

A Stone Thrush

It had been a terrible year. Watching a loved one with a terminal illness in excruciating pain was daunting enough, but to have that person take his own life because of it; and in an especially brutal manner — was nearly too much to take. I was overwhelmed by sadness, frustration and familial obligations. I had borne up pretty well for a long while, but the toll within, was high. A darkness that defied description was stalking me. I held up during the daylight hours, but as the evenings unfolded, I found myself slipping into despair, despite my best efforts.

I counted my blessings daily, focused on little things that brought quick comfort. Fred, (the family member who had just passed away,) and I shared a mutual love for birds. He always had a backyard full of them; made a science out of feeding them, knowing what sustenance would bring the greatest variety of individuals from the avian world. Fred worked to ensure wintering feathered friends had all their nutritional needs met, and they rewarded him with their presence year 'round. Two days before he died, he and I looked out his bedroom window. The ground outside was a sea of purple finches. The sober ex-Marine had tears in his eyes. I think he wanted to believe the flock had come to express their appreciation for the years of rations and care he had lovingly provided. We both had our favorites and the finches were one of his.

Growing up in the Pacific Northwest, I had only seen cardinals in photographs or on Christmas cards. For that reason, I guess, they had always fascinated me. The bright red color made them seem so exotic. When I finally began making trips to the East Coast, I was able to experience the scarlet gatherings first hand. On one morning at my friend's house in upstate NY, I experienced a somewhat common event for her, but for me — amazing. My best pal, Peggy, aware of my love of cardinals, had sprinkled seed out over an early snowfall in front of her rural home. She gently woke me and made hand motions to come and join her in the front yard. There, dozens of crimson cardinals were enjoying their breakfast. What a wonder.

As fate would have it, a third familial event proved to be the proverbial straw for my already beleaguered psyche. Its effect was pervasive and extreme. As time passed, I had more and more difficulty dispelling the shade settling over me. Eventually, I became resolved to take things into my own hands. There were no feelings of self-pity, quite the opposite. I had

convinced myself that my departure would benefit others in a tangible fashion. I was all right with it; an appraisal of my life led me to the conclusion that my time was near an end anyway. A key personal relationship was a crushing disappointment, my income-earning potential was fairly grim, I had no medical insurance, no hope of obtaining any, and my own middle-aged body was beginning to fail. I felt, quite simply – played out.

I went to bed one night...resolved. Plans were made and I felt a burden lifted. While I slept, I dreamt...

I was traveling on foot in the high desert somewhere, I had no supplies; somehow I knew where I was headed, I wouldn't need any. The geography became increasingly hostile with each step. What little vegetation I had seen early on, was quickly disappearing. Something within was driving me tenaciously. I began to climb. The way ahead was treacherous, and I had acquired a terrible thirst, but I persevered over rocks, thorns and hot, dry sand. Eventually, the steep terrain began to level out, and I looked upon an unforgiving wasteland. Nothing in view offered consolation or comfort. I wasn't expecting anything of solace, so there was no sense of disappointment. My bare arms were brutally torn and the rest of me hadn't fared much better, but I knew I was nearly there. Off in the distance, I could see my destination. With bone-numbing fatigue, I plodded forward. Finally, I knew I'd reached my troubled trek's end. There in the middle of this brutal landscape was a cot made of hand-hewn timber and a short wall beside it constructed in a similar crude style. It was as quiet as the grave, no sign of life from horizon to horizon.

I reclined, closed my eyes and gave thanks. It was finally over, all the struggling, sadness and regret. As I lay there, I could feel myself leaving my body. It was subtle at first, but the sensation slowly intensified. When my corporeal departure was nearly complete, I was stymied by a noise, the chirping of baby birds, demanding food from their mother. I slowly opened my eyes and witnessed a blue bird, her beak full of squirming food for her hungry young. The azure family had nested on the little wall near my resting place. The unlikely nature of this vision in this inhospitable place beggared my imagination. I watched them for some time with exhausted eyes, but eventually began the process of passing into the next world once more. Leaving my body was easier this

time; I was nearly gone when clamor, louder now, disrupted my exodus. It took every bit of strength I could muster to open my weathered eyes, but I finally did. There, where earlier the blue birds were nesting, was a community of cardinals! They were all busy homemaking and creating such a racket I could hardly believe my ears or my eyes. I had, however, gone past the point of no return. My body felt like an empty sack and I was too weak to rise. I took a measure of joy from the lovely cardinals, but I was no longer fully present. Without even trying, I began to leave my body, in spite of the inspiring image of my favored birds.

I was hovering above the cot now; the body below—a foreign object. There was a sense of peace now, a long journey at an end. And yet, a sound more vigorous than the others began to disturb the scene below. With tremendous reluctance, I re-entered my body. It took a Herculean effort to will my eyes open a third time and when I did, the sight I beheld both charmed and confused me. There on the same wall where the blue birds and cardinals had come and gone was a singular, non-descript, brownish bird, working away. The bird's tremendous industry was producing a most disturbing cacophony. This mystery specimen was creating what appeared to be clogs for his feet. I watched dumbfounded, as he carved and shaped with his resilient beak one for his left foot out of rose quartz and the other of amethyst. Bits of quartz were airborne. The process took some time, but eventually, he seemed satisfied, shook his feathers and flew away with his tiny new shoes. It was easy to assure myself that this winged transient was a hallucination as a result of my near escape from the transitory plane. But as my world-worn body watched and almost *felt* the bird depart, I glimpsed a figure far away on the horizon. Somehow I was compelled to reach this individual, but my body wouldn't cooperate. I endeavored numerous times to rise and finally succeeded in falling off the cot. The person had made a little progress towards me, but was still at what seemed an unreachable distance. I began to crawl. The figure was obviously august, with a back like a question mark, walking slowly with a cane. After awhile, I was able to make progress on all fours and I reached what turned out to be a very elderly man with a long, white beard. With great effort, I straightened up to meet him. He looked at me with ancient eyes that shone with wisdom and kindness. "What have you seen?" he asked. My dry mouth and throat were slow to respond, "I've seen something remarkable. There was this bird and it was cobbling shoes for itself out of rose quartz and amethyst. I saw you and I just had

to tell someone.” The old man appeared awed by my declaration, took his time and said, “Ah...you have had the privilege to see something quite rare – a *Stone Thrush*. Many believe them to be extinct, but the truth is otherwise. While extremely uncommon and almost never viewed by humans, a few still remain.”

“Why was it creating footwear for itself?” I dryly managed to ask. The sage took his time to answer again. “The *Stone Thrush* lives only in the harshest of environments. It makes its home on dry creek beds and chasms which are strewn with razor-sharp rocks and thorns. It has learned to adapt to its surroundings by fashioning shoes out of the most colorful rocks it can find. Without such protection, the life of the *Thrush* would be a short and painful one.” I felt strength slowly returning to my battered body. Looking into the all-knowing eyes of my new acquaintance had a restorative affect. After a period of silence, he gazed at me intently and asked, “Do you still want to die?”

I awoke with the wise man’s query still ringing in my head. What had transpired while I slept would change my life. That was well over ten years ago. As with most lives, there have been many difficult and painful times; some of them testing the threshold of tolerance, but whenever the darkness begins to descend, I remember the *Stone Thrush* and I — soldier on.

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June 2007