The Stranger

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Abstract

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by Fred Sawin

Distributed Studies, Senior

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A buzzing sound from far away made her pause for a moment and turn her eyes toward a black dot above the horizon. As she watched, it grew larger and its angry buzz became more distinct. Whirling blades glinted above a small locust body that hovered over a patch of trees. As the helicopter drifted closer, she looked from the strange machine to her hut and back to the machine. She shuffled to the sled, put her wide straw hat on and passed the braided tow cord over her shoulder. The bamboo runners squealed over the dry earth as she pumped her legs against the ground, rested and pumped again, inching the rice sled through the paddy field.

Halfway, she stopped and pushed back her hat. She seemed to search the sky for something. For a few minutes she stood and listened. Then, she leaned against the rope and continued to drag the sled toward the little built-up island in the center of the brown fields. A thatched hut stood against a row of straggling fruit trees on the earth mound. A path, no longer worn smooth, crossed the little houseyard and wound off along an old dike across the miles of flat rice land. Here and there on its way, the skeleton of a ruined hut crumbled beneath the bare sky.

The old woman reached the path and stepped up on the earth terrace. She slipped out of her thong sandals and pad-
ded across the bare ground to look out over the berry hedge to the empty fields. Nothing moved . . . and yet she stood a long time to watch a single wisp of smoke that hung above a far woodline.

At last she turned away and went into the hut. She hung the big hat on a peg and wiped her face with a piece of rag. Taking a large flat tray from beneath the bed, she padded out to the rice sled and began to carry the rice to a mat laid out in the afternoon sun.

After many trips, the sled was empty and a shallow layer of gold-brown kernels spread over the palm leaf mat. She placed the tray on the ground and straightened, massaging her back under the white peasant's blouse. She walked to the hedge and peered out. Far across the dry paddies a tiny figure stumbled along the dike. He was dressed in green and was bareheaded in the fierce heat. A misstep. The little figure flopped down on the hard earth. The slanted sunlight glared on his white face as he staggered to his feet and slumped onto the dike.

Her eyes left the distant man and searched the woodline from which he had come. There was no movement. Nothing interrupted the brown landscape except the small green figure.

The old woman rubbed her rough brown hand on the back of her arm. She pattered into the hut and spread a cloth out on the bed. From a small chest, she began to take little parcels . . . money, pictures, tobacco . . . and pack them up in the cloth. Then she stopped. She squatted on her heels by the door, staring at the little pile of keepsakes. Her eyes roved from the handrubbed bed and the high altar shelf with its small bundle of joss sticks, to the two spotless china bowls sitting on the cross brace by the fire table. For many minutes she sat with her head bowed. Then she rose and began to replace the things she had assembled.

The light was failing now as the sun sank below the hedge. The old woman carried a mat from her hut and carefully spread it over the drying rice. She stopped in the middle of the courtyard and turned to survey her preparations.

A small mat lay just outside the door and she sat cross-legged to watch the path that came up from the abandoned fields. The day was gone now and silence hung in the star-
light.

Three sharp cracks of a rifle cursed the night. The old woman shivered but continued to sit, waiting. Several minutes passed.

The sound of shuffling feet came up the path. Two figures moved onto her terrace and stopped. The first peered at her in the dim light, “You should not be here. The Americans will come.”

She nodded.

“You should leave, old one. They may burn your hut.”

The old woman said nothing.

The two men walked on across the courtyard. The first one stopped and called back to her, “Do not cross the dike. It is mined . . . Remember, you saw nothing.”

The old woman nodded and pulled her blouse closer about her shoulders. “I saw nothing.”

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Poem

by Zorba

Illinois sungrass
near apple tree fountains
down the graygravel road,
lined with tall weeds, sparkling,
the pond
and her wonderful cool wetness
reflecting long strands of sungold

sungold.
the great room of light
labors slowly in the heat of the morning
grows mature with the afternoon breeze
only to die
at Illinois dusk