

The Duel of the Storyteller

Once long ago, there was an old master storyteller who had served at the court of the Emperor for many years. One day, he took the opportunity to tour around some towns and cities to take his stories to the locals and for them to share their stories with him. After all, maybe this would be the last tour he would be able to make in this life.

One day, his route was longer than expected, and he suddenly found himself in the middle of the mountains, the sun about to set, exhausted and with an empty stomach. If only he could find a roadside inn where he could tell a story in exchange for a bowl of soup and a bed!

Luckily, when he turned a corner of the path, he caught sight of a dojo that dominated the heights of a valley. It was the school of samurai warrior, where the young aspirants to the service of arms were instructed and trained under the traditions of the old masters. In those times, it was customary that anyone who was willing to fight a duel with one of the young students, using wooden swords, could enjoy food and bed in the facilities of the dojo.

The old storyteller stopped and stared at the samurai school. He knew he was too old and too tired to face even the youngest student. The punishment that a young man might subject him to, could cause him to have to end his travel then and there.

But then, a mischievous smile crossed his lips and, without thinking more about it, he went to the dojo and knocked on the door.

A young student appeared.

‘Elder, what can I do for you?’

The old storyteller smiled peacefully and said:

‘I have come to challenge your master sensei.’

The young man looked at the old man from top to bottom and could not help but smile.

‘Honourable sir, would it not be better if you challenge one of the younger students? There is one that arrived recently, at the end of winter, who maybe ...’

‘No.’ The storyteller answered calmly. ‘I have come to challenge your master sensei.’

The disciple looked at him worriedly. The man was too old, and he seemed exhausted. Custom dictated that the duel with the master sensei was not with a wooden sword, but with steel, and it was a duel to the death.

‘Think about it well, sir,’ insisted the young man. ‘Why do you not try it with a second-year student?’

‘No.’ The old man replied calmly. ‘I have come to challenge your master sensei.’

Finally, the young man let the storyteller in and took him to the training hall. All the students gathered there quickly. They did not believe their eyes when they saw an old man, so fragile, ready to fight with their master.

They also informed the master sensei, an expert swordsman recognised throughout the land. The master sensei came to the hall with his katana at his belt, bowed to greet the old man, and then made a sign for one of his students to give the storyteller a sword. The storyteller accepted the weapon with both hands and, without further delay, deposited it delicately onto the floor in front of him, and paid no further attention to it.

The Master Sensei, surprised, continued nevertheless with the ceremony.

‘I accept your challenge.’ He said. ‘Please, take your sword and let’s begin.’

And, slowly, the master sensei put his hand on the hilt of the katana and, without removing it from its sheath, turned the edge towards the outside, ready to unsheathe.

Then, the old storyteller started talking.

‘Once, a long, long time ago, in a mountain village, there was a young man who longed to master the skills of the body and the sword. But, unlike other young people of his age, his longing was not to become a warrior to fight in battle for his clan. He did not even crave the rousing of courage or the glories of combat. What fascinated him was the beauty and harmony of the martial movements, the perfection and precision of the steps, the turns, the cuts and the assaults. He just wanted to master the epic dance of the warriors with their weapons and their agile bodies.

‘Then, one day, the young man ...’

At that very moment, the great samurai released the hilt of his sword and bowed to the old storyteller.

‘You have defeated me,’ he said humbly.

A loud stir crossed the hall. ‘How can it be?’ ‘What has the old man done?’ The low voices of the students were heard. ‘But he has not even touched the sword!’

Then, the master turned to his students and told them with a meek smile:

‘How many times have I told you that, to win in a duel, you must be in the present, in the here and now?’

And turning to the storyteller, he added, 'This man has taken me to a very distant time and place. If he had wanted to, he could have killed me at his pleasure.'

And the old storyteller was honoured with a succulent dinner, and was then taken by the master himself to the bedroom that he reserved for his most illustrious guests.