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The Way of the Bow

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*A prayer without a deed is
an arrow without a bow-string.*

*A deed without a prayer is
a bow-string without an arrow.*

Ella Wheeler Wilcox

'Tetsuya.'

The boy looked at the stranger, startled.

'No one in this city has ever seen Tetsuya holding a bow,' he replied. 'Everyone here knows him as a carpenter.'

'Maybe he gave up, maybe he lost his courage, that doesn't matter to me,' insisted the stranger. 'But he cannot be considered to be the best archer in the country if he has abandoned his art. That's why I've been travelling all these days, in order to challenge him and put an end to a reputation he no longer deserves.'

The boy saw there was no point in arguing; it was best to take the man to the carpenter's shop so that he could see with his own eyes that he was mistaken.

Tetsuya was in the workshop at the back of his house. He turned to see who had come in, but his smile froze when his eyes fell on the long bag that the stranger was carrying.

'It's exactly what you think it is,' said the new arrival. 'I did not come here to humiliate or to provoke the man who has become a legend. I

would simply like to prove that, after all my years of practice, I have managed to reach perfection.'

Tetsuya made as if to resume his work: he was just putting the legs on a table.

'A man who served as an example for a whole generation cannot just disappear as you did,' the stranger went on. 'I followed your teachings, I tried to respect the way of the bow, and I deserve to have you watch me shoot. If you do this, I will go away and I will never tell anyone where to find the greatest of all masters.'

The stranger drew from his bag a long bow made from varnished bamboo, with the grip slightly below centre. He bowed to Tetsuya, went out into the garden and bowed again towards a particular place. Then he took out an arrow fletched with eagle feathers, stood with his legs firmly planted on the ground, so as to have a solid base for shooting, and with one hand brought the bow in front of his face, while with the other he positioned the arrow.

The boy watched with a mixture of glee

and amazement. Tetsuya had now stopped working and was observing the stranger with some curiosity.

With the arrow fixed to the bow-string, the stranger raised the bow so that it was level with the middle of his chest. He lifted it above his head and, as he slowly lowered his hands again, began to draw the string back.

By the time the arrow was level with his face, the bow was fully drawn. For a moment that seemed to last an eternity, archer and bow remained utterly still. The boy was looking at the place where the arrow was pointing, but could see nothing.

Suddenly, the hand on the string opened, the hand was pushed backwards, the bow in the other hand described a graceful arc, and the arrow disappeared from view only to reappear in the distance.

'Go and fetch it,' said Tetsuya.

The boy returned with the arrow: it had pierced a cherry which he found on the ground, forty metres away.

Tetsuya bowed to the archer, went to a corner of his workshop and picked up what looked like a slender piece of wood, delicately curved, wrapped in a long strip of leather. He slowly unwound the leather and revealed a bow similar to the stranger's, except that it appeared to have seen far more use.

'I have no arrows, so I'll need to use one of yours. I will do as you ask, but you will have to keep the promise you made, never to reveal the name of the village where I live. If anyone asks you about me, say that you went to the ends of the earth trying to find me and eventually learned that I had been bitten by a snake and had died two days later.'

The stranger nodded and offered him one of his arrows.

Resting one end of the long bamboo bow against the wall and pressing down hard, Tetsuya strung the bow. Then, without a word, he set off towards the mountains.

The stranger and the boy went with him. They walked for an hour, until they reached a

large crevice between two rocks through which flowed a rushing river, which could only be crossed by means of a fraying rope bridge almost on the point of collapse.

Quite calmly, Tetsuya walked to the middle of the bridge, which swayed ominously; he bowed to something on the other side, loaded the bow just as the stranger had done, lifted it up, brought it back level with his chest and fired.

The boy and the stranger saw that a ripe peach, about twenty metres away, had been pierced by the arrow.

'You pierced a cherry, I pierced a peach,' said Tetsuya, returning to the safety of the bank. 'The cherry is smaller. You hit your target from a distance of forty metres, mine was half that. You should, therefore, be able to repeat what I have just done. Stand there in the middle of the bridge and do as I did.'

Terrified, the stranger made his way to the middle of the dilapidated bridge, transfixed by the sheer drop below his feet. He performed the