

Sludge

He felt that the sludge in his head mirrored the chunks of dingy snow on the sidewalk. The bus strained as it jerked through the trenches dredged in the ice-crusting pavement. Although he was somewhat supported by the grimy window, his head slid down by slow degrees to the ledge. He tilted his legs further across the seat's center to anchor his book bag more securely. The yells and screams of the other kids on the bus annoyed him. They didn't truly concern him since they weren't directed at him personally. He didn't expect them to be. They never were. For the most part it was good to be ignored. Not entirely, but usually.

When the bus came to a wheezing stop, Marco pushed himself upright and grabbed his book bag just before it fell to the floor. Joining the flow of shifting, scuffling bodies, he edged down the aisle. The driver lifted one shaggy eyebrow when Marco started down the steps.

"See yah, kid." He couldn't remember Marco's name. Probably, didn't try. Some of the kids he knew and remembered. Marco guessed that he was just lucky that he got spoken to at all. That didn't always happen. At this end of the route where the square beige duplexes clustered in a faded half circle, there were too many anonymous tan faces where sizes, shapes and sexes tended to blur. To be fair, Marco wasn't sure he remembered the driver's name either. He thought maybe it started with an S.

When Marco opened the door to their side of the duplex, he smelled the normal sour smell of beans left too long in the pan. It was so much a part of normal it seemed that the odor oozed from the walls, and he heard the same sound that he always heard this time of day—nothing. If he stood for a minute, he could hear some small noises, the

refrigerator hum, the click that the wall clock made, but that was all. This much quiet started to mess with him after a while. He began to move and thump around to get some noise going.

Marco intended to start his homework as soon as he got in as always, but he didn't. It seemed like too much effort. Some kids a couple of houses down were shooting hoops in the driveway; it was a stupid thing to do. The ground was way too slick, and it was way too cold out there. No coaches with Italian names going to be coming after these boys. Anyway, with all the ice and slush, they'd bust their butts real easy.

Naw, he'd play video games for a while. He had a football game that was ok, but really old. Mama had fished it out of the discount bin at Wal-Mart, but it was better than TV. He knew he should start some beans for dinner like he promised Mama, but he had over an hour yet. He looked at them soaking and swollen in the pot—their pods bruised and bursting against their skins. Sometimes, he wished they could have something different. He wouldn't say anything to Mama. She'd just remind him that he was lucky to have 'em.

He heard her key in the door when it seemed he'd just sat down.

“Marco, you started the beans like I told you?”

“Not yet.”

“You take out the garbage?”

“I didn't see it.”

“Boy, if it were a snake, it'd bitten you.”

“I wasn't lookin' for no snake.”

“Of course you haven't set the table or done homework?”

“Getting ready to.”

“Sure, like yesterday and Monday.” She sounded mean, but her mouth didn’t have no turned down corners.

“I’ll start the beans now.”

“No, I’ll take care of it.” She sounded really tired. She must be after riding the city bus out to the new Super Wal-Mart, shifting, and sorting clothes by colors and sizes, and putting up with pushy customers all day. People who wanted to kill time and spend money they didn’t have, or worse, not spend money they didn’t have. Just try on and try on and leave clothes dropped and messed and scattered all over the dressing room. Sometimes, when business was slow, they’d ask her to cashier on the food side which was hard on her feet. Still, she always reminded him, she was lucky to have a job, unlike a lot of folks.

“When you going to get on that homework?”

“I was about to.”

“You see the new neighbor?” That was something he hadn’t expected. “We got a new neighbor? They got kids?” Yeah, like he really cared.

“No, I don’t think so. I heard he was a retired gentleman. His wife died a couple of years back, and he sold his house to move in here. I think he has a couple of grown kids, but they are away somewhere, California or Indiana, someplace like that. Betty told me. She’ll probably tell me more tonight if I ask her.”

“Now why do you think I want to know about some old dude for?” He shook his head. He didn’t want to hear no more of this. “You don’t need no new man.” He meant it as a joke, but either Mama didn’t hear it, or she was acting like she didn’t.

“Well, it should be nice and quiet with just a single elderly man.”

Of course, it was always quiet around here. That was the problem. Maybe not such a problem. Mama probably liked quiet for a change. It stayed pretty loud when his old man was here. Toward the end, either they were trying to get him out of jail, or he was drinking up all their money and busting up dishes, glasses, and stuff. His mom stayed pretty cool, but she came close to losing it when he broke the Poppa cup granddad left her. It was cream colored with a gold rim and had “Poppa” written in blue script circled with pink roses.

“You need to get outside more.”

“For what?”

“Don’t what me, young man. Take out the garbage, and then find you a little fresh air.” He was glad that she didn’t tell him to just go out and play. What did she take him for anyhow, some dumb butt little kid.

It was way too cold with nothing out there. He’d asked for a puppy constantly when he was little. He thought that it would be great to have a puppy to talk to, run with, and maybe teach a few tricks to. He hadn’t asked for quite a while now. It was a crappy idea anyhow. If he’d had a dog when he was little, his dad would probably have shot it. Now he was way too old to worry about a dog, and there sure wasn’t money for dog food. Still, it would be nice to come home to something more than a clicking clock.

After dinner, they scooted around pretty quick to get the dishes done. His mom didn’t like to be late for choir practice. Betty was coming to pick her up, and Marco sure didn’t want her in the house mouthing on with all the “news” about everybody she knew or thought she knew. He for sure wanted his mom to be ready on time.

When the two women finally made it out the door, he picked up his books and squared them on the kitchen table. He pulled out a notebook, sharpened a couple of pencils, and pulled the lamp over closer. He got up to go to the sink to get himself a glass of water, but decided instead that maybe there might be some lemonade mix in the cabinet. Oh crap, he thought when he found the container. It was all solid and clumpy. He shut the cabinet door hard, and that's when he noticed the light in the backyard. He looked through the window to see where it was coming from. The floodlight was on next door. It lit the backyard so clearly, he could see the irregular clumps of snow and trash wedged in the broken chain links at the back of the yard.

There was this old dude in white pajama pants and tee shirt with long stork legs whirling and jumping on his porch. He spun in fast tight circles pausing to whip out a long leg quicker than an adder's tongue, which was a name for a snake his English teacher said. Then before you blinked, he twirled in the other direction His thin skeletal hands and arms went snapping and chopping through the air. Holy shit, this guy was nuts. He didn't even have shoes on. Wonder that the rickety old porch didn't shatter around his ankles.

Marco watched for a while. He saw that the kicks, punches, and blocks had a regular swing and rhythm. Hell, who did this guy think he was, Jackie Chan? It was their luck to live next door to a real nut case. Even homework made more sense than this.

For the next two nights, he couldn't help but watch as the man performed the same ritual. For at least an hour, he went through a series of feints, kicks, and chops. His long thin body whirled and circled against the frame of ice-white light against an invisible opponent. Always at the end, he would fold himself together in a slow lingering

courtly bow. Marco never mentioned any of this to his mom. She had to work till closing through the weekend, so it went right out of his mind. He was embarrassed, anyway. She'd think he was the one that was nuts, instead of the skinny white dude, and that this was just something else to avoid homework.

Late Saturday afternoon, just before his mom came home, he remembered to take out the garbage. He grabbed the black sack off the floor. A couple of boxes he'd forgotten to break down all the way were poking through the cheap black plastic.

“Oh shit, why do we always buy the crummy kind? The kind that always rip,” he muttered to himself as he stepped through the ruts where grass used to struggle to grow.

“Were you speaking to me?” Marco looked up startled. What did that old dork think? Of course he wasn't.

“Naw. No sir. I was just talking to this brown plastic piece of shit.” He looked up into the biggest spookiest pair of silver grey eyes he had ever seen. Even in the shadowed late afternoon light, they got his attention. Marco shut up. His thoughts dribbled off into nowhere fast.

“You're a pretty big kid. You into sports—football, basketball?” It always weirded him out when old grown people tried to talk to kids. Why did they always think they liked sports?

“No Sir, never interested in all that.”

“I've been into Karate now for most of my life, and that has been a long, long time.” The long thin mouth moved upward at the left corner in a slight smile. The eyes weren't really that scary, and Marco could make out little crinkly lines at the corners.

”Different styles at different times. It’s just something I started a long time ago and can’t seem to quit.” Hmmm, maybe he was like Jackie Chan.

“You ever killed anybody? Hurt ‘em bad, or anything like that?” No answer.

“My name is James Oliver, yours?”

“Marcus Hancock, but most everybody calls me Marco.”

“You interested in trying a little Karate, learning a few katas?”

“No, I don’t think right now. I’ve got a sh...a lot of homework to get done.”

“I usually work out a little every evening if you care to join me.”

“Yeah, maybe.”

“You a pretty good student? You seem pretty serious about your homework.”

“Not really. It doesn’t make a lot of sense to me. I start on it, but I kind of lose the point after a while. I like art, though. You know the lines, shapes, angles and colors. Arts ok.” Marco shifted the bag off his shoulder and pitched it into the can. He didn’t want to be rude, but this old guy was strange. He knew he was telling too much about himself. Well, his mom wanted him to be polite, but there were limits.

“How do you manage to jump around like that?” In the cold, how come your feet don’t freeze? You act like the cold don’t bother you at all” Marco felt like he should say something.

“You sure do ask a lot of questions.” The voice was sharp, but the face wasn’t. Kind of like Mama’s when she was only aggravated, not mad.

“It’s all a matter of focus. You get your mind settled on where you want to go, and your body follows. Everything else just is outside your mind. You only pay attention to the result you want, not on anything outside you.”

“Kind of like when you’re playing video games, and your mom calls you to dinner, right?” Marco snorted at his own joke. The sound of his own half laugh sounded strange to him too.

“Sort of the same. However, there is a lot to it, more than you think. You have to concentrate on the moves, the blocks, and the breathing.”

“Could I learn in a couple of weeks, Mr. Oliver?”

“Maybe in a couple of lifetimes.” There was a real smile this time. “If you’re interested, though, we can give it a try. We could start this evening. I realize you’re busy with your homework and all, but if you could give it about 30 minutes or so, we could make a start. I guess you’re not too old to get started. How old are you, 15-16?”

“No, I’m 13 next month, just big for my age, I guess.”

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Marco tried to imitate the moves of Mr. Oliver. It wasn’t nearly as simple as it looked. It wasn’t that he truly wanted to be involved; this was just a way to kill time, maybe humor an old guy. It was something to do better than homework. Then, he started to get mad. Why couldn’t he manage the turns, the twists, and the leaps?

“It isn’t an instant kind of thing, Marco,” Mr. Oliver explained. His voice was calm and quiet, but Marco knew he expected to be heard. It wasn’t like when his teachers said sort of the same thing but acted like they were too bored to care.

“There is no easy instant method to this. You should start small and build. When you think you have part of it down, then you have to back up and start over. You start with one movement, then another, and another. It’s like building a house one board at a time. You can’t push a button and poof, it’s done. You need to have a plan. You need to

know where you start, and where you will finish, and work to get from one to the other. You focus on one step after another.”

“Yeah, Mr. Oliver. Like you say, it’s really easy.”

Even with only 30 minutes on most days and 60 minutes on others, Marco started to feel he was making some progress. It wasn’t easy, and it wasn’t fast, but he did improve. He started to get into the swing of the movements. He began to get the rhythm of basic sparring moves—the one, two punches and the kicks. Mr. Oliver wrote some of it down at first. Then he started to have Marco write it down.

“Mr. Oliver, I’m not real good at writing stuff down.” Marco’s eyes were stinging and blurring as he wrote and rewrote the steps to the different katas.

“Marco, you like to draw. Why don’t you draw the positions? You could show a head block, a chest block, a roundhouse kick, a side kick. You could use pictures, even stick figures to represent the movements to each kata”

Marco drew. He used most of his art paper that he saved from class to draw figures representing the different motions and movement of the katas. In the afternoons when he came home from school, he spent a few minutes with his drawings spread around his room practicing between the times he spent with Mr. Oliver. He would practice for as long as he could, then stuff the drawings under his bed.

