in position allowed the chant to die. The monks appreciated the break, to allow bald pates to lower for private thoughts, glistening dark brown eyes. Some gazed sadly at the empty raised dais at the other side of the temple, across from the votive bright Buddha.

The bell pierced the oppressive silence to indicate the initiation of new meditative chanting. Heads raised and turned to refocus. Sound pushed against the quiet, holding it back from crushing the monks with grievous sadness.

A flutter of movement added to the chanting until it revealed a middle aged monk entering the temple from a side entrance. Shuffling cotton and straw sandaled feet whispered from one end of the double row, where the youngest monk sat disrupted. His four year old eyes widened with surprise as an older boy,

beside him, placed a hand on the child's forearm, snapping the boy back to his meditation.

Up the line the middle aged monk walked, occasionally causing disruptions in the chant's defence against the silence, until he bent over an elderly monk whose concentration never wavered. The chant stuttered and died, only incomprehensible whispering filled the void.

The gloom thickened, anxiety coating it, slicking it densely, bowing shoulders under its weight. Groaning, the elderly monk raised his body to stand. His gnarled hand patted the shoulder of the monk who had sat by his side. Without a word the old monk turned away from the doubled line and headed towards another open doorway, the middle aged monk following behind.

Down the stone hall he walked. His straw slippered feet shushed over grey flagstone until the manmade tunnel opened to the left, revealing a courtyard bathed in full moon light. Halting at the entrance to the garden, the monks stood silent in the sight of the one who had come to their sanctuary decades ago. Awash in blue radiance they watched their long time guest move from one position to another along the precise dictates of one of their higher forms.

Long white hair flowed in a wind of his own making, his tall slender form clad only in the loose orange pants all the monks wore beneath their robes. The monks stood patiently despite the urgency of their message. Dark brown eyes flashed in awe. In all the years they had lived in the monastery they had never witnessed such precision and grace in the martial forms taught to the youngest among them to the daily practice of the old.

Moonlight dusted the guest's pale skin blue as he leapt, spun, kicked and punched. His movements blurring at times until the form came to a close, leaving the Guest standing still in the middle of the courtyard. For any other, heat would have radiated off of exerted flesh, sweat would create rivulets down face and body, and lungs would bellow the chest as the heart raced from exertion. Not so with the Guest. He stood there, as still as a marble

statue, with only the slight breeze forming their own patterns in his long white hair.

The monks stood patiently, each hoping it would not be long before their guest would notice them. They would not interrupt the Guest, but if necessity warranted it, they would. A deep shuddering sigh escaping from the Guest relieved their growing tension and the old monk stepped onto the dew covered grass, its wetness permeating his naturally made slippers.

“It is time.” The old monk’s voice spread gravel across the silence.

Pale eyelids fluttered open to reveal irises of blood surrounding a darker pool. No black pupil helped to fix the stare of the Guest, only red. A pinched expression flowed over the Guest’s youthful features and the old monk felt its impact upon his own innards.

The old monk remembered when the Guest arrived years ago. It had been the old monk’s – then a youth – responsibility to teach the Guest their language and their ways. Despite the transformation the years had applied to the old monk, the Guest had never changed, only their friendship had grown in a triumvirate with the Master. There was no need for the Guest to voice his feelings about what he was called to do, it was written across his face and reflected in each person within the monastery.

The old monk watched the Guest close his eyes, his face belying the conflict within. When the red piercing stare returned resignation slumped muscular pale shoulders. The monk turned at the shallow nod and walked back into the cloister-garth. He did not need to see if the Guest followed and his ears did not need to hear pale bare feet upon cold stone, he could feel the presence of the Guest behind him as he turned towards the cells where all the monks slept, the younger monk taking up the rear.

Through the dimly lit halls they walked the well known paths. Not to their own rooms, but past, towards the large suite set aside for the Master of the monastery. The gilded double doors lay open, admitting a view of a bed piled high with finely crafted

blankets. Propped up against silk covered pillows of yellow, the Master lay sleeping.

The old monk stepped into the room and glanced up at the tall Guest, noting the sadness in his eyes. Two monks who sat on either side of the doors stood and closed them, sealing all within the incensed confines of a room weighted down with death. The resonating boom startled the Guest. The Master did not stir. The two young monks knelt down in their positions amongst the monks that formed a row against the wall, each one in prayer, their *nian zhu* clicking and shushing through fingers.

“He’s expecting you,” said the old monk, his voice barely above a whisper.

