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Jump! How high?

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FLORIDA INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY

Miami, Florida

JUMP! HOW HIGH?

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the

requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

in

CREATIVE WRITING

by

Tracey Ann Broussard

2004

To: Dean R. Bruce Dunlap
College of Arts and Sciences

This thesis, written by Tracey Ann Broussard, and entitled Jump! How High?, having been approved in respect to style and intellectual content, is referred to you for judgment.

We have read this thesis and recommend that it be approved.

Dan Wakefield

Kimberly Harrison

Denise Duhamel, Major Professor

Date of Defense: February 24, 2004

The thesis of Tracey Ann Broussard is approved.

Dean R. Bruce Dunlap
College of Arts and Sciences

Dean Douglas Wartzok
University Graduate School

Florida International University, 2004

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DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my husband, Martin Silverberg. Without his love and support this book would not have been possible.

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

JUMP! HOW HIGH?

by

Tracey Ann Broussard

Florida International University, 2004

Miami, Florida

Professor Denise Duhamel, Major Professor

JUMP! HOW HIGH? is a memoir of a journey to a black belt in Karate, one that explores the duality inherent in being a nurturing yet powerful woman. The book moves between personal growth and an exploration of karate training, questioning both the means by which martial arts training promotes growth and the dichotomy of what it means to be a good girl/bad girl. The karate style in which the author trains embraces the Samurai virtues of honor, justice, loyalty, wisdom, compassion and bravery. This is juxtaposed by the virtues of the Southern woman, compliance, hospitality, and warmth, with which the author was brought up. In the final analysis, the author grapples and comes to terms with the question of loyalty to the self.

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“Look. Really Look.”

Master Joseph Kelljchian

Prologue

I've just finished eleven hundred front kicks, five-hundred push-ups, sit-ups, reverse punches, back fists, leg lifts, three hundred back, side, and roundhouse kicks, thousands of other exercises, two pints of water, a quart of orange Gatorade, one package of chocolate-filled Mini-Oreos, a Twix bar, two swigs of Pepto-Bismol, and a twenty minute cry on the toilet seat.

My right shoulder feels as though it's been whacked with a baseball bat, my husband wants to know why I'm not in bed, my teenage daughter is mad because I'm preventing her from using the computer at 11:30 p.m., I've got my period, a bad attitude, ten essay questions which I am required to answer, but cannot reveal the content of, a debt of two-hundred dollars payable to the administrators of said exercises and essays, four more months scattered with six additional tests consisting of a myriad of other benchmarks of martial arts ability, after which time, if I'm fortunate enough to pass, I will receive that which I have worked toward for six years – a black belt.

All of this for the love of Karate. Or should I say hate. As much as I love Karate, I hate it. The question I ask myself at times like this is why do I continue to train? Karate is an art form that has the power to agitate me like little else in life, and yet I return to the classroom again and again. Like making love, Karate is impossible to know until you've done it. When I first walked into a Karate class, nothing could have prepared me for the internal journey I was embarking upon, or the changes which would transform my life.

If someone had told me I was going to become a postulate in a throat grabbing, face pounding discipline of destruction, an art whose practitioners seek inner growth while revering the Samurai virtues of honor, loyalty, wisdom, courage, compassion, and justice, I would have laughed. Had they said I was going to spend the rest of my life struggling to master the moment through awareness that any second could bring death, I would have said, “Huh?” Yet here I am, aching from what it sometimes dubbed “the *GoJu* 500.” Five hundred repetitions of a myriad of exercises, phase one of black belt testing.

If I were smart I’d log onto E-Bay and buy the \$48.99 jujitsu second-degree black belt which includes forty-six books and two hours of video instruction. They claim to be, “not like traditional martial arts schools. Not only do we teach a total weapons mastery program, but also a brutal style of fighting applicable to today’s hostile environment, and we are one of the few schools to recognize that a **belt ranking is NOT a measure of a martial artist’s ability!**”

Exactly what, then, is a measure of a martial artist’s ability? I’m not sure. I can’t even be certain of how I ended up training in Karate, or how Karate ended up changing me. I know there is no way I could ever do justice in rendering my Karate journey. I can only give glimpses, a montage that may hint at the mystery. And there is no way I can accurately render the lessons my *Sensei* gave me. I can quote her to the best of my memory, and only hope that the spirit of her intentions will shine through.

I do have one concrete example of how Karate has changed me. It has to do with my nose. When I was a child, I really, really wanted to be beautiful. My father used

to tell me, “You’d be beautiful if it weren’t for that bump on your nose.” I spent more time than I can remember looking into the mirror, willing the invisible bump to go away, hoping to one day get a nose job.

Due to skin cancer, I now have a scar the size of a dime on my nose. After the surgery, I told my father, “I don’t have a bump on my nose, but now you can tease me about my scar.”

“What scar?” He said.

Indeed. I look in the mirror but don’t see it.

Sometimes I think it was an accident, or circumstance that brought me to Karate. Other times I’m sure it was divine providence. Something was driving me to this discipline; only I hadn’t seen it, my introduction to the art coming three years before I began training.

Standing with my daughter, Laura, in the parking lot of her preschool, I waited to speak with the Karate teacher. Laura had started dance lessons the month before, but didn’t like them. Karate was something I’d always wanted to try, but was afraid. I wanted Laura to grow up without the fears I had known. Starting Karate early might make that happen, I thought.

I was mesmerized as the teacher, an enigmatic, energetic woman in black unloaded long and short sticks, blockers, padded gloves and other paraphernalia from her car. She was a small woman, but her demeanor was large. There was an

inexplicable aura of power surrounding her, something disquieting, yet seductive.

Finally, she turned to me. “Hi. I’m *Sensei* Kathleen.”

“This is Laura. I’d like to sign her up for Karate lessons,” I said.

Sensei Kathleen bent her knees to be eye-level with Laura. “Do you want to take Karate,” then she looked up at me, “or is it your mommy who wants you to?” Laura, for once, took a moment to think about it. At three and a half years of age, Laura had been nicknamed by her teachers, “The Mouth of the South.” Lessons on speaking softly had fallen on deaf ears, that she could actually think before shouting was not even a concept to Laura.

“I want to do it,” Laura said, beaming up at me. *Sensei* Kathleen stared me straight in the eyes. I wondered if she could tell that I, too, was interested in the art, but felt too uncoordinated to try.

Laura had been a Karate student for about eight weeks, when I noticed she’d developed a new habit. “You can’t tell me what to do,” she said when I asked her to pick up her toys. “I’m the boss of me.”

“No. I’m the boss of you. Pick the toys up now.” I couldn’t imagine what had gotten into her, until I observed the end of a Karate class one day.

The pre-schoolers were seated in neat little lines, every rear end placed exactly in the center of one of the black floor tiles. *Sensei* Kathleen said, “You are all in charge of yourself. You alone can make the decision on whether to do the right or wrong thing, and no matter what anyone else says, it’s up to you to control yourself.” I laughed when I heard this, understanding how Laura had interpreted this message, and gained a newfound respect for Karate.

Not long after, Laura entered her first Karate tournament, encouraged to compete by *Sensei* Kathleen. Here I found something else to admire about the art. Standing in the center of the recreation room, Laura practiced her moves while waiting for her turn. Suddenly, I saw *Sensei* Kathleen jump on top of a chair and yell. “*Kiske*. Courtesy bow to Master Kay.” In an instant, the room was at a standstill, the students standing like soldiers, focusing on a massive man standing in the doorway.

Master Kay, the chief instructor and *Sensei* Kathleen’s teacher, wore a Wal-Mart happy face sticker on his sweat suit, Birkenstocks on his feet, and rainbow colored socks fitting his toes like gloves. After everyone had bowed to him, he bellowed, “Line up.”

The students scurried like squirrels racing for the best tree branch, arranging themselves according to the colors or stripes on their belts. “Sit down,” Master Kay said, standing front and center addressing the students. “Everyone here today is a winner. Just by showing up, you kids have won. It’s easy to just sit home and do nothing, which is what most people are doing right now. Everyone can’t win first place, but you need to know that we don’t care who wins what. We’re proud of you just for being here.”

This was different from the “winning is everything” mentality that I had known doing sports as a youngster. Laura didn’t bring home a trophy that day, though she brought back a determination to get one next time.

I brought home a determination to not to embarrass myself again. That day, my purse had been stolen. Laura was competing in more than one event, and I had tucked my purse under my chair, following her to the room where her next event was

to take place. I suppose I thought that because I was among Karate people, my bag would be safe.

When I discovered the bag missing, I asked *Sensei* Kathleen if anyone had turned it in. Immediately, she leaped onto a chair and whistled. The room came to a standstill, her tone daring anyone to move.

She thundered that everyone should stop and look for the purse, said she could not *believe* that anyone would steal something *here*. The look on her face was so serious, her body so still, I wanted to crawl under the chair. While *Sensei's* anger wasn't directed at me, my bad judgment had caused it. I knew from that moment on, her anger was something I'd never want to be in front of.

By the time Laura was six years old, she had been in Karate for two years. Due to my frequent hospitalizations during a second pregnancy, Laura was unable to attend class. Once I had given birth and was feeling better, Laura asked to go back. I never dreamed that I would go too.

Sensei Kathleen was starting a women's only class just as I was in need of a physical activity. The pregnancy had left me pale and pudgy, in the worst physical shape of my life. When *Sensei* Kathleen first told me she was starting a new class, I said I couldn't do it. I told her I was spastic, remembering the way my sister curled into a ball on the floor laughing at me whenever I had tried to dance. I recalled how my father didn't like to dance with me, because I always stepped on his feet.

“Karate’s not as hard as you think,” *Sensei* Kathleen said. “Why don’t you give it a try?”

To this day I question what gave me the courage to walk through the classroom door. I know I wanted it. Though I told myself I was doing it to lose the baby weight and re-build my strength, the truth is, I think I was titillated. Something excited me about the possibility of having physical strength. Was it the sense-memory of the fights I used to have with my sister, Stacey, the long-buried knowledge that violence could sometimes be fun? Perhaps. Maybe it was my ego responding to *Sensei* Kathleen. Somewhere, deep down, I knew I could be a force to be reckoned with. Here was my chance to have the tools.

It could have been the thought of secrets seducing me, the lure of becoming privy to Karate’s mystical sides. Most likely, it was a combination, my only conscious reason being the desire to lose weight and get in shape.

And shape, it turns out, is one of Karate’s many gifts. On the first day of class, *Sensei* Kathleen talked to us about one of the art’s most important components, called *kata*. *Kata* is ritual movement in which you fight an imaginary opponent. Some people describe it as a kind of dance, comments such as, “she was in the dance,” denoting a practitioners level of immersion. *Kata* is also defined as a form.

In the beginning, *Sensei* taught us *katas*, prescribing every move and emotion. As one progresses in Karate, the *sensei*’s input decreases. It’s up to the practitioner to develop her forms, to decide what story she wants to tell. Both *katas* and stories begin with rising action, build to a climax, and end with a denouement. Like every life. Like making love.

Love and violence, birth and death, these are the *katas* we live each day. Karate has taught me to live my life based on the story I want to tell. To do this means being honest with myself, and seeing myself clearly. It isn't always easy, and often I'm not successful. But as *Sensei* Kathleen says, "I'm a work in progress."

To this day, Stacey laughs at the way I move, and my father shies away from dancing with me, for fear I'll step on his toes. But it doesn't bother me any more, this inability to move with grace. What matters is that I am choosing the movement.

According to Karate history, at one time the only belt color was white. The belt darkened as the practitioner trained, eventually blackening. Should the practitioner continue on the Karate path, the black belt would begin to wear out, gradually returning to white. This symbolized the journey from innocence to knowledge to innocence. Sensei Kathleen says that a rank before white belt exists. It is the state of innocence one is in before ever walking into a Karate dojo.

Chapter One

Who I Was The Moment Before I Met A Sensei

“When God made the Southern woman, He summoned His angel messengers and He commanded them to go through all the star-strewn vicissitudes of space and gather all there was of beauty, of brightness and sweetness, of enchantment and glamour, and when they returned and laid the golden harvest at His feet, He began in their wondering presence the work of fashioning the Southern girl.”

Florence King

I love violence almost as much as I love making love. I can say that now, without guilt, only after months of revelation and contemplation. I roll the words around on my tongue; love, violence, love, violence, love, violence. The letters of love are in fact, contained in the word violence. It was only during the past summer that I admitted to myself that there's a part of me that likes violence. Now, for the first time, I confess. *I love violence.*

This confession could not have come about had *Sensei* Kathleen not given me two gifts. One was a black headband with which to tie my hair back. It was in anticipation of my promotion to black belt, which is the Karate equivalent of reaching adulthood.

At the black belt level, the Karate practitioner is allowed to dispense with the only required uniform item, a white headband. The headband symbolizes a readiness to work. It can be compared to the western tradition of rolling up one's sleeves.

The other gift *Sensei* Kathleen gave me were the words with which to tie up the predicament I had been in for weeks; the inability to work on the story of my Karate journey. I thought I had been experiencing writer's block, because I didn't want to admit to myself that a part of me likes violence. To actually write down this discovery would be denying myself the option to take it back. It would be like going out in public naked, with unkempt hair and no make-up. People would see me for the savage I truly am, not the combination southern belle/Martha Stewart persona I have carefully cultivated and presented to the world; a blonde with a bob who not only uses the word *crudités* in its correct context, but who can throw kick-ass parties and make a mean stuffed artichoke.

I always wanted to make a mean stuffed artichoke. As my Aunt Mary had. Our family used to "ohh" and "ahh" as she carried the steaming vegetables to the table at Thanksgiving, ask for seconds, tell her how wonderful a cook she was.

When I was little, I'd sit in Aunt Mary's lush tree, devouring her *Women's Day Encyclopedia of Cookery*, anxious for the day that I, too, could please everyone. The ability to please people is a power, only I didn't think of it in those terms then. I just knew I wanted it.

I also wanted to speak French, write books, and travel the world. All of these things, I saw as possibilities, but not the belt. To have a black belt meant being tough. I was the furthest thing from that, crying if my father so much as looked at me cross-eyed.

To get a black belt meant having to know how to fight. I knew nothing about fighting. I wanted the ability to fight. To be able to say, "These hands are lethal

weapons,” and be telling the truth. I wanted to walk with a swagger that said, “Don’t fuck with me. *I’m* a black belt.” Or better yet, actually win one of the fights I was constantly in with my sister, Stacey.

Back then, I didn’t think of the fights with Stacey as fun. I thought of them as self-defense, assuredly initiated by Stacey, most often finished by me. I didn’t end the fights with physical force, however. I ended them with words. Unable to best Stacey with my hands, I lashed her with my tongue.

Such was the time when I waited outside of the bathroom in which Stacey had just locked herself. She feared retribution for the punch she’d given me seconds before. Since I couldn’t touch her, I crouched down on my hands and knees and whispered through the crack beneath the door, “You almost killed Mama, Stacey. When she gave birth to you she nearly died.”

“Nah-ah.” Stacey said from the other side.

“How do you think she got that big scar on her stomach? Why do you think she gets sick sometimes? Because of you. Mama’s lucky to be alive, after all the pain you gave her.” I heard Stacey sob in a way I never had before when I hit her. It was my first lesson in words as weapon.

Other lessons in words came from my Grandmother and Mother. “You catch more flies with honey than vinegar,” they were fond of saying. When it came to men they advised me to smile sweetly, curl my hair, agree with what was being said, then do whatever I pleased. No sense in arguing about things. Fighting was for men. Women were meant to control things from behind the scenes, at best while making a man think he was getting what he wanted.

What my father wanted was my mother. And a cup of hot tea when he woke up. Both of these things my grandmother gave him, carrying the tea down the long hall to his bedroom, carting us kids off to Royal Castle or the park so my parents could be alone weekends, moving in so they could go dancing at night.

My parents are wonderful dancers. Mom used to teach at Arthur Murray's, after a bunch of Grandma's family died and Mom packed her up, moving from town to town as if by running across the country they could somehow outrun grief.

It didn't work, of course. Grandma guilted Mom into moving back to New Orleans, then Mom married Dad because he was fun, he didn't cry, and he didn't box her in. Mom and Dad met on the dance floor, courted to the tunes of a jukebox, jitterbugged down the aisle, then mamboed to the maternity ward.

Grandma kept crying. She moved in to help Mama after Stacey was born, but I remember before then. I used to wake up in my crib, pulling aside the curtains to watch for Grandma's car. I was waiting to be taken into the warm kitchen, with the oven door open, my hands wrapped around a bottle of hot tea with milk.

Nights I remember pulling aside the same curtain as my parents drove away. "They're going dancing," Grandma would say. "Don't cry. Mothers and Fathers need some time to themselves." Then she would rock and sing, songs like, "*Are you lonesome tonight?*" I would cuddle up to her, smell the Pond's cold cream she rubbed on her face each night, and beg her not to cry.

My parents' story was a dance of love and shared interest, my Grandma's story was a *danse macabre*. Stacey got older, and did the cha-cha, and the cat. Then the freeze.

I could not dance. My story was one of over compensating for two left feet. I would never dance well, I decided, but I could learn to cook. And serve with grace. I studied Letitia Baldridge, worshipped Miss Manners, inhaled cookbooks and wifely magazines. Then, I read *Cosmopolitan*, read and re-read *How To Make Love To A Man*, by Alexandria Penney. I had heard about the Madonna/whore complex, and wanted to make sure I had all my bases covered.

Mom and Grandma gave my father the illusion he ran the household, but let Stacey and I know it was only a game. Mama hid the stuff she bought from Saturday shopping sprees in the closet, storing an extra shower and toilet in the attic because they were such a deal. My father had no need to know of these purchases. Really, the less men knew about what actually happened in the house, the better. Or so they said.

And so I learned. What Mom and Grandma didn't teach me about living around illusions, Catholic school did. I wore my skirts, said the prayers, and brought home good grades.

I danced behind closed doors, alone, in front of the mirror, wondering if I really looked as spastic as they said, determined to make up for my ineptitude with other skills.

I found myself especially good at pleasing people. It wasn't difficult considering it was a job I had been trained for my whole life. My mother and grandma were constantly trying to make everyone else happy, even if it meant sacrificing what they wanted. Simple questions, such as what restaurant to go to, were most often answered with, "Whatever you want."

If someone needed a favor, Mom and Grandma were the first to offer. The kids on the block did not have enough money to go to an amusement park? Being the only Mother who worked outside the home, Mom could pay for everyone, and did.

Grandma not only kept my mother's house, cooking, scrubbing floors, and doing laundry, but she cleaned for my Aunt Mary as well. Her daughters worked hard, and Grandma wanted to make them happy.

"You will be happy," I was told, if ever I should frown. "Your mother doesn't like unpleasantness," Daddy would say. "Go to your room, and don't come out until you're smiling."

I spent a lot of time in my room, escaping into books, then escaping to the theatre. In the seventh grade, I got a part in my first play. Here was a place where I was allowed to yell, encouraged to cry, could be as mean as I wanted. I was hooked, vowing to move to California when I grew up.

"It's going to be hard to get there with two broken legs," Daddy said. He was afraid I'd move to California and join a cult. New York, however, was an acceptable alternative.

The summer after I finished high school, I moved to New York. Acting school, I found out, was not for me. Being nice got me nowhere. No matter what I did, the teachers were always screaming, or saying something demeaning to me. How dare they do this, I thought. Was this why I gave up a loving family and warm house, commuting in the cold from the Bronx to Manhattan every day? I began to skip classes, finding more fulfillment in my Penn Station waitress job than at The

American Academy of Dramatic Arts, the school I had always dreamed of attending. They eventually threw me out.

Then I got engaged. Met a man who adored my pleasant disposition, was stricken by my pliability. He was handsome and powerful, the president of his own company. I was like a noodle *kugel*, the dessert my sister-in-law, Abbe, likes to make. It's sweet but formless, molding itself into whatever shaped container you put it in.

Before marriage, I molded myself into a Jew. I began with scraping my knuckles bloody as I assisted Dorothy, my future mother-in-law, in grating potatoes. I graduated to the *mikvah*, the ritual bath one undertakes when converting. I remember standing naked in the room while a fat lady checked under my fingernails for dirt. Three elderly Rabbis stood outside the door, waiting for an okay. "I need to look at your toenails, too," the lady said. "For polish."

Both fingernail polish and makeup were not allowed. I had been instructed beforehand, and was in compliance. Looking away from the woman, I wished I were invisible or that the concrete would somehow rise up and swallow me whole. Nudity was not a state I was comfortable with.

Maybe, for a moment, I wished this all were a dream. That I would wake up and find myself back in New Orleans, never having left my family to pursue acting in New York, never having met the man I was in love with, never having made the decision that would alter the course of my life. Maybe that moment existed. But if it did, I don't remember it.

What I do remember is stepping forward and slowly lowering myself into the swimming pool that served as the *mikvah*. I remember being thankful that the water

was heated. I remember Rabbi Kahane saying, “Do you believe in monotheism? Do you accept that there is only one God?”

I remember responding, “Yes,” then submerging myself beneath the water three times, as I had been instructed. The woman stood by as witness.

I didn’t stop to question why I was submerging myself in the *mikvah* fifteen years ago; I didn’t wonder just how far I’d go to keep the man I loved. I just did what needed to be done, as I had on many other occasions in my life.

When I wanted to become an actress, I moved to New York. I was eighteen years old at the time. When I decided to become a flight attendant, after Barry spent months convincing me that this would be a good job, I did what was necessary to finish training. At no time did I wonder, am I capable of this? The airline had sensed what was in me. Anyone who got through their six weeks of hell had to not only want the job pretty badly, but had to have the inner strength to put up with the mental torture piled on by the trainers.

Airlines, I realized, have worked hard to hire personnel who are capable of mastering servitude. People with Catholic school backgrounds are ideal candidates, having been trained in dress codes, inane regulations, and guilt.

A flight attendant must be able to console a grieving passenger on one hand, calm the ruffled feathers of the VIP Platinum flyer whose special, low-fat-vegetarian-Pritkin-Atkins-fruit plate was accidentally switched with a Hindu meal, and a nanosecond later, administer CPR or transform an emergency slide into a life raft so that two-hundred passengers can be evacuated into the Atlantic. You bet the airlines hire people who can both kiss and kick ass.

“What I want for you,” Sensei Kathleen once said to my class, “is the ability to kick ass and take names.” On another day she said to me, “If I could only show you the power that’s within you.”

That I could kiss ass was never in question. The moment before I met my sensei, I had just come from a catering job, catering being a business I got into with the encouragement of my husband’s clients. To build customer loyalty, I frequently catered breakfast and lunch meetings for Barry, serving homemade quiche or chocolate dipped strawberries from a silver tray. On the day I met Sensei Kathleen, I was catering a party after a *bris*, the ritual circumcision in the Jewish religion.

I kicked off the job with a fall, tripping over a buried sprinkler, skinning my knee on the sidewalk, and scattering broccoli and carrots everywhere. As blood dripped down my leg I said nothing, waiting for the customer to offer her assistance or a Band-Aid, neither of which materialized. I attended to my injury with napkins in the kitchen, before warming the chicken wings.

Over the course of the next four hours, I heated, served, arranged, and picked-up, never once being offered something to drink or eat. Although it sounds silly even to me, I never once in that time took a sip of water or a bite of anything. I remember feeling dehydrated, but didn’t want to ask for anything. I had always been taught it was the height of rudeness to ask for anything in someone else’s home.

Finishing the job with a smile, I rushed to pick up Laura from pre-school. There, I waited to meet the Karate teacher, hoping that this would be an interest beneficial to Laura.

Chapter Two

Ninth Kyu – White Belt

How To Raise Samurai Children

“In bringing up a boy, one should first encourage a sense of valor. From the time he is young the child should liken his parents to master, and learn everyday politeness and etiquette, the serving of other people, the ways of speech, forbearance and even the correct way of walking down the street. When he does not put effort into things, he should be scolded and made to go the entire day without eating.”

Tsunetomo Yamamoto
Hagakure, The Book of Hidden Leaves

The room where my women’s Karate class took place had been sponged with bright pink paint. There was a brass ballet bar running along the entire left side of the room, accented by a huge, homoerotic painting of four semi-nude dancers. A single red rose adorned the piano in the corner, placed before the huge mirrors lining the right side of the room. The wooden floors, while beautiful, were riddled with dust.

The proper way to enter a Karate class is to place your hands at your sides, bend forward slightly at the waist, straighten up, then step through the threshold. By virtue of this courtesy bow, this dance studio becomes a Karate *dojo*. *Dojo* is a Japanese word, translating as “*way place*”. The *dojo* is the place where the way is passed on, the *ryu*, or school, the vehicle of transport.

When I first walked into Karate class, I rushed through the threshold, running late for the class I had been invited to try. *Sensei* Kathleen, said, “Relax. Don’t worry. We’ve just begun.”

A Karate *dojo* can be anywhere; a place in a park, someone's garage, the kindergarten class that sometime served as our summer *dojo*, a fancy storefront with a sign reading, *Karate School*. What makes a place a *dojo* is the mentality with which it is approached. On my first day of class, *Sensei* Kathleen told us to leave our egos at the doorway. Those along with the outside world. Karate, she said, is from me to me. It's the one time during the day where you get to focus entirely on yourself. I was also told to take off my shoes and socks, remove my jewelry, and wear a white headband. The shoes, socks, and jewelry were for safety, the headband to show a willingness to work.

"*Kiske*," the highest ranking person in the room shouts. Everyone scrambles to take the attention position; feet together, hands at sides. "Courtesy bow to *Sensei* Kathleen. *See*." She says the command that means *do it*. The class and *Sensei* Kathleen bow to each other.

Whenever a *sensei* walks through the door, the correct courtesy is to stop what you are doing, face them, and bow. Today, along with three bags bursting with Karate gear, *Sensei* Kathleen has brought CC the black cat. CC stands for Curious Cat.

Sensei Kathleen, named by Master Kay when she reached second degree black belt, is called The Wildcat. Both the Wildcat, and CC in my opinion, are appropriate. While *Sensei* readies herself for class, CC streaks across the room jumping atop the piano and knocking over the vase with the rose. Though he wears a leash, CC is allowed to roam free before class starts. Later, while we work techniques, CC will be tied to one of *Sensei*'s Karate bags.

We have to be careful, while we're working, not to get too close to CC. One never knows when he'll strike, scratching with what appears to be an errant, but is surely deliberate, paw. We can pet him if we want, but he bites. You'd never guess it, from watching the way he slides up to Susan, rubbing against her leg, or when he curls into a fluffy ball of black, *Sensei's* Karate bag and sparring gloves his cushions. He may appear to be sleeping, but he's always watching.

"CC was an ugly kitten." *Sensei* Kathleen tells the old lady in the pink leotard. The woman is watching us work, while waiting for her lambada lessons.

"Only in the way that babies are all ugly," says Debbie, another classmate.

"Cat genetics. That's what I was in." The woman screeches from the dance academy's carpeted foyer. "I wanted to make a black-haired, blue-eyed Siamese, but I never got one."

"That's too bad," *Sensei* replies, bows us into class, then says, "Widen out the feet. Drop down to one foot." A ripple of groans are heard throughout the room. It's eight-thirty a.m., and our bodies are just awakening. As she leads us through a series of stretches, *Sensei* Kathleen begins a talk about safety in the home.

"Take inventory of your house," she said, "note everything that can be used as a weapon: umbrellas, lamps, broom-sticks, nail files, hat pins. What a wonderfully deceptive weapon. It's too bad hats aren't stylish any more. Tracey, ever think of using the pin from your wings, when you're at work?"

I'd thought about giving the passengers on the airplane Valium, but hadn't considered poking them into good behavior. "No, but I will now."

“Don’t store knives in wooden blocks on the counters,” she continues, “too easy for a burglar to grab. Be comfortable with the layout of your rooms in the dark. I know what can be used as a weapon in every room of my house. So should you. If someone breaks in, then you’ll have the advantage.”

I mentally reviewed the contents of my home while we stretched, then continued with push-ups, sit-ups, leg lifts, calf-raises with simultaneous opening and closing of the fists, called “*GoJu* grabs,” named for the style of Karate we were studying, USA *GoJu*.

GoJu Ryu, meaning *hard/soft way* is the style from which we are derived. When our style was brought to America, reality self-defense was added. We finished exercising with a series of front kicks, side kicks, back kicks, then roundhouse kicks, in which we should be able to balance cups of tea on our extended legs.

She then taught us the hard blocking system, giving us moves with names like, “rainbow block,” and “got that phone call, give it away.”

“*Kiske*,” *Sensei* called again. By then, I had broken a light sweat, thinking, yeah, I can do this. I started envisioning wash-board abs and Thighmaster thighs, when *Sensei* shouted, “Fighting stance!” The students made a noise, moving into what looked like a boxing pose, with their left feet forward. I copied the position, minus the sound effect. “What is a *kiai*, Susan?” *Sensei* Kathleen asked.

“A loud, powerful yell, *Sensei*,” Susan replied.

“And you call those loud, powerful yells? Try it again. Fighting stance. *See*.” That time I made a noise. It was audible. Sort of. Seems stupid, a *kiai*. “Why do we *kiai*, Susan?”

Susan was ever ready with her answers, as should the highest ranking student be.

“To intimidate our opponent. To summon *chi*.”

“Yes. *Chi*. Inner strength.” *Sensei* Kathleen took fighting stance, her *kiai* rocking the room. I took a step back, fearing that perhaps I’d made a mistake. I didn’t realize being in Karate meant having to be *loud*.

Then, when *Sensei* Kathleen started working *katas* I got really nervous. Here, I thought, is where I’ll surely make a fool of myself. She stood before the class, explaining that we were about to learn the *kata* entitled, *tekki one*. *Tekki* means “I” pattern, she said, demonstrating how the movements of the *kata* made the letter “I” on the floor. I copied as *Sensei* demonstrated, jerking into what she called, “the drunken monkey turn.”

“You’re doing great,” *Sensei* Kathleen said to me. “That’s it. Now watch the curve of your wrist as you make that punch.” Little by little, she led us through the *kata*. Little by little, she began to build our confidence.

“Repetition wears down resistance,” she said, explaining the body’s sense memory, and our ability to train it as we choose. “There’s no magic in Karate. What we do a lot of, we become very good at.”

During that first class I made the connection between *Sensei* Kathleen’s words, and the words of motivators my husband admired, such as Zig Ziglar and Les Brown. “We shall believe that nothing is impossible,” is one of the virtues of USA *GoJu* Karate. It is also the type of thing preached by sales motivators, and was something

we heard when attending Barry's mortgage conferences. "What we do a lot of we become very good at," is another motivational saying with multi-uses.

Within minutes of *Sensei* Kathleen shouting, "Gear up," I began to see how Karate differed. While motivators were wonderful at inspiration, there was a notable absence of perspiration. Perspiration is in plentiful supply in the *dojo*.

When the class members raced to their Karate bags, donning sparring gloves, padded shin and foot guards, and plastic mouth guards to protect teeth, I thought, "Oh no, not me." It looked as though they were going to fight. I wasn't ready to fight yet. It's not that I thought one could do Karate without ever getting hit, but did it have to be so soon? Besides, I didn't have any gear. Neither, it turned out, did the other new member of the class.

Never fear. *Sensei* Kathleen always carried an abundance of extra gear with her, along with brand new mouth guards. She handed the equipment out to Kim, the other new girl, and me.

"I can't do this," I said.

"What? Did I hear what I think I just heard?" *Sensei* Kathleen asked. "Was that the C word? We never use the C word in Karate. It's the only four-letter word not allowed."

Later, Kim and I would replace the C word with the F word, muttering, mouthing, or shouting "fuck" whenever a situation warranted it. Kim is in her early sixties and epitomizes refinement. She fights, however, like a bat out of hell. At that time, though, we didn't know each other well enough to do anything more than giggle.

Donning the fighting equipment, we stood by as *Sensei* Kathleen paired off Hollie, Kim's twenty-something daughter, and Pam, an aspiring actress. They were both green belts. As they sparred, *Sensei* Kathleen described sparring to Kim and me as a game of tag. "The object is to be the first to make contact. The target area is the top of the head to the top of the belt on the front side of the body. Tags to the rear of the body are penalized. Whoever gets three "tags," or hits in first, wins the round." The goal of sparring is to teach the practitioner to act rather than *react* when attacked. A person will spar for years in the *dojo* before they are given this focus.