Marco noticed that he remembered more of his schoolwork than he had before. It was probably because he had so much practice remembering katas that he remembered other stuff, too. The breathing stuff was helping, too. He was getting so used to ignoring pain in his body by counting his breaths in and breaths out that he used this when some

wise ass in the hall or on the bus smarted off to him. It didn't seem like it bothered him half as much any more what people said.

Some of the guys in his classes started talking to him. In math, when he pulled out his Karate drawings to slide over his homework paper, Antoine Brack asked what he was working on. Marco told him he was finishing some kata drawings. He said it straight out and didn't try to put him in his place like he used to when he thought someone was trying to mind his business.

When summer vacation started, Marco started to wonder what he would do over the summer. He couldn't work yet, he was too old for daycare, and he really didn't want to be stuck in an after-school program.

"Marco," Mama looked up at him as she washed and chopped wilted salad greens—yea, no beans tonight. "That nice Mr. Oliver next door wanted to know if you could help him some this summer. He's going to work with some of the summer programs at the Boys and Girls Club. He told me that if you were interested, that he would ask you to be his assistant."

"Yeah, that'd be ok, I guess. What'd I be doing?"

"Well, he didn't say for sure. He told me that he'd be doing some martial arts training starting this summer. If the program worked out well, that it would continue during the fall, maybe. I told him I knew you didn't know anything about stuff like that, but it sure would save me from worrying about what you'd be doing this summer."

"Well, I guess I could think about it I guess if I didn't have anything better to do I could give it a try.

It worked out better than Marco thought it would. Mr. Oliver let him work with the little guys doing their warm ups, some basic exercises and blocks. It gave him a good feeling when all these little guys—some little girls too—would run up to him yelling his name, wanting him to watch them do some small thing or another. Of course, when it was class time, they knew to quiet down and listen. They knew he wasn't their Sensei—that was Mr. Oliver—but they'd hush up and pay attention. Their little voices would quit shrieking and hollering and they would line up, real solemn-like and listen to what he had to say.

He learned the katas better for himself, too. He kept repeating those patterns over and over, then he drew them on the board, the same way he drew them on his paper at home. They seemed to understand a lot better when they could see how each block, kick, and turn was supposed to look. Then, of course, he'd demonstrate these moves to them. He didn't twirl, spin, and strike out like Mr. Oliver, but he was a lot better than he was last winter. He almost felt bad when the summer class was over.

The last night of class Marco was feeling a little down when the last parent picked up the last kid, and they were shutting down for the night.

"Marco, could you put in some time this fall?" Mr. Oliver mentioned casually as he flipped out the lights out and checked the water cooler.

"Yeah, I guess. I don't have much else going on." Marco's heart rate which had slowed way down after practice, started to pick right up again. "Do most of these kids want to keep on with it?"

"Most do. The six and seven year olds that you are working with would hate to lose you. That is a big commitment though, Marco, they're easily disappointed. If you

say that you'll work with them, you can't quit. You should stick with it until their class is over. I guess I don't really have to tell you that do I? You seem to truly know how those kids feel."

"I don't want to stop there, though. You need to work on your own practice, you know. There is a tournament coming up in Nashville over Christmas. I'd like to have some of our students participate, and I'd like to see you involved, Marco. Would you do it?"

"I guess I'd think about it, Mr. Oliver. Do you think I'll be good enough?"

"It's all a matter of focus, Marco. Think about where you want to be in the next three months, and then work toward that. I'll give you the tools, but is up to you to do the work."

"I'll be ready, Mr. Oliver. I won't quit on you neither. Not with those little kids." He wouldn't either. Marco knew he wouldn't let these kids be hurt and disappointed over any promises that he broke, not like his dad. He would just have to get to work and see it through. Focus, that was it.

The night was still warm and muggy when he and Mr. Oliver stepped out into the parking lot. There was a slight tang in the breeze that let him know that fall was surely on the way. Yep, fall definitely was coming with winter right on its heels. As the two walked silently and easily together, Marco felt the sludge in his head steadily and surely begin to melt away.