The Guest frowned, staring at a spot on the stone floor in front of the bed. “I know.”

“He spoke of this to you a long time ago.”

“Yes.” The Guest’s voice sibilant.

The old monk lifted a gnarled hand and patted the Guest on his cold milk coloured arm. “We’ll be here.”

The Guest nodded and did not watch the old and middle aged monks sit in line, taking up their own meditation beads in prayer. Instead he stood still against the silhouette of his friend in the bed. Tentative steps brought the Guest to stand beside the supine Master. He gazed down at the one who had opened the monastery to him, providing him a refuge and a place where acceptance was norm rather than the fear and disgust he had come to expect from mortals. What was once a smooth shaven face of a middle aged man filled with love and compassion was now a shrivelled plain crevassed with age. Slack translucent grey skin outlined boney features and eyes that once sparkled in obsidian brightness now fluttered open in opaque greyness.

The heart of the Guest broke and he sat down beside the Master. “I have come.”

A faint tremulous smile lifted thin grey lips that once reached their happy pinnacle with ease. “Thank you.” The Master’s sussurant voice barely lifted to the Guest’s preternatural hearing.

“I don’t want to do this,” sighed the Guest.

Sympathetic silence saddened the Master’s clouded eyes.

“I want you to live.” The Guest’s crimson eyes searched the Master’s for hope.

“But I will,” replied the Master.

“You will be dead,” stated the Guest. He flinched at his bluntness.

Somehow the Master shrugged a shoulder, but caught himself in a wince. The Guest’s eyes went round with concern.

“I will be reborn,” sighed the Master, “into a new body.”

“But— ”

“You have been with us a long time,” said the Master. “We have accepted you and what your role is. How often did you ease those who required transition from this life into the next so that they could continue on their karmic cycle towards Nirvana? When we let you in, we let in with it the knowledge of death. Little did we know that death had no knowledge of himself. It was karma that brought us together – life and death, yin and yang. Would you deny me a peaceful transition and submit me to unnecessary pain and suffering? The world is pain and suffering. The Buddha taught us a way to help those alleviate that and work towards Nirvana. You have been given a great gift – to be an instrument to help remove suffering.”

“But I suffer—”

“That is your choice.” The Master closed his eyes and took a deep ragged breath.

The Guest lowered his eyes. The Master was right. It was his choice. When he glanced back at the Master he saw clouded eyes peering at him and he knew what he needed to do. “I will do as you ask.”

“Thank you,” whispered the Master.

The Guest stepped back, the taste of his friend’s ancient blood on his lips. The dichotomy of pleasure and pain for his actions bound him to the spot. In a daze he watched the old monk step forward to

check on the Master, but the Guest knew it was unnecessary. Silence compressed the chamber. The monks awaited word to what their hearts told them.

The old monk straightened his back, glanced at the Guest and then nodded at the row of monks. The Master was dead.

New chanting took over and the oppressive sadness seemed to alleviate. Sombre happiness tinged the tones of their voices. The middle aged monk stood and exited through the double doors. Not long after low blazing notes from the ceremonial horns blazed through the monastery setting a flurry of activity into motion.

The Guest glanced from the remains of the Master to the old monk, halting the old man in his steps to leave the room. “What is happening?”

The old monk smiled up at the Guest. “We must prepare for the Master’s return.”

Confusion pulled down fine brows of white. “I don’t understand. The Master is dead.”

A dry weathered old hand alighted on the Guest’s arm. “You do not think he will return?” The question was more statement and the Guest shook his head.

The old monk shook his head as if a student did not understand a simple lesson. “The Master will be back. He has always come back. This is not the first time. It will not be the last.”

“But he is dead,” stated the Guest, uncomprehendingly.

“For now, yes,” replied the monk. “He has given us clues on how to find him. As it was important for you to be what you are and to alleviate his suffering from this form, so was it important for the Master to be released at this point so that we may find him in time once again.”

“I understand the idea of reincarnation—”

“But you do not believe in it.”

The Guest shook his head. “No.”

“Then stay, wait and watch. You will see, when we have found the Master again, that our friend is not gone, but has returned to us once again, you will know.”

“Know what?” asked the Guest, frowning.

“That life and death are ruled by Karma.”

The Guest watched as the old monk walked out of the room and then turned back to the husk that once held his friend. Yes, he would wait to discover if the old monk told the truth. He would wait to see if Karma truly ruled Death.

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Cheers!

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