While Kim and I listened to *Sensei* Kathleen, Hollie and Pam appeared to be beating the crap out of each other. One would charge the other, slamming a backfist or reverse punch to their opponent's head, stomach, or ribs. I imagined how angry I'd feel if someone hit me that hard, wondering how I was going to take it, worried that it would soon happen to me.

Hollie and Pam may have moaned or groaned when a hard hit came in, but mostly they smiled. Kim rolled her eyes toward them, and I nodded in agreement. Were they whacked, or what? *Sensei* Kathleen said, "Kim, I'll take you first." I thanked God for the reprieve, my fears subsiding with the flow of *Sensei's* fists. Yes, she tagged Kim, but in a kind and gentle way. Then Kim hit *Sensei* Kathleen, in not such a kind and gentle way. For some reason, she kept slamming her fists into *Sensei's* gloves.

My sparring proved much the same. *Sensei* Kathleen was soft with me, leaving the target area open on her body, so I would have a chance to tag. "Keep your eyes open. Don't turn your head to the side because my fist is coming at your face. Look.

Block.” Though I saw the target area, I repeatedly hit her gloves. This tendency to hit that which would hit you lasts for a long time. The ability to control your hitting power is difficult to master, too. I think this is because the strength of a hit when one begins Karate is proportional to the fear in the moment. The more frightened you are of being hit, the harder you hit your opponent.

Hollie and Pam could smile as they slammed each other, because they knew what to expect. They both understood that sparring at its best isn’t personal. It’s just a game of tag. The repetition of the action wore down their bodies’ resistance to being hit therefore they had fun in the fight.

It is in this place that Karate differs from the motivational trainers I had heard or read, only then I had just a sliver of a sense. In Karate, you not only hear the thing, you’re required to do the thing. Karate is immersion.

I left my first day of training surprised that it hadn’t been harder, happy, knowing that I would go back. What I couldn’t know was that building confidence is the sensei’s number one job with new students. It isn’t until later that the tearing down process begins.

Chapter Three

Eighth Kyu - White Belt, One Green Stripe

How Not To Get Nervous

"Before you attend an important occasion, apply spit to your ear lobe and then breathe in deeply through your nostrils. Then go out. Kick every object you come across. This is the secret."

Tsunetomo Yamamoto
Hagakure, The Book of Hidden Leaves

One Wednesday morning at 8:30 a.m., *Sensei* Kathleen put me into my first test without warning. It began with exercises and consisted of twenty-five repetitions of each. Twenty-five reps doesn't seem like a lot, but by the time you're two-thirds down the prescribed list of push-ups, sit-ups, jumping jacks, and so on, a hot bath and massage are the two things foremost on your mind. That, and when is this ever going to end? Besides exercises, just how many strikes, kicks and combinations could there be? My legs and stomach muscles were aching, sweat dripped down my back, and I wondered what fool thing had made me think this discipline was for me?

The first promotion one receives in our Karate style is a stripe of green tape on the end of your white belt. This designates that the practitioner has achieved the rank of eighth *kyu*, or boy. One begins with a solid white belt, the numbers decreasing as rank increases until you are at first *kyu*, which is brown belt. At black belt level, the practitioner is promoted to *dan*, or man.

When the belt system and accompanying masculine terminology were explained to me, I didn't give it much thought. I was too worried about how I was going to get through this test. I didn't know enough to be promoted, couldn't possibly stand alone before *Sensei* and do *kata*. I tried to control the tremble in my voice as I did the formal introduction which precedes *kata*.

"My name is Tracey Broussard, my *kata* is *Tekki One*." Woosh. I breathed, forgot to do the bow before backing up, couldn't remember the first move after *muso*, eyes shut, the closed curtain before a play begins, the beginning of all *katas*. *Muso* means dream state. It is the place where we try to achieve a state of no mind.

Here, in the execution of my first *kata* test, was my introduction to my greatest enemy. Myself. Only I didn't fully understand it. How could I achieve a state of no mind when I was in a state of panic? Surely, I was going to trip and fall, or turn and face the wrong wall. Who was I that I thought I could do this Karate thing? Really, I should go back to the kitchen where I belonged.

The other women were practicing their *katas* on the opposite side of the room, while Kim, who was in testing also, had been ordered to face the wall. Though the others seemed immersed in what they were doing, I wondered how ridiculous I looked to them. Had they been this nervous during their first test? I couldn't imagine it. Hollie looked graceful as she executed the *kata empi-ha*, elbow battle. She was so precise and patient as she worked with Pam to get the moves correct.

"It's okay," *Sensei* Kathleen said, when I couldn't remember how the *kata* began. "Inside block to your left." Of course. I started over, sped through the *kata*, remembered to bow at the end. The wait in *kako*, the attention position, was an

eternity. *Sensei* Kathleen was bent over a paper, writing notes. I know I was bad, but did she really have to write about it?

Couldn't we just move on to self-defense? And when we did, *oy vey*. Which way *do* we move to escape from a wrist grab? And that tiger-neck takedown. An important technique in our style, *Sensei* Kathleen had said. From a straight punch, one blocks to the outside, grabbing the wrist of the opponent, then leaping across the room to loop one's arm around the neck of the opponent, the force of which causes the opponent to lose balance and fall flat on her ass. Right.

I did an inside block, then wondered why my leap wasn't long enough. "Let's move on," *Sensei* Kathleen said, her pen moving at warped speed as she pointed out a corner of the room for me to sit in, as I took the written part.

Sensei Kathleen pulled the louver doors shut, as dancers were starting to make noise as they arrived for the class following ours. At least I'm acing the written, I thought, until I turned to the last page of the test and saw the list of Japanese terminology for which we had to provide the English counterpart.

Turning the test in to *Sensei* Kathleen, I asked when I would get it back. "Never," she laughed. Little did I know she meant it.

"Do we get to read what you wrote while we were testing," Kim wanted to know. *Sensei* Kathleen just laughed some more.

"*Muso*, eyes shut." *Sensei* Kathleen said after putting us in the formal kneeling position. I felt her tapping my shoulder and opened my eyes. She motioned with her finger for me to stand in the front of the class. Kim, who had been testing as well, was already standing in the front of the room. "Eyes open," she said to everyone else.

“Getting your first stripe is an important moment. Sometimes people think, wow, I did this, now I can relax a little. But that isn’t what it’s about. Every promotion in Karate is an added responsibility. With every advancement you have to ask more of yourself.

Don’t worry about the mistakes you’ve made. Eventually, you’ll get it right or you’ll quit. As adults in today’s society, you should be proud of yourselves just for being here. Most people stop growing once they finish high school or college. To stand up and be judged as a grownup takes guts. I’m proud of you.”

I stood in disbelief, unable to comprehend that I was actually receiving a promotion in Karate. Surely, she’s making a mistake. But there she was, wrapping the stripe onto my belt, then placing her hand on my head. “Eighth *kyu*,” she said. I never would have believed that a little piece of green tape could make me feel so good.

We’re All Bozos On This Bus

I was excited to have been asked to help the next week at a children’s *shiai*, tournament, in which Laura was to compete. *Sensei* Kathleen called together all of her assistants, giving me the task of score keeping. *Kyus* are given a variety of duties, while black belts serve as judges. Of all the things I could have been asked to do, why this one?

Visions of my D's in high-school math came back. I would've failed if Sister Edmond hadn't forced me to sit with her every day after school, notebook and ruler in hand, the methods for finding "x" hammered away at again and again. I dismissed the thought and concentrated on scorekeeping.

The first few rounds of competition had been nerve-wracking. The job of the person seated next to me was to call forward the contestants, then shout the numbers when they had been scored. For this, five black belts sat in a row, the highest-ranking one serving as center judge.

At the time, I just saw the black belt row as the fourth degree man in the center, flanked by an attractive second degree woman, another second degree man, and two first degree black belts. Later I was told that the center judge was married to the blonde on his right, divorced from the grey-haired black belt across the room who had slept with half the black belts in the *ryu*, school. The blonde he was now married to was divorced from the high-ranking judge in the next room, and their daughter was a white belt who was competing in the recreation room.

After three of the children in our ring were finished competing, they stood in a line as their scores were called out. Each judge held two white cards with numbers on them, in their hand. Like lightening, the center judge would yell, "Judges score," then five hands would fly out thankfully holding the numbers in their correct positions. If a judge was too slow, he or she got yelled at. If the caller didn't speak fast enough, a sensei yelled at him. If I didn't write quick enough, someone wanted to know what the problem was.

The white belts had competed thus far, without any problems. Next up was Laura's division, the green belts. Laura was competing in *kata*. I was so proud as she introduced herself to the judges. Hearing her name called out, she completed her courtesy bows and stood before the black belts in the attention position. "My name is Laura Silverberg. My *kata* is *Empi Ha*." Her red hair shined against the black Karate uniform, falling softly around her white headband. Her *kata* went beautifully, her moves powerful and precise. I wasn't surprised when Laura took first place, as she had vowed she would do. For weeks Laura had practiced for the *shiai*, Barry and I watching her *kata* over and over.

The next group of contestants proved to be not as wonderful, the fact that I'm mathematically challenged hitting home. Whatever I had done, the numbers just somehow didn't look right. I pleaded with the *sensei*-in-charge to double-check my addition, but he refused. Smiling, he gave me the once over and said, "Don't worry, honey. I'm sure it's fine."

Perhaps no one would have noticed my error had it not been for that meddling mathematician mother on the sidelines, adding up the scores in her head. Of course, she didn't say anything until the wrong child got the first place trophy. Another *sensei* then pointed out the error to Master Kay, as *Sensei* Kathleen was nowhere in sight. Oh, shit, I thought. Now I'm in for it. But he just laughed and bestowed an additional trophy on the kid I had inadvertently put in second place.

When, I wondered, would I ever be able to attend a tournament without making an ass of myself? Last time I cause a commotion by losing my purse, this time I screw up the scores. *Sensei* Kathleen often says, "We're all Bozos on this bus," whenever

talking about a human weakness. Though I made it through my first promotion without being perfect, this *shiai* illustrated that my journey had barely begun.

Chapter Four

Seventh Kyu - White Belt, Two Green Stripes

The Karate Picnic

“Every day when one’s body and mind are at peace, one should meditate upon being ripped apart by arrows, rifles, spears and swords, being carried away by surging waves, being thrown into the midst of a great fire, being struck by lightning, being shaken to death by a great earthquake, falling from thousand-foot cliffs, dying of disease or committing seppuku at the death of one’s master. And every day without fail one should consider himself as dead.”

Tsunetomo Yamamoto
Hagakure, The Book of Hidden Leaves

When I began my journey to manhood, I didn’t expect cake-baking to be one of the rest stops. But as I stood four months into my Karate training, beating a bowl of batter for the Karate picnic later in the day, I realized that this business of becoming a martial artist was not at all what I had thought it would be.

Broken noses and bruised abdomens, yes. Serious lessons in self-defense, yes. I had taken my homework seriously hoping to ensure that no harm should come to my loved ones. My first chance came not long after *Sensei* had given her household items-as-weapons speech. My infant son, Max, was taking his nap as I undressed for a bath. Upon hearing his cry, I left the bath water running and went into his room to check. He was curled up contentedly. Must have been a nightmare, I thought. Then I heard another noise. It wasn’t Max. Couldn’t be Barry, he was at work. The noise sounded so close. Like it was coming from the living room. Laura was at school. I figured I must be imagining things. Then I heard it again. It was a rustling sound.

Not like the plunk of oranges falling from our tree, which had frightened us at night when we had first moved in. Without a doubt, this was a person. First rustling, then the rhythmic sound of footsteps.

No time to think. I had a baby to protect. Never mind that all I was wearing was a lime bra and panties set. I had forgotten that the bath water was still running. I did remember, however, the heavy metal clothes rod in Max's closet. I had taken note of it during my inventory. Grabbing the dowel, I flung it over my shoulder and crept into the hallway to investigate. Nothing. I lifted the dowel over my head, then rounded the corner into the living room. There, standing face-to-face with me was the pool man. He was on the other side of the sliding glass door.

Perhaps he dropped the chlorine, or simply dropped his jaw upon seeing me. I don't remember. I do know that my face flushed the color of the raspberries in the cake I stood preparing a few weeks later, and that the living room's open jalousie windows were what had allowed his noise to carry. I know it took me twenty-minutes to clean up the flood that ran into my bedroom, and approximately twenty seconds to don the rest of my clothing.

Modesty is a virtue, my grandma taught me. Put your clothes on fast and don't ever touch *down there*. Down there was a scary place. A place where no one should ever look. Grandma's doctor used to ask her if there was gold between her legs, since no physician had ever been granted an examination. She used to tell us stories about giving birth to both of her children in the living room of her shotgun house, the highlight of which was the difficult labor. To ease the pain, she said that her neighbor made her lay on an ironing board.

“I saw Doctor Salatich last week,” Grandma said, her slippers flip-flopping as she came into the kitchen. The cake was baked, now I was getting to work on the icing.

“He wants me to have this test,” she said, smashing her breasts into her chest.

“A mammogram?”

“Yes.”

“You’re going to do it, I hope.”

“Eh. Miss Florence had cancer of the bust, you know.” Grandma never said *breast*. She didn’t say *pee*, either. What we did in the ladies room was tinkle. “But she didn’t die from it. She died because of me.”

I heated heavy cream in a pot. “What?”

“It was right after Uncle Pat died of the gangrene.”

“Are you coming with us to the Karate picnic?” I tried to steer Grandma’s train of thought away from those she had lost, not wanting to see her become blue.

“I left the hospital to drive Rosemary home, when what I should have done was bring Florence home first. Florence had a cold. From sitting in that cold hospital room so long, she got pneumonia. She died within a week.”

“Grandma, don’t do this to yourself. Here, have a taste.” I offered her a spoon of melted chocolate.

“You’ll understand how I feel when I’m gone. But by then it’ll be too late.”

Grandma was visiting with me then, but she lived with my parents, sister, and niece.

“I’ve been thinking about donations, you know.”

“What?”

“When I die. My eyes have glaucoma, so they’re no good. My heart’s out

because of my angina. My teeth aren't real – and speaking of teeth, I've seen those billboards about dentist's doing teeth whitening. I think I'd like to do that. It'd be nice to have white teeth again."

"Grandma, that laser stuff isn't for dentures."

"About the only part of my body I could donate is "down there." It's hardly been used at all. I ever told you about the man I knew growing up who got his thing ripped off while operating a machine at the bakery? Poor fellow. He never did get married."

"Grandma, did you take a Darvon this morning?" Her doctor had prescribed them to her, but most days she didn't take her medication.

She laughed. I considered telling her about the pool man incident so she would stop talking about death and dismemberment, but thought better of it. Grandma would think that being caught in your underwear by the pool man while brandishing a six-foot metal rod was in the very least, cause to be mortified. And I had been. Not as much, perhaps, as she would have. She probably would have done penance, a few Hail Marys, perhaps burned a candle. Then again, I don't know. I didn't tell her about the incident. She was not pleased that I had taken up Karate. She thought it was unbecoming of a lady.

"Hah?" Grandma said loudly when I told her it was *ganache* that I was making for the picnic cake. "Don't be smart. That's frosting."

Indeed, *ganache* is a combination of chocolate and cream that is often used as frosting. Only my *ganache* is special. It has Chambord, a raspberry liqueur, in it. Won't the Karate people be pleased, I thought, when they taste this. Barry's clients

always raved whenever I prepared a cake or special treat. The kareitica will be no different.

The students attending the Karate picnic could've cared less that I used Chambord in the cake. I probably could've used cyanide for all anyone would have noticed. Someone would have tasted it and keeled over, then a fellow student would've just propped him up and continued the wheelbarrow race, or helped the poor guy drive knife hands into the sand. This was Karate, after all, not Julia Child's kitchen.

Master Kay tells stories about the old days, when Karate was *really* Karate. Twenty years ago he was fond of setting up obstacle courses. Some of the features would be broken glass that the students had to run through, and a wasp's nest in the trunk of an abandoned car. One practitioner would have to open the trunk lid, inciting the bees, while the next in line would have to slam it down. I have also heard tale of rocks covered with barnacles as part of the beach workout terrain. In those days, I wouldn't have made it through week one of training.

Thank goodness Master Kay's philosophy changed over time, and that *Sensei* Kathleen came to believe that everyone should have the chance to enjoy Karate as she does. The broken bones or bruised abdomens, it turned out, are the least things to fear from training. What's really scary are the demons one encounters while looking inside.

Karate, *Sensei* Kathleen says, is a spiral journey to the center of your self. You're given the chance to look at purple belt, but even then the people who really look are far and few between. At white belt I didn't know enough to question why the food at the Karate picnic was more important to me than the workout. I couldn't even tell

you what happened during the workout, other than the fact that everyone was full of sand and soaking wet by the time it was over.

Grandma and I manned the picnic table, making sure that everyone there had had enough to eat.

I didn't learn to cook so that people would like me. I learned to cook because I love to eat. Wanting to share the fruits of my labor with those that I care for came about only later - after I had progressed to being a somewhat decent cook, and when I realized that watching someone enjoy a food that I'd prepared was more pleasurable than eating it myself. So much so, in fact, that I often found myself obsessed with the thoughts of making food for others.

When I first visited London, the flight attendants I had worked with that day were making plans to dine out, or visit museums. I, on the other hand, was unable to pull myself away from the aisles of Sainsbury, the local supermarket. Carrying an empty suitcase to London, in anticipation of the delicacies I would cart home, was my reason for being. There were such wonderful cheeses and cookies. Biscuits as the Brits call them. So many things which were unavailable at home. Indian spices, for as far as the eye could see. Who would choose to see Stonehenge, when they could be viewing this gorgeous Scotch salmon? Westminster Abbey could wait. The dairy department was wooing me with promises of clotted cream for my homemade scones. I would serve them to Laura's teachers at their appreciation lunch. And the salmon? Perfect for a client brunch I had planned. Barry would love these cookies. Oh, and

the chocolate. Bar after bar of bittersweet, semi-sweet, milk and white. The chocolate would be for me. And possibly to melt down for dipping strawberries.

Chocolate-covered strawberries were always a favorite with Barry's clients. One of Barry's realtors periodically reminds me of the day I brought a beautiful tray of berries into her office, then went to my car to get the rest of the luncheon. On my way back in, it dawned that I was supposed to be at the real-estate office across the street. Realizing the correct clients would end up with no dessert if I didn't react, I snatched the tray right out of her hands.

Sensei Kathleen often speaks of how we should strive for the ability to *act* rather than *react*, both in the dojo and in real life. It is in my life as a cook that I have been most successful at acting. Having the desire to cook as a young child, I stood at Grandma's side, absorbing whatever I could from her.

She taught me the basics, her background a cuisine of making due with what one had. There were no measuring cups or measuring spoons in my house, nor were there any cookbooks. Grandma would begin her lessons with words, such as the ones used by most New Orleanians when making gumbo, "First you make a *roux*." *Roux* is the oil or butter and flour base for the multi-cultured, many-faceted gumbo. A thick soup made with either seafood, poultry, or meats, gumbo draws on French, Spanish, Indian, African, and Cajun roots for its unique flavors.

When I think of gumbo, I can't help comparing it to the Karate *dojo*. My workout partner likens the *dojo* to a cauldron. Things simmer and brew in the *dojo*, sometimes boiling over or burning, other times commingling into something unique and wonderful. The *roux* that gumbo is based upon always starts out as a white mixture.

It's what my grandma used to call a white sauce. As the *roux* cooks, it becomes darker and more complex. Many consider the best *rouxs* to be those that are almost black when done. The trouble with *roux*, however, is that the darker it gets, the hotter the pot, making it likely that either the *roux* or the cook will get burned.

I burned lots of things in the beginning, later trying out recipes from the 4-H club. Soon I got brave, entering contests run by the home economist employed by Louisiana Power and Light.

Grandma's potato salad and rice pudding garnered blue ribbons, which I proudly received along with green sherbet punch at the LP&L substation. I couldn't imagine life getting much better than this, power lines be damned. Back then I hadn't heard that power lines are thought by some to cause cancer. Back then, I didn't know that the term "power lines" could be used to describe joint control properties in self-defense, something we were just beginning to explore in Karate class.

Sensei Kathleen says that as a Karate teacher, her job is to make us powerful. At the beginning of training, she slowly exposed us to the techniques that are empowering, both physically and mentally. And they all have to do with control.

In the physical realm of self-defense, one is taught to manipulate certain areas of the opponent's body, resulting in what Master Kay calls "a power line." This type of technique allows for alternatives to deadly force, also referred to as "come along properties." It is the pain factor inherent in come alongs, which allows one to successfully control her opponent without undue force.

The new Karate student is also exposed to the thought of mental control, both in meditation exercises led by the *sensei* and in application during sparring.

Sparring, we were told, is a game of tag. The object simply to hit the opponent's target area before they hit you. It is a game where absence of ego is stressed, and total control something to strive for. Someone who is good at sparring not only hits with just the right amount of power, but also strategizes well, making a new plan or combination in the midst of flying fists.

At white belt, two stripes, I learned to see sparring for what it is; a game with little stakes, unless one becomes out of control. Shelly was my sparring partner, an enthusiastic, lower ranking woman in our *dojo*. White belts, most teachers will agree, are the most dangerous people to spar. They know only hard.

We had just begun to spar when Shelly's kick came at me. I stepped out of the line of fire, blocking it with a downward sweep of my left arm. "Ow." I wasn't quick enough. Taking out my mouth guard, I said, "*Sensei* said *ju-kumite*. Fight soft. That was way too hard and below the belt."

"Oss." Shelly replied, a word meaning either yes or no. She courtesy bowed and shouted, "Eeeeahhh," taking fighting stance.

"Eeeep." I *kiaied*, stepping into my fighting stance as Shelly roundhouse kicked me in the kneecap, then flew at me with an out-of-control backfist to the head.

Damn. I extended my right foot in a hard front kick into Shelly's stomach. I hadn't wanted to do that. Shelly doubled over, clutching her abdomen.

"*Yame.*" *Sensei* shouted from across the room. We stopped, courtesy bowed to each other, then looked toward *Sensei* for further instruction. "I'll take Tracey," she said.

I ran to where *Sensei* was standing, completed the courtesies and took fighting stance. *Sensei* began the fight with a reverse punch. Grabbing my stomach with one hand, I breathed out as I was hit, and attempted to block *Sensei*'s roundhouse kick with the other arm. The kick came in, knocking my hand up against my head. I retreated as *Sensei* advanced like a demon. Backfist, reverse-punch, front kick, backfist, ridgehand, spinning back kick.

Shit. Shit. Shit. I took the hits, tasting blood against my mouth guard. It had begun to feel like an orthodontic torture device. Woosh. I felt the air being forced out of my stomach as another punch came in. Winded, I took *kiske*, the ready position, and bowed out of the fight.

Sensei took out her mouth guard, giving me a *kiai* of the eyes. It was the kind of look that had been rumored to kill men when given by the Karate masters of old, had even been classified into the art known as *kiaijutsu*. "Next time you feel like beating up on a lower rank, remember what goes around comes around."

I think that day I finished class in a childish manner, refusing to answer any of *Sensei*'s questions, as I normally would, and refusing to make eye-contact, focusing instead on a point just beyond *Sensei*'s head when addressed. That I was upset was visible to everyone, a fact that made matters worse when considering one of the main tenants of Karate is to treat the expected and the unexpected the same.

Chapter Five

Sixth Kyu - White Belt, Three Green Stripes

Comply With Me

“When you hear others talk, listen to them earnestly, as if their talk were rich in substance, however empty it sounds to you, so that they will not hesitate to tell you whatever is in their minds. Let them talk freely and without interruption.”

Tsunetomo Yamamoto
Hagakure, The Book of Hidden Leaves

As white belts, *Sensei* Kathleen introduced our class to the concept of internal fighting. “What differentiates *GoJu* from other fighting styles, is that we fight best when we’re up close and personal.” *Sensei* Kathleen said this as she closed in on Kim.

Sensei Kathleen instructed Kim to wrap her arms around her, placing her in what’s called a front bear hug. “There are many ways to get out of this hold,” she said, “one of them lies in the ability to immediately soften when grabbed. It’s very hard to do.” *Sensei* Kathleen’s body slackened a little when Kim wrapped her arms around her. Her voice was soft when she said, “Whatever you want to do, we’re doing.” With that, she leaned forward, brushing her lips against Kim’s. Kim jerked away, releasing her as we all laughed.

“This time I’ll pick on Tracey,” *Sensei* said, motioning for me to grab her the same way. Placing my arms around her, she said, “There are three options in a self-defense

situation, fight, flight, and negotiate. The technique we just did can end with flight or negotiation. This technique ends with fighting.

Sensei fisted her hands then extended the middle knuckles of her two middle fingers. “These are called *epon-kens*,” she said, again letting her body soften and then speaking. “Whatever you want to do, we’re doing.” As she spoke, I felt the light pressure of *Sensei*’s knuckles near my ribcage. Suddenly her knuckles dug into a spot between my ribs, causing me to jump as I released her. She then motioned as though she were running her foot down my shin, ending with a stomp to the top of my foot.

“At this point the attacker would probably bend forward, at which time you could upper-cut them with an elbow strike to the chin, then follow up with a hammer fist to their spine.” She demonstrated the techniques, all up-close and personal. “Styles such as *Tae-kwon do*, which is Korean, are external,” she said. “They do lots of kicks, where we rely on our hands. *Aikido* is Japanese, like *GoJu*, but focuses on revectoring the opponent’s energy.”

Will I ever have a complete understanding of this Karate thing, I wondered? The martial arts seemed so overwhelming. It was a world unto itself. First, there was all this bowing stuff we had been introduced to, along with rules about headbands and color of uniforms. Karate is based on courtesy and discipline, we were told.

Then, there was all this technology related to self-defense moves. No matter how many times we did the stuff in the classroom, I couldn’t seem to remember it once I left. Add that to all the Japanese terminology, and facts inherent just to USA *GoJu*, and I was frustrated.

To top it off, *Sensei* Kathleen said I should help her teach a children's class each week. "If you want to master something, you should teach it." She said this over and over. I began to assist in an after-school Karate class with students ranging from five to ten years old. I'm too new at this to be able to assist with anything, I thought.

Sensei Kathleen played the *kako/kiske* game with the kids. The only position you're allowed to move from when in *kako*, the attention position, is *kiske*, the ready to work position. When the student moved into the wrong stance at her deliberately erroneous command, they had to do push-ups. As we weren't tricked very often in our morning class, I was not used to the game. It seemed as though I spent more time doing punishment push-ups than helping.

I had to teach the hard and soft blocking systems facing the children, in mirror image. I barely knew the material facing the front, much less doing it in mirror image. I loved the class, but hated it. The kids were great. They were annoying as hell. I'd try to teach a move while Nickie shoved Rachel, and little Emily stood in her spot watching herself blow spit bubbles in the mirror.

"You're right foot moves this way," I'd repeat for the hundredth time.

"We're having a professional decorator make our house pretty for Christmas," Emily stops spitting to say.

"That's wonderful," I respond. "You're right foot moves this way."

"The child is more important than the move," *Sensei* Kathleen said when I shared my frustration. "All we want to do is give them the tools to cope a little bit better in this world. If we've done that, we've done our job."

“Karate is for everyone, but everyone isn’t for Karate.” *Sensei* said this phrase repeatedly to our class, then showed that she meant it in kids’ class.

A lady brought in her little boy, who was autistic. He had trouble focusing, and constantly interrupted class shouting out, “Dirty feet! Dirty feet!” *Sensei* ignored the outbursts and moved on. The children learned to ignore the outbursts as well. *Sensei* brought in an extra teacher, to give the child one-on-one attention. As years went by, I watched *Sensei* teach more special needs children than I can remember. No one was ever turned away.

Sensei Kathleen would speak to us at the end of our morning class, as we sat in *sayza*, the formal kneeling position. Sometimes the new-age music of Kitaro would be playing. Other times top-forty, oldies rock and roll, or Baroque would be in the background, music we had told *Sensei* Kathleen that we liked.

“Karate means empty-hand. *Kara* is empty. *Te* is hand. Tracey, what are the five animals we refer to in USA *GoJu* Karate?”

“The lion, the tiger, the snake, the dragon, and the crane.”

“And what qualities do we try to take from the animals?”

“The lion is power, the tiger speed, the snake patience, the dragon is the ability to ride like the wind, and the crane is balance.”

“Good. When *Sensei* Green and I were new black belts, we were asked to give our favorite Karate saying. *Sensei* Green gave his, not fully realizing at the time, how true it was on so many levels. “He said, ‘A Karate man’s pride is his balance.’ I think then, he was just referring to the body’s ability to remain centered. We’ve since

discussed the importance of the internal aspects of balance. *GoJu* literally translates into hard and soft. It is the balance between the two that we strive for each day, both physically and in the way we conduct our lives. *Go corizon.*” Sensei said the phrase meaning, thank you for doing what is expected of you, then bent her forehead to the triangle she had formed with her fingers on the ground.

The class mirrored the action, answering with the phrase which means thank you for teaching us. “*Go corazama dashita, Sensei.*”

Master Kay says that everything in life, except for one’s relationship with their religion, is set in the alley. What he means is that in every conversation or action between two people, there is a battle waging. Either consciously, or unconsciously, a power struggle has been played out.

About a year into my training, at the end of my time as a white belt, I heard him use the expression, “go to war,” for the first time. He was talking about a discussion he had been having with someone, and said, “It wasn’t important enough for me to go to war over.”

I started thinking about what he’d said, though I could barely comprehend what he meant. I thought about my relationship with my husband, about the idea of picking and choosing my battles. Barry and I had a good relationship. We didn’t fight often, and when we did it was usually over in minutes. I thought about the problems that sometimes cropped up with the people close to me, about being taken advantage of

due to my reluctance to ever say no. I thought about what was important to me, and what I'd ever go to war over.

I knew I wanted my green belt, which would be my next promotion. I wanted it with a passion evident in the way I had immersed myself in Karate classes, relentless about attendance, and surrounded myself with any texts I could find on the history of martial arts.

Master Kay had written a book called Beginning Karate, which was geared to children, and useful in getting an idea of the different sensei in our *ryu*. Peter Urban's book, The Dojo, was interesting, giving a little broader overview of the style and Karate history, while Peter Hyam's Zen in the Martial Arts touched on the philosophical aspects I enjoyed so much. I wanted to read more, as reading had been my favorite pastime since childhood, but *Sensei* Kathleen encouraged us to take our Karate lessons from the doing rather than the reading.

Other than really wanting my green belt, I was content. Laura was happy in school, involved with friends and activities. Max was walking and amusing me with the antics of a one year old. Barry was immersed in work, scheduling many presentations and social gatherings for which I catered, then entertained his clients. These functions went so well that the little catering business I had started was beginning to grow. I was also still working part-time as a flight attendant.

It was as a flight attendant that Master Kay's words began to sink in. The flight to Aruba was oversold, meaning the airline had caused a situation in which there were more passengers than seats. Not an uncommon scenario in December.

“Will you look at this special meal list?” Chantal, a flight attendant I had gotten friendly with the flight before, was the galley slave. After boarding I had gone to the aft of the plane to see if I could assist her. “Two-hundred and ten kosher meals. Always happens this time of year.”

“I want club soda, I want more peanuts, I want my kosher meal.” Fred, another flight attendant, began to sing to the tune of *Havanagilah*.

“Do you need anything from up front?” I asked Chantal? I needed to get away before I confronted Fred. Earlier he had made a comment about this flight being a “Jew Canoe”, now this. I thought about whether I really wanted to start the day out with an argument. Fred didn’t know I was Jewish.

Many flight attendants don’t realize that Jews come in all shapes and sizes. Some have blonde hair, green eyes, and Cajun names like Broussard. I thought about whether saying something to Fred would do any good in the long run. Probably not. He’d just censor what he said around me in the future. It wouldn’t change his real feelings, feelings which came about, I’m sure, due to the behavior of the Jewish passengers Fred had encountered on previous flights.

Working as a flight attendant taught me that many prejudices exist for a reason. As much as I tried not to pre-judge what a flight would be like due to the destination, or passenger majority, I was unsuccessful. Did that mean that I said cruel, or racist things? No. But did I prevent myself from wrinkling my nose at the prevalence of perfume-smothered body odor when boarding a plane to Haiti? No. Can I truthfully say that I didn’t avoid flying Caracas (dubbed crack-butt by many flight attendants,)

trips because I have experienced the majority of passengers treating the flight attendants as though we were some mad cow diseased sub-human peasant species?
No.

What right did I have, then, to call Fred on his anti-Semitic remarks? Truth is, we live in a society rank with anti-Semitism. It wasn't the first time I'd heard comments like Fred's. Additionally, it's a pain in the ass to deal with special meals on the plane. And many passengers who order kosher meals have been known to be demanding, and out right nasty, if things aren't exactly to their liking.

I also didn't want to think about what Chantal said about people running away from Christmas. I was scheduled to work on Christmas. That meant I couldn't fly home to enjoy the holiday with my parents and children, as Barry and I didn't celebrate in our household. The most difficult thing about having converted to Judaism was getting through Christmas.

Christmas was a big deal when I was growing up. Though our family didn't focus on its religious aspect, they were obsessive about family unity. Our doors were always open during the holiday season. Friends and family would fill our living room while Daddy fingered his trumpet, a few off notes, then played "The Saints Go Marching In," a conga line of revelers marching down the block to the fire station, the engine accompanying us back, sirens proclaiming our presence to those who stayed in on these icy Christmas Eves. "And too all a good night," Mama would finish as she tucked my sister and me into bed, "Now you must sleep," though we didn't want to. We wanted to watch Daddy's friend, Mr. Forrest, dress up like Mama in her evening gown and beehive wig, the feather boa she hid in the closet for such occasions. Herb

Albert's "Whipped Cream" blared. As Mr. Forest stood on the table, stripping, Stacey and I peeked round the corner.

Mama always caught us and chased us back to bed. Then her Fender would come out. Daddy would hook up the amp. I would lie warm beneath the covers sniffing the lemon polish of the shiny wood paneling, replaying the party, the olives topping my fingers like crowns. The games of hide and seek, the gift of Baby Alive, the things I'd shape with my new Play Doh, the cookies and milk we'd left on the table.

Christmas time now made me sad. I never regretted converting because my beliefs conflicted with the teachings of Catholicism. I never could have anticipated, however, how much I would miss some of the rituals.

Frozen. The kosher meals were all frozen. The airplane had leveled off enough to allow Chantal to begin loading the meal carts. During pre-flight, she had only counted the racks of sandwiches. She hadn't thought to check for sub-zero temperature.

"Why don't you heat them," I asked?

"I have no empty oven racks. And the sandwiches are wrapped in plastic. If I unwrap them, they won't be kosher any more."

"We ready, baby?" Fred poked his head into the galley.

Chantal kicked the cart door shut.

"When you're finished hurting the equipment, will it be my turn?"

"Those idiots gave us frozen food." Chantal turned towards him.

"Hello. Isn't that always what they give us?" Fred wrapped his hands around my

neck, pressing his thumbs into my shoulder blades. I had found that giving massages was a favorite pastime of some male flight attendants. I shrugged him away.

Bells started to ring. The passengers were call-light happy, making Paula and I bounce back and forth like Ping-Pong balls between the cabin and galley. “Another tomato juice, no ice, club soda, Diet Coke, deck of cards. When are we going to do the service? We’re not going to have any drinks left.”

Tearing the special meal list in two, Paula and I played food police. Some of the passengers who watched the people being served in the rows before them, realized that the sandwiches were frozen. They were claiming to not have ordered a special meal. They wanted the meatloaf, only we didn’t have enough to go around.

“Your president is going to hear about this.”

“What kind of airline serves frozen hockey-pucks to their passengers.”

“This is no way to do business.”

“What am I going to feed my children? They haven’t eaten in hours.”

“I’m sorry. Sorry. So sorry. It’s my fault. I didn’t realize the meals were frozen. We’ll give you meal vouchers when we land.” I felt nauseous.

“That doesn’t help us now.” The woman’s bracelet jangled in front of my face.

“Would you like a complimentary drink?”

“Can’t you warm these in the oven?” She handed me her family’s sandwiches.

“I’ll have to unwrap them.” Unwrapping would mean they weren’t kosher any more.

“It’s okay. God will understand that my kids are hungry.”

I unwrapped the sandwiches in the aft galley, using some tin foil I had swiped from first-class to cover the bread. Otherwise the crust would end up like stone.

Paula flung the divider curtain shut as she stormed into the galley. Her hair was askew, and her face flush. “I can’t believe these people. A woman asked me for cookies off of the regular trays. I told her there weren’t any extra. Then I saw her picking up one that had fallen on the floor.”

“Gross.” I turned the oven switch to heat the sandwiches.

“Why are you doing that?”

“It’s for a family with kids.”

“You did your job. It’s not our fault the stuff was frozen. Why make extra work for yourself?” Paula pulled out the fruit salad she had brought from home.

“I wouldn’t want to see my kids hungry.”

By the end of the flight, people were pushing each other in their anxiousness to deplane. Chantal and I were the last off. As we rolled our suitcases down the jet bridge, we commented about what a tough day it had been. I stopped to adjust the bungee cord which attached my suitcase to the rolling cart. Chantal reached the door to the terminal then turned around, calling out, “Goodbye. Maybe next time we work together it’ll be better. This wouldn’t have been so bad if it weren’t for those Jews. I wish all Jews were dead.”

Standing on the jet bridge, I stared at her retreating back. I couldn’t move. Run after her, I told myself. You have to do something. I wanted to hit her. Say something, I told myself, anything. But I couldn’t. All I could do was think about my children. I kept picturing Laura’s strawberry curls and blue eyes, Max’s blonde

hair and chubby cheeks. I felt tears slipping from my eyes as I kept thinking, how could anyone wish my babies dead? At that time I didn't think about myself, nor consider the weakness my inability to go to war at Chantal's statement, implied.

Chapter Six

Fifth Kyu - Green Belt

Lesson From The Heavy Rain

"Here is my lesson from the heavy rain: on your way, you meet a shower. You dislike to get wet, so you hurry along the streets running under the eaves. Still, you get wet all the same. As long as you accept that you will get wet, you won't suffer from being wet."

Tsunetomo Yamamoto
Hagakure, The Book of Hidden Leaves

I wanted my green belt more than any other promotion. Perhaps it was because green was the first colored belt we received, after wearing a white belt for so long. Other styles receive a rainbow of colors such as yellow, orange, blue and red from almost the beginning. Most likely, I wanted my green belt because of Daniel.

Daniel is my age and is a pilot. We met when we were in our early twenties, and he was still a flight attendant. I was married by then, and had Laura. I was intrigued by this man who was learning to fly airplanes, had done Karate, and who spoke seven languages. He had lived all over the world, grew up negotiating the quicksand's of Africa with a stick. And he could make me laugh. He amused me. I too wanted to fly airplanes, do Karate, speak other languages, and travel.

Despite my wonderful pass privileges, Barry's job and parenthood made travel a rarity. Living in South Florida had helped to sharpen my skills in Spanish, but French

was still lost on me. Though I tried classes once or twice, I had trouble retaining the knowledge. As for flying, that too turned out to be a difficult thing.

“You’re going to kill yourself,” Barry said when I insisted on flying lessons. This was years ago, not long after I had met Daniel. “What about Laura? What’ll it be like for her to grow up without a mother?”

“I’m not going to kill myself.”

“You just wrecked the car driving out of a parking spot, for God’s sake.”

“It was two a.m., and I was tired from my trip. I can’t help it that I forgot the wheels were angled.” And so our conversations went.

I held firm to my desire, until the day that I soloed the airplane. Everything had been smooth until the final approach. A different instructor had taken me up for a trial run, a few moments before. It was the same airport, the same landing pattern I’d flown at least forty times. Only this instructor had made a big deal of pointing out some power lines on final. Power lines that hadn’t bothered me until I soloed. I was aware of avoiding wake turbulence, was on the correct glide path, had reduced flaps and achieved optimum approach speed. Glancing down at the landing lights, I saw red over white. All right. Then I noticed the power lines. They appeared to loom up at me from the ground, like a giant spider’s web.

I added power sure that she would hit the wires otherwise. I was coming in too hot. A go-around was necessary. The second time around was the same. Beautiful radio communications, perfect maneuvering until final. I went around again. And again. My blouse was wet from perspiration, my heart beating like a metronome on speed. I recalled Barry’s words that very morning, then began to do the deep

breathing exercises I'd learned as an actress. Laughing off the next missed approach, I cracked a joke with the guys in the tower. Whatever happened, I would not go down sounding like a hysterical woman.

I didn't mind hysteria if it was a strategy, but losing control now was the last thing I wanted to do. Truth was, though, that no matter how calm I sounded on the radio, in the end it was out of my hands. I'd had no choice but to give up control, letting power out all the way, or else I never would have landed safely. A few weeks later I "gave in" to Barry's wishes.

Daniel reacted to my quitting by taunting me, calling me chicken, and taping a sign on my back while I was at work, reading, "I need a date." It wasn't until an hour into the flight that I found out why all of the coach passengers were grinning.

I'll get you back, I vowed, then placed calls to him pretending to be a bill collector or the IRS. But that wasn't enough. I wanted to best him at something. He'd gotten to green belt before injuring his hand and quitting Karate. I had to get at least that far.

Sensei Kathleen said that green belt is the rank where most students leave Karate. She said it so often, in fact, that it seemed to be a dare or challenge elicited whenever things got rough.

"I *know* Urban's *bo* is a difficult *kata*. I've seen many people cry over it. Not to mention those who've quit Karate while learning it."

Not me, I'd mentally reply. Twirling around a big stick is not going to cause Karate to be on my lengthy tried and failed list. Urban's *bo* is a *kata* made for the *hojutsu*, or Long *Bo*, which translates as *way of the stick*. Made from materials such

as wood, bamboo, Plexiglas, and metal, the correct size of the long *bo* is three inches taller than the practitioner's head.

To save money, *Sensei* Kathleen suggested we buy wooden dowels from Home Depot, rather than costly *bo*'s from the Karate store. She neglected to mention the significant weight difference in bamboo, or competition *bo*'s, to the heavy rods we had purchased. Lisa, a fellow student and our resident artist, tapered our *bo*'s for sleekness and comfort, leaving us blissfully ignorant to the ease with which we could have wielded a *bo* of bamboo.

In the midst of *bo* training, I had planned an elaborate dinner party for some of Barry's best clients. The morning of the dinner I'd had to call it off. Doubled over in pain, I lay on my bed and thought this is what it must feel like to die. I hadn't slept at all the night before, my ribcage in such pain that to touch it felt as though I were being slammed with a two-by-four. I didn't want to awaken Barry or alarm him, but couldn't imagine what was happening to me.

About six Tylenol's later, I thought of the *bo*. There's a place in Urban's *Bo*, where sharp strikes to your opponent's ribs are administered. Unlike fighting in actuality, however, in *kata* you are fighting an invisible man. With no opponent's ribs to strike against, the *bo* cuts through the air making a short stop on the practitioner's ribs. The hits hadn't feel nearly as bad when I executed them.

I called Barry's clients and cancelled dinner, making up an excuse about a sudden stomach virus. I was too embarrassed to tell them I was in bed crying because I had beat myself up with a big stick.

As white belts, we had trained and were tested on the *escrima*, or short stick. I had lived through that course without any injury. Hurting myself taught me a new respect for weaponry. Like the *escrima*, the *bo* is a multi-dimensional weapon. Not only are these weapons useful in *kata*, they're easily accessible in reality. A *bo*, for example, could be a pool cue or a broom stick. A pointy umbrella or leg of a chair could be used as an *escrima*.

We learned the defensive properties of the weapons, with the addition of sweeping people out or taking them down with the *bo*. There were prescribed techniques, blocks, and strikes that had to be mastered before one could be certified as knowing the basics of a weapon. Once certified, we could then buy a cool red patch with a picture of said weapon on it, to sew onto our *gis*.

The patch or certificate one received after completion wasn't much on my mind. What mattered was that I not make an idiot of myself in testing. In order to not do something stupid, I would've had to spend many hours practicing and had luck enough not to go brain-dead when Master Kay called on me for a technique.

Weapons testing took place at Master Kay's *dojo*, a small warehouse in an industrial suburb of Fort Lauderdale. As this was only the second time we were preparing to go to him, tensions and nerves were running amok. Jessica, a newcomer to our class, injected a sense of humor into our serious group.

Jessica would go into testing for her *escrima* certification, while we accomplished the *bo*. "*Arnis de mano* means harness of the hand," *Sensei* Kathleen told Jessica. "Remember that because it'll be on your written test."

We were required to take eight weapons seminars in all, and with each seminar came a written test. The tests were written and corrected by *Sensei* Jane, Master Kay's wife. She was a sixth degree black belt held in awe by the students due to her wealth of knowledge on the martial arts. Her insistence on a written component to each test insured that the students of this *ryu* would learn not only how to wield a weapon, but be able to intelligently discuss its history, advantages, disadvantages, and more.

"Harness de menstro," Susan said as we left the *dojo* that morning. "That's how I'll remember it. Did you ever wear one of those belts for your Kotex?" she asked.

Before I had time to reply she was on to Kim. "Guess what? The embroidered hankies you brought us back from Maderia came in handy this morning. There was no toilet paper in the dance academy's bathroom, but luckily I had your gift on me." Susan grinned.

Kim said nothing, unlike the week before when she had presented us with the handkerchiefs. Bubbling with enthusiasm, she spoke as we readied ourselves for class. "Maderia has a fascinating history. Nuns and pirates, pirates plundering nuns. Inbreeding. The people on Maderia are so ugly, they look as though they've escaped from a Picasso painting."

I needed to practice for my *bo* test, but Grandma wanted to go shopping. Both Mom and Grandma were visiting, and though Mom thought the better deals had been

in New York, when I had taken them to 14th Street, Grandma thought South Florida to be just as good.

“I need a white blouse,” Grandma said.

Grandma had 48 white blouses in her closet. The last thing she needed was another one. “And I want a white dickey, too.” I never understood Grandma’s desire for dickeys, the pseudo-blouse that’s really just a collar to wear under another shirt, nor have I ever met another person who actually wore one. But never mind, that’s what Grandma wanted, and I wanted her to be happy.

Shopping would make Mom happy, too, though it wasn’t as easy for me to find her in stores anymore, now that she had stopped wearing her hair in a beehive. “Oh, no, your Grandma’s headed for the makeup counter again,” she said, when we reached the mall. Mom darted into the men’s wear, pretending not to know Grandma. I watched from a closer distance.

“That’s my granddaughter over there,” Grandma said to the saleslady, pointing at me. “Look at how handsome her husband is.” She flipped open her wallet, displaying a picture of Barry dressed like Super-Man, with the words Mortgage Man scrawled across his chest. She’s softening her up for the kill, I thought, knowing what would come next. “My granddaughter’s a flight lieutenant,” Grandma said, the saleslady looking confused. Grandma often mixed up words.

Attendant was lieutenant, daiquiri’s were zacharines, computers were compooters.”

“I’m looking for a foundation,” she told the woman.

“What’s the name of it?”

“You know, it’s on the Coke bottle.”

“What?”

“Beige. It’s beige, with the word before it that’s on the Coke bottle.”

“Excuse me?”

About this point, Grandma would start to get belligerent. I had seen this same conversation take place for at least three years, ever since Estee’ Lauder stopped making this particular shade of foundation. If Grandma were one of the elements *Sensei* Kathleen sometimes talked about, she would be water. *Sensei* had often brought up that with consistency, water was able to wear down rock. Like a river, Grandma relentlessly ran her course, pursuing what she wanted.

“Now honey, it’s the word they put on the Coke bottle that didn’t used to be there. I know you know it. That’s the color foundation I want.”

“Classic?”

“That’s it! Classic Beige. Could you please give me one Classic Beige?”

“I’m sorry. We discontinued that color three years ago.”

“Shit,” Grandma said as she walked away.

“Shit,” I said when I stood before Master Kay, turning the wrong way in Urban’s *Bo*.

We’d left in a caravan, with *Sensei* in the lead. Kim followed closely, with Jessica jumping out of her car at a red light, to expose her chest up against Kim’s window. Either she didn’t notice or didn’t care about the state trooper three cars ahead.

I wished I possessed some of Jessica's inhibitions. Not that I wanted to flash people in the street. But it sure would be nice to test in front of Master Kay without wanting to wet my pants.

"You fail," he said, when I had finished mutilating Urban's *Bo*. "Go in the parking lot and practice, then come back when Jessica's finished her test."

I stomped through the puddles, ignoring the drizzle as I did my form over and over. If I had been relentless, like a river from the beginning, perhaps I could have saved myself the rain.

Chapter Seven

Fourth Kyu – Purple Belt

Mastering Servitude

“When one departs for the front, he should carry rice in a bag. His underwear should be made from the skin of a badger. This way he will not have lice. In a long campaign, lice are troublesome.”

Tsunetomo Yamamoto
Hagakure, The Book of Hidden Leaves

The rank of purple belt is fourth *kyu*, exciting because one has made the half way mark, only four ranks left before testing for black belt. The only thing I remember about achieving my purple belt is that it meant more of the same as white or green belt. There was more information to know when test time came, and more obligations to fulfill in order to do my part in the *ryu*. And then there were the *sai*.

The *sai* are the first bladed weapon *GoJu* practitioners train with, and one that introduces an element of danger to the workout. There are many stories of the stitches received compliments of the *sai*. The *sai* is a heavy weapon, made of metal with a handle. It is optimally three inches longer than the distance between your elbow and finger tips, tapered to a point, with three-inch prongs sticking out on both sides of the blade. Picture a hand held pitchfork with shortened prongs on the outside edges. No, wait, picture the devil holding one of these modified pitchforks in each

hand, light flashing off of the metal as he flings them out to do flip strikes, circular dexterities in opposite directions, pokes, and 180° catches in order to hook your opponent with the prong in order to, say, kick him off of your foot. Then imagine the *sai* used for stop power, that is, a motion designed to immobilize your opponent.

This would involve things such as puncturing his lung with the shaft of the weapon, striking to the top of his head or down the base of his spine. Add to that come-alongs, or alternative to deadly force properties, which are contingent upon grabbing a person's hand and then sliding the correct prong around his wrist in order to control the joint causing enough pain to be able to move him to where you want him to go without resistance.

Did I forget to mention the *sai kata*, *Kenkaku Sai*? The name means *crane on a rock*. Placing closed *sai* in each hand, flip them open as you fall backward, stopping in just enough time to catch yourself, floating both arms upward as though you were a giant crane displaying your wings. When the *sai* are directly above your head, lower them in front of your face, all the way below your waist, then up over your head again. Now criss-cross them bringing the blades right below your chin and pause for a moment as you frame your face with the weapons. Unwrap your hands while keeping your wrists touching, slide the *sai* across each other, bring the right *sai* behind your body as you lift your right leg, poke up to the sky with the right *sai*, and pivot around about past 190° to the forty-five degree angle in the back right corner of the room. Do this while accomplishing a downward block with your right *sai*. This is just the break, or opening to the *kata*.

The *sai* is an evil weapon, with an evil *kata*. One could make a sawed-off *sai*, leveling the blade to be even with the prongs to make what looks like a baby pitchfork. This would be an excellent tool for someone who wanted to move resisting people without unduly hurting them, or drawing attention to the fact that one was carrying a large, bladed weapon. And if using the prongs in an alternative to deadly force didn't result in making the person come along, one could always flip the weapon around and whack that pesky bandit on the head with the heavy metal handle.

I say the *sai* is an evil weapon not because it is such a deadly, powerful weapon in the hands of the trained practitioner. I think the *sai* is evil because it made me cry. And I don't mean while banging myself in the head practicing, though I daresay I've done enough of that. I cried while trying to learn the *sai kata*.

To think I was eager to get my purple belt because that meant I could learn the *sai*. Purple is a color often associated with royalty, holiness, being exalted. Perhaps this is the reason learning *sai* comes when it does. Just when the practitioner's ego begins to swell from the higher rank and darker belt color, she is cut down quicker than the grain for which the *sai* was originally intended to plow.

From plow to instrument of my torture. Never mind that the *sai* had a grand and glorious history, enabling the disarmed Okinawans to fight back against the oppressive Samurai. That it could be launched in such a way to pierce Samurai armor, giving the user greater combative distance. I took it personal that the *sai* didn't like me. *Sensei* and I stood in the corner of the dojo, my other classmates working independently on their particular needs. She went over the particular move she was teaching me, five, six, seven, maybe eight times. She had tried to teach me

this move the week before. It wasn't that I hadn't practiced. I had. It was just that my body didn't want to pivot while poking, spin around then block with a flourish. My hands didn't even want to hold the *sai*. They hurt. If you've ever tried holding something really heavy in your hands for a long time, then bent your wrists back and forth until the bones were popping from the movement, then you can imagine what the *sai* feel like.

Sensei kept trying to make me focus, pay attention. "Do you understand this move?" She asked. Dazed and confused expression. "Here, where you pivot and make the downward block." I looked around and down to where I was supposed to turn, started to sniffle. I sneaked my finger up to wipe the snot from my nose, not wanting her to see me cry. Didn't she see how hard I was trying? I just couldn't get it. "Oh, shit, you're crying," she said. "Don't feel bad. I cried when I learned *sai* too." She rotated to another student, leaving me to work on the moves alone.

"Don't be discouraged when you can't seem to get something," *Sensei* said at the end of class. "Either one of two things will happen. You'll get it, or you'll quit."

Learning *sai* may have made me want to quit Karate, but more than that it made me mad. I decided to learn the *kata*, do it until the moves were something to be proud of, and then quit. That'll show her, I thought.

Of course, that isn't what I did. I loved Karate too much. And *Sensei* Kathleen. She was a guiding force in my life, my time in the Karate *dojo* something rare and precious. Though at times training was tumultuous, it was nothing compared to the chaos that reigned in my household.

Our front door practically revolved from the frequency with which friends and family came to visit. I pulled out the sofa bed and made up the couches for Barry's boyhood friends, playing den mother to this group of goofballs who hadn't had a visit in way too long.

Having just completed a year of expanding and remodeling our yellow fifties kitchen, we now boasted a gas stove, indoor grill, and marble slab for baking. Barry said he missed his Grandma Weinstein's knishes. When we lost Grandma, we lost her recipe for crispy knish dough. I've heard so many stories about how pots and pans would be strewn about, potato peels and kasha kernels littered the counters and the floor, beads of perspiration on Grandma's forehead as she punched down the dough, formed the knishes, cleaned the kitchen as the pastries baked.

It is said that Grandma Weinstein's last words to her daughter, Dorothy, were, "Potato water." Then she died. I set out to try and re-create his grandmother's knishes. I tried every recipe for knishes I could find, settling at last on one from the book, *The Jewish-American Kitchen*. Rather than using plain water, I substituted with water first used for boiling potatoes. It made the difference. Grandma Weinstein, I guess, knew what I feel to be true. Good food can transcend even death.

When Teddy, Barry's cousin, was visiting, he said he wished he could taste his mother's jam cookies again. I called relatives until I scored an approximation of the recipe, then spent weeks toying with the margarine/butter ratio until Teddy and Gordon, Teddy's best friend, pronounced the cookies to be almost duplicates.

Had I been part of another family, people may have been bothered that I spent so much time playing around in the kitchen. My family was grateful, my mother-in-law,

Dorothy, visited frequently and helped me with catering jobs. Max puttered at my feet in his walker, then holding himself up on my legs. Laura acted as my *sous* chef, stirring, mixing, and doing taste tests.

Gordon, who had grown up with Teddy, stayed with us sometimes too. Sometimes Barry and I would join them for dinner and dancing, leaving as they caroused for single women. But mostly, they hit Miami's hot spots alone, sharing the lurid details of their conquests or failures with us the next morning at breakfast.

As Grandma and my niece, Haven, were often visiting at the same time as Teddy and Gordon, the gossip would have to be put on hold. Teddy and Gordon were perfect gentlemen around Grandma. Gordon was especially attentive, taking snapshots with Grandma and buying her friendship cards when their vacations were over.

"Damn shame," Grandma said one morning as they drove away.

"What," I asked?

"That those boys are queers. They could've made some women nice husbands." Teddy and Gordon would've freaked had they heard Grandma's words. My laughter was short-lived, when not more than an hour later Grandma shuffled into the kitchen with the announcement, "Haven has boogers again."

"They're not boogers. They are called lice. I wish you would stop saying I have boogers on my head." Haven stomped into the room, screeching at Grandma.

The summer before my sister had sent Haven to visit me without checking her head first. I couldn't believe the same thing was happening again. In the past year, we were about two weeks into Haven's visit the whole household was scratching.

My babysitter was in a panic. She had just spent eighty dollars for a multitude of synthetic braids. How on earth would she pick the nits out of little bitty braids? And for that matter, would boogers survive on fake hair? Who could she ask? Certainly not her hairdresser. Sabrina worked out of her house, and having children of her own would certainly not want them exposed.

Grandma had been in a state bordering hysteria. Even though I spent two hours in the direct sunlight picking out the nits, she was still too worried to keep her weekly appointment for a hair set. What if one had survived? If the hairdresser found it she would never do Grandma's hair again. And if she didn't keep the appointment, how could she be seen in public with a straight head of hair?

"I want to get my hair cut to above my ears!" Laura cried. I refused. She cried some more. We finally settled on just below the ears.

I spent two hours a day, four days in a row picking the nits out of Haven's hair. If you're fortunate enough to be unfamiliar with lice and nits, allow me to enlighten you.

There have been recent reports in women's magazines about the new strains of bionic lice, which are almost impossible to kill. How lice could not die after being smothered in medicated lice shampoo is one of life's greatest mysteries. The stuff smells like industrial strength antiseptic on steroids. If you've ever accidentally mixed bleach and ammonia, the resulting odor is similar to this smell. The shampoo is gelatinous, and must be left on for a long length of time, or the lice won't die.

And you must be sure not to get the stuff into your kid's eyes, or they'll go blind. The best part comes when the shampoo is actually rinsed out. Grown-up lice are

relatively easy to spot, unless you have brown or black hair, that is. The lice are brown and are about the size of gnats, or no-see-ums. My mother liked to tell us about how they would smash the lice between two fingernails when they were kids, so they could hear a crackling sound.

Nits are another matter all together. Nits are unhatched baby lice, glued to strands of hair by goo mommy lice secrete while laying her eggs. If even one nit survives on a head of hair, it will be fruitful and multiply, causing another lice outbreak in the near future. To avoid this catastrophe, the manufacturers of lice removal kits include a teensy, weensy comb with teeth so close together it's difficult to get dental floss through them. This is what you must use to comb out each and every strand of your child's hair.

Grandma told us stories of the nuns at St. Alphonsus' orphanage, where she had been left when her father abandoned her family. "The nuns would lock us between their knees and plait our hair so tight that it would be almost impossible for lice to survive."

Haven was well aware of the uproar lice could cause, even admitted knowing that she had them when she first came to visit, but was embarrassed to tell me. Her refusal to cut even an inch of the worlds' thickest hair would haunt me when we went to visit them for Christmas and were faced with yet another lice outbreak. Grandma claimed it was because of their neighbors. They had three children and she didn't think they ever washed the bedding. The lice just made their way from one child to another, then jumping the fence to next door. Right.

Throughout all of this, I remained pretty calm. Except for the nightmares. The most difficult part of the entire episode was in keeping Laura and Haven to keep their mouths shut about it. God forbid my mother-in-law found out, as my two nieces and their nanny were visiting from New York.

Laura was already on probation after her last play date with them. When Carmen, the nanny, asked what they were doing, Laura replied, "We're playing lesbian." This did not endear her to Carmen. If the cousins managed to catch the boogers it would not have been a pretty picture. Their hair was so long it reached their waistlines.

I recalled my mother-in-law's bad experience with lice while she was living in New York. My nephew from the other sister-in-law caught them during mother-in-law's visit. It wasn't until Mom was back in Manhattan that the darned things were discovered.

True to my sister-in-law's calm, restrained manner, she immediately took her poor son to get a "buzz" cut. No more lice for him. Every sheet, pillow, pillow sham, and bedspread in the house was thrown away. She tried to get rid of the mattresses but couldn't get them through the doorways. Her husband said "Enough is enough." and refused to help. This decision cost him three weeks of sex. Amidst the pandemonium she remembered my mother-in-law. Calling long distance, she informed her of the possible contamination. As my mother-in-law lived alone, imagine her embarrassment at having to resort to her hairdresser to check her hair for lice.

Lucky for me, the kids had kept their mouths shut and she didn't find out about last summer's outbreak. In the thick of it all I dreamt she insisted I douse the children's hair with kerosene, as her own mother used to do.

In the dream we were having a Fourth of July party. Laura got a little carried away with her sparkler and before I knew it she and Haven were rolling in the grass trying to put out the fire on their heads. The adults were standing around, drunk, laughing. One of them said, "Boy those Chinese have come up with a winner this time. Look at their heads light up."

Though I had already spent too much of my time wrestling with lice, dreaming about them, and taking measures to prevent them, Haven's plea that morning couldn't be ignored. "Aunt Tracey, please get them off of my head now."

I had Karate in thirty minutes. It was the only time during the week that I did something solely for myself. "Can't it wait a couple of hours?"

"Puhleeez. I can't stand the thought of them."

"Okay." I felt bad about missing my class, but it wasn't as though there was anything earth shattering going on. I would miss the workout, and any new information that *Sensei* would teach, but other than that it'd be no problem.

Our class had gotten into something of a routine. Except for the *sai* that I had tackled at the beginning of my purple belt time, nothing too difficult was happening.

We strolled in a few minutes before class began, lugging huge bags filled with the personal gear we had accumulated. *Sensei* Kathleen would hang back, give us a little time to organize ourselves and gossip. "You realize this is not how we train at night,"

she said on many occasions. “In the evenings we start on time. If you’re late, too bad, so sad.”

We discussed what we thought it would be like to train at night. It would be more difficult on a personal level for some of us, as we had husbands and families. I know my husband liked to have dinner every night at a reasonable hour. My children also needed to be bathed, read to, and put to bed. As Barry was the major breadwinner, these other responsibilities fell to me. I didn’t do them begrudgingly, it was my choice to be home rather than fly a full schedule.

I still worked the occasional two-day, or turn-around flight, but I didn’t earn enough for it to matter when it came to domestic chores.

Besides the personal reasons for taking morning class, there were other issues. That there were more students in night class would mean more generality. Exercises wouldn’t be modified for the students with injuries. The students would have to take care of themselves. The exercises were probably more ballistic, more strenuous. Men were in class at night. Besides the added danger factor, the addition of men to the mix meant we couldn’t make remarks about sex or our periods in class anymore. As years had passed since our class began, *Sensei* Kathleen’s demeanor changed a little. She talked on a more personal level, sometimes about her boyfriend or the mother she doted on, other times telling us about her nephews. This kind of talk in almost unheard of in a large Karate class, no matter how many years had passed. We felt lucky to be privy to such talk, even luckier to have developed a special bond with our classmates.

Sensei Kathleen referred to us as her morning *dojo*. Later I heard tale that some of my classmates, who also took evening class, referred to morning's as "tea and Karate." While I think this may have been intended as an insult, due to the fact that we were a small, women's only class, I viewed it as a compliment.

The Samurai, Japan's ancient warrior class, embraced the motto, pen and sword in accord. To be a true Samurai, one had to excel not only in the fighting arts, but other arts as well. Calligraphy, flower arranging, and the tea ceremony were but a few of the skills embraced by the Samurai. All of the women in our morning class had some outside skill that brought an interesting component into class.

Sensei paired each of us up with another person, saying we should work out some on our own. "You will come to need your work out partners," she said. "Working outside of class will give you a perspective you could never get within the walls of the *dojo*."

Our class decided to put together a musical *kata*, to perform as a birthday gift for *Sensei* Kathleen. For the first time, we were alone together without her.

Someone had picked the new-age music of Kitaro. Others wondered how *this* particular music had been selected, but said nothing. We stood on the lawn at Kim's house.

