

BACK KICK

I CHANGED QUICKLY AND warmed up the usual way with stretches, stationary kicks and poomsae. When I was done with all of that, drenched from head to toe, I walked over to the heavy bag, took a deep breath and faced it like I would an opponent. My right leg was forward and my hands raised, fists loose, in a fighter's stance. I put my right hand on the EVERLAST logo. Doing my best to keep my hand level, I withdrew it from the leather and stopped it a few inches from my chest.

"Chest height," I said to myself. "I can handle that."

My head leading the way, I started to turn. As I spun, my right shoulder dropped and my left foot crossed my body and stopped just in front and slightly to the outside of my right foot. My chest opened to the floor and my head, still leading the way, looked over my right shoulder to face the bag. My right knee chambered and pulled tight to my chest. My foot and toes tightened as well so that my heel pointed at its target. Push with your foot and extend your hips. Stretch your body. Lock your knees and snap! Pull back after the kick. Grandmaster Han's words echoed inside me but instead of trailing off they got louder. There was a content emptiness inside me as my foot landed squarely on the bag's logo. I heard myself kihap as my foot struck and suddenly, as if I had never moved, I was back in the fighter's stance I started in. I felt calm. Except for the swaying bag and its clinking chains, it would have been difficult to convince me that I had actually thrown a kick and not imagined the whole thing,

Smiling, I took a deep breath and did it again. This time it was more fluid, faster with more power. The bag swayed but it buckled too; the way a person would if you kicked him straight in the gut. I recalled Max saying, "If the bag folds you're really kicking into it and not just pushing it. That's the way to kick. You gotta snap, dude."

"Repetition and training both sides," I whispered. That's another thing all the black belts said. "It's the best way to practice each technique," they all said. So I did - ten more with my right foot and twelve with my left. Each kick felt better, easier, than the one before it and, as my confidence grew, my kihap became louder.

Effortless. That's how it felt. It was as if the back kick was made just for me. With the last one, I caught myself in the mirror. My uniform top hugged me and revealed a leanness I'd never possessed. My dobok clung like a second skin. The muscles in my neck were flexed, too. My body formed a straight line, from my heel to the top of my head, as I dug into the bag. It was me I was looking at but it didn't feel like me; at least

not the present me. What I saw was a version of me in the future with a black belt around my waist.

“Ricky,” Grandmaster Han stuck his head into the dojang and brought me back to the present. “Come here.”

“Yes, Sir!” I caught the bag in mid-swing and stopped it before running into his office, making sure I saluted before exiting the training hall. I wiped the sweat off my brow.

“Sit down,” he said, gesturing with his hand towards the chair in front of his desk. Placing my hands in my lap, I sat up as straight as I could. “The back belt test is coming soon. You must come.”

“Yes, Sir,” I said. “Max told me about it. I can’t wait to see it.”

“Good,” he said. “How is training?”

“Sir?” I wasn’t sure what he meant.

“How do you like training? You like Tae Kwon Do?”

“Very much, Sir,” I replied enthusiastically but carefully, ending on a higher note like I was asking a question.

“You know Mental Training number nine?”

“Yes, Sir,” I said confidently, eager to impress him.

“What is it?”

I ran through them in my head, starting at one, as quickly as I could. I stopped at nine then repeated the mantra to make sure I had gotten it right. When I was certain of my answer I said, “Face opponents with courage, Sir.”

Grandmaster Han nodded approvingly, giving me time to ponder its relevance, before he continued. “Do you do that?”

“Yes, Sir,” I answered. “I mean, I think so. Whenever we do sparring...”

“No, No,” he interrupted. “Yes, it’s for sparring but it is also for life.”

“Sir?”

“Yes. Whatever comes into our lives, we must work through it and not run away,” he added. