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Otisville, New York

### Black Winged Stranger

Ahh, I remember it well. It was Wednesday afternoon, June 26, 2003. The air conditioner had been out of service for two days and there were damn near 200 inmates laboring away in the prison's industry—or, should I say, withering away in the prison's sweat shop. I mean that literally. It was 92 degrees outside and ten degrees higher inside where we sat at our workstations, assembling fluorescent lamps. I suppose the heat would have been bearable were it not for the 100 percent humidity which had the lot of us in a lethargic state of body and mind. Inmates moved sluggishly from lamp to lamp like characters from "Night of the Living Dead." Not even the guards, who sat beside portable fans, were spared. Our slave masters in this case suffered right along with us—thank God for small favors. And I don't say that loosely, because the oppressive heat forced them to open one of the steel gates out back. But it was to no avail. Conditions remained the same except for the fact we were now slowly cooking in an open oven as opposed to a closed one.

As I sat there mindlessly twisting a screw into one of the lamps, my vision caught a movement to my left and slightly above my head. At first glance I thought I had imagined it. It fluttered lazily from workstation to workstation.

"Eh! What's that?" a black prisoner said, pointing at the thing hovering by.

"It's a bat," I said, knowing good and well it was no bat. I didn't know what it was, but it sure in the hell was not a bat, I'll tell you that.

"It's a black butterfly," a Jamaican said in a thick accent, as the little winged acrobat moved from bench to bench and back again.

"That's not a damned butterfly," said a young Puerto Rican kid doing a twenty-year stretch for possession of rock cocaine. "That's a moth!"

The mystery insect gracefully touched down on the table where a Mexican partner of mine sat.

"Check it out, Homie," he said with a twisted grin on his sweaty face. "It's got four black wings and a blue, kind of purple body."

The prisoners gathered near the tiny visitor, a diverse group of men brought together by the circumstance of their plight, yet separated by ethnicity and belief.

"Wow, man," the Jamaican said, lifting his left hand to brush away the

dreadlocks that had fallen over his face. "It's a dragonfly."

"Yeah, that's what it is," echoed the Puerto Rican.

"It sure looks like a dragonfly," I said, taking off my safety glasses, "but I ain't never seen one with black wings like that."

"Me neither," added a burly biker, as he moved in for a closer look.

Meanwhile, the two guards who had been nearby moments before the small visitor arrived, disappeared into their break room area.

"If that's a dragonfly," I said skeptically. "It's a very rare species, cause I ain't never seen one that looks like that, and believe me, I've seen lots of them in my days."

"Me too," said the tall Dominican who stood looking over my shoulder, "but not like that." He pointed at the alleged dragonfly with his chin.

"You ought to snatch his little ass up, Gee." I said to the black dude standing closest to the tiny critter. "It may be the only one in the world like it...a collector's item, dig?"

"You don't think he bite, do you?" Gee asked, contemplating the situation.

"Naw, just get him by his wings and stick him in a bag or something," I said encouragingly. For a moment, those of us gathered there had completely forgotten the stifling surroundings, only aware of the flow of energy running through and around us. Our world had come to an abrupt stop as we stood there motionless, wet with perspiration, while Gee got into position. He held his breath and carefully reached out and captured the mystery insect between thumb and forefinger.

"Gotcha!" he said, exhaling. The black winged insect wiggled its spindly legs in all directions, probably cursing us out.

"You plan on taking him hostage?" the tattooed biker quipped.

"What do I do with it?" Gee asked, looking, wide eyed, from face to face.

"Go on and take him back to your cell," I said for no particular reason other than to test the compassionate attitude some of the fellas were discretely trying to hide.

"Come on, you guys," blurted the Jamaican. "Let him go. You all know how it is to be captive."

"Yeah, the door is open," said the Puerto Rican. "Take him outside...let him go."

"They weren't feeling all that when they was out there robbing and popping caps at people," the Mexican said to me as the rest of the prisoners escorted Gee and the blacked winged stranger to the back door where it was released.