"My idea is that we start like this, move into this stance, then pick up the moves from Urban's *Bo* here," someone said.

"No. That's not the correct way to turn in that movement," said someone else.

"Oh, I'm sure it is."

"No. I don't think so." And so some of us stared each other down, others

muttered beneath their breath, and yet others voiced what they thought to be correct.

These were the first rumblings of dissention within our *dojo*.

Chapter Eight

Third Kyu - Brown Belt, Three Stripes

Hoppy Days are Hare Again

“Stir up your compassion for all sentient beings in order to devote yourself to the service of others.”

Minoru Tanaka
Introduction to *Hagakure*

Testing for brown belt had been the same as testing for white, green, and purple, only more so. There was more self-defense to know, more *katas* to show, a little harder sparring, and a longer written test.

I was almost three years into my Karate training when I was promoted to brown belt. “Third *kyu*, (rank below black belt),” *Sensei* Kathleen said, “her hand on my head, “Courtesy bow.” The class bowed to me, the latest in a long line of brown belt recipients, the other place in Karate training that many people quit, and the one requiring the highest level of technology and technique. The tough road ahead was not what I was thinking of, however, when I received my promotion.

That cocky, smart-alecky attitude brown belts are known for will never befall me, I thought, admiring the umber of the belt tied around my waist for the first time, feeling the flow of pride flush through my body like a tidal wave of na, na, na, na, na, na’s. I wanted to be back in the eighth grade, showing off the belt to the clique of girls who excluded and wanted to fight me because I was uncool. Not only did my

mother make me wear training bras but that I wouldn't accept the supreme authority of Donna Dolittle, the clique's exalted and esteemed leader. I wanted to be back in the moment when my sister, Stacey, chased me through the house with an axe, then ripped out handfuls of my hair. I would wield the brown belt like Wonder Woman's lasso. "Look at me you lame-brained, leprosied, lasagna-head losers. I'm going to smack those smug smiles right off your lard layered, Dr. Pepper flavored lip-glossed lips."

But these thoughts only lasted for a second. Karate is, after all, about staying in the moment. At that moment *Sensei* Kathleen was giving her welcome to the world of brown-belts speech.

"Brown belts not only have the responsibility of setting the example in the front line, they must also fulfill the many obligations of the *ryu*, school, she said." Since those of us being promoted were the highest-ranking *kyus* in class, we were used to setting the example and fulfilling obligations. This isn't to say we did them well, mind you. At that moment I should have been paying closer attention.

"Brown belts are the *dojo* teenagers," *Sensei* continued. "They think they know everything, are always arguing with their teacher. You may not think you'll become this now, but trust me, you will." What is *Sensei* Kathleen talking about, I wondered? Not only did I rarely argue with her, she was always lecturing me for not thinking highly enough of myself. "If I could only show you how good you are," she said time and time again as I did *kata* and technique for her during testing for the brown belt.

I wasn't as bad at this Karate thing as I thought I would be when I started. But I certainly wasn't good. That I passed the brown belt test without a problem was due

to *Sensei's* excellent teaching. Period. All in all it was a deceptively easy start to the desert that forms the brown belt years.

Like the desert, the things one learns after she's received the brown belt are harsh and unforgiving. Sweltering during the day, freezing at night, survival of the fittest at its extreme. There was a film I saw on desert life. It showed the need for the female wasp to poison a tarantula, ensuring food for the egg she will lay on the spiders back. I watched the wasp fly from hole to hole, searching for her prey. Finding the tarantula she engaged in combat, barraging the spider with stings, poison rendering it motionless. To see the wasp then drag a tarantula five times its size, measure and dig a hole large enough to fit the arachnid, was awesome.

Who would have laid odds that the wasp would win? Yet one must fight like the wasp to make it through the brown belt years, looking into the blackness, regardless of what could be beneath, unsure who in the dojo is predator, and who prey, the teachers, the students, all become suspect in the game of "how long can I stay," the black belt to come but a mirage on the horizon.

The best thing about becoming a brown belt was at this rank we were allowed to learn the *nunchucks*. Originally a farming implement, the *nunchucks* were used to thresh grain in Okinawa. When the Samurai seized all swords and weapons from the Okinawans, they became proficient in fighting with what was handy.

Nunchucks are two same sized sticks, traditionally made of wood and connected by a *himo*, or rope sometimes woven with a woman's hair. Today one can buy

practice *chucks* made from rubber, not allowed in our style, and ones made of pipe or plexi-glass sometimes connected by a chain. There are even *nunchucks* which screw together to form an *escrima*, fighting stick.

My favorites are traditional. “A weapon is most dangerous when in the hands of an untrained practitioner. I’m not talking about as danger to your opponent. It is a danger to you. *Nunchucks* are the first weapon you’ll learn in which you have to give up control in order to get it.”

Sensei Kathleen moved to a spot in front of me and began teaching dexterity. “This is inside the body toward the opponent.” She moved the *chucks* in a circular motion.

I was in awe as I watched her demonstrate. She handled the weapon with such ease. For a moment I was afraid the *nunchucks* would fly out of her hand and lob my head off. With a lesser practitioner this could have been a possibility. Not with *Sensei* Kathleen. It amazed me that she was so proficient at so many facets of Karate. If I were to get hit with anything by *Sensei* Kathleen, there could only be one reason for it. She wanted me to be hit.

“Try not to look at the weapon,” she said as I fumbled with the *nunchucks*. “Change to inside/outside the body, toward yourself.”

My wrist began the figure eight motion. The *chucks* flipped around, gaining momentum until, bam. The chuck slammed into the high-nerve endings on the top of my hand. I rubbed it.

“Keep it going.” *Sensei* Kathleen said. I started the chucks up again, got them moving, tried not to focus on the pain in my hand. “Now switch to nose breaks.” She

demonstrated holding the weapon in one hand then shooting one stick forward towards an imaginary opponent, as if to break his nose. The *chuck* struck out like a snake, then swung around backward into a circle, only to noiselessly rest in her hand on top of where the other *nunchuck* sat.

I tried it, then did my ten punishment push-ups when the *chucks* flew out of my hand. I did it again, this time smashing my head before dropping down for my ten. We continued with other dexterities, the pattern of events flowing something like this. *Sensei* Kathleen would shout out a dexterity command such as, “Reverse alternate catch.” Then I would switch positions, bang head, smash knee, drop *chucks*, drop down do ten, change hands, bang other side of head, smash other knee, fling *chucks* across room, drop down do twenty.

“If you try to hard to control them, you’ll never get it,” she said.

If I don’t control them, however will I get it, I wondered? I thought about what Master Kay had told me once about the power of the *nunchucks*. “You’ve never heard a grown man scream until you hear the howl of a *nunchuck* hit. He told me about the time he accidentally cut off a couple of good ole boys in a yellow pick-up truck. They followed him, from stoplight to stoplight, telling him to pull over. He apologized the first time, then again at the next stop light with a caveat. “You really don’t want to do this. If I get into a fight with you, this will be a day you won’t forget.”

“Pull over asshole,” the driver said at the third stop light, edging his bumper into Master Kay’s truck. Master Kay stopped on the side of the road, pulling out a pair of

nunchucks as he exited the truck. Two men jumped out of their pickup brandishing tire irons.

“Are you familiar with this weapon,” Master Kay asked as the two approached.

The men laughed. “These are iron,” one of them said, holding up the tire iron. “Yours is wood.”

“Wrong answer,” Master Kay said, as the driver of the other vehicle came swinging at him with the iron. Within a couple of seconds, literally, the tire iron had flown out of the man’s hand from the force of the *nunchucks*. Bringing the *nunchucks* back up to where they began caused the man to fall into the dirt, howling with pain from the feel of the weapon across his shin. The other man went back to the truck and locked the door. Master Kay drove away.

“Dexterity drills last for a minimum of forty-five minutes when you go to test at the *nunchuck* seminar,” Sensei Kathleen said. “You all have only been going for five. *Yame!*” She shouted for us to stop.

Thank God. I wanted to go home and pack my hands in ice. Why ever had I thought I would like the *nunchucks*?

As the *nunchucks* had flown out of my control, so went my life. When I received my brown belt, Laura was furious that I now outranked her. She was still a purple belt, yet she had been in Karate three years longer than I had. I couldn’t make her understand it was because of her age. Our style is ultra-conservative in the promotion

of children. Nothing I could say or do made it any better. Karate became a sore point between us. She still attended classes, but wouldn't let it be a thing we could share.

Interest rates were up, new mortgage lenders were aggressively pursuing Barry's clients, his bank had tightened underwriting that meant fewer loans approved, therefore less commission. Barry turned forty. I found out I was pregnant with baby number three.

We decided to downscale, put our house on the market, then started to fight.

To top things off, our house became infested with rats. In my experience, the prerequisite to rodent activity is stillness. Here I mean stillness in the sense of household inactivity. Either everyone else is settled down for the night, sleeping, or the sun has just risen and other family members have yet to awaken.

I knew our neighbor, Karen, had rats, as well as a few others on the block who admitted to it. It was winter and we lived near the water. Happened every year, the exterminators said. Karen was beside herself, as no one in her family could sleep without seeing a rat scurry past the bedroom door. Once she left a cantaloupe on the kitchen counter, to find a hole the size of a baseball gnawed into it the next morning.

I was seated on the sofa with a bowl of pasta and homework when I first heard them. Barry was out and Laura and Max were at a friend's house. The week before I had enrolled in a college writing course, and a ten-page autobiography was my assignment.

Have you ever heard the sound of rats overhead? First, there is the rapid rustle of claws skidding to a short stop, at which time your internal organs leap into your mouth. Your heart begins to beat as though you were wired to an IV of speed.

Though your cells are cringing, and every hair on your body is at attention, you sit back and doubt.

That couldn't be what I just thought it was. Surely it's my imagination. Perhaps it was something just outside the door, a cat, or falling tree branch. Then comes the intermittent scraping and scratching noise, a creak and crackle, followed by a thump of what could only be tail. You begin to wonder just how thick your ceiling is, whether or not plaster is edible. They're almost inaudible, these follow-up noises after the first skirmish of sound. Almost, but not quite.

You take your work and pasta, move to the bedroom. By all rights your appetite should have fled. But you're in the first few months of pregnancy. Sick as the sounds make you, you have to eat. You also have to get this homework done. Moments without other obligations are rare, so you must take advantage of this opportunity. The crawling overhead continues. It sounds as though you are being stalked by someone crumpling an empty potato chip bag, but though your mind tries to block it, your animal instinct screams; pestilence, plague, disease, death.

You call your husband to come and help you. He says, "I cannot." He has his reasons. They are probably very good ones. You do not hear them. You hear only the scraping overhead, the scratching that has accompanied you to the bathroom. You are sitting on the toilet with the lid down. You could leave. You probably should leave. You don't.

The three rules of defense against a weapon are; out of the line of fire, control, disarm. *Sensei* Kathleen held a wooden gun to my forehead. To properly defend against this attack, I should have first gotten out of the line of fire by dropping down as my hands concurrently shot up in a “V”, or butterfly catch. This catch consists of thumbs crisscrossing at the base and lying up against the opposite index finger.

I wondered what kind of lotion *Sensei* Kathleen was wearing this morning. It smelled nice. Perhaps it was pear or apple blossom. *Sensei* and my classmates always smelled so fresh and clean in the mornings when we worked out. I worried about how I smelled. My mother had told me I needed deodorant at twelve, and though I’d worn it since then, didn’t always think to put on lotion. I should remember in the future, I thought.

“Then you grab the barrel of the gun with your right hand, bending the attacker’s index finger backwards and breaking it as you take the gun away.” *Sensei* Kathleen demonstrated on me. As I felt my finger being bent backward, I snapped back into the moment. What had she just said?

“Could you repeat that?” I asked. Her face was expressionless as she repeated the technique. How she had not already given up on me, I don’t know.

She had said, “Oh, shit,” when I told her about being pregnant. She was concerned about the things a pregnancy would keep me from doing in Karate. The *nunchucks* had to be put away for the time being, sparring would have to be light and less often, not to mention the care now necessary in self-defense techniques, partner

work, sweeps, take downs, and so on. And I had to tell her the medical issues my pregnancy raised.

While pregnant with Laura, I was hospitalized with 105° fever due to a urinary tract infection. Three weeks into my pregnancy with Max, we had to charter a plane off the island of Bequia. While vacationing, my temperature had risen to 105° and showed no signs of receding. “It’s your appendix,” the island doctor said. “If you don’t get to the states soon it will burst and you’ll lose the baby and possibly die.” Turned out to be the first of many high fevers, kidney infections, and hospitalizations I would experience during the pregnancy.

After having Max, it was determined that my left kidney was ceasing function as the pregnancy progressed. For an unknown reason, the kidney had never grown to normal size. Now that it was completely dead, the nephrologist said it posed no problem in normal life. You may want to have it removed if you plan to get pregnant again, he had said.

Too late for that, and unsure of how difficult this pregnancy would be, I approached everything with caution. I had to sit a lot during Karate, as standing for any length of time made me dizzy. “Come to class anyway,” *Sensei* Kathleen said. “We’ll get through this together. I don’t want you to miss the important technology we’ll be covering.” *Sensei* and my classmates were ultra sensitive to my needs, ready to assist with anything whether in class or out.

We hired a lady who could drive to live in and help at home. If I became ill, we wanted to be sure the kids could still do their normal activities. And we would need help packing and organizing the house when it sold.

Why had I ever thought I would want to move into another house? It was one thing to put our house on the market when we thought we were moving up, a master suite, guest bedroom, perhaps a Jacuzzi to look forward to. Quite another to move because we weren't sure if we could make our monthly nut. I was devastated. It was the first home Barry and I had that we owned, and so many memories were tied in it. It was also the first time since childhood that I had a best friend as a neighbor.

Karen was an interior designer with a wonderful sense of humor and a son a little older than Max. We chatted while the children played and did grocery shopping together. She told me wonderful stories about her past and people she knew now, while I prepared food for my family and hers. Karen hated to cook, but she could make me laugh and cry like no one else. She also was one of the best listeners I have ever known, always making me feel that she truly cared. I knew our relationship would change without her physical proximity. We both had busy lives, and it would become an effort to get together. Lunch dates would have to be scheduled, our husbands and children's needs taking first priority. Life would become lonelier.

Sensei Kathleen repeated the gun to the forehead technique, then moved on to gun to the opposite hip, that is, the gun being held in the attackers right hand and pointed at the defenders left hip. Unlike the sandwich technique used on gun to the same hip, the gun to the opposite hip utilized the hula move. I swung my hips to the side as I practiced with my partner, trying to get the out of the line of fire straight before my move to control the weapon. The pink sponge painted walls began to spin.

Why ever did the studio owner paint the walls Pepto-Bismol pink? Beige would have been nice, or cream, or taupe. I considered the possibilities as I slowly sunk to the ground. “I need to sit down now,” I looked up and said to my partner.

“Are you okay?” She asked.

“No problem,” I whispered back.

Sensei Kathleen did her best to continue class, as the sight of me scooting to the back of the room was becoming commonplace as the pregnancy progressed.

I could have simply skipped class during this time, but didn’t want to miss anything. I also didn’t want to be left behind by my classmates. While I had tried to convince myself that rank didn’t matter, I wasn’t quite successful. The competitor in me kicked in. I had also decided that nothing would keep me from getting my black belt.

I needed to become self-reliant. Having a black belt would mean I could go anywhere and make a living as a teacher. Though I could make a living as a flight attendant, if necessary, it would mean leaving my children for fifteen days a month. I didn’t want that to be my only option.

Besides a black belt, I planned to go back to school and finish my college degree. The writing class I had enrolled in was wonderful. I was working hard, but having a great time.

Early in our marriage, Barry and I had fought about the necessity of a college degree. Having come from a blue-collar neighborhood, I was of the opinion it was unnecessary. I knew lots of people growing up who got along well without a degree.

Barry was adamant that his children should have a higher education. I told him he had been right from the beginning. I, too, should have a higher education.

Marlene, the woman we had hired to help at home told me one day that space aliens had directed invisible beams at a commercial airline that had just crashed. I had gotten many references before hiring her, one even from a judge. She started leaving copies of the New Testament around the house, told us we should turn to Jesus. One day we walked in and our mattresses were off the frame and on their sides vertically. Pots and pans were strewn about the kitchen, and things were all over the floor. Barry and I just looked at each other, then told her she was fired.

Marlene grabbed my hand and led me to my bedroom. "I don't want to be in this house anyway," she said. "The devils at work here." She pointed to a banana peel that was under my side of the bed. Max ate bananas like crazy. He must have eaten one then thrown the peel there, I thought. "Barry's got another life he's hiding from you. He's doing voodoo, and this is a spell to kill you. You'd better watch yourself, missy."

Why me, I wondered? "Not only is he doing voodoo, but he's got a lover he's going to leave you for. And it's not a woman. It's a man."

"Please leave now." Marlene packed her bags while I cleaned up the mess she had made. Luckily, the pregnancy was progressing okay. I'd had a couple of infections, but nothing serious enough to land me in the hospital. Her leaving wouldn't make much of a difference.

From the beginning of my training *Sensei* Katherine said, "You must give back to Karate what Karate has given to you. To that end, we did periodic demonstrations for

both the city, and a day care center. On this particular day, the day care center was decorated for the season. There were construction paper flowers hanging from the ceiling, Easter eggs and bunnies taped on the walls, and letter cut outs reading, “Hoppy Daze are Hare Again,” on the bulletin board.

Unlike the majority of day care centers, the clients here are not preschoolers.

They are

Senior citizens. I remember the nervousness I felt the first time I did *kata* for these people. I was sure I would screw up and probably did. Early in my pregnancy with Sam, I did *sai kata*, the pregnancy lessening my nervousness for some reason.

On this day, I bumbled through a *nunchuck kata*, sensing the nervousness of the people at someone being so close to them wielding such a violent weapon. *Sensei* Kathleen followed me with a flawless rendition of a more advanced *nunchuck* form, her speed and power awe inspiring.

Here was just another example of *Sensei* Katherine *acting*, rather than *re-acting*. I wished that I could have that much faith in my own execution. *Sensei* still visits the day care center. Only now, she goes there monthly with one or two of my classmates to teach. The senior citizens either sit or stand as they copy strikes and *kata* moves. There is one lady who is blind, and others who are wheelchair bound. Some of the students are well into their eighties. They exemplify the most important virtue of our *ryu*, “We shall always keep our fighting spirit.”

Chapter Nine

Second Kyu - Brown Belt, Two Stripes

Collapsing House

“You ought to spend your time doing whatever you like to do. This is my secret, from my own inner shrine. I personally like to sleep. I am thinking of sleeping away the rest of my life, permitting my legs to work only as much as my present circumstances require.”

Tsunetomo Yamamoto
Hagakure, The Book of Hidden Leaves

One day, for no apparent reason, *Sensei* Kathleen walked up to my workout partner, Kim, and pulled one of the black stripes off of her brown belt. “Second *kyu*,” she said with a smile. She then turned to me and did the same thing. I can only imagine the looks of surprise on mine and Kim’s faces.

“At brown belt level I don’t test you anymore,” *Sensei* said. “It’s a given that you know everything you’ll need for black belt testing. At least I know I’ve taught it all to you. From here on out it’s up to you to become better. I’ll still be here when you need me, but I won’t be holding your hand anymore.”

Yippee, I thought, ecstatic not to be subjected to the scrutiny of testing. What I didn’t understand is that, in testing terms, I had just stepped into the eye of the hurricane. There was so much information on our plates I didn’t see how it could be possible to become proficient in all of it anyway. On many times throughout our training, *Sensei* Kathleen reminded us of the Japanese philosophy, “One *kata*, three

years.” That is, the traditional Japanese practitioners believe it takes three years to learn a *kata* well enough to go on to a new form.

In the three years I had been training in *GoJu*, I was taught fourteen empty hand *katas*, six weapons *katas*, empty hand self-defense from a dozen different attacks, defense against guns, defense against knives, and defense with the aid of the *nunchucks*, *bo*, *sai*, and *escrima*. I was learning how to teach, assisting *Sensei* Kathleen once a week with a children’s class, and was fulfilling my obligations to the *ryu*, school, by scorekeeping at *shiais*, contributing to the concessions, and doing whatever else was needed at the moment. I often wished we were like the Japanese. One *kata* would have been more than enough for me to work on.

Barry didn’t understand about the obligations. Didn’t I pay for my classes every month? This wasn’t a work/study program. It seemed to be like a cult. At *shiais* he saw bunches of people in identical uniforms with patches sewn all over the place, bowing to this sensei, bowing to that sensei, kneeling, standing, responding to commands like robots.

Though I didn’t admit it to him, I, too, questioned the whole set-up. Kim and I had frequent philosophical discussions on the absurdity of some of the rules and regulations, as well as the slavish dedication displayed by many practitioners. What was wrong with these people? Didn’t they have a spine?

Why weren’t we informed in the beginning of training that to reach black belt level we had to do time in a concession stand, teach children, attend meetings concerning future concession stands, take part in candy drives, sell raffles for weapons, or keep score at *shiais*?

Why did we continue to train despite these things? It would have been much easier to earn a black belt if we went to a *Mc DoJo* down the street and signed a two thousand dollar contract. We'd outrank our former sensei in no time with the way people are promoted in these places.

In the beginning of my dissolution, I continued to train out of love. I loved Karate. I loved *Sensei* Kathleen. While I may not have liked or understood these obligations or rules, it was clear that *Sensei's* teachings came from the heart. Her love for Karate and her students shone forth in everything she did. I also loved my classmates.

Months upon months of learning with the same people in a *dojo* leads to incredible bonds or serious enemies. Each person's weaknesses become apparent as the repetition of *katas* or self-defense strip away a person's mask. *Sensei* Kathleen often said that Karate is a spiral journey to the center of yourself. I think it is also a magnifying glass into the essence of others.

Trust in your fellow students is essential. Danger is synonymous with the *dojo*, both on a physical level and a mental one as well. Students constantly spar with each other, a never-ending test of maintaining control while executing the proper kicks or strikes. It's difficult to accept that Sally hurt me because she lost control of her back fist, when instinct shouts to give Sally a taste of your front kick in the sternum. Partners are also utilized in self-defense, a place where accidents easily happen.

Then comes the clash of egos when the execution of a technique or move is in question. Who will be the hard nose, always correct and eager to share her superior knowledge with you? Are you willing to fight for your beliefs, or do you concede to the man with the bigger mouth?

How one handles herself in these situations says more about character than a thousand conversations. I was lucky to be in a class where my fellow students were of excellent character. Sure, we had our disagreements or occasional spats, just as most siblings do. But I believe we shared a mutual respect and a sincere desire to see our classmates succeed in their efforts. Not all Karate classes are so fortunate, the excesses of ego creating an environment where one can never fully let down her guard.

Not only was I able to let my guard down in the *dojo*, I downright leaned on my classmates when things at home spiraled downward. We went into contract to sell the house, and within days found a bungalow on a block off of the beach. It was half the size of our current house, but at least had three tiny bedrooms. I cried when I packed up my books to donate to the library. The ten boxes represented a huge part of my past ten years.

Within weeks of moving, I delivered Sam. Thankfully, he was spared the eight days of I.V. antibiotics that his brother suffered because of my infection. Sam did, however, have to be re-hospitalized for jaundice. After days of hospital treatment, he was sent home along with a machine to treat him there.

While the machine glowed an eerie green at the foot of our bed, I tried to get a grip on what seemed to be a surreal situation. Sam was calm now, but I knew in the morning the nurse would arrive to draw blood from his foot. It was a painstakingly slow process, horrible to watch. His heel was sore from being pricked so many times. He would continue to scream as the nurse scraped and scraped again, making sure she

had collected enough blood. I wished I could take the pain for him. There's no pain as terrible as that of your child's.

Laura and Max were adjusting well to their new brother, but it seemed as though my husband was slipping away. I felt as though the diet he was on was turning him into a domineering, distant person. We were fighting constantly. Details concerning his whereabouts weren't making sense. He said it was my imagination. I caught him in some lies. He said I was overreacting.

I felt numb at the fact that almost half of my possessions were missing from the move. Even my wedding dress was missing. The movers were claiming no responsibility.

My parents had driven from New Orleans to be there for Sam's birth, and to help us get settled. They were helping to unpack and organize the house before Sam's *bris* (ritual circumcision) was to take place. I was overwhelmed with the new baby, the new house, sure that I would've fallen apart if I hadn't had their help.

On the morning of the *bris*, my father literally drilled holes into the puddles in the street in front of the house. It had flooded from heavy rains. He didn't want the party guests to step out into water. I sat on the porch watching in disbelief. This from the man who told my mother-in-law that I had only pretended to convert, that secretly I was still a Catholic. Here he was, risking electrocution in order to make things nice for my son's *bris*. I thanked God for my strange but wonderful family.

I continued to train, working hard to leave the past where it belonged, to live in the moment. It was part of what *Sensei* Kathleen called "the way of the warrior".

That one should be patient with idiots and morons, because life is like a cherry blossom: beautiful, fragrant, fleeting. The cherry blossom is the flower of the Samurai, because of what its short life represents. It made so much sense when *Sensei* Kathleen talked about the Samurai virtues of honor, justice, benevolence, wisdom, and courage. It was when she got to loyalty the trouble began.

“Take *sayza*. *Sensei* commanded everyone into the formal kneeling position at the end of class. “Close your eyes, hands resting softly on your thighs. Breathe in through the nose, out through the mouth.”

I closed my eyes, tried to focus. I heard the fans whirl overhead, a car screech outside. Everyone sat in stillness, waiting for *Sensei* to speak. “The way of the warrior is a code. It is meant for everyone, but not everyone is meant for it. There are different parts of the code, and each person must determine their own order of importance. Today I want to talk about loyalty.”

Whatever flaws I had, loyalty wasn’t one of them. I stuck by my family and friends no matter what. It was what my family had taught me.

“When I speak of loyalty, I’m speaking of loyalty to the self. If you aren’t true to yourself, how can you possibly be true to anyone else? Loyalty to the self means drawing your circle around you, and only letting those in who are worthy.”

And how do you determine a person’s worthiness, I wondered? Is it measured by words and deeds, or a combination of both? And what about feelings? I knew I’d have difficulty with that one. Whenever feelings were in question, my heart ruled my head. It was a weakness I was working on. Along with the warrior’s number one

dictate. It was the ability to say, “So I said it, so shall it be.” My word is as good as my life.

Sensei continued to speak. “Once you draw your circle, the lines must be non-negotiable. You must be willing to stand behind your line. Not everyone will agree with it, they may not even understand it. It doesn’t matter. If it’s clear to you, if it makes sense to you, then that’s how it must be.”

I took *Sensei*’s words seriously, taking stock of all of the people in my life. Little by little, I began to change. I had never felt so alone. I stopped cooking the way I used to. In the past I had always made a little extra, bringing soups or pastas to *Sensei* Kathleen and to friends who hated to cook. I didn’t want to feed anyone anymore.

It became time again for the Karate picnic, and of course, I was in charge of the food. The morning of the picnic, I paced up and down the aisles of the supermarket. The workout was to begin in twenty minutes, and the clerks still hadn’t finished frying the buckets of chicken I had ordered the day before. While I had no interest in cooking anything myself, at least I would be sure everyone had enough to eat.

I arrived at the beach along with the rain. *Sensei* said, “I couldn’t have asked for a better day for a Karate picnic.” As we gathered to do the workout before the food, the sky darkened and churned. Needles of rain pelted them as *Sensei* spoke. “Do you feel the rain more now than when we first started?” There were murmurs of yesses.

“So, then, repetition wears down...”

“Resistance.” I finished.

“At first our bodies fight the sting of pain, deny it. But if we’re in it long enough, we no longer resist the feeling. We become one with the rain.” *Sensei* raised her hands to the sky. “Stop intellectualizing so much. Look at the ocean and the sky. Can there be no doubt that we do not control our lives?” Waves and thunder crashed. “Look at the violence. Can anyone deny the beauty within it?”

I watched the storm, licked the saltwater from my lips. I had knelt down in the ocean and done knife hands into the sand. I had run in the water, wrestled at the shoreline with all of my classmates. Covered in sand, we laughed together, yelled out, “*GoJu.*”

When the workout was done, everyone demolished the food. It truly was the perfect day for a Karate picnic. I had hoped Barry would show up. He said he might, if it stopped raining. *Sensei* thanked us for coming, said to remember the point of all this. Treat the expected and the unexpected exactly the same.

During our brown belt progression, *Sensei* continued to teach us new technology. We started *Nunchaku* Form 1, the first of three *nunchuck katas* that we would learn as *kyus*.

“Holding the weapon in your left hand, fall forward at a forty-five degree angle, stop with your feet in a right side forward *zencuzidachi*, and your left hand in a forearm block.”

“Why are you falling forward?”

“Falling forward represents the x in the fight.” *Sensei* Kathleen said.

“What?”

“X is the unknown. It takes a higher skill level to be caught off balance and recuperate.”

Every so often a student would shout out “*GoJu*.” It was appropriate as our style’s most important virtue is “we shall always keep our fighting spirit.” I knew there was a lesson in this for me, but my head was too foggy to figure it out.

Before long I was preparing for my weapons certification in *nunchaku*. Standing on a moonlit beach, I was beating my body with the weapon. Ostensibly, in an effort to prepare for the forthcoming Karate test. In actuality, lashing out at myself with anger.

That day I’d cried in the Karate classroom, took part, for the first time, in a yelling match with *Sensei* Kathleen. “Are you trying to blame *me* for what you brought on yourself?” she asked.

“I’m trying to make you understand that my kids are my first priority,” I replied.

“And I didn’t say they shouldn’t be,” she said. “All I said was make up your mind. Will you, or will you not be at the test on Sunday?”

“I’ll be there if I get a baby-sitter.”

“Yes or no. It’s that simple.”

“Well if it has to be like that, then, no. I won’t be there.”

“Fine. Put away your *nunchucks*. I’ll call *Sensei* Jane and try to explain to her why you can’t get it together enough to make it to the test.” She pivoted and stormed

from the room. I followed her, unable to stop myself from crying, unable to see what she was trying to show me.

If I had wanted to be at that test badly enough, I would have been sure to have a baby-sitter lined up. Though she never said it to me, I realized fear was probably what prevented me from taking care of the situation. Though I didn't want to face the fear, I did that night as I stood on the beach.

What I really wanted was to quit Karate. Not just Karate, but my life. In the past six months I had given birth to my third child, been lied to by my husband, been coerced into selling my home, had lost half of my possessions, was audited by the IRS, and had developed such severe allergies that I hadn't had a full night's sleep in months. To top it off, the new house also seemed to be infested with rats. Though I hadn't seen any, something had been crawling in the wall beside my bed as I tried to sleep the night before. Barry banged on the wall, and whatever it was scurried away.

I thought of these things as I worked the *nunchucks*, telling myself that it wasn't worth it. Karate, my marriage, nothing. I should just take my children and leave. Run far away from the people who would manipulate me. Go home to my parents. They loved me unconditionally. I would always have a home with them. But I knew I couldn't.

No matter how far I ran, there was no escaping myself. Through Karate, I saw that I was my own worst enemy.

I left the beach and went through my old neighborhood, past my old house. I missed it. When they had added the family room, Barry surprised me by having a carpenter surround the room with bookcases. He built me a French bay window with a window seat. After Max was born, I would sit there in the afternoon while he napped. I'd sip lemon tea and read while the sun warmed my back. It was the most thoughtful thing Barry had ever done for me. I wanted to be back there. Where I had felt safe, secure, loved. Where the rooms held the memories of the night Max was conceived, where I had spent so many nights entwined with Barry whispering dreams for the future. Back in the days when he was more interested in me than the television, when I was unaware of the link between my self-esteem and Barry's treatment of me.

I was so ashamed not to be stronger. Why had I spent the past three years studying Karate, building chi, trying to find the quiet within and listen to what it had to say? For what? So I could keep myself from yelling at people in traffic? So I could have the guts to confront the pre-school teachers when they gave me attitude? So that I could rip someone's throat out if they tried to hurt my children? I could do all of these things. But that's not what it was about. If the point was to be as a majestic oak, able to bend and flow with the wind, secure in the knowledge that the root system was so firmly entrenched, that though a bough may break, the trunk wasn't moving, then I was an oak anchored in soil above a sinkhole. At any moment I could be sucked under.

