

Ghostwriting for a Ghost

1532 Words



I had the rare privilege of being engaged to ghostwrite a supernatural fiction novel based on the ideas and very well-structured notes of one Radu Shing-Zien, a Romanian Chinese mixture of philosophy, anarchy and the most wonderful compassion.

The story followed Radu's life from the first memories he could muster, then his exodus from Taiwan at 10 years old, praying every day the Triads weren't just round the corner, wondering if Daddy would come home each night and if he'd be angry or sad.

It was the story of a man who'd endured the most radical changes to his existence on a regular basis but a story of a man who'd prevailed.

He'd seen hideous war, he'd loved so very much and he'd been cheated, targeted and attacked on many occasions, principally due to his hatred of evil and its manifestation in humankind.

He'd been a catholic priest in the Philippines and an infantry soldier in Angola, a barman, a terrible pool player and a poet.

Sometimes he prevailed with anger, sometimes with love, but most of all, tenacity and an unswerving belief that not only were all of life's movements happening for a reason but that reason was inherently good. The universe was good.

He wanted to call it, "Shame I didn't make it to Chapter Five."

When I met him in Andalucia in Spain, he was seventy three. It looked like he'd spent every daylight minute of those years baking hard and creased in hot sunshine. And he was unable to remove the secret smile that was always there, making you feel at ease, comfortable, inspired by his peace.

He got started on the Camino de Santiago, a 500 mile pilgrimage across Northern Spain, in early Summer 2017 and I started writing. He said he'd been here so long, after he landed in Spain from Sardinia in 1998, but he'd never done it.

His notes really were exceptional, leaving me with my mouth open, showing me things I'd never imagined, let alone experienced.

He'd set his email to send me notes on one new chapter a week. I did mention it would be ideal to get the whole thing understood before starting but that smile returned along with a polite silence and two more tumblers of black rum and ice.

The chapters rolled. One by one, they informed me, infuriated me, flapped around me like a field of bedsheets, made me sad and made me very very angry.

I began to get the feeling there was something more round the corner, something more ghastly, like the death of a child, or more wonderful, the recovery of a wonderful cure. I began to feel slightly nervous whenever a new email was due, as if I was about to be in trouble for something.

It was the Monday that chapter five landed at exactly 9am that everything became clear.

I was halfway through a strong mug of lemon, honey and ginger tea and for some reason, I thought about the Camino de Santiago. I'd wanted to do it as well ever since I heard about it. I wondered if there was anything online, see how they were all doing. There was plenty online about it but most of the headlines concerned a rockslide that occurred three days previously.

There was a high cliff wall with an iron walkway tacked on to its surface. I could imagine it creaking and swaying, dropping bolts and rust with every step. But the locals had been taking produce and livestock around it since it was built. A hundred years. It was solid but the rocks above hadn't been.

There was a rockslide and three people had died, taken over the edge as the rocks came down. It was a headline I had to read but as I queued it up, I'm sure I had an inkling. The names of the victims appeared and there it was.
Radu Shing-Zien

As with the others, he'd been carried off down the mountainside and his life was gone by the time they found him at the bottom. One police officer attending the scene said, "He looked so peaceful, almost smiling," and the immediate numbness of the news turned into a smile of my own and I couldn't tell you why.

Then my smile paused and I looked away from whatever I was looking at and remembered, 'Shame I didn't make it to Chapter Five.'

I stored it in the bottom drawer of 'Supernatural things that definitely just happened but, nah, they couldn't could they?'

It was then I got the chilled feeling, it started behind my ears, across my forehead and I got a little dizzy. I realised I was ghostwriting for a ghost.

His life was on my laptop in the front room by the window. I wondered if there might be a casual haunting but I honestly didn't feel anything but total

peace in the house. It was like the universe had had the good grace to pause while this man's story was realised.

The plot was becoming less chaotic as a philosophy started to embed itself into Radu. A peace had come over him pretty soon after he got to Spain.

He attempted to explain why that peace had come but could only put it down to suddenly being aware of his place in the universe.

He'd been shown his future and he'd been shown his end, the timeline according to Radu Shing-Zien, and eventually it played itself out.

The final chapter notes covered the Camino de Santiago trail he'd yet to start when he wrote them and it culminated in a fairly graphic account of his own demise.

The final few pages had me in a schizophrenic bout of tears and shout-out-loud laughter. I'd never experienced it before. It was like there were two people in my head battling to take one track or the other.

Radu's account of his own death ended with a beginning. He bid farewell to this world from this life and looked forward to seeing us all again in a place he said he didn't have the words to describe.

When I finished, I shut my laptop down and went away for a few days deeper, little finca, deeper into the mountains. A week later I returned home carrying a broken little toe.

The house felt different. I didn't see anything and didn't hear anything but there was something there. So convincing was his coda, so definite his return to us at some point, I knew he was right. He'd proven it.

The week at the finca was an attempt to absorb a supernatural shock and the weight of discovering another dimension. We've all wished we could see that bit further, beyond our dimensional world, like we all wish we could see UFOs and aliens. But then it happens, we still have to fight to absorb it as it was intended, avoid some dangerous electric cross-circuitry in the brain. If we're lucky, we succeed in accepting it and we open up a new pathway or two in our brain.

I knew one day I may well see signs, like Radu did, I may well see my path and I may well decipher my own demise.

I went through the motions, editing, spell checking and eventually knocked it into legible shape. I didn't really know what I would do with the book now he was gone. Part of me expected another email with details but instead the phone rang.

An elderly and polite female voice the other end took under a minute to relay the fact that she was Eliza and she was Radu's sister. Eliza had cropped up more than once in Radu's notes and he'd made her sound exactly as she did here.

Her voice was a little croaky, like she was staying strong in the face of ever-threatening tears. She said she'd been contacted last week and told the news. She hadn't seen Radu for twenty-three years and that made it worse.

Radu's will had a simple message for her. To get in touch with me as I had something for her. It didn't say what and no-one else knew either. So here she was, the other end of the phone, asking.

My own tears threatened. Radu's story, prophetic or otherwise, was for Eliza. When I'd first spoken to him, I'd asked whether he wanted it published and he'd just said, 'Lets cover that when it's done.'

I sent Eliza Radu's notes and his brand new book. It felt like I was the final menial cog in his extraordinary existence and I knew Eliza would laugh and cry as I did.

Embedded somewhere deep in my conversations with Eliza, was a little piece of information that my brain probably suppressed until I was man enough to contemplate it.

Eliza said it had taken ages to find the will. Twenty years had passed and it took some digging out. It had been deep in a filing cabinet in a dusty old place somewhere in Ireland, untouched by solicitor or mortal man since 1998.