Gradually, they all returned to their work stations and the reality of their bleak existence. The flow of energy dissipated along with the departure of the black winged stranger.

It was 3:15 and almost time to leave, when all of a sudden there he was

again. Funny thing, though. No one seemed to have noticed its return. What's more, it didn't fly as before, hovering from workstation to workstation. It flew in one direction and landed right on the edge of my bench. "Oye, Homie," I said to my Mexican comrade. "Look who's back." The insect stretched out its wings and then closed them as though asking, "What's up?"

"Ain't that something," the Mexican said with a crooked smile.

"Yep, it sure is," I said with curious wonder. I carefully reached over and took the little guy by his wings just as Gee had done earlier. I then placed it inside a small ziplock baggie.

"What you gonna do with it?" the Mexican asked.

"I'm going to take it back to my cell and find out exactly what it is." And then in a low mischievous voice I said, "Check this out." Turning in my chair I called over to the Jamaican. "Eh, Dre'...look!" I held the baggie up so he could see its contents. Dre' stood from where he had been sitting and walked towards me staring at the thing in the plastic bag as though hypnotized by it.

"Man, where did you get that?" he asked, somewhat confused as to whether it was the same insect as before or one just like it. "Is it alive, man?"

"Yeah, it's alive," I said, shaking the bag. The black winged captive clawed at the plastic walls around him in search of a way out. Moments later the gang from before had gathered around once again and the flow of energy returned. Half of the group opted for the insect's release while the other half didn't care one way or the other—they were just in it for the diversion this insect was providing them.

"Look," I said to no one in particular. "He had his chance to leave, but chose to come back...now, his luck's run out. That is, unless one of you wants to post his bail."

"God is going to punish you," said the tall Dominican, a born again Christian. His concept of God was rather stringent, I thought. I mean, I understand that all creatures great and small are of God, but please, let's not take it to the extreme. And besides, my true intention was elsewhere. All I wanted to do is identify the alleged dragonfly—where's the villainy in that? Anyway, I continued to prod on. I suppose the saintly Dominican would have deemed what I did next maliciously wicked, warranting the wrath of God. But personally speaking, I believe even the good Lord enjoys a wholesome laugh every now and then.

"If you feel so strongly about it," I said to the holier-than-thou Dominican, "you can post a book of postage stamps for his release." A moment longer and his basilisk stare would have turned me to stone. I was spared, however: the inmate recall announcement was made over the institution's P.A. system and everyone scrambled to leave the sweat shop. One by one through the metal detector and out the door, each to his respective housing unit.

When I got back to my cell I released the black winged hostage. He fluttered around a bit and then landed on the barred window. "Don't get too comfortable little fella," I said affectionately. "Cause you'll be out of here in a short bit...Bear with me."

One hour later I zeroed in on the identity of my temporary cellmate. According to the encyclopedia in the prison's library, it was a damselfly, a brightly colored insect of the order Odonata. The damselfly is related to the dragonfly but differs in the way it folds its wings when at rest. When in flight it moves with a flitting or, "twinkling" motion that gives it an appearance of delicacy and lightness and accounts for its name.

Back in my cell I slid open the small hatch situated just beyond the barred window and bid my friend a farewell. It hovered for a moment outside and then flew off to wherever fate awaited it.

That night, I lay in my bunk going over the day's events. I wondered what relation the damselfly played in each of the inmates' lives it had touched. Surely it must have served a unique purpose in its brief encounter with man.

Oh, and by the way. Remember the holier-than-thou Dominican? Well the following morning he slid up next to me on my way to the mess hall.

"I'd like to post the dragonfly's bail," he whispered. I stopped dead in my tracks and looked at him—he was serious!

"Man, that little bastard escaped," I told him with a poignant expression on my face. Of course I was ribbing him, but, boy you should have seen his eyes light up. I bet he could hear the trumpets in heaven sounding off at that very moment.

"Praise the Lord!" he rejoiced with a huge smile. And as I watched him walk away, I could see his lips move in silent prayer.