Chapter Ten

First Kyu – Brown Belt, One Stripe

The Art of Breath

“Do I hit the goal, or does the goal hit me?”

Eugen Herrigel
Zen in the Art of Archery

Shelly and I were dressing when *Sensei* walked through the door. “*Kiske*. Courtesy bow to *Sensei*. We stood to attention, faced *sensei*, and bowed. *Sensei* didn’t smile or wave a hand, dismissing the courtesy as she normally would. She returned the bow then dragged her bag in, ignoring us. Shelly raised her eyebrows at me as she donned her *gi*, Karate uniform, top. I tied my belt. It was brown with one black stripe.

I was a first *kyu*, boy. You could tell by my belt color and stripe. Shelly was a third *kyu*. Her belt is brown with three stripes. When the last stripe on the brown belt is removed, it is a sign that the practitioner is in testing for black belt. For three months the black belt candidates are tortured and tested. If they pass, they are then proclaimed, *dan*, man. Less than a year away for me.

Years ago, when we first started to train, we’d wear our *gi* tops and belts into class. Later we learned that it was uncool to proclaim your rank to the outside world, the final act of dressing was reserved for the intimacy of the *dojo*. “Something’s wrong with her.” Shelly mouthed the words, producing no sound. I shrugged my

shoulders, kept smiling. I was not in the mood to be brought down by anyone, even if it was *Sensei* Kathleen, the wildcat.

Shelly is still at that place where *Sensei*'s mood sets the stage. I'd like to think I passed there a long time ago, slipping back on occasion when I lose control. Few things make me madder at myself than when I lose control, and control, it seems, is to be the theme of this day.

Nicole, our newcomer, enters from the room behind us. She doesn't yet own a *gi*, and has busied herself getting water. In a few moments Kim breezes through the front door. She laughingly spouts French to Nicole and they begin a conversation. Finally, Shelly and I are acknowledged with a curt nod of the head and a grin. Kim is my workout partner, and is ahead of me in rank by a few weeks.

"Why the mysterious smile," asks Shelly?

"I am the Mona Lisa," Kim replies. And I know what's behind the smile, I think. Kim knows I don't speak French, but have struggled to learn. Normally, she would say good morning to everyone in the room. She smiles because she has deliberately dissed Shelly and I for some reason. Shelly is the *dojo* "dynamic" Kim would like to disappear. I am the upstart who has begun to annoy her.

Kim calls me, "the blonde." I call her "the wild woman." She pokes fun of my occasional airhead behavior. Such as the time I arrived at her house, *nunchucks* in hand and ready to work out on the day she had hand surgery. Or the time we were practicing *kata* with *bo* staffs in her back yard, and I fell backwards into the pool. "I would have warned you she said," wrapping the towel around my shivering shape,

“but you know the pool is there. I thought you were pulling my leg when you started moving backwards.”

I tease her about how strong she is for a 56 year-old woman. I make fun of how the people who sit on the board of directors with her of all those philanthropic organizations don't really know who she is. They have no idea that Kim would beat the shit out of anyone who threatened her, and enjoy every minute of it. I would trust her with my life, with my most intimate problems. I am lucky to have her for a partner. When I don't feel like smacking her. As I do today.

As I did last class, when she refused to do the correct knife defense technique. And I refused to let her get away with it. I have stopped being okay with letting Kim be in charge. I have a problem. Putting it from my mind, I join my classmates who are lined up in *kako*, the attention position. We are ready to begin class. *Sensei* is not.

“It isn't 8:30 yet. Relax.” Still not a smile. We come to *kiske*, the ready position, and wait. *Sensei* carries a blue punching bag into the room. She may be in a bad mood, but this morning *Sensei* Kathleen knows just what I need: something to hit. I am sure my eyes are twinkling. She returns my smile.

“We don't often do this, but today I'm going to ask you to kick the bag with all of your power.” *Sensei* described the correct form for the straight punch, front, and roundhouse kick. “Nicole just has to do what I say. There won't be any guilt on her part, because she can't screw up. She hasn't been here long enough to understand what I'm asking for.” *Sensei* leads us in stretching as she continues. “I can make all

of you powerful if I piss you off. That's not the point. What is the point?" She looks around the room. No one answers, so I do.

"It's to be able to call up your power at will. The point is to act and not react."

"Good. When you're out there," *Sensei* points to the street, "you need to have power when it's what you choose. Not because of what someone said or did. In those cases you're allowing yourself to be controlled. Control freaks that we are in here, that's not a good thing."

We take *zencuzudachi*, front forward leaning stance, and *kiai*, power yell.

Each of us measures our distance to the bag and does the prescribed strike. I kick the bag, pretending that I am hurting my weaker self. The self that is annoyed with Kim for being Kim. She has practiced with me for five years in the same manner. What right do I have to expect her to suddenly change? Just because now, when she does the incorrect technique, it will throw me off balance. Because soon we will be in testing, and I can't afford to be screwing up. Because if I don't set her straight, I will begin to doubt myself?

"You're not *chi'd* into the ground," *Sensei* says, "but good power." Her mood is visibly lightening as she immerses herself into the love of her life. I drop down into my center, stare at the middle of the blue bag she holds. My foot makes contact, she rocks back with a laugh. "Good focus."

Kime is focus. I try to focus on the work at hand, and not think about how often I have been losing control. How I have become angry over the past couple of weeks, when I was kept from doing the things that I believed needed to be done. Why hadn't I just walked away? In the *dojo*, in my real life situations? Why did I hold myself

responsible for Kim's knife technique? I think, perhaps, I was trying to prove a point. Yes, I am strong. I am, in fact, as powerful as you. If not more. Though I may cloak who I am through sweetness and a smile, don't mistake me for someone else. I can allow you to hurt me only so much. I will stay in control.

Three weeks later I found myself standing in a cook's nightmare. I looked at the inoperative stoves, disconnected ovens, lack of refrigerator shelving, layer of construction dust, and scarcity of electrical outlets, thinking, *you did it this time, dingbat. Now how are you going to serve four-hundred people from this chaos?* Before walking into the kitchen, my biggest worry was whether or not there were enough hot-dog buns. I thought I was being smart when I volunteered to do concessions for the Karate tournament. It made sense at the time. I knew food and entertaining. How difficult could it be to serve a bunch of black belts Gatorade and Blowpops?

I never could figure out their bizarre fascination with Blowpops. In the midst of two people pounding each other, at least one, if not both of the judges would be standing there, sucking away on one or using it as a pointer, hemming and hawing over whether or not they should call the point that a competitor just made, or let the fight keep going for their own amusement.

I figured I could perk up the concession stand. Offer some healthy alternatives to candy. Maybe some fresh fruit cups, homemade muffins, whatever. It didn't occur to

me that my desire to cook was beginning to surface again. Subconsciously, I think I wanted to nurture in some way, the people who had given me so much. Consciously, however, I thought of how working the concession would be preferable to the other responsibilities that a brown belt was forced to shoulder. I could have been a scorekeeper, if I wanted. I had driven down that road before, had learned my lesson the hard way. Competing was an option. It was the only way to get out of the obligation of serving the *ryu*, Karate school, in some capacity, and still save face. Some people loved competition. They practiced for weeks on end, their smiles triumphant when their fights or forms were finished. I had tried competing in the forms, or *kata* division a couple of times. I had succeeded in facing the wrong walls, of having my *escrima* stick fly from my hand and almost fracture the center judge's foot. My *kiais*, which were supposed to be loud powerful yells, sounded more like a muddled cow in the middle of the road than the warrior princess I would have liked to appear. As public humiliation was not on this week's agenda, the concession stand would have to do.

But how would I cook the hotdogs? I could rent an industrial hotdog machine, one that rotates around until the hotdogs are wilted from dizziness. And I'd have to scratch the frozen pizzas normally served at the competitions. Nowhere to heat them up either. Truth be told, I would have been embarrassed to sell frozen pizzas anyway (even if they had been heated).

The tournament coming up was to be bigger than our normal *shiais*. It was to be an open competition, with an expected four hundred people. When I first

volunteered to do concessions, *Sensei* Kathleen told me that Master Kay had someone who normally handled the foodstuff. She would put me to use elsewhere.

A few weeks later, I was called into a room where Master Kay sat alone. “I’ve decided to let you do the concession stand for the big tournament,” he said. “Do you think you can handle it?”

“*Oos, Sensei*,” I replied, happy that I would get to do what I liked.

“Well, I just want you to know that I won’t be upset if anything goes wrong. You just do what you want to do, and handle it how you see fit. Don’t let anyone give you any flack, you understand? *You’re the man*.”

He must have mistaken my look of bemusement for confusion. “I mean, you’re in charge,” he said. “You take complete control.”

“*Oos, Sensei*,” I said again.

“Most of all, I want you to relax on this and have a good time. Okay?”

“Okay.” I smiled.

I smiled again three weeks later. After dealing with the shock of the discombobulated kitchen, and the scrutiny of Wayne, the Karate student I had inadvertently displaced, I set off to do preliminary shopping at Costco. Only Wayne insisted on accompanying me. He said that he would need to help me carry things. I did my Southern girl best to be nice.

“You drive well,” he said, as we made our way up the street. “It’s unusual for women to be good drivers. Men couldn’t have understood what danger they were unleashing when they started to let women drive.”

I nodded politely. Encouraged, Wayne continued, “And this whole thing about women working just isn’t right. A real man doesn’t let his woman work.”

Oy vey, I thought. He continued to ramble until we reached the Costco parking lot, at which time he grabbed the flatbed roller thingy used to pile up your merchandise. “I’ll roll this. It’ll be hard for you to control.”

“Thank you.” I smiled again.

As we made our way down the beverage aisle, Wayne refused to let me lift any of the cases of soda or water. I acquiesced. He repeatedly questioned the quantity of each item that I had selected. There would be too much of this, not enough of that.

“You think so?” I responded, moving along with my merchandise. The entire time Wayne was trying to power move me, I was thinking about control. Was he under the impression he was controlling me because I let him roll a cart and lift heavy objects?

“Let’s go to the kitchen apparatus aisle,” he said.

“Why?” I asked.

“We can get a microwave, or something else to heat the hotdogs with. That rotisserie thing isn’t going to be sufficient. Just wait until you get swamped with people.”

“I’m not buying a microwave,” I said.

“Then we should at least get a toaster oven.”

“No.”

He grinned and gazed into my eyes. Bending over, he brushed my arm with

his finger tips, and murmured “*Omnia vincit Amor; et nos cedamus Amori.*” That’s Latin, he said. It means, “Loves conquers all; let us too yield to Love.” He heaved the flat bed 180° degrees. “I think we need more hotdogs.”

I didn’t know whether to laugh or cry. Later, while we were checking out, he pulled out his wallet and tried to pay for everything. “Let this be my contribution to the event,” he said.

“That’s so nice of you,” I said, “But no thanks. I’m going to do it the way Master Kay said it should be done.” Wayne was not a happy camper. I considered Master Kay’s words, “You’re the man.” Did being, “the man,” mean I had to act like one? Technically I was a *kyu*, boy. Would I feel like a man once I got my black belt?

When we arrived at the tournament kitchen, ready to unload the food, we found the door locked. The handyman was nowhere to be found. After a few frantic phone calls, the men began to worry that Master Kay would be angry when he found out that we hadn’t been able to stock the kitchen beforehand. I said I could do it early in the morning, no problem. They wouldn’t hear of it. Within minutes, five men were gathered around the door, one with hammer and another with a screwdriver. By the time the handyman arrived, they had taken the door off of its hinges, carried in all of the groceries, and replaced the door without a scratch.

Tournament Day

I hear a *kiai*. It is pure animal. Putting aside my hot dog, I scan past the potato chips and pickles to the source of the sound. I am running the concession. A

rainbow of martial artists are present: blue belts, yellow belts, red *gi*'s, white. Our style sports few belt colors. Advancing rank in our style is more often shown by a stripe upon a belt, rather than a change of belt color. A traditional style, we have remained true to many customs of Japanese *Goju Ryu*. One of our American forefathers, however, broke custom when deciding upon the color of our uniforms. They are black. For intimidation purposes. I hear the bellow of the man across the room, knowing his *kiai* has been honed for the same purpose.

He is competing in a *kata* ring. Nobody moves. Everyone is mesmerized. Whether or not this man takes home the trophy, he has won the prize. He has succeeded in taking the room. Few people are capable of this feat. It is an ability martial artists aspire to. I watch the man's movements. He is doing a tension *kata*. His arms slice through the air as if in slow motion, harnessed by a rubber band which, if popped, would unleash the strength of a tiger. Tension *katas* are about strength subdued. They are about breathing. About centering the self and drawing on *chi* (inner strength). *Sensei* Kathleen, often stresses the necessity of being able to summon your *kiai* at will. It is a task that has troubled me.

When I first entered the Karate *dojo* *Sensei* defined *kiai* as a loud, powerful yell. For five and a half years I have struggled to master my *kiai*, trying everything from shouting alone on the beach at night, to beginning my *kiai* under water, the sound escaping as I rise to the surface. Why is it that this seemingly simple task has given me so much trouble?

I wanted to drown in the sound of this man doing *kata* across the floor from me. His competition ring was so far away from me that I couldn't see his face. But

his face wouldn't have mattered. It was his sound seducing me. I wanted to wrap it around my body and let it seep into my soul. To suck it in until my lungs overflowed and I could no longer breathe, but die. Only to be reborn with the ability to *kiai* like that man. A phoenix who commands attention on the strength of syllables, takes a room on a tone.

It's been a long time since I first put on a white belt, and the "loud, powerful yell," that I once thought defined *kiai* has been expanded. *A Dictionary of the Martial Arts*, by Frederic, is on our suggested reading list. Before buying the book, I flipped to the "K's." The definition of *Ki* is listed before *kiai*. The book notes that *Ki* is integral in Japanese philosophy, and as such is at the root of all martial arts. "*The nature of this universal and fundamental energy is such that it penetrates everywhere, uniting all the manifestations of the universe, visible or invisible,*" the book said. Yes, sound is invisible yet it binds. Is not the first thing we fall in love with our mother's heartbeat?

It is a creative energy, the divine 'breath' in every being, which appears as active attention, concentration, mental force and can, according to certain writers, be 'projected outside oneself,' like a *kiai*, I thought, by means of the *Ki-ai*, I read. M. Random writes: '*Thought energy* or "*conscious energy produces a vibratory field which operates in an alchemical way, in the sense that it "crystallizes" or manifests certain subtle properties which are characteristic of this vibrating field.*'

Stendhal wrote about falling in love, calling it a crystallization process. In search of a clue to improve my *kiai*, my attention was drawn to another weakness of mine. The desire to drown in someone's sound. The propensity for falling in love with

someone who I perceive as better than I am. How could I possibly have watched this competitor moving across the floor and not have fallen a little in love? Love.

Another four-letter word I've had trouble with.

I read on in the dictionary, learning that *kiai* isn't just a loud, powerful yell. The Frederic dictionary calls *kiai* the cry which gives life. It also says that some Karate masters believe there are different kinds of *kiais*: low and weighty at moments of action, high and piercing with a cry of victory, normal for purposes of resuscitation, and silent in certain meditation exercises. The dictionary fails to mention the *kiai* my children are most proficient with, the *kiai* of the eyes.

Love at first sight. Also a *kiai* of the eyes. Not unlike the one which escaped me when I laid eyes on Barry for the first time. Barry's *kiai* was his normal voice, asking me on our first date. The thought of being with him breathed new life into me. "Will you cook for me?" He asked.

Doing what is asked of you is another of the virtues I was raised with. No was a naughty word. Yes ma'am, and yes sir were the only appropriate responses to a request in my home. Master Kay once lectured me on the value of the word no. No is not a bad word, he insisted. Your saying no, or having someone say no to you is okay. Saying no won't hurt you. That particular thing is just not right at this time. It's easy to do. It goes like this. "No." His voice got a little stronger. "No." A little softer. "No." "I mean, like, NO." He smiled. So did I. "No. No."

When Barry asked me to cook for him, I said yes and meant it. Too many other times in my marriage, I said yes when what I should have said was no. My passive

aggressiveness became clear when I tried to practice the black belt requirement of saying what you mean and meaning what you say.

It is, I think, one of the reasons that the more advanced a person becomes in our Karate system, the greater they connect with Karate people. The expectations of the *karetica*, within the realm of the Karate world, have a way of crossing into the real world. You find yourself disappointed in others when they fail to be as straightforward as you hope you are. *Sensei* Kathleen always gives the example of a person fishing for compliments by saying something like, “Oh, I got the worst haircut.” To which the expected reply goes something like, “No, it looks great on you.” She tells us to be careful not to expect of non-*karetica*, what is demanded in the dojo.

This is harder than it seems. Last week Barry came home from lunch with a friend and said, “David is going with a group of guys to Las Vegas.”

“That’s nice,” I said.

“He’s really looking forward to it.”

“I’ll bet.” David has had a really hard time for the past year. His wife left him for someone else.

Barry is removing the tie from around his neck, fooling with the change on his dresser, staring into space. I have anticipated the next sentence.

“He wanted me to ask you if I could go with him.”

“Okay. If you want to.” I turned back around to the computer screen.

“When you go away with him, I’ll go somewhere that I want to go.”

“Where do you want to go without me?”

I was starting to get annoyed. “I don’t want to go anywhere without you. I want to go to Europe.” In the fourteen years we’ve been together, I have spent eleven of them working for an airline. I can fly to Europe for twenty-five dollars, but have only been twice - for one day each time on a work trip. There is always a reason my husband doesn’t go there. Or anywhere further than the Caribbean, for that matter.

Silence. His facial muscles tense. “You can’t go to Europe for just a few days.”

“No. *You* won’t go to Europe for just a few days.”

“I can’t believe we’re getting into this.” This is an old discussion, and one that always strikes a nerve with me. “That’s not what this is about. I had hoped you’d say that you didn’t want me to go away. That you want me here with you.”

“I would prefer that you be with me, but when have we ever stopped each other from doing what we want to do?”

“I didn’t really want to go.”

“Then say what you mean and mean what you say.” I snapped at him and stormed out of the room, immediately feeling guilty. He had wanted reassurance and I behaved like a bitch. What was wrong with me?

It was the me who would wander that had lashed out. The me whose need is not addressed by my hardworking husband. While I dream of visiting exotic ports, I have not insisted that we travel there. I am not the major breadwinner. I’m barely a minor one. It has never felt right to insist that Barry spend his rare vacation days doing something he’d rather not do. And visiting the beaches of the Caribbean is not so bad. Some people never even get to go there. While Barry and I may have been

having some difficult times in our marriage, I think of how I need to be grateful for what I have.

“Where is Kosovo?” I had asked when Daniel told me of his new job.

“Look it up on a map,” he replied. If Barry had responded to me that way, I would’ve been mad. Daniel just makes me laugh. For a long time I couldn’t figure out why this was. Then I realized it’s because I like to spar with Daniel.

In the Karate classroom, sparring is a game of tag. Hands and feet are used to strike your opponent in the target area: from the top of the head to the top of the belt, front and sides of the body. Whoever gets three “tags,” or hits in first, wins the round. The goal of sparring is to teach the practitioner to act rather than react when attacked. A person will spar for years in the dojo before they are given this focus. Another service sparring provides is in teaching the person how to take a hit.

“Keep your eyes open. Don’t turn your head to the side because my fist is coming at your face. Look. Block.” *Sensei* Kathleen instructs Shiri, a newcomer in our class. I am sparring Kim, my workout partner. Kim is circling me, charging in every now and then for the tag. I refuse to chase her, pivoting around and waiting for the attack. The skill of letting an opponent come to me has been slow in arriving, but makes for a better battle. Kim, however, would disagree with me. Each of us must find his own way. Something we never could have understood as white belts, and still sometimes struggle with.

When Kim and I first started working out together, we’d share our opinions and questions, concurring on issues before taking them to *Sensei* for confirmation. Now

we tread carefully, debating whether or not we want to risk arguing with each other, and taking our questions to *Sensei* alone.

I focus on Kim's shoulders. "Never look your opponent in the eyes," *Sensei* Kathleen says, "they will deceive you. Shoulders don't lie. Watch there to see where the next move is coming from." Kim throws a punch to my abdomen. I backfist the side of her head. We smile, acknowledge each other's tags.

Sparring should, like other Karate endeavors, be an egoless pursuit. "Leave your egos at the door," *Sensei* Kathleen said when I first began training. Easy enough in theory. Quite another thing when someone is bopping you upside the head. In the beginning, anger often entered the picture. I would get mad when someone hit me too hard, reacting with a harder punch of my own.

"*Yame.*" *Sensei* would call out the word meaning stop. "People, this is only sparring. It's just a game of tag."

When Daniel tells me to look up something in an atlas, or calls me a "little woman," I smile. This is what I expect. He has tagged me. Look for your opponent's weak spots and strike. Yes, I can be lazy. I'd much prefer you tell me where Kosovo is than get out a map and look it up myself. Yes, lord your masculinity over me by calling me a demeaning name. I know you don't mean it, or maybe, just maybe, I fear that you do.

And something about this excites me. Barry would never admit to feeling anything sexist. He is the most fair-minded person I know, believing in his heart that we are all equal. While he may often treat me as a typical man would treat his wife, rattling off grocery lists and complaining about my inability to keep a room clean, he

does so with respect and a mutual understanding of the roles we have chosen to play in our marriage. I willingly shop for groceries rather than work a nine-to-five job.

Daniel tells me about his new girlfriend, who is ten years younger than he is. “She cooks me dinner, and has a rum and coke ready for me when I get home from work. It’s not as if I want to be waited on all the time, but it sure is nice....,” his voice trails off. New target area, I think, wondering how I will use this information to hurl an insult. I’ll get a strike in with one of the next few sentences. He’ll laugh, marking time until he finds my next opening. Our game is one of tag. We live at opposite ends of the planet. Our stakes are low.

Barry, however, shares my bed. We live inches apart. Where my husband is concerned, I can’t afford to leave my ego at the door. Should I enter our conversations egoless, who knows how he’ll react? Intimacy, I have found, can be an invitation to pain. But in this arena, there is no *Sensei* Kathleen standing by, ready to punish the out-of-control practitioner. I have only the sheet we share to cover my nakedness. It is Barry’s right not only to see my weak spots, but to touch them as well. How am I, then, to defend myself in this game of marriage? By not exposing target area.

I watch the man finish his *kata*, get back to selling hotdogs with a sigh. The concession stand was a success. It made an above-average profit, and Master Kay was happy. “I’m going to do something to thank you for all of your hard work,” he said. “I’d like to help you with your martial arts. Give me a call on Monday, and we’ll set up some private lessons for you at no charge.” Normally, his lessons cost fifty dollars an hour. This was a generous offer, and one that terrified me. Private

lessons with the chief instructor? He'd see how spastic I was. What had I gotten myself into now?

Chapter Eleven

Wolf in the Woods

“When you hear a veteran talk, listen to him carefully, even though he may tell you what you already know. In due course, as you listen to the same story ten time and twenty times, the moment will come when you suddenly understand the point you have been missing.”

Tsunetomo Yamamoto
Hagakure, The Book of Hidden Leaves

Grandma came to visit and was behaving strangely. Perhaps she was just reacting to my stupid behavior. She hated to be in the house alone, so I brought her with me to an appointment with my therapist. I had started seeing him about a month before, having felt the need to talk to someone objective. I was unsure of where my marriage was going, and confused as how to make things better. When Grandma asked where we were going, I just said, “the doctor’s office.”

“You’re mother used to see a psychiatrist too,” she said as we drove away.

“What?”

“Yes, she used to have nightmares when she was young. You know Cyril (my grandfather) used to come home drunk as a skunk and sit on the back porch sharpening a big knife. Your mother was terrified.”

I couldn’t believe Grandma had actually paid attention to the sign on the doctor’s door. In the past, I would have shared my problems with her, not tried to pretend they

didn't exist. And though I knew my grandfather had been an alcoholic, I'd only heard fond memories from my mother.

"You're running yourself ragged," Grandma continued. "You're going to have a nervous breakdown if you don't watch yourself." She used to say that about my mother. I read it as, "You're not spending enough time at home. You're neglecting your children." Maybe, I thought, it was her way too of saying, "You're not paying enough attention to me." I knew I wasn't being my normal self, but was too wrapped up in sadness to snap out of it.

Grandma grabbed my arm one evening and pulled me onto my bed. "Here," she said, handing me a shoebox. "I wanted to give you your stuff." Ever since I was a child, Grandma had saved certain mementoes for me in a little red suitcase tucked beneath her bed.

"Why are you giving this to me now?" I snapped. "I want you to save it for me."

"I want to make sure you get what's yours," she replied.

"What are you talking about? I want you to hold them for me."

"I might not always be around," she said. "Oh, and I told the rest of the family that you're to get the grave at St. Louis Number Two."

"Don't talk like that." St. Louis Number Two is the cemetery where our ancestors are buried. I spent a lot of time there with Grandma as a child, and she knew that I was the only family member who cared about the tomb's upkeep. I tried to give her back the shoebox, but she refused to take it. I refused to think about the implications of her words, glancing at the box's contents before I put it into my closet.

There was my old high-school drama pin, a couple of greeting cards I had sent Grandma, a two-dollar bill I had loved because it was out of the ordinary, and what looked like some religious medals.

On the last day of Grandma's visit, I began to question whether or not she was getting senile. She loved to go out to eat, and we stopped for breakfast on the way to the airport. For the longest time she'd been adamant about needing to eat at specific times. She had lost weight since the last time I'd seen her, and I was annoyed that she was just picking at her food.

"Grandma, why aren't you eating? You're going to be starving on the plane."

"I can't eat much anymore," she said. "There's something I want to tell you. I had a third husband that I never told you about before."

"What?"

"He was a seaman. I married him and then he had to go right back to sea. He left his car for me to use, and one day I looked in the glove compartment and found a marriage certificate showing his marriage to someone else. I got an annulment right away.

When he got back, he was in shock. He begged me to change my mind, said it was a marriage license, not a marriage certificate. He said the girl's mother had caught them in bed together. The marriage license was just to appease her. I didn't believe him."

I was speechless. I'd been an adult before Grandma told me she divorced my grandfather, then later took a second husband. Now she's telling me about a third?

“He was a sweet, good man. And so generous. I often wonder what my life would have been like if I had stayed with him.”

A psychiatrist for my mother? Another husband for Grandma? Were there more skeletons in the closet, or were we all losing our minds? We drove to the airport, then I watched Grandma as she boarded the plane. I kept my eyes on her until she was out of sight. What I would give to have known it was the last time I’d ever watch her walk away.

Getting Ready for Blackbelt Testing

Sensei Kathleen started preparing me, along with four other of her students eight months before our black belt test was to begin. The test itself is held on seven mandatory evenings, consisting of an exercise night, empty hand *kata*, weapons defense, empty hand defense, weapons *kata*, sparring, and a written test. These tests take place over a three- month period, with retests at two-week intervals for those who failed their first attempt. Failure at second try warrants intervention from that person’s *sensei* and Master Kay.

To get ready for the test, we had to hone fourteen empty-hand *katas*, nine weapons *katas*, empty hand self-defense against attacks such as front punches, kicks, slaps, front grabs and bear hugs, rear grabs and bear hugs, nine different knife attacks, eight different gun attacks and every bit of information I had ever been taught about the four *kyu* weapons: *sai*, *nunchucks*, *escrima*, and *bo*. Each weapon had a blocking

system, some two, as well as inherent striking systems. The *nunchucks*, *escrima*, and *sai* all had at least six come-along properties (alternatives to deadly force) that we'd be required to demonstrate, as well as the top three hit properties and the top three kill techniques.

The *nunchucks*, *escrima*, and *sai*, as well as the empty hand all have corresponding techniques for both snatching someone out of a car and putting them into a car. This is an especially fun part of the test, as a three dimensional car is never utilized. One of the judges will say, "Pull up a car," at which time a *kyu* will drag a chair over to the testing area. At this time the person testing must not only remember and execute the techniques correctly, but she must envision the car door facing in the correct direction. If the practitioner accidentally bumps into the imaginary door, the *Sensei* will shout out "FAIL!" Also, the height of the car roof must be considered in the execution of the techniques. Say, for example, the judges want to see the person taken out of the car three ways with the *sai*. Keeping in mind the devil prongs on the sides of the *sai*, one must somehow get the weapon lined up with the "driver's" neck and close off the weapon with her other hand facing in the correct direction, that is, the one that provides the greatest control, without bumping into the imaginary door, or crashing into the imaginary roof. This is for the "snatch." If a snatch is not shown as one of the three techniques, the *Sensei* will again shout out "FAIL!" A joint control must also be shown with the *sai*, or the *Sensei* will shout "FAIL!" To execute the joint control, the practitioner must slip the devil prong over the wrist of the "driver" who is holding onto the imaginary steering wheel, then torque her hand until the pain factor causes it to come off of the steering wheel, at which time the

practitioner moves her foot in a half-moon motion, dragging the driver out of the car and onto the floor.

For all weapons, including *bo*, we were to be tested on chokes via starvation of oxygen and starvation of blood. The *bo*, due to its length, enables the practitioner to possess unique sweep and takedown abilities. These too we had to know, along with what's called, "the five memorized techniques," for the *bo*. Our bodies had to be in condition to survive exercise night, that is, five hundred repetitions of exercises including push-ups, sit-ups, jumping jacks, donkey kicks, roundhouse kicks, front kicks, side kicks, crab kicks, back kicks, back fists, hammer fists, knife hands, ridge hands, palm-heel strikes, upper cuts, ground spar, *GoJu* grabs, and more.

Then comes a night of sparring, which consists of one to two hours of continuous fighting against black belts. On exercise night we were given a paper with ten essay questions on it. These we had to complete and hand in on the evening of the written test. The questions were top secret, and the answers to be typed and handed in both to *Sensei* Kathleen and Master Kay.

Early on in our test preparation, *Sensei* Kathleen spoke of the five books we should study for our written test, including The Book of Five Rings, and The Overlook Martial Arts Dictionary. *But what exactly should we study in these books, we wanted to know. Everything*, she said.

An acquaintance of mine had to perform five forms (*katas*) for his black belt test in Kung Fu. *Karate International Magazine* prints photos of black belt recipients, the

captions beneath the pictures often mentioning the three or five hour test the candidates endured before receiving their promotion.

Our written test alone consists of over two hundred questions, covering many things we had been taught over the course of our training. This is not to say other students were as familiar with the material. *Sensei* Kathleen is an especially thorough teacher. Even so, much of the material on the test was information we had never seen nor heard of before. It is said that only seven people have ever passed the black belt written test. *Sensei* Kathleen is one of them.

Sensei Kathleen was obsessive compulsive that we be better than ready for the tests.

Kata night is very important, said *Sensei* Kathleen. Every black belt comes out of the woodwork to judge the people to be promoted. “It is a pressure unlike anything you’ve ever experienced, and it is your opportunity to shine.” What she didn’t say was that our performance would be a direct reflection on her, as she is our teacher.

I came to realize this as she pounded and prodded us, yelling and carrying on when we failed to do as well as we could have. “You have to work on your forty-five’s,” she told me. We stood in the kindergarten classroom that served as our summer-time dojo. There were six of us, all facing different angles, all performing *katas* on *Sensei* Kathleen’s command.

The students who were there, but who were not going into testing, were getting a special insight. They were not the object of *Sensei*’s scrutiny, but got to play anyway. “*Kata, Empi-Ha*. One command after the break. *Muso* eyes shut. Do it.” She spoke the string of commands for this *kata*, as well as the thirteen others we must know.

We rotated to different positions in the room each time, trying to perform the *katas* exactly when we were supposed to. The commands were so confusing that we kept messing up. I was frustrated, thinking that I would never be ready for this test.

Some *sensei* never tell their students what to expect in the room on *kata* night. They have no idea that Master Kay shouts out commands in an arbitrary manner, designed to confuse the testee and break her (concentration). When one does the wrong move at the wrong command on test night, she is required to do two hundred push-ups for each infraction.

“You can see how all of those push-ups will wear you out,” she says. “That’s why you have to let the mistakes go as soon as you make them. You can’t carry them with you or you’ll never pass the night. You have to develop a ‘fuck you’ frame of mind. I never punish people by putting them into testing to watch them fail. If you’re there it’s because you’ve earned it. You should walk into the room with the attitude, *how dare you try to refuse me my right.*”

To get ready meant being present at every class from now till test time. It meant working out on our own and with our partners. It meant making sure we were pushing our bodies to be in the best physical shape ever, while calling on our minds to show the techniques we had been taught without flaw. It meant putting ourselves on the line more than we ever had before. “This is the hardest test you will ever take,” she told us. “I doubt that all of you will make it to the end.”

Not long after *Sensei* Kathleen began our test preparations, Master Kay called to ask why I hadn’t taken him up on his offer of lessons. *Because I’m a Southern girl*, I

thought, trained to not accept anything unless it's been offered to me at least three or four times.

I remember a birthday party I attended as a child. Beforehand, my mother had cautioned me, "Don't eat anything unless it's offered to you." I stood in a spot next to the wall in my frilly pink dress, waiting for something to be offered to me. At one point, a mother said, "Would you like some potato chips?" proffering me the bowl. I munched two, then spent the entire remainder of the party watching the other children have punch, cake, and ice cream, wishing I could have some too.

Master Kay was adamant that we schedule a time for my lesson, accepting no excuses. When lesson day came around, I donned a T-shirt that read, "I'm naturally blonde, please speak slowly." *Perhaps he'll be easier on me if he thinks I'm an airhead*, I thought.

I stood outside his *dojo* tying and re-tying my belt as I waited to enter for my lesson. The sign of the carpenter across the street read, *Wolf In The Woods*. At that moment I likened myself to Little Red Riding Hood, knowing not what I would face on my way to deliver my basket of food.

Food is what got me there in the first place. I cursed my culinary knack, half-wished I'd never volunteered to run the concession in the first place. I thought about how *Sensei* Kathleen always refers to Master Kay as my grandparent. I wondered what side of him I'd see, when I entered the room.

Would he be the kindly, benevolent grandparent I was hoping for? Or would he turn into the wolf, attacking when confronted with my blaring ineptitude? I knew my Karate wasn't as good as it could be. That I didn't practice anywhere near as much as

I should have. That in self-defense techniques, even when I was giving a hundred percent of my attention, often I still didn't get it. The mind and the motion just wouldn't connect.

I anticipated Master Kay's annoyance with me, wondered how I could avoid this embarrassment. Damn it, I didn't ask for these lessons. What is this Karate courtesy shit that says you need to do what the master says? *Sensei* says - a game that's played in kids class. You do the hokey-pokey and you turn yourself around.

Why wasn't this man opening his door? It wasn't time yet. Should I knock? What's the protocol? Why didn't *Sensei* Kathleen save me from this? *Because no one can save you from yourself.* I didn't realize that that was the answer at the time. I paced back and forth in the parking lot outside of the *dojo*, a warehouse surrounded by other warehouses. Pencil and eraser supplier on one end. On the other side of the warehouse were welding machines and loud noises, printing shop at the end. Wolf In The Woods across the street. Behind the door?

I took out the list I'd prepared for this occasion. Perhaps Master Kay will attend to what I asked for. And if I got to say what I want, then he wouldn't get to see my weaknesses. Maybe I should just snowball him with a huge list of problems. Let him know from the start how messed up I was, then maybe he won't make me come back. I took out the list. It read:

1. Way of the warrior. (Re: handling people)
2. *Kiai*. How to draw from the self.
3. Elements. One above the other?

4. Personality in *kata*.
5. Presence (Upon entering a room, etc.)
6. Combating my biggest weakness - lack of practice, discipline.

I was halfway through reading the list when the door flung open. “WHAT?!” Master Kay said. I jumped at least half a foot off of the floor. “Come on in.” he said and smiled.

His *dojo* was always a fascinating place to enter. I had been there five or six times before, whenever our class was testing for a weapon certification. A big square carpet covered the part of the room that had mirrors on the walls. Beyond the carpet, Master Kay sat at an antique roll top desk, which faced the wall. The desk held untold treasures. On test days he’d often pulled pictures from the mountains of papers piled there, and shown us *Sensei* Kathleen as a Green Belt, shots of Japanese Grandmasters, flyers from long ago fights.

There were baskets at Master Kay’s feet, which contained numerous bottles of craft paints. A wood-burner was plugged into the wall, and rested beside his chair. Across the garbage pail to the right were two *escrima* sticks, drying from their latest paint design or coat of varnish. Another giant garbage pail held weapons; *bos*, swords, oars, and some things I didn’t recognize. Beyond the pail was a wall of cubbyholes, all containing weapons, and at least three kinds of punching bags were suspended from the ceiling.

There was a dark and narrow stairway, cluttered with objects. What did it lead to, I wondered? There was an American Flag displayed on one wall, which had only 48 stars on it. He told me the story of how he had obtained it. While watching a newscast on some protest that was going on, he saw a man take the flag down and step on it. Recognizing the neighborhood where the protest was taking place, he drove over there and demanded that the man give him the flag. “You don’t deserve this,” Master Kay said.

There was a sign proclaiming the *dojo* rules; EVERYONE WORKS, NOTHING IS FREE, EVERYONE STARTS AT THE BOTTOM, and above his desk was another sign reading, “We shall always keep our fighting spirit.” There are also a multitude of holes and pockmarks peppering the walls, the result of various knives and weapons being thrown at them.

Master Kay says the only thing he fears is the fear he sees in the eyes of his opponent. Our first lesson was going better than I thought it would. I manage to get through whatever *katas* he asked me to see without facing the wrong walls, or falling on my face. He was now sitting across the floor from me on a rolled up mat, the one that is used to learn break falls. Though I had wanted to address my list of prepared questions, somehow we get on the subject of fear and violence.

“Fear is the enemy, technology is the solution,” he said. He meant technology relating to self-defense. A person’s skill as a martial artist is in direct proportion to the fear he’s likely to feel. In Master Kay’s case, his technology level is so high that what he fears most is his own weakness. He sees himself in the eyes of his opponent.

He knows what he is capable of. After almost forty years of martial arts training and body guarding, he has an intimate relationship with the line between life and death.

“Fear is the knowledge of your body’s weaknesses. You say you love violence,” he says to me. “What do you think violence is?”

“The waves crashing at the shore, little by little, breaking the land’s resistance. Childbirth is violent, yet miraculous. Making love is violent. The French call an orgasm, *La Petite Morte*, the little death. The little death leads to life. Both are violent processes, ones in which we’re completely out of control. Hurricanes, tornadoes, volcanoes. Deadly but all beautiful.”

“When you say you love violence, people may think you mean that you take pleasure in seeing other people hurt. Ninety percent of the population loves violent movies. But that’s not actual violence. That’s witnessing violence. There’s a difference.”

“People who take pleasure in other’s pain are sadistic. Violence and sadism are two different things.”

“Violence is in the eye of the beholder,” he says.

“How, then, do you define violence?” I want to know.

“Someone who takes a child’s hand and presses it onto the stove as a punishment. Rape. You know, some rapes are labeled as non-violent. She wasn’t bruised and bloody therefore it was a non-violent rape. Bullshit. All rape is violent. I call rapists the killers of hearts.”

On the car ride home, I think about the things Master Kay has said to me.

“You’re so far removed from what you fear that you can’t even see it yourself.”

“What do you mean,” I ask. “I understand the fear I feel when one of my children is sick, the kind of fear that exemplifies a loss of control.”

“That’s bullshit fear,” he says, flipping out a switchblade. “If we were in a restaurant, and I held up this knife and told you I was going to skin the waitress over there, you’d say, Oh my God, that’s terrible.” He pressed the blade of the knife against my forearm. “If I held this against you and said I’m going to skin you to the bone, you’d know fear.”

“I see your point.”

Master Kay said I should live for a while with fear in my body. Try to make its acquaintance, so to speak. “We’ll talk more,” he said. “Next time you come to my dojo I’ll pound the shit out of you. We’ll see what it takes to make your self defense mechanism kick in.”

I later found out that the pencil man moved because his school supplies kept falling from the shelves and onto the floor. Something to do with the people who kept slamming into the wall, on Master Kay’s side.

Chapter Twelve

Water's Softest State

"You'd better carry rouge and powder in your bosom, as the occasion demands. For instance, in the event of recovering from intoxication or of awakening from sleep, you may look pale."

Tsunetomo Yamamoto
Hagakure, The Book of Hidden Leaves

Grandma was being prepped for her second surgery when I arrived. My cousin had called at one a.m. that morning, to tell me that what the doctor's had thought were flu symptoms were actually fibroid tumors wrapped around Grandma's colon. She had been blocked for sometime now, and as the situation hadn't been diagnosed correctly, the tumors were now inflamed. I wondered if this would've happened if Grandma had actually had the gynecological exam the doctor was always telling her she should get.

Barry accompanied me on the first flight that morning to New Orleans. He began making arrangements and trying to make the situation easier for me. I was numb with disbelief.

For twelve days, our family camped out in the S.I.C.U. family room at the hospital. Grandma had pulled through the surgeries, but there had been leakage during one of them. Her organs were shutting down. Having one of my family

members die was the thing I had feared most in life. No one close to me had died since I was too little to remember.

Within a couple of days of Grandma going into the hospital, her daughter, Mary, went into another hospital across town. Aunt Mary had been having kidney problems for some time, and her condition had gotten progressively worse. We huddled in the waiting room, my mother repeating the story of Grandma's parents.

"My Grandmother was in one hospital, and my Grandfather in another a few blocks away. Neither one knew about the other's hospitalizations. They just thought that the other was sick at home. The family took turns running back and forth between the two. One day the church bells rang, signaling a death. Grandmother said, 'Some poor soul is gone.' No one told her it was her husband."

Six months after losing both her mother and father, my grandma's husband and brother died. She took to leaving the house in the middle of the night, and walking along the sea wall of Pontchartrain Beach. My mother found Grandma there one night, packed their bags, and got into the car. "We're leaving town," Mom said, driving away. She was only seventeen.

From that day forward, Mom supported Grandma. They moved from New Orleans to Spanish Harlem, to San Francisco. On a visit back to New Orleans to see Aunt Mary, they picked up Grandma's sister, Margaret. Aunt Margaret had left her husband after he whacked her with a dead, bloody chicken on Easter morning. Now Mom was supporting Aunt Margaret as well.

For years they continued to travel, staying mostly in San Francisco. Mom wanted to settle there. She was teaching dance for Arthur Murray, and working in an office

that she loved. The people she worked with were unlike any she had ever known. Except for her, they were all Holocaust survivors. Mom listened to stories, and learned that she loved Gefilte fish. She especially loved that she got off on both Christian and Jewish holidays. Grandma missed the rest of the family, however, and insisted that they move back to New Orleans. When Mom tried to go back to San Francisco, Grandma started complaining of pains in her chest. Mom stayed to take care of her.

While Grandma was in the hospital, *Sensei* called, then Kim called every couple of days. Was there anything anyone in the *dojo* could do for me? They didn't want to bombard me with calls, but wanted to let me know they were there for me. They sent flowers. I did the *kata*, *Tenshoa* in the corridors at night, when things were quiet. I wanted to kick and punch the walls. *Tenshoa* comforted me. I held Grandma's hand, studying a big ink mark on her fingernail. I wondered what she had been writing.

The night before Grandma died, we thought she was going to get better. The news was positive from the doctor. I convinced Mom to let me take her home for the night. The family had been camping out in the S.I.C.U. waiting room since Grandma had been admitted. At two a.m. we got the call that she wasn't going to make it. I threw on some sweat pants and jumped into the car. As we were driving back to the hospital, Mom balanced her entire makeup bag on her knees. Between tears she applied eye shadow, mascara, rouge, and lipstick.

"I can't believe you're putting makeup on," I said to her. The last thing I cared about in that moment was what my face looked like.

“You should always look your best,” she said. “I can’t go anywhere without my makeup on. I would feel naked.”

I thought about what Sensei Kathleen had once said to me about the similarities between Samurai and Southern Women. They were as far apart as one could imagine in many ways, but in other ways they were the same. Loyalty, duty, appearances, decorum, the list could go on. My mother may have been facing the worst moment in her life thus far, but by God she was going to face it looking good.

I thought about how it was imperative to the Samurai that they think every day about death, and how Grandma had lived this notion. Besides our weekly visits to the cemeteries when I was growing up, Grandma burned candles every night in our bathroom. She would say prayers and name the people as she lit them. It used to scare the hell out of me when I had to pee at night, as my mom’s Styrofoam wig heads were also lined up on the bathroom counter. The shadows made it seem a like a crowd of people were hanging out in our bathroom every night.

And then there was the insurance man. Every month he used to knock at our front door, carrying a little black book in his hand. Grandma would give him a few dollars, reminding me each time that she had a burial policy for when she died. It would pay for everything. The last thing she wanted was to burden anyone in the family.

The skies were black on the day of Grandma’s funeral. The rain began in the morning, continuing throughout the night.

Chapter Thirteen

Shoulders Don't Lie

"Indeed, it is still impossible for you to know your length and width; you cannot judge yourself."

Tsunetomo Yamamoto
Hagakure, The Book of Hidden Leaves

About two months before black belt testing began, I found myself wondering at what point I stopped defining the events in my life as good or bad, and started thinking of them as lessons. I do this almost compulsively, now, obsessed with uncovering the meaning in the material of my life.

The day before I had sat on the floor of a gymnasium in Fort Meyers, Florida, along with three other women. We were waiting to compete against each other in a *kata* competition, the ritual re-enactment of a battle in which the Karate practitioner performs prescribed moves. The moves can be the remains of a *kata* invented hundreds of years ago by a Japanese farmer or warrior, and passed down through the generations, or it can be something invented yesterday, a series of blocks and strikes put together by a modern practitioner.

The goal of the practitioner, in our style, is to achieve a blend of the four elements: earth, air, water, and fire, within the execution of a *kata*. At least this is what I understand at this time of my training. In later years I am told that the master achieves the four elements within a single movement. Each element represents a

particular kind of motion, and correlates to a particular part of the body. Earth is *chi*, the body's center, located just below the navel. *Chi* power is strong, solid. Air is intellect and the respiratory system, responsible for the breathing patterns, which take place during *kata*. Water is blood, the body's circulatory system. Water represents softness and flow. Fire is heart, intensity of feeling, speed.

Speed or fire is my strong suit, according to *Sensei* Kathleen. *Sensei* Kathleen often points out her students strengths, along with the warning, "Be careful not to rely too much on your strengths. They will become your weaknesses. You can only be as hard as you are soft. Your ability to punish must be equaled by your benevolence."

Benevolence comes from the heart, my strength. Yesterday's competition was about working one of my weaknesses, flow. I thought. When I began studying with Master Kay, he suggested that we review the material I needed for my upcoming black belt test. He took one look at the fourteen empty-hand *katas* that I was to be tested on, then pronounced flow to be my weakest link. "If you're going to work one thing," he said, "then it should be flow."

When I took this back to *Sensei* Kathleen, she put her hand on her head and said, "Aarguh!" *Sensei* Kathleen had spent the last eight months preparing us for our test. To have her teacher throw a wrench in the works at the eleventh hour was the last thing she needed. "I don't think this level of element mixture should be required of new black belts," she said, "It will come with time, as you find your way. But since Master Kay asked for it, let's find a way for you to work at it." I have never known *Sensei* Kathleen not to respect her teacher's wishes. She sat in a folding chair in the

corner of the room where we train. “What do you consider your best and worst *katas*?”

“I think *Empi-ha* is my best, and *Koorunfa* my weakest.” *Empi-ha* is a *kata* I have been doing for four or five years. It means elbow battle, and consists of lots of elbow strikes and sharp, rapid motions. *Koorunfa* is a *kata* taught to brown belts. I have only been doing *Koorunfa* for a little over two years and still struggle sometimes with getting the moves in the right order. This *kata* is all over the map where movement is concerned, with places to exploit every element.

“Do both *katas* for me now,” *Sensei* Kathleen said. When I completed *Empi-ha*, *Sensei* pointed out a few places where flow could be incorporated. She noted that, while I had flow in the *kata*’s opening movement on the right side of my body, I used speed during the identical move on the left. “Flow is about transitions,” she said. “You can’t see smooth transitions when they’re there, but you notice it when they’re not.”

I did *Koorunfa*. “It doesn’t look *that* bad,” she said. I laughed. *Sensei* is a wonderful teacher. She has a knack for knowing when to say the right thing. Are we strong that day, feeling good about who and what we are? Then she’ll push us further, ask us to be better than ourselves. Is it a bad hair day or PMS time? Then she’ll congratulate us for getting out of bed and coming to class, saying, “The times you most need Karate are the times you don’t want to be here.”

We commenced to work on flow in *Koorunfa*. *Koorunfa* means violence. Once I thought of writing a fictional story about a lady who was told, “Real women throw knives.”

My writing teacher said, “Maybe this lady doesn’t want to learn how to throw knives. She might think it’s too violent.”

Hmmm. What does this mean, I wondered? Is the action of throwing a knife violent, or does it become violence when aimed at a living creature? I went to the dictionary to look up violence, which is an activity *Sensei* Kathleen has reprimanded me for.

“Stop taking things so *literally*,” she said. “Some things you need to just define for yourself.”

I thought of this conversation yesterday, as I sat in the gymnasium, waiting to compete with the *kata Koorunfa*. Next to me sat a petite, freckle-faced woman who was my age. She whispered to me about a young classmate of hers competing in the next ring. We chatted for a moment, at which point she said, “My *sensei* says I have to get out of my head.” I smiled and told her of having gotten in trouble for going to the dictionary.

Within the next few moments, I would stand in the center of the floor and do my interpretation of the *kata Koorunfa*; violence. Earlier in the day, I had sat in the bleachers with *Sensei* Chuck, a high-ranking teacher in our style. He was sprawled out with his eyes closed and his head propped up on a makeshift pillow. “Tracey. Look mean when you do your *kata*. You know what *Koorunfa* means, don’t you?”

“No, *Sensei*,” I replied.

“Violence,” he said.

“Oh yeah, I knew that.” *Sensei* Kathleen has only said it about a thousand times.

But yesterday I wasn't thinking about the *meaning*. I was thinking about the *doing*. I sat on the floor picturing the blocks and strikes of the *kata*. I mentally reviewed the *kata's kiais* and its culmination.

Did my invisible opponent die at the end of the fight? I guess not, since this wasn't a question I even thought of. I had learned and practiced the moves of the *kata*, without really imagining the battle that was supposed to be taking place. *Kata* could only end one of two ways; with the practitioner's death, if he or she quit the fight, or with the death of the attacker.

Years before, when *Sensei* Kathleen had introduced our class to the virtues of the Samurai; honor, loyalty, courage, benevolence, compassion, wisdom, and justice, I did some further research. In reading about the virtues, I learned that when faced with a choice of life or death, true Samurai always chose death.

This wasn't necessarily a literal death. It meant always seeing a situation through to its end. Beginning things and not finishing them had always been my weakness. I thought that just by virtue of my practicing for this competition, and showing up, I had seen it through. I was wrong.

I realized that what I had so smugly thought of as my strength had become my weakness. Benevolence? Bullshit. No. Was I benevolent when I sat beside the freckle-faced girl and spoke about the dictionary? No. I had dismissed her as weak. Her shoulders kind of slumped when she sat. Her voice was soft, her speech halting. She had none of the qualities I attribute to those with confidence, with the ability to kick ass and take names.

Yet, she shined when she did *kata*. Her movements were crisp and clear. She had good fighting spirit and she did not fuck-up. At least it was unnoticeable if she did. No foul-ups so blaring as losing her balance when taking a cat stance.

“You rocked when you took that cat stance,” Master Kay said to me when the competition was over. He, *Sensei Kathleen*, and some other students in our style had come to Fort Meyers for the tournament. “And you looked nervous as shit.” He was not smiling when he said this. Disappointed in me? At first I thought that. Now I think he was probably more disappointed *for* me. The nervousness? Nothing he could have done about that. But the cat stance? He had told me to work that. Had put me through a grueling exercise to prove his point. He had the same expression on his face when I finished what seemed like a million kicks out of cat stance in his *dojo*, as he did when I screwed up *Koorunfa* in competition. It was an expression of resignation. “You’re going to do what you want to do, anyway, but if I were you, I’d do a hundred kicks out of cat stance every day. You have a weakness in your legs. It’s like you took cat stance one day and it hurt. So your body said, ‘I’m not doing this.’ And you’ve been doing it wrong ever since.” That day in his *dojo*, I didn’t want to hear this. I wanted to collapse. My legs were killing me.

“You know, if you worked those kicks out of cat stance every day, it would strengthen your legs. That stronger power line would carry over into everything you do.”

I knew Master Kay was right when he said that. Yet I didn’t do it. I told Barry about the kicks from hell when he came home from work that evening. He thought it

was hysterical. Barry and I had been working on our marriage. Our relationship had been improving, and we were settling in to our new home.

“I wish I could’ve been there to watch him make you do all of those kicks. I know where you’d tell me to go if I told you to do something like that.”

“You’re right,” I said with a grin.

“So, are you going to do them every day?”

“I’m going to try.” But I knew that was a lie. I was already rationalizing why I would not be able to do them. I was in the midst of preparing for testing, responsible for everything I’d learned over the past six years. When would I find the time to add kicks from cat stance into the melee? I had three children and a husband to take care of. I was in graduate school full time. How much more could I possibly put on my plate? And how important was this in the big picture? Surely, flow was the more important thing to work on. I didn’t stop to think that perhaps flow was the easier thing to work on that actually doing the kicks would be part of seeing the situation through to its end.

When the competition was finished, and Master Kay said, “You rocked in your cat stance,” and “You looked nervous as shit,” I thought, yes. I did screw up the cat stance. But look nervous as shit? I hadn’t felt nervous as shit. Sure, I had a few butterflies. But had I looked that bad?

And what did that mean, anyway? *Nervous as shit*. Shit can’t be nervous. Shit is excrement; feces; duty; cow-dung. Shit may become agitated when it hits a fan, but really, can it be nervous all by itself, just sitting there in a pile. I think not.

I think what he may have meant to say was that the manner in which I executed my *kata* looked like shit, but then again, who am I to second guess? *Sensei* Kathleen said she was proud of me, and gave me a huge hug. Both of them were angry with two of the judges, Master Kay calling out, “You weren’t showing any favoritism now, when you scored that girl from your own style *so* much higher than the others, were you?”

“No, *Sensei*,” the judges shook their heads.

“You got cheated,” *Sensei* Kathleen said to Talia, who had taken second place, and to me. I had received a medal for third place.

“I want to see those score sheets,” Master Kay said.

“I don’t care about that,” I said. I looked at *Sensei* Kathleen. “You know I don’t care about a prize, right? I just wanted to do this.” Master Kay went into the speech he gives at all of our style’s competitions. He says we’re all winners for showing up. How the majority of people are home, doing nothing, and we should be proud of ourselves for taking action. It’s what he calls the will to act.

Yes, it was true that I had pushed myself by going to the competition. It was one of my last chances to compete as a rank below black belt, and I was eight months into test preparations. When would I ever be more ready to compete, I thought, having practiced my *katas* innumerable times over the past few months? And this gave me a reason to work hard on *Koorunfa*, my weakest *kata*. Not to mention that flow problem. But did the will to act encompass my refusal to work kicks from cat stance?

Once again was I not lying to myself, pushing to the background the knowledge that indeed, I was not doing all that I could do?

Talia stood there, grinning with her trophy. I was happy for her. Winning is important for Talia. She had entered the *kata* ring grim, but determined. “I do the worst in *kata*,” she said.

“You’ll do fine,” I said. And she had. Talia did *Empi-ha*, the *kata* I am most comfortable with. She did it well, and she didn’t screw up. I could’ve done *Empi-ha* too, I consoled myself, but I had wanted to work my weakness. And so I had done many repetitions of *Koorunfa* before the competition, keeping in mind the whole flow issue. I didn’t take home a trophy, but then that wasn’t what I had set out to do.

“I’m going to put this away and get out my sparring gear,” Talia tells me, her eyes lighting up with unspoken challenge. “You are sparring, aren’t you?” she says.

“No. My husband and I are leaving. We want to spend some time alone together.”

Talia stops smiling, dismissing me with an “Oh.”

I would like to swat her like a gnat, I think. I know she must be remembering the day four or five months ago, when we sparred against each other. It was the night of a black belt sparring test. Brown belts are invited to participate in the test with the knowledge that once you start sparring you don’t stop until the evening is over. It was the first time I had participated in such a test, as evenings away from my family are hard to manage. Not to mention the fact that I wasn’t thrilled by the thought of

sparring for an hour and a half straight without reprieve. Was it really for the good of my family that I didn't go out evenings, or was it fear? Since the next black belt sparring night would be my test, I thought it'd be a good idea to know what was coming, without the added pressure of being watched. It was forty-five minutes into the evening when I first met Talia.

Master Kay called out, "Switch." I courtesy bowed to my current partner, then turned to face Talia. I didn't know her name then, but saw that she wore a brown belt. Good, I thought. At this rank, she should have a high technology level and some control, not like the white belt man I had been sparring moments before. He kept swinging at me hard, then apologizing for his inability to lighten up. After almost an hour of sparring, I was tired, and not wholeheartedly into the match.

"The object of the game is to live through the night," *Sensei* Kathleen had said prior to the event. I was pleased with myself just for being there, never mind the thought that I might show off some sparring skills.

Talia showed a nice three-part combination early on in the match. Her technique resulted in a tag to the side of my head. Were we sparring in competition, a point would have been called in her favor. It was a good combination, and she tagged with control. Though she had hit the side of my head, to her credit, it wasn't particularly painful. Then, she tagged me with the same hit again. And again. In fact, she continued to tag me with the same combination, a huge grin on her face the entire time.

Doesn't she realize I'm not fighting back, I wondered? My arms were so tired by this point, it was more preferable to me to be bopped upside the head, rather than lift

my arms to block. Does she really think what she's doing is so wonderful? What an idiot, I thought. How much honor is there in what she's doing?

When we were at the open tournament, and Talia so smugly said, "Are you going to spar?" I wanted to hit her. I wanted to pin her to the wall and say, "Do you know me? Have you any idea of what it takes to leave everyone you love at age eighteen, for a place you've never even seen? Do you have any idea of what it is to go through three high-risk pregnancies, the strength it takes to be a good mother to three children? How dare you smirk at me! Can you imagine how hard one has to work to stay in a marriage for fifteen years? You think you know what I'm made of from the three-minute fight we had six months ago?"

You don't know me. You couldn't guess how much I'd love to grab you by the hair, smack you in the face, then take you to the ground." Of course, I didn't say any of these things. I grabbed Barry's hand, said goodbye to *Sensei* Kathleen and Master Kay, then left the tournament.

What I was astounded about then was my reaction. Not since I moved away from home and my sister, Stacey, had I wanted to hit someone as much as I wanted to hit Talia. I am a violent person, I thought. Buried beneath layer upon layer of sugar coating, was this woman who wanted to hurt. While I can't deny that I wanted to hurt Talia physically, I wanted to strike her with words even more. How horrifying that after all these years I still harbored the feelings of a vindictive child.

I thought I was so above that. Almost six years of training as a martial artist, and still I had such a strong reaction. This tournament was a good lesson. A reality check on how far I still had to go. I learned I'd still take the easy way out, if possible, my

rationalization skills at peak performance, when considering how easily I was able to talk myself out of doing those kicks from cat stance. And I learned that I'm not as sweet and benevolent as I had thought, as evidenced by the violent feelings I had towards Talia.

Not too long after I finished patting myself on the back for learning these lessons, I had an epiphany. What if I had gotten so good at snowing other people, I was now snowing myself? Perhaps the reason I didn't tell Barry, "Wait, there's one more thing I have to do at this tournament," wasn't that I was so anxious to be alone with him. Perhaps part of me was afraid.

Maybe I was afraid of the harm Talia could've done to my body if she got a good strike in. Maybe I was more afraid of being made to look a fool. Possibly, I was afraid to face again the part of me that is capable of true violence, destruction.

As a child I was relentless with my sister. Once she hurt me, nothing could stop me from finding the place where I could cause true damage. Tit for tat, Grandma used to say. Competing with Talia had called forth the person I spent the past seventeen years trying to suppress. It terrified me.

Kim and I bow into Master Kay's *dojo*. "Touch your toes," he says. We copy. Before my index finger reaches my big toe, I hear him say, "Gear up." As Kim and I begin to don shin guards, mouth guards, and gloves, Master Kay puts on some music.

He begins with Kim. I stand on the side, grinning as I watch them. Kim circles Master Kay, backing him this way and that, throwing many controlled punches his way. He uses one hand, parrying her strikes as though she were a gnat. Kim begins to breathe heavy. Master Kay is singing along to, "Can you feel the love tonight."

I wondered as I waited *will this be the day he hits me hard?* It is. "I'm going to smack her around a bit," he says to Kim after bowing me in. I feel a twinge of fear. I hope he doesn't hit me so hard that I will embarrass myself by crying.

His strikes are fast and accurate, painful because they are mostly to my face. I had noticed him hitting Kim a lot in the face, heard her grunting in aggravation.

"Getting mad?" he asked her.

"Yes," she said.

He laughed. You'd think from having seen him pound Kim moments before, I would be guarding my face better. I am not. I have a tendency not to block my face enough.

This isn't so bad, I'm thinking. Then he throws me into the wall. I crash into the corner where the oars and *bos* are standing upright. They rattle around me. He comes at me like a freight train, relentless in his barrage of punches. He is leaving his face unguarded, but I hesitate to hit him there. "Hit me," he says.

I throw a punch to his jaw, then a left across his nose. He backs off me a little, but not much. "Come on," he says. I hit him again as he continues to hit me. Even as he lets down his guard, allowing me to connect with his face, I realize how ineffectual I am. In reality, I would be in serious trouble should a man this size attack me. If I

were lucky enough to get my fingers into his eyes, then perhaps I'd buy seconds to run away.

Though I'm hitting him hard, my strikes bounce off of him like rubber arrows. I am breathing heavily, starting to sweat. He is still singing.

"Are you looking at me?" he says. "You looking at me?" I shake my head.

"Don't look at my face. Look here." He indicates his chest.

Yes, I should be watching his shoulders – another bad habit I have. *Sensei*

Kathleen says, "Shoulders don't lie." Master Kay is punching me hard, striking to my stomach and rib cage. I am striking as much as I can, mostly with kicks, as these seem to be my best shot of actually making contact with his body.

It's very scary to try to get within punching distance when someone is as big and powerful as Master Kay is. I have felt pain from his fists, some strikes harder than others, but I realize that what I've felt is probably only a small percentage of what he's capable of. What if he decides to hit me harder if I get in too close? I feel the futility of trying to fight him, sense for sure that in reality my only prayer would be in having the ability to work a serious strategy. Every feminine guile I possess would have to be put into play, and that's providing my attacker didn't just knock me out to begin with.

I am slammed up against another wall. "Hey. Watch out for my grandkid's pictures," he says as I smash into the 8 X 10's hanging on the wall. I cannot believe how quickly I became tired. Hitting hard expends so much energy. Now I understood why boxers adhere to such rigorous workouts.

Master Kay fights Kim and I one more round each, before calling it a day. By that time I am soaked. My face is as red as the pool of blood silk-screened on back of the USA *GoJu* Federation sweatshirts Master Kay wears. My last round ends abruptly when he hurls me against the mirror. I hear Kim scream, “watch out,” and step forward just as the mirror breaks free from the wall and shatters all around me. I feel glass hitting me, but I am not cut. It seems as though this is taking place in slow motion. Kim and Master Kay race to me, to ensure that I am not hurt. I begin to laugh. We clean up the broken mirror.

I am still sweaty and breathing heavily when we have finished cleaning. Master Kay vacuums the rug, and then tells Kim and I to lie down. “Close your eyes,” he says, “and picture a cold, black cloud on the horizon. The cloud is moving through the sky towards you. It’s churning and is so very cold. It stops when it is over your head. You look up at it as rain begins to fall. First a few fat drops, then the rain comes faster and harder. It’s cold. So cold. It’s raining harder and the drops are hitting you like needles. You feel their sting all over your body.”

I concentrate on feeling the drops of rain, on telling my body that the sweat sliding down my nose is actually frigid drops of rain. I try not to think about the fact that my nose hurts from being punched, as does my left eye. I will my body temperature to go down, my breathing to slow. I tell myself I was not afraid when the mirror came crashing down.

“As you peek up at the black cloud, you notice a spot where it’s not so black. It’s dark blue. You focus on that spot. The dark blue becomes lighter and lighter. Before long, light is beginning to peek out from behind the blue cloud. Focusing on the

light, you feel the warmth of the sun as it sheds the cloud and stands directly above you. The warmth feels good on your body. You soak it in, realizing that everything you need is right before you. All you have to do is look. Really look.”

Chapter Fourteen

First Kyu - Brown Belt, Zero Stripes

Deny the Gods if They Stand in Your Way

"I pray to the gods simply for my good luck when I am working under a rain of blood and jumping over the dead bodies."

Tsunetomo Yamamoto
Hagakure, The Book of Hidden Leaves

Exercise Night

"I put on my *gi* and tied my belt as if it were part of a sacred ritual," Kim said to me after she picked me up. "Do you have your headband?"

"Yes, Mom." I smiled.

"I brought us towels, extra shirts, fruit, and water."

"You're amazing. I only brought water."

"I know from tennis that these are things we may need later." Kim is an excellent tennis player, competing on a regular basis. "Are you sure you know where we're going?"

"Pretty sure." I gave her directions to the Pine Island *DoJo*, one of our system's schools in a community center. Making a right, we turned into a long winding road with ditches on either side. A giant cross was illuminated ahead of us. We started laughing. "Okay, another blonde moment."

“I can picture them now,” she said, “wondering why Tracey and Kim didn’t show up for the test, then finding us at the bottom of this canal.”

“We should be so lucky.”

Landing at the bottom of a canal seemed preferable to the exercise marathon we were about to face. I had been meaning to put myself through a mock exercise test for months, but couldn’t seem to get anywhere near the five-hundred repetitions of each exercise that would be required of us on this night.

Nicknamed “the *GoJu* 500” by some, I had serious doubts that I’d be able to complete the test. *Sensei* Kathleen says that one will never be in better shape than right before their *Shodan*, or first black belt test. She also told us that the most important thing about exercise night is making it through. It was better to pass out than to quit. Quality was not an issue. Bonus point were awarded for throwing up.

Upon arrival at the test site, Kim and I discussed the fact that *Sensei* Kathleen still hadn’t pulled our one remaining stripe off of our brown belts, signaling that we were in testing for black belt. All of the other people’s stripes had been pulled. What does this mean, we wondered?

“I’m going to say something,” said Kim.

“Go ahead,” I said. “Stripe or no stripe, I don’t really care.”

Sensei Kathleen looked befuddled when Kim brought up the stripes, then leaned over and yanked mine off. I started jumping up and down, “I out rank you now,” I said to Kim. In the past, Kim had always been promoted first.

“See what your lack of patience caused?” I said to Kim. She and sensei both laughed as *Sensei* pulled Kim’s stripe.

“Let’s fight it out,” Kim said, raising her hands in a fighting stance.

“Save your energy for the exercises,” *Sensei* said.

Sensei Kathleen had prepped us beforehand on what exercises to expect. As always, the duty to avoid injury fell on the practitioner. We were expected to modify anything that could possibly inflame or cause a new injury. *Sensei* told us that she didn’t expect us to do the high-impact exercises such as donkey kicks, which could cause knee injury. She suffered with bad knees, and didn’t want us to injure our own senselessly. We were instructed to substitute with front kicks, and respond, “*oos*,” the generic term meaning yes or no, if a *sensei* asked us if we were injured.

When the test began, we were divided into rank and/or age oriented groups. The sensei in charge sounded like drill sergeants, shouting out exercises and numbers. Four of our group of six modified the high-impact exercises. “All of you have knee injuries?” the *sensei* in charge questioned.

“*Oos Sensei*,” we replied in unison. I felt guilty for substituting, as though I were cheating on the test. But in addition to *Sensei*’s warning, I had seen the way a knee injury completely changed my mother’s life. One day she slipped when climbing from a boat to the pier. From then on, she was unable to dance or walk more than a short distance without inflaming her knees. She went through numerous surgeries, but never recovered.

The two-hour test passed quickly, the experience less harrowing than I thought it would be. One woman cried before and during the test, sniffing as she told us she

had just gotten the flu, but everyone else was upbeat, shouting out “*GoJu*,” at moments of difficulty. When one person yelled “*GoJu*,” the others in testing would respond by shouting, “*GoJu oos!*” The energy level in the room amazed me. I think this is why the test was bearable.

By the time the test was over, I was saturated with sweat and had the chills. I was grateful to be able to change into Kim’s extra shirt. The feeling reminded me of when I was a teenager, and swiped the diet pills my mother got from a charlatan doctor. The world was wonderful and I was on top of it. Kim and I congratulated each other, then chatted the entire way home.

Laura was the only one awake when I got home and was anxious to hear how the test went. She was excited that I was in testing, but bitter that I had bypassed her. It didn’t seem fair to her that she had been in Karate for three years longer than me, yet was stuck at the brown belt level until she turned sixteen.

It didn’t seem fair to me either, but Master Kay was adamant that no one be promoted to black belt until they were mature enough to understand its meaning, and bear the responsibilities that came with the belt.

Laura and I talked for a while, then I soaked in a hot tub. Despite the relaxing bath and the late hour, I was still wired. I sat on the sofa with my thoughts jumping from one thing to another, finally stopping on my grandmother.

I missed her so much. I began to cry, and for some reason thought about the shoebox she had given me before she died. She had been trying to tell me something

by giving me the mementos at that time, but I had been too steeped in my own misery to notice.

When Grandma gave me the box, my warped sense of loyalty to self had clouded my vision. And while loyalty to myself and my needs was important, I couldn't live with it being at the expense of the people I loved. How had I let myself slide into such a selfish state of mind? The realization that I am equivocally alone in the world had been the beginning.

During the worst of my marital difficulties, I had taken stock of my life. My husband and I weren't on the same page. My children depended on me. The rest of my family was a thousand miles away, and living their own lives. Who else could I count on if not me?

This was why I so passionately threw myself back into college, and stayed the course to get my black belt. I wanted to be skilled in as many areas as possible. I didn't know what the future held, only that I was determined to face it prepared.

I cried as I thought about how Grandma had prepared this box of mementos for me. At first glance, it appeared to be a young girl's random souvenirs. Upon closer inspection, I saw that she had carefully chosen each piece to convey something. Included was a card I had made Grandma in kindergarten. Stapled to it was a plastic lily, and the crayoned words, "the flower of love." There was my high-school drama pin. My youth had been consumed with love of the theatre, and I had worked hard for four years to earn that pin. I left home at eighteen to pursue my dream of acting and to this day wish I had stayed home a little longer. An old two-dollar bill and a silver certificate were in an envelope. I had always loved the old and the unusual. In

another envelope was a letter I had written to Grandma at nineteen. I wrote that I had a new boyfriend named Barry, and I thought I was in love. And there was a card that Grandma had given me years ago. It was a blonde-haired girl holding a rabbit, with a rainbow arching over her. As a child, I had many pet rabbits. Inside the card she had written, “Look here whenever you need love.”

Laura saw me crying on the sofa with the mementos spread out on my lap. She hugged me and began to cry too, telling me all of the things she missed about Grandma. She said she still could taste Grandma’s “Lost Bread,” French toast to people outside of New Orleans.

I said, “Let’s make some.”

As I took some slices of bread from the loaf, Laura said, “Remember when Grandma was making this for Dad? And the last piece of bread in the bag turned out to be the sponge she lost the day before?”

“What I would’ve given if she had dipped that sponge in egg and fried it.” Laura and I giggled.

Mom and Dad came to visit along with my Aunt Joycelyn and Uncle Bobby. For a few years now they had been making an annual Florida trip to both spend some time with us and make the rounds at the race and dog tracks.

Mid-day found the family gathered around the swimming pool, which overlooked

a canal. Dad had built a device to raise and lower a pedal boat that we had bought for the kids. The boat had been stolen, however, and now Laura had attached a lawn chair to the line. Her friend, Liat, was sitting in the chair, waiting for Laura to lower her into the canal. “That looks like fun,” my mom said, about ten seconds before the line let loose and Liat began to fall fast into the water. Laura tried to stop the sudden descent by grabbing onto the line. It didn’t work. Liat fell into the water, and Laura ripped open her hand.

Barry and I raced to the hospital. Laura panicked when the surgeon tried to touch her hand. “Don’t touch me,” she screamed. Barry tried speaking to her softly, reasoning with her to calm down.

“Stop it, now,” I said. “Get a grip on yourself. The doctor’s going to do what he needs to do with your hand, and you’re going to let him.” It tore me apart to speak in mean tones to Laura under such circumstances, but I knew someone had to snap her out of her panic. The entire time that the doctor was stitching her hand, she was in tears. Barry stood to the side, holding back his tears, unable to watch.

Throughout the entire fifteen stitches, I had to continually snap at her, to keep her from freaking out. It was so strange. I had had watched boys much bigger than her blacken her eye in Karate, and she had barely blinked. Doctors, however, were another matter. She was petrified of needles. I felt terrible when it was over, as if I had somehow betrayed her. I hadn’t wanted to be mean, but knew it was necessary.

Later that evening, Barry got his chance to save the day. We were having a quiet dinner with Mom, Dad, my aunt, and uncle, when we heard a scream. Max was

around five years old, and had just started not only training in Karate, but in taking a bath by himself. He declared that he was too big for me to assist him in the tub.

Barry and I ran round the corner to the bathroom where Max was bathing. He had locked the door! This was a first.

“Max!” I screamed.

“Max!” Barry screamed, hurling his body against the door. It didn’t budge. He stepped back and front kicked the door until he had broken through it. Shards of wood were splintered and sticking out from Barry’s skin. He was bleeding.

From the doorway, we couldn’t see Max at all. He ran in yelling his name, and saw him flat on his back in the tub. By the time we were standing over him, Max picked his head up from the water and said, “What?”

“Why were you screaming,” we asked?

“Didn’t you hear us calling you?”

“I was counting to ten in Japanese. I didn’t want to hear myself, so I put my ears under the water.”

“Shit,” I said, and got some medicines to tend to Barry’s cuts. “That was pretty impressive,” I said. “I’m so proud of you.”

“I’m proud of how you handled the situation in the E.R. today,” he said. “We make a good team.”

“Yes. We do.”

“I’m not coming back here anymore,” Uncle Bobby said. “Too much excitement.”

Weapons Defense Night

People stood on the lawn wielding *escrimas*, *nunchucks*, *bos*, and *sai* as though they were prosthetics. It was weapons defense night, and the need to display a myriad of defense techniques in front of the *sensei* with precision was pressing.

Kim stood to the side while the black belts testing for higher rank were called into the room. The people who were left continued to practice.

“Is this the way the arm bar with the *sai* is done?” someone asked.

“Yes,” another replied.

“No. It goes like this,” still another said.

Kim retied her belt, nodding her head toward the testees, “That’s why I don’t want to practice. No sense in confusing ourselves now.”

“You’re right,” I said, though I really didn’t agree. Perhaps I could perfect or at least remember a technique I’d forgotten in the few moments before test time.

The woman who had cried at the exercise and *kata* test was commenting on some of the *sensei* who had shown up to judge. “I can’t stand that woman,” she said, pointing to a *sensei*, “she’s slept with half the *ryu*, including some of the married *sensei*.” I realized that the closer I came to becoming a black belt, the more unpleasant issues would come to light. *Now is not the time for gossip*, I thought, ignoring her comment.

“Will you watch my weapons while I use the restroom?” Kim asked.

“Of course,” I replied. Kim rounded the corner to the back of the building just as

the front doors flung open. A handful of high-ranking *sensei* trampled out muttering beneath their breaths.

Master Kay's son slung his gear bag over his shoulder with a jerk. "I hope you all have better luck than I did. My dad failed me before I barely had a chance to do anything." He strode away, while another *sensei* stayed.

This *sensei* made comments about how the *sensei* inside were failing everyone, how they must be in really bad moods, how they were out to get him. The door flung open again as *Sensei* Kathleen stormed out. "All of you get your gear and come in." She spun back inside.

Everyone rushed to get their Karate bags and weapons, beating a path through the door so as not to start off the test on the wrong foot. I moved Kim's and my gear to the front of the door, watching for her to get back from the bathroom. I knew I should go in with the others, but then what about Kim's stuff? More importantly, how would she feel coming back from the bathroom to find everyone inside? *Sensei* Kathleen would be mad that I didn't go in when she said I should, but Kim finding everyone inside could cause her anxiety before the test even began. I waited until Kim came back.

Sensei Kathleen stuck her head out of the door. "I want you in here *now*." Shit, I thought, still waiting. She's really going to be mad at me for not listening. But Kim still hadn't gotten back. To go inside somehow felt like I'd be betraying Kim. I waited.

Kim and I were sent to the side of the room where *Sensei* Kathleen was running the test. Master Kay sat center on the other side, testing the higher-ranking people.

Was it my imagination that *Sensei* Kathleen smiled kindly at Kim, telling her that she would go first, while completely ignoring me? Did she really snap at me every time she needed me to move during Kim's turn? Why wasn't she giving me an encouraging nod, as she was Kim? I had been working as hard as Kim. I couldn't remember working harder at anything for such a long length of time. Why didn't she see that?

Kim completed her test, passing without a problem. Now it was my turn. The first thing I was required to show was a snatch, a technique used to take someone out of a car. "Let me see you do that again," *Sensei* said after I'd finished. "Does anyone fail her?" she asked the two *sensei* who were judging with her. They both said no.

"I'm going to let this one slide," *Sensei* Kathleen said, but you know your hand placement should have been better than that.

Perhaps that information was embedded somewhere in my memory, but exactly what I could've done better, I couldn't say.

The rest of the test followed the same pattern. *Sensei* Kathleen would ask for a technique, then I would attempt it on Kim. *Sensei* Kathleen would then frown or fail me. Kim shot me sympathetic glances and made goofy grins, trying to cheer me up.

The more displeased *Sensei* appeared, the angrier I became. I felt as though she was unjustly judging me. The test was divided into four components: *escrima*, *bo*, *sai*, and *nunchucks*, and was structured on a three-strike system. Three errors in any one weapon was an automatic fail in that weapon. Failure in any one weapon required a retest of that particular weapon. While I may have one or two strikes, I didn't reach three with any weapon.

Sensei finished my test by once again asking the judges, “Does anyone fail her?” They shook their heads no. Normally it would take more than one judge to fail a candidate, but because *Sensei* Kathleen was my teacher, she alone could fail me.

“You should fail,” she said. “I know you can do better than this, but this time I’m going to let you slide.”

I grabbed my weapons and slammed out of the room.

Empty Hand Defense Night

Kim and I got caught in a traffic jam enroute to the empty hand defense test. We tried not to let ourselves get uptight during miserable drive to the *dojo* that’s so far away it’s almost on the edge of the Everglades.

When we arrived, we found others were late too. Though this should have calmed us, it didn’t. One of the women in testing was running around trying to get Master Kay the perfect cup of coffee.

“I don’t take it *black*,” he said. She leapt into the air and scurried off to find cream. “I want Kim and Tracey first,” Master Kay said.

“But they weren’t the first ones here,” someone responded.

Kim and I looked at each other and said, “shit.” Why, why, why was he asking for us first? A whim.

We began with me being the *uke*, and Kim being the testee. She fumbled a couple of things here and there, but never got to three strikes. The test consisted of

performing prescribed defenses against a gun, a knife, and an empty-handed attacker.

Whatever Kim didn't execute perfectly, she made up for in spirit. Early on in our training I nicknamed her, "the wild woman," and her *kiais* and power during the defense test reflected it.

When it was my turn, I began by criss-crossing my hands against Kim's outstretched arm to knock the knife from her hand. It flew across the room and almost hit *Sensei* Susannah, a high-ranking black belt, in the head. I apologized profusely. The other judges smiled. *Sensei* Kathleen said, "You're a *really* good *uke*, Kim."

What did she mean by that? I was a bad *uke*? What had I done to displease her this time? We had barely gotten started, and she was glaring at me. Shit.

The judges continued to call out commands, and I executed techniques. The knife flew over at *Sensei* Susannah again. And again.

"Are you trying to hit me?" she said, and everyone laughed.

The test continued, and I kept the weapons away from *Sensei* Susannah. By the time it was done, I had failed a thing here or there, but nowhere near enough to fail me in any one category.

"Does anyone fail her?" Master Kay asked.

Everyone in the room shook their heads, "no."

"I fail her," *Sensei* Kathleen said. "I know she could have done better. I don't want to aggravate you people by having to come to her retest. I'll just retest her in the *dojo*."

What? She failed me, but wouldn't let me take the retest with the rest of the people who failed? I was furious.

Though the majority of my time was spent with the children, or helping Barry with work, I still kept my job as a flight attendant, and flew part-time. Through the years, my Karate training had manifested itself on the airplane in many ways. The first time I encountered a medical emergency in flight, I was terrified. I ran to get another flight attendant for help. Karate taught me that emergencies and emotion were two words that didn't belong in the same sentence. During future medical situations, I didn't think about what I was feeling, I just did what I had been trained to do.

That is the beauty of *kata*, discovered by the Japanese so long ago. Repetition built muscle memory, enabling one to enter into "mind of no mind" when fighting in reality. Our airline's training is the best in the industry. Every year each flight attendant is required to review medical procedures, as well as a myriad of other possible emergency situations. My martial arts training helped me to stay grounded while in flight.

Karate also helped me to get over a rough period when I returned to work after having Max. I think my reluctance to be away from him brought on a fear of flying. After years of not only working as a flight attendant, but also piloting a small plane, I loathed flying. My palms would get sweaty and my stomach turned on takeoff. I became a nervous wreck if there was a mechanical problem, reading nonexistent things into delays.

During those times, I sat on the jump seat and did the breathing exercises I had learned from the *kata, Tenshoa*. Before long my fear of flying passed.

I became more vocal at work when the situation warranted it. I didn't step back to avoid confrontations as I would have in the past. While avoiding confrontation may have been important to Southern ladies, it had no place on the airplane. The passengers were the priority, and I took it seriously. This is not to say that Karate made me perfect, mind you. Far from it. While in the past, I completely ignored an anti-semitic situation, I now over-reacted.

It was the day after Rabin, the prime minister of Israel, had been assassinated. I walked onto the 767 and into the aft galley to begin flight preparations. Hanging on the clip where our catering papers belonged was a newspaper clipping of a woman. She was holding her hand over her mouth in a horrified expression, the blurb underneath giving details about the assassination. Someone had written in the caption, "*Oy vey*, I didn't get my kosher meal." I was livid.

Although I knew that none of the members of my crew could have done this (we had just stepped onto the plane, after all), it didn't stop me. I brought the clipping to each member of the crew, individually. I showed them the clipping and said, "Look at this." I tried to remain neutral, just waiting for one of them to laugh so I could pounce. When none of them did, I started to rant. "I don't find this funny. Do you think it's funny for someone to put this in the galley?" They must've thought I was a madwoman.

Having encountered a few racist flight attendants shouldn't have led me to judge all of my peers so harshly. Flight attendants do a difficult job, under tiring and

dangerous circumstances. The vast majority of them go above and beyond the norm in being good to everyone. While Karate had given me the tools to cope with emergencies and be assertive, I can't say it had made me any smarter.

Chapter Fifteen

The Word of a Samurai

“The word of a Samurai was sufficient guarantee for the truthfulness of an assertion.”

Inazo Nitobe
Bushido, The Warrior's Code

Halfway through my black belt test, I have been ordered to write an essay on obligation. I sit at the computer frustrated because I can't pinpoint what I want to say about obligation, annoyed because this essay is a punishment. Last week I didn't keep my word. I continue to pay the price for my transgression. I started to pay for my what? Error? Sin? Stupidity? Or was it something more? Last Tuesday night, I didn't compete in a Karate competition in which I had said I would.

Four times during the year, the *ryu* holds competitions for the adult students. It isn't mandatory that one competes, but it is highly encouraged. Initially, I had planned on competing at this *shiai*. When I told *Sensei* Kathleen I had changed my mind, she responded with curtness, then ignored me for the rest of the evening.

The next morning during class, she said that I must write an essay on obligation. All this I expected. Not the specifics, mind you. How she'll choose to punish me when I do something wrong is not something I'd even try to guess at. But I bet my

life on the fact that there would be retribution. You see, this is not the first time I have not kept my word, nor I expect, will it be the last.

A long time ago, *Sensei* Kathleen spoke to our class of *Bushi No Ichi Gon*, which translates as, “My word is as good as my life.” She said that once one is a brown belt in Master Kay’s *ryu*, it is expected that you live up to this dictum. This is because Master Kay runs his *ryu* based on the Samurai virtues.

Honor, in Master Kay’s opinion, is not only the number one virtue, but is worth losing everything for. Keeping one’s word is a matter of honor. *Sensei* Kathleen warned that if we breached this honor, and didn’t keep our word, there would be hell to pay. My hell then is to write an opinion of what I think the obligations are at each rank, up to *sandan*, which is a third degree black belt.

As a brown belt, in the four-month process of testing for my black belt, I am considered a teenager in the Karate world. I’ll be treated as an adult if and when I’m promoted to black belt. The big event is scheduled to take place in less than six weeks. You would think, then, that I’d be smarter than to go back on my word with my big promotion looming tantalizingly on the horizon. You’d assume that I’d be on my best behavior, conscientiously reviewing for my tests, and trying to say and do the right thing. And while I am working hard on my technology, the other stuff, such as living up to the obligation of *Bushi No Ichi Gon*, eludes me. As much as I didn’t believe this thing would happen to me, this behavior befitting a teenager, I have to admit what is true. I have become infected with brown belt disease. It has happened just as *Sensei* Kathleen, years ago, said it would.

Back then I didn't believe I would become one of the smart-asses. You couldn't have convinced me that some day I'd be one of the people who begin to blur courtesy lines in the Karate classroom, forgetting to say, "*sensei*" (a necessary courtesy) after the word "*oss* (a generic term meaning yes or no)." Twice in the past week, I have been reprimanded for this transgression. And although I haven't wanted to admit it to myself, I fear I've become one of those students who think they're ready for a fight.

Not long ago, *Sensei* Kathleen said to me, "If I could only show you how powerful you are." *If you only knew what I know about myself*, I thought. I am all too aware of the power within me. The power to hurt. I am a dangerous woman.

A danger mostly to myself, I realize, having become one of the anxious ones, eager for someone to cross their line. I used to listen to those Karate people with befuddled amusement. "I'm just waiting for someone to start with me, would welcome the opportunity to kick ass." I'd think: idiot. How could this person so not get it? Didn't they realize the whole point of martial arts training was to avoid confrontation? What could have happened to turn someone who was probably a normal human being into someone relishing the thought of a fight?

I saw so many good things in Karate training, so very little negative, that I came to the conclusion that this metamorphosis wasn't due to the martial arts at all. These people must have been assholes to begin with. As I was an asshole to begin with. As I still am. Why was it that I was only realizing it now?

Why is it I cannot write or talk without using profanity? Last month my parents, aunt and uncle, were visiting. During dinner, my father said, "I don't care about that Karate shit. It's been a long time since you've felt my fist on the back of your head,

but it's going to happen if I hear you say *fuck* one more time." I looked over at this remarkably un-wrinkled grey-haired man in his seventies, laughing at the absurdity of what he'd said. I half believed him.

There was a time when I was growing up, when he'd knock me upside the head, "because you looked like you were thinking about doing something wrong." Most of the time, though, he never had to hit me. He'd just look at me with his eyebrows bunched together and I'd start crying. I so much wanted to please him. It would break my heart when I didn't.

Last week, when I forgot to say "*sensei*," after "*oss*," and *Sensei* Kathleen snapped at me, I hid in the bathroom and cried. I ran out in the middle of reviewing for my weapons test, then lied to my partner when she knocked on the door to see if I was okay. "It's congestion," I said. And indeed, I was congested. My head cold had moved to my chest the night before I was to compete in the tournament. But why I sat sniffing in that bathroom was congestion of another sort. I was overflowing with shame. On so many levels, for so many reasons.

For not competing the evening before, as I had said I would. For using my daughter as an excuse. Laura is twelve, and has been studying Karate since she was four. Two years ago she became discouraged and wanted to quit. I wouldn't let her. She says she hates Karate. What she really hates is that I've been promoted faster than she has, that other people, who also began after her, have advanced more quickly than her. She refuses to understand that this has to do with age; no one under the age of eighteen is given a black belt in our style.

To attain a black belt in an internal system, a style that holds personal growth above physical prowess, is to have reached adulthood. It isn't presumed that one under the age of eighteen should be burdened with the responsibility of *bushi no itchi gon*, or keeping their word. Therefore, the underage practitioner whose technology level and time spent in training cannot be denied, is given a *shodan-ho*. The rank of *shodan-ho* is designated by a brown stripe running through the center of a black belt. When the *shodan-ho* reaches eighteen, she is given a solid black belt.

Laura doesn't think the designation *shodan-ho* is a fair one, despite the built-in protection this special belt provides. Many people see a black belt on a person, and think "it's open season," sparring hard or giving that person a difficult time. The brown stripe through the black belt signals that care must be taken, as this practitioner is not yet an adult.

Laura also doesn't want to accept that she hasn't moved up faster due to inconsistent attendance in class throughout the years. She'd like to believe that her ego hasn't entered into the picture that it's just that Karate bores her, and there's nothing more she can learn from it.

I know better. So I refuse to let her quit. So I jumped on the opportunity to coerce her into competing last week. Laura hasn't competed in years. The top of my bookcase is lined with trophies from the times she did compete. Laura is an excellent Karate competitor. Better than I'll ever be. I hate competing. I spent all of my high-school years participating in drama tournaments. Wanting to win. Needing other people's affirmation. There are boxes of trophies collecting dust in my parent's attic to attest to this. What do I have to prove now?

Sensei Kathleen says Karate is from me to me. She says it's about being better than yourself. She warns us of the mistake in comparing ourselves to the people standing beside us in the Karate classroom. I understand this. My Karate is about me. About seeing myself for who I truly am. About trying to be better. So why would I want to compete? Why would she care that any of us compete? What's the point?

As a teacher (It's been three years since I started teaching children's class), I think competition can be used as a tool. The will to win, the desire to not stand before others and be made a fool, is wonderful leverage. Preparing for competition makes the practitioner stronger. What we do a lot of, we become very good at. A good teacher spurs their students to be the best they can be, a goal which lengthens as the student progresses.

It wasn't as a teacher, though, that I wanted Laura to compete. It was because I thought she'd win. I would've bet money that she'd take home a trophy, leave the tournament smiling, feel good about herself, remember some of what she used to love about Karate. And she did. She won first place in *kata* even though she forgot the opening movement of the dance. The rest of what she did was so strong that only the center judge (the most senior black belt), noticed her error. Laura shines when she taps into her strengths.

Two days ago, Laura told me she is beginning to enjoy Karate again. I asked her if it had anything to do with winning at the tournament. She said no. Yesterday, she apologized, and said, yes, it had a lot to do with that. She just didn't want to admit it to me, because I had manipulated her into competing.

Shortly before the tournament, Laura was suspended from school, with the prospect of possible expulsion. She'd been caught with a Swiss army knife in the classroom. The school handbook leaves no room for negotiation where weapons are concerned, mandatory suspension. Laura attends a public magnet school. Located in a low-income area, the school is given extra funding for programs to attract students from other areas. It is one of Florida's alternatives to forced busing.

Laura is classified as a highly gifted child, having an I.Q. of over 145. Laura's class consists solely of gifted kids. This was the first knife confiscated this year in the entire school. This is the third incident in the past three months in which Laura has received disciplinary action.

She had been sent to the guidance counselor for the effect her blatant mood swings were having on the class, and I was called in to a conference to discuss Laura's unwillingness to own her inappropriate behavior. Things will get worse before they get better, the teachers warned me. Just wait until next year. Seventh graders are even more difficult than sixth graders.

When asked by the vice-principal why she had brought a weapon to school, Laura replied that it was due to concern over the recent massacre that took place at a Colorado high school. "Don't even go there," I said to her later. "You know I'm not going to accept that you actually *believed* a Swiss army knife would be a good defense against an automatic weapon. Why did you really do it?"

"Because a boy gave it to me," she said. "I brought it to school on purpose. I wanted to look at it throughout the day and cherish it."

They say the apple doesn't fall far from the tree. When Laura said what she did, I could completely relate. The dumbest things I've ever done in my life were for the love of a man, or for the want of a man's love. Father, boyfriend, husband, the loves that couldn't be or never were.

I've been told that in Buddhism, there is what's called the world of hunger. It is the place where desire rules, preventing one from progressing along the path to enlightenment. I'd like to think I'm beyond that world, but I won't deny what's true. Laura is having her first taste of this world. With her suspension, she's paying her first price for the want of a man.

Is there not a way out, I wondered? What can I give Laura to keep her from the world of hunger, to enable her not to struggle as I have? She needs confidence, along with the belief that standing alone, she is a worthy entity. A man's love, while marvelous, should not be the defining element in her life. While Karate has not cured me of this want, it has helped me immensely. If Laura could learn to love Karate again, maybe she could learn to love herself. I used Laura's suspension to manipulate her.

From love, to wisdom, to manipulation. I had used Laura's suspension as a cop-out for me not to compete. On the day of the tournament, I told Laura I wanted her to compete. Having been dealt a double-dose of guilt in life (considering my Catholic and her father's Jewish background), I knew Laura would feel compelled to comply. I told her that I didn't feel well, but that our Karate school was counting on the fee I would pay to compete. Wouldn't she compete instead of me?

Laura didn't hesitate to say yes. With the suspension less than two days old, Laura was acquiescing to anything I said. It made me wish she were suspended more often. What a pleasant person my pre-teen had turned into. I wondered what else I could take advantage of while she was in this state.

As Laura got used to the idea of competing at the *shiai* instead of me, her excitement grew. "Watch me practice my *kata*, Mom. What do you think of this move? How do I look here?" Instead of storming off and sulking when I offered a tip to improve, she actually listened and incorporated the suggestion. "Can I wear your *gi* (Karate uniform)?" she wanted to know.

"Absolutely," I said. "You can even wear my embroidered one."

"Oh, no. I couldn't do that," she said. "*Sensei* gave that to *you*. It wouldn't be honorable for me to wear it."

"Don't be ridiculous. *Sensei* loves you. She wouldn't be offended if you wore it."

"No, I couldn't."

Laura ended up wearing my faded canvas *gi*. Later, I realized that our garments should have been reversed. She was worried about dishonoring herself by wearing a uniform that was a gift to me, while I was conniving to escape from my word.

How much less complicated my life would be if I could let honor be my guide. As Laura's mother, I was called in to school because Laura wasn't owning her inappropriate behavior. At my next Karate class, I handed in a bullshit essay to *Sensei* Kathleen, detailing the monetary and bureaucratic obligations that accompany

rank. While I'm sure *Sensei* could find my mother's phone number to rat me out if she tried, that isn't the Karate way.

Karate, *Sensei* says, is a spiral journey to the center of yourself. It's from me to me.

Weapons Kata Night

By the time that weapons *kata* night rolled around, I half-expected that *Sensei* Kathleen was going to fail me. But still, I hoped. Why it mattered to me that I pass, I'm not sure. It could've been because of all the effort I had put into preparing for my black belt test - never in my life had I practiced so focused, so seriously, so long, for anything. It could've been because I was pretty damn sure that I met the performance criteria, even surpassed it in a spot or two. Most likely I cared about passing due to my ego. I wanted an affirmation that yes, my efforts hadn't been in vain, that yes, my *katas* did look good.

The test took place in the back room of a Gold's Gym. The room connected to where we were testing was taken by a spinning class, that is, people on bicycles pedaling to imagined destinations. Music was blaring and the glare of strobe lights intermittently blasted through the door.

As I waited my turn outside the room, two *sensei* in testing for second and third-degree black belt approached me. They asked if I could show them how to tie their *hakima*, which is the split skirt type garment worn by Samurai. I obliged, thinking

how strange it was that they were asking a lower ranking person for instruction. At their rank, tying a *hakima* should have come as easily as tying their shoes. One of the amusing criticisms of the movie *The Last Samurai* is the scene in which Tom Cruise is given a *hakima*. With no instruction at all, he put it on perfectly. Perhaps Tom could have helped these *sensei*.

When my name was called, I courtesy bowed trying to come to terms with the room's odd shape and over abundance of corners. The room was mirrored, but shaped in the most bizarre way I had ever seen – like a cross between a rectangle and triangle on steroids. I had trouble enough doing *kata* at a 45° angle in a room with four normal walls. How ever would I accomplish it in this fun house from hell?

The first thing we were asked to do upon stepping into the testing room were the *sai katas*, both of which end with special courtesy designed for use with the *hakima*. I completely forgot this courtesy, taking the formal kneeling position with disregard for the garment I was wearing.

I had executed my basic *sai kata* facing *Sensei* Marcel, who giggled like a schoolgirl, then mimicked the courtesy I should have accomplished.

“Shit.” I mouthed the word. He laughed, making me feel at ease. I strove to dismiss the error from my mind as the test was only beginning. Afterwards I could come unraveled. For now I had to focus on the task at hand, performing the next seven *katas* with their corresponding weapons.

The *sensei* sat around us, forming a misshaped circle. I did my advanced *sai kata* still facing *Sensei* Marcel, sure that I missed the 45° angles, but confident that I had at least gotten the moves in the right order.

I struggled to quell the nervousness I felt when rotating to Master Kay's corner. Something about doing any Karate before him always made me ill at ease. I thought, surely, I must look like a fool to this man who had spent almost half a century as a martial artist.

By now, the *hakimas* and *sai* were long put away. We were using *escrimas*; the fighting sticks which were said to have originated in the Philippines in the 1600's.

Master Kay grinned when I completed my courtesies to him, wishing me well by his demeanor. Kim and I were in his good graces because we had begun to assist him on the production of his rape awareness and defense book.

I completed my *escrima katas*, feeling good about them, then rotated to the next corner, where *Sensei* Kathleen sat. She remained expressionless while I did both my *bo katas* and courtesy. There were parts of my *bo kata* which I knew she hadn't been happy with during practice.

For weeks now I had been trying to fix the height in which the *bo* was held when parallel to the floor, as well as a couple of other minor details. While I knew my *katas* were far from perfect, I was pleased with the progress I had made. I didn't make any major mistakes or turn the wrong way, and I was confident the *bo* was in the right place at the right time. Because of the room's strange angles, I couldn't be sure my forty-fives were on target. But then *Sensei* Kathleen had said that alone wouldn't fail me.

I rotated to my next spot, the corner where I would complete my *nunchuck* forms. Though the strobe lights and music were still blaring from where the women were spinning, I had ceased to notice them. *Nunchucks* had become my favorite weapon,

and while most people dreaded testing with them, I looked forward to this part. I loved the feel of *nunchucks* in my fingers, and felt at home with this weapon.

When these *katas* were done, Master Kay had us line up facing the side of the room where he and *Sensei* Kathleen sat. He called out the name of the first testee in line, then went around the circle of black belts for judgment. “Did anyone fail Kim?” he asked. When the responses were all, “no,” he moved on to the next person.

He went around the circle when it was my turn as well. I stood in *kako*, the stiffness of my body belying the beating of my heart. Everyone responded “no,” that they hadn’t failed me. Then he got to the last person, *Sensei* Kathleen. “I fail her,” she said.

I smiled, acknowledging what now could not be denied.

“Do you realize that everyone else in the room passed her?” he asked.

“Yes,” she said. “But I don’t want to waste everyone else’s time by having her retest. I’ll just handle it in my *dojo*.”

I nodded my head.

Dazed and disheartened, I was determined not to let *Sensei* Kathleen’s actions get the better of me. She had instilled in me a “fuck-you” frame of mind, and no matter how many times I examined my performance over the past weeks, I came to the same conclusion. *Sensei* Kathleen was being cruel.

I tried so hard to understand what I had done to displease her so much. She hadn’t failed any of her other students, and certainly not in the demeaning manner done to me. The way I saw it was that one couldn’t be a little bit failed, just as one couldn’t

be a little bit pregnant. If I had erred so badly, then I should be required to retest with the other people who had failed. But that would be wasting the *senseis'* time, she had said.

Days past, and I asked her when I would retest in the *dojo*. “Oh, don’t worry about it,” she laughed. “It was no big deal. We’ll get it eventually.”

What? It was important enough to embarrass me in public, but not important enough to review. Fuck you, I thought.

Near the end of the four-month testing period, Kim and I visited Master Kay to give him a look at our sparring. It was the last test before writtens. He was pleased with what he saw, our furious fits of giggles aside, and now sat to address Kim’s question, “Just how bad were we on weapons’ *kata* test night?”

“Sensei Kathleen takes black belt promotions too seriously,” he said. “Getting your black belt doesn’t mean you’ve achieved this great thing,” he says, “it’s like you’re being born.”

Kim and I were seated at Master Kay’s feet. He was centered atop the rolled-up workout mat. “Now the teachers sit back and wait to see whether or not we’ve given birth to a melon-head.”

Kim and I grinned at each other, as we are wont to do in Master Kay’s presence. He is like a grandparent, benevolent and indulgent with Kim and me, smiling when we horse play or tease each other during a lesson, gently correcting our movements when wrong. “When I’m talking about one of the new black belts during the next

few months, you'll hear me say things like, 'We'd better put him back in the incubator. Obviously, he wasn't done yet.'"

From the way things had been progressing in my testing, I felt as though I would be the one who needed to be put back to bake, as well as the one most likely to be designated melon-head.

"You didn't look bad at all," he said. "Both of you did a nice job."

"Then why did *Sensei* Kathleen fail me?" I wanted to know.

"It's the teachers prerogative," he said. "She has the right to say she thought you could've done better."

I knew that it forty percent of the black belts in the room had to fail someone in order to make them retest, but that a person's sensei could override that rule.

"I wouldn't let it worry you," Master Kay said. "I passed you, and so did everyone else in the room."

But that isn't good enough, I thought. *Sensei* Kathleen is the one who carried me for the past six years. She is the one whose opinion mattered the most.

Sparring Night

By the time sparring night rolled around, I was ready to hit anyone and anything. Like the exercise test, sparring night was judged by whether or not you made it through the test. The atmosphere in the main dojo was one of excitement. Everyone milled about donning gloves, shin guards, and mouth guards, laughing and catching

up on gossip. For the first time, people below the rank of black belt were allowed to come and spar just for fun.

This added another element to the evening, as the most dangerous people to spar are beginners. Especially new beginners, as they don't know control or their own strength. Master Kay lined everyone up, then yelled that every black belt in the room should spar every person in testing, and that if anyone hurt a woman, they would have to answer to him.

This didn't mean that the testers couldn't hit us hard, it just meant that they wouldn't be forgiven for breaking a nose, or causing some other kind of injury. I vacillated between being annoyed at his warning, and wanting to profusely thank him. I didn't want less of a test because I'm a woman, but I also didn't want a broken nose – something that isn't unheard of when the rowdy guys get going.

It turned out I was annoyed for nothing. While I didn't get a broken nose, I got plenty bruised. One massive *sensei* said, "Do anything you want, but don't bore me." Then he bore down on me like a freight train. I tried avoiding him by using the forty-five degree angles that *Sensei* Kathleen had taught us, but wasn't having much luck. He just kept coming. This was about five rounds in for me, and the fighting was nonstop, Master Kay calling out "Switch" every so often as a signal to change partners.

I finally realized the best way not to bore this *sensei* was to run. The room was packed, and bumping into the person next to you or getting your feet stepped on was not uncommon. I wove my way through the people, making a beeline for the opposite end of the room. When the *sensei* caught up with me, I backed up at an

angle, once again parting the people. I saw him crack a smile or two as he came after me.

Another *sensei* kept leg checking me, that is, using one of his feet to try and sweep me out. This was something we hadn't practiced in my *dojo*. It made me nervous. After he did it a few times, I asked him to stop, telling him that I was untrained in sparring this way. He laughed and did it again. I hated the way I felt as though I might fall on my face. "If you do that again," I said, "I'm going to kick you in the shin." The shin is off-limits, and is one of the most painful places that you can kick a person.

He laughed again, threw some more punches, then tried to sweep me again. I kicked him hard in the shin. "Ow," he said, bending down to rub it. "Who's your teacher?" He asked.

"Guess," I said.

"*Sensei* Kathleen," he answered.

"Right." I smiled.

Writtens

We had heard that only seven people out of a hundred had ever passed the black belt written test, but all secretly believed that we would be the eighth. Kim and I were looking forward to seeing these legendary questions. No one, but no one, had given us an idea of what to expect. *Sensei* Kathleen had mentioned the five books

that we should study from, and told us that there may be some questions on how to deal with injuries in the dojo.

I studied as best as I could for the test, and spent the two weeks prior answering the ten essay questions that were due on that night. We were instructed not to share the essay questions with anyone.

I spent the entire two hours allotted for the test, taking it. There were many different types of questions, and many, many things that I had never heard of. I wished I could have kept a copy of the test, so I could look up the things I didn't know later. That, of course, was impossible. Not only does no one get to keep a test, no one ever finds out what they scored.

Kim and I agreed that it had been a fun test to take. We also agreed that we had probably failed.

Chapter Sixteen

Defeating Yourself by Victory

“Being that you are samurais, be proud of your valor and prowess and prepare yourself to die with frenzy. Keep in mind to purify your everyday diction, thinking, deportment, and the like.”

Tsunetomo Yamamoto
Hagakure, The Book of Hidden Leaves

The night I got my black belt was one of the worst nights of my life. That it was raining that evening came to me as no surprise.

It was raining the day I left my family and moved to New York, the city’s skyline grey and lonely, looming up at me as the plane descended into my future.

It poured the day Barry and I married. Champagne flowed at the reception, specifically through the waitress whose responsibility was to ensure the bridal couple became inebriated. I have no memory of how we made it through the impending hurricane’s winds and rain on our way to the hotel.

Rain marked the Karate picnic during which *Sensei* Kathleen spoke of finding beauty in violence, a concept I considered while making the decision to stay or leave my marriage.

Heaven cried the day my Grandma died. Not with little drops and dainty drizzles, but with roiling clouds punctuating the air with thunder and streaks of lightening.

So why wouldn't it storm the day I got my black belt, drops turning to drizzle as night consumed the sky? What was unfortunate about the rain on the night of my black belt promotion was the fact that we had to be dressed in a new, white *gi*. For the first time since beginning training, we were not only allowed but required to wear a color other than black.

The white *gi*'s were ordered by *Sensei* months beforehand, with the command that all patches be sewn onto the uniform before promotion. This meant a fist patch, hall patch, back patch, and weapons patches, all of which, including the new white *gi*, would get drenched and dirty during the run and workout we were required to do before the promotion began.

So many of us were being promoted that night, and yet there were more Indians than chiefs when the time came to lead the *kyu* in the run and workout. One black belt candidate remarked that she wouldn't run due to cramps from her period. A man said his *sensei* told him to lead the run, then proceeded to bullshit with the other candidates, verbalizing a much shorter route than what I had been told.

I proceeded to dispute the shorter route, explaining the way *Sensei* Kathleen had said for us to go. The guy just shrugged his shoulders, letting me lead the way like an idiot, while he continued to kibbutz.

Of course, I didn't lead the way for long, the younger *kyus* soon outdistancing me, me yelling at them, "Knock it off," when two young boys smashed into each other as they raced through a puddle. What had I been thinking?

Why weren't all of the black belt candidates running as they should be? There was entirely too much nonsense going on. I know some of them stayed back, as they

had legitimate knee injuries. But the others? Wasn't this running through the rain and puddles what Karate was about? Pushing ourselves through the ordinary to the extraordinary? Why did I care so much what everyone else was doing?

When the run was over and we were gathered once again before the main *dojo*, it was time for us to lead the *kyus* in a workout. The nice man, who had been instructed to lead us all, kinda sorta mumbled something about lining up.

"Sensei," I said. "Why don't we go down the line, each of us giving the *kyus* something to do."

"Oos, Sensei," he said, "sounds good." He went back to his conversation.

"Twenty-five front punches," I shouted into the rain and darkness. The other candidates stood beside me in a line, the *kyus* in the puddles across from us.

The exercises began, the *sensei* candidates giving commands as we went down the row. Some of the commands were inaudible or unenthusiastic. I was becoming more and more annoyed. One candidate said we'd have to come back to him because he couldn't think of anything.

Couldn't think of anything? I seethed. Why the hell was he standing here then? A minimum of five years in Karate, and he couldn't think of any exercise, basic technique or *kata* to do? Please.

When he finally did think of something, after we had gone through the dozen people in line, it was a game. The game goes like this: A *sensei* calls out a certain *kata*, then movements from that particular *kata*. "Block." He calls out the first move of *Tekki One*. "Strike." He says the next move. "Strike." The third move is a block, not a strike. Everyone who turned into the block, rather than staying still because the

wrong move has been called out, has to drop down and do ten pushups. No matter that there were puddles everywhere and it was still drizzling.

Even if one is executing a simple *kata*, the chances of moving when one shouldn't are high, especially when the sensei is shouting the commands rapid-fire, attempting to trip-up the student. Why this black belt to be would want to torture these students who have braved foul weather to see him promoted is beyond me. Why the other black belt candidates are not doing push-ups when they mess up, or are simply not doing the *katas* is clear. They think their impending promotion is a free ticket from torture.

I think this is a disgrace. I'm doing my pushups in the puddles, notwithstanding my white *gi*.

How much longer can it possibly take the brown belts to set up *saki* and cake? The *saki* is for the toast during the promotion, the cake after. What must be taking long, I'm guessing, is the battle for rank order amongst the sensei who are promoting people.

Sensei Kathleen said there was a meeting held before the promotions, during which time the *sensei* battled out which students should be placed in line before whom. Rank order isn't based on technology level or physical ability alone. Politics come into play as well. How much does one give to the *ryu*? Is so and so on their *sensei*'s good side that day, or are they in need of a lesson?

Shodan-hos, the black belt candidates under age eighteen, went last in line no matter what.

"The system isn't fair," *Sensei* Kathleen said. "By all rights Kerry should be first

in line.” Kerry had been a student of *Sensei*’s since childhood. He trained in the evening class.

“He’s the most together, has done an excellent job in testing, and yet he’s punished because of his age.”

When we are finally called inside, we walk in to see that a line has been set up across the floor of the room. There are thirteen Japanese cups in a row, beneath which are the black belt candidate’s certificates.

The black belt certificates are beautiful, having been written in calligraphy with Japanese characters and *GoJu* symbols on them. We file past the line of certificates on the floor, looking for the ones that bear our names.

Kerry ends up first in the line of *Shodan ho*’s. I am second to last in the line of adult black belt candidates. About eighth in line, I am being outranked by all of *Sensei* Kathleen’s other students who are being promoted (except for Kerry, her *Shodan-ho*), I am behind Master Kay’s student (he is first), after a few other *sensei*’s students, including the one who could not think of a single karate technique to teach, and the woman who cried at every test.

I am disappointed at my placement in line and mad at myself for caring. I don’t want to be here to begin with, so why does my rank matter? I understand some of the other people outranking me, but the crying lady? And the one who couldn’t do the pre-promotion run because of her period? And the man who goofed off rather than run the workout? And why hadn’t *Sensei* Kathleen failed me honorably, rather than saying she’s retest me in her *dojo*? Retests that never took place.

To top it off, these were my Japanese tea cups laid out on the floor. Well they used to be, anyway. I had given them to *Sensei* Kathleen a few years before. They were a wedding present to Barry and me, only we had never used them. I had no use for twenty Japanese teacups. *Sensei* Kathleen would appreciate them, I had thought. I fought the urge to snatch them back up, then I thought about the similarities between Karate and marriage.

Karate for me began with a flirtation, developed into a serious interest, blossomed into love, then hate, then ambivalence. Add more confusion, take away the hate, replace it with anger, first at someone else, then at myself, pique my interest again and we're back to where we began.

Black belt promotions are an initiation into the select few. Even more so if your style requires trial by fire before promotion. It is the formal ending of your *kyu*/childhood years, the beginning of taking full and unclouded ownership of all of your words and deeds. Getting your black belt is a marriage of self to a way of life, a set of virtues, a code of honor. It's not unlike the novitiate that enters the convent pledging to live by the rules of her order.

For five minutes in elementary school, I thought I wanted to be a nun. I studied for religion tests, trying not to laugh with my classmates when Sister Bernadetta mispronounced things, saying, "Take out a shit" rather than "sheet of paper", or "phlegm of God" rather than "lamb of god." I attended slumber parties at the convent, my friends and I donning habits and taking pictures until we were thrown out at 1:00 a.m. for fighting with baby powder.

I knew the sisterhood wasn't for me when I entered high school. I couldn't comprehend the multitude of vows required of nuns while priests had cleaning ladies and spending money. Not to mention the fact that I couldn't imagine a life without a male partner. I wanted love and marriage.

Unlike marriage or the sisterhood, however, the vows one makes as a black belt are implicit. There is no public declaration of the code. There is no law or rule to provide punishment for those who would dishonor themselves.

There is, in fact, no guarantee that the black belt candidates really understand the meaning of the belt they are about to put on. I can't say I understood anything other than the incredible sadness and hurt I was feeling.

As much as I knew I should have been immune, I could not stop myself. *Sensei* Kathleen had four students being promoted that night. When the time came for her to say something about each of us, she declined, giving a vanilla speech about us as a whole rather than as individuals.

When it came time for the candidates to speak, Kim gave a beautiful speech, thanking me for being there for her. Not only did I forget to thank Kim when it was my turn - and I surely would not have been there had she not encouraged me in my darkest moments - but I neglected to thank Laura, who stood in the front of the room videotaping the proceedings. I realized I had forgotten Laura as soon as I sat down. I felt sick. When I looked up and saw the tears streaming down her cheeks, I wanted to cry.

There I was, feeling sorry for myself on what should have been one of the happiest nights of my life. I was surrounded by people who loved me and I could only think

of me. When all of the black belt recipients had spoken, and Master Kay was putting an end to the evening I jumped up. While I knew it was a huge breach of courtesy to interrupt him, I couldn't help myself. However wrong it was to stop him, it would have been worse to not apologize to Laura. I excused myself, telling Laura I was sorry for having forgotten to single her out, and saying how much I thanked her for being there for me.

It wasn't until later that I realized I hadn't thanked Kim. I apologized to her as well, but it was too late. Kim deserved a better acknowledgement than what I had given her in private.

Though the promotion was formally over, there was still cake to be cut and gloves to be donned. Some of the new black belts had cake with their friends and family. Others continued in the time-honored tradition of sparring after their promotion.

"Why aren't you fighting?" my father wanted to know. He was sitting in the back of the room with my mother.

"She doesn't need to fight," my friend, Howard, said.

"She can't fight," Daddy said, "not like those men or that girl over there."

Master Kay's twin sons, both black belts, were pounding each other. Some girl was sparring hard with one of the men. There were no other women sparring. Nevertheless, Daddy wanted to see me fight. I donned my gloves and mouth guard.

The girl was gone when I entered the melee, as were most of the men. The ones left were bored, sparring me light, apparently out of obligation. Unless I was to go crazy on them, they wouldn't hit me hard. As I had no desire for a broken nose, not an uncommon thing when people spar hard, I was going to try and prove anything.

It was still raining when we left the room, Laura refusing to ride or speak with me, despite the fact I had apologized publicly to her, my father harassing me the entire way home. “If you ever got into a fight you’d get your ass kicked. From what I saw tonight there’s no way you could hold your own.”

Barry took Dad’s comments as an opportunity to add his own two cents. “Yeah, she won’t fight me. It’s because she knows I’d hurt her.”

I sat in the back seat no longer sad but pissed off. I rapped Barry in the back of the head with my knuckle. “Ow,” he said, making another snide remark. I bopped him again. “That hurts.”

“Good,” I said. My father laughed as my mother admonished both of the men to leave me alone.

“What’s the matter with you two? I’m proud of you, honey. Don’t pay any attention to them. They’re being stupid.”

I knew they were just teasing me, but I couldn’t take it as such. I had hurt Laura and neglected Kim. After six years of training and that God-awful testing, my teacher hadn’t cared enough to say anything about me as an individual. I hadn’t had the will to prove to my father that I could fight by sparring the men hard. An hour after getting my black belt, I took off my damp, muddied *Gi* and went to sleep on a pillow wet with tears.

Chapter Seventeen

Epilogue

One Year After Black Belt

I am standing in the grass at T.Y. Park, trying to pay attention to *Sensei* Kathleen, but am having trouble focusing as two ducks are trying to mate in the lake behind where *Sensei* stands.

The male mounts the female without a problem, then used his head and neck to submerge the female's head beneath the water. When she was finally able to come up for air, she shook him off of her back. He then mounted her again, repeating the entire drowning/flinging scenario. Why doesn't she swim away, I wonder.

Sensei Kathleen makes a comment on my new *kata*, *Nunchuck* Form Five. It is a *kata* utilizing two pair of *nunchucks*, and a *kata* I've wanted to learn for a long time. The idea of controlling two pair of *nunchucks* excites me. Not many people are comfortable using one pair of *chucks*, much less two. This is due to the pain factor involved in hitting yourself while working the *chucks*. I want to get beyond the fear of pain, using the *chucks* as a tool of transcendence.

Only, I don't practice enough. Not nearly enough to be as good as I'd like to be. But when I do work the *chucks*, I do so out of love. The feel of the *chucks* in my hands, the cool, smooth varnish, the bumpiness of the *conji*, Japanese characters carved into the wood, the octagon shape of the handles, the play of the *himo*, rope

connecting the two sticks. I love the way my *chucks* look, sleek, sepia stained then brushed with forest green. I adore the rush of power I feel when slipping the pair into my hand.

How is it that two slivers of wood can encompass much? Is it the weapon which possesses the power, or my possession of the weapon empowering me?

I know the answer, heard it in fact the very first time *Sensei* Kathleen ever handed me a weapon. She said, “A weapon is most dangerous when in the hands of an untrained practitioner. I’m not talking about as danger to your opponent. It is a danger to you.”

Though I vaguely understood her words to be a warning, I couldn’t comprehend their full meaning until now. It is by understanding her reverse that enlightenment is found. If what *Sensei* Michelle says is true, then it must also hold that a weapon is least dangerous to a skilled practitioner.

The more comfortable I am with the weapon, the less likely I am to hurt myself. The only way to have achieved a modicum of comfort with the *chucks*, however, is to have worked them manifold times. To have repeatedly worked the *chucks* is to have repeatedly hurt oneself. Proficiency is achieved by pushing through the pain.

You accidentally slip up and are smashed in the shin with the *chuck* at the beginning of training, and while what you feel years later when you slip up and smash your shin may be exactly the same, your reaction to it is different. The principle of repetition wearing down resistance has been at work. A smack six months into training doesn’t feel as bad as one on your first day.

Love and violence are so alike. Many people leave the dojo after they are hit hard the first time. Many others are afraid to risk love, after experiencing the pain of their first break-up or betrayal. We humans are prone to holding back. We struggle to be civilized, often losing touch with our animal instincts, with the childhood exuberance enabling us embrace joy.

We have known pain, so we hedge, question the legitimacy of our rushes of feeling, weigh the risk of showing all of our cards. We hold back, sidestep, retreat, renegotiate, renege on our word, deny our truth, often without ever fully knowing what that truth is.

Our defense mechanism has become our worst enemy. When a child grabs a hot burner, it is a good thing that the message of pain this causes so deeply embeds itself. But can the same be said for the pain of a failed love relationship, the hurt of failure when one wanted so desperately to succeed? The desire for self-preservation so strong that it is too easy to become a watered-down version of what we once had the capacity to be? By repeatedly beating my body with a *nunchuck*, I become more proficient with the weapon, embracing the pain as part of the price I must pay for the knowledge. The better I become with the *chucks*, the less I hit myself.

I palm my chucks, spinning them 190° degrees so they are facing the opposite direction. The better one is at palming one's *chucks*, the less motion takes place in the movement. Nowadays, my palming is pretty good. A pleasure, in fact. My cross-x strikes, moving up and down both sides of my imaginary opponent's body with vertical x-shaped motion, are pretty good, too. My nose-breaks, however, could use some work. As could the spot in *Nunchuck* Form Five, where the chuck ever so

lightly flips over the top of my hand, to be caught by the underside. Difficult motions, all. Ones which will improve with practice and time.

“As your movements in *Chuck* Form five improve, your movements somewhere else will suffer. There is no way around it. What matters is that you continue to work.” Behind *Sensei*, the male duck is still trying to mate with the female. Her head, once again, is submerged beneath the water.

I think of how I would hate to be that female duck, driven by some incomprehensible force to allow myself to be near-drowned in order to reproduce. Then I realize *I am* that female duck. How many times have the violent emotions of love left me gasping for air, drowning in tears for reasons I cannot comprehend nor control?

A mother duck swims by, surrounded by her ducklings. *Sensei* says I have the moves of the *kata* in the right order. It’s just a matter of honing and refining.

“We’ll let this cure for about five weeks, then I’ll look at it again. Feel free to call me if you have any questions while you’re working on it.”

Now what? I begin to think. I’ve learned the two *katas* necessary for my promotion to *nidan*, second-degree black belt, but it’ll be at least another year before I’m tested. I know I have to master my self-defense techniques on the left side of the body for that promotion, but that basically encompasses just a lot of repetition.

“I’d like to see your best *kata*,” *Sensei* Kathleen says. Oh shit, I think, hoping she won’t ask for something I haven’t practiced in a while. “Probably that’s Soft *Teyuko*, as it’s the *kata* you teach the most.”

“Oss, *Sensei*, I reply.”

“Do it facing the same direction you’re in now, and we’ll watch for similarities in problems you’re having in *Chuck Form Five*.”

I begin the *kata*, ignoring the other pair of ducks who are on land, the male chasing the female. I am using trees to the south and north as my reference to front and back. When turning into a move I overcompensate, missing the forty-five° angle I should be in by about two feet.

When I’m finished, *Sensei* Kathleen mentions the problem with the forty-five, as well as the fact that I’m not holding my shoulders back as straight as I should. My punches are not crisp enough, either. They would be if I were driving from the hip, rather than leading from my shoulders, she says.

“The important thing is to not be discouraged by these little things,” *Sensei* says. “Self-doubt is not an option. As good as you become at one thing, another weakness will step in to take its place. The important thing is to keep at it. Because black belts aren’t policed the way *kyus* are, it’s easy to stop, to not push themselves to be better. But being a black belt is about being your own teacher. That’s why I’m so hard on people during testing. It’s the last time I push people in that way. I have one last chance to make you understand all that you’re capable of. After that you’re on your own. You must become your own master.”

My own master? Master Kay had been right. Getting my black belt wasn’t this great accomplishment. It was just like being born – another beginning on the journey to death.

“The higher rank you are, the harder it is to find yourself among peers, much less anyone else to look up to. Look at Master Kay. He’s entirely in a class of his own. No one can come near the proficiency or technology he possesses. It has to be difficult for him because ultimately he is the only one who can better himself.”

I thought about how grateful I was to *Sensei* Kathleen, about how I wished there was some way I could thank her enough. I thought about how no one else could have taught me as well she had. She was the strongest woman I knew, and an incomparable Karate master. Sure, she made me feel angry or hurt at times, but that was the nature of growth. The potter’s bowl had to be blackened before it became beautiful. I watched a lone duck glide across the pond and disappear into a sliver of sunlight.

Three and a Half Years Later

“What’s with this *ho* stuff?” Mom wants to know.

We are driving home from Laura’s promotion to *Shodan-ho*. She has just received her black belt, albeit, the one with a brown line running through it. “*Shodan-ho* means she’s under eighteen, Mom.”

“Well, I think these people are nuts that they keep calling her a “ho,” Mom says.

“*Shodan-ho* was a term long before ho was a slang word,” I say.

“I can’t wait ‘till I’m a ho,” says Sam.

“You already are one,” says Max.

“That’s enough, boys,” Barry interjects. Barry is proud of Laura’s accomplishment, and proud of what I’ve achieved in Karate as well. There is the old saying, “I change, you change.” Barry has not only supported me, but changed himself to accommodate a woman very different than the one he married. It could not have been easy.

Sam is seven and wants to be a comedian. He also dreams of being as good a martial artist as Bruce Lee. He sleeps with a four-foot by four-foot poster of Bruce above his bed, and has the family’s karate trophies on display in his room. “Just think if I had won all of these,” he said to me recently. I have no doubt that before long his trophy collection will surpass the rest of us combined.

Max likes to fight, and is working on receiving his purple belt. He continues to dream of having more money than Bill Gates, and has taken Laura’s place as a hair-raising pre-teen. This week he rode his bicycle to The Diplomat Hotel, the only five-star resort in our area. He locked up his bike, then Ninjaed his way past security to one of the floors with guest rooms. Once there, he told the maid he had run out of hair conditioner. Could he please have more? After conditioning his hair with ill-gotten products, he asked me once again, why I don’t curl my hair anymore. This has come to be a weekly conversation. “I want you to look like you did when you were young,” he says.

“I don’t have time,” I respond. When he is older, I will explain that I stopped curling my hair because I finally had the confidence not to curl it.

Sensei Kathleen talks about Karate's ability to help one age with grace.

"Constantly hitting and being hit builds confidence," she says. "I don't want to grow into a bitter old person, or become a senior citizen who gets abused. I stay in Karate so I can stay strong and confident."

"Dude, you can't ever quit Karate," my student, Melissa, says to me. She has been training with me for three years, and is soon to be a purple belt. I know I shouldn't let her call me "Dude," but it amuses me. She never does it in public, and only speaks that way when confiding something. "I don't want another *Sensei*. What other *Sensei* would let me do the things you let me do?" *A sensei with more sense, perhaps.* I think, but don't say.

As they are wonderful practitioners, I encourage Melissa and Rebekah, my most senior student, to train with *Sensei* Kathleen and Master Kay. Only now I understand why *Sensei* Kathleen used to get frustrated after I had a lesson with Master Kay. It's easy to be the grandparent who smiles and compliments the grandchild. A person could envy their child's relationship with a grandparent, if they weren't careful.

Laura will be seventeen in one month. She would like to remain a teenager. At her black belt promotion, there were many *sensei* present. There were also a bunch of children present, whom Laura had helped to teach. They were so excited for her, one of them saying that they hoped to be just like her one day. Many *sensei* spoke as well, praising Laura's tenacity and spirit. One of them said, "I want you all to take a good look at her. Can you believe she's only *sixteen*? Think about where you were when you were sixteen." The tests hadn't been easy for Laura. I worried more about her nerves than her ability. She had failed the first round of tests. Once she got over

her initial fear, however, she retested with a flourish. People were impressed with her ability to hold it together.

At the end of her promotion, Laura stood up to thank the many people who had helped her reach her goal. When she finished, and was bending to sit, she looked across the room noticing the person behind the video camera. It was my student, Rebekah. Rebekah is a brown belt, set to go into testing in a year. She had given Laura a lot of emotional support throughout the testing process.

“Rebekah, you’re the woman,” Laura said, giving her a thumbs up. Cool, I thought. “You’re the woman,” Laura had said. At sixteen, she had an understanding that had taken me over thirty years to realize.

When we were in the car, Laura said, “I’m sorry, Mom. I ruined your black belt promotion because you forgot to thank me, and then I forgot Rebekah.” She now understood how the person behind the camera could be overlooked. Laura was behind the camera at my promotion.

“What goes around comes around.” I laughed and thought about justice, the hub of the Samurai virtues. How sweet it is when justice is served.

I thought about a picture of Laura that hangs on my bedroom wall. I took it thirteen years ago, not long after we stood in the parking lot at her preschool, wondering if Karate would be a good thing for her. She’s was four years old.

In the picture, Laura is standing in *kako*, the attention position. Her elbows are pointed outward at chest level, and her feet are spread apart. She is wearing a blue skirt, polka dotted blouse, and toothless grin. It is her first photo as a Karate student, her journey just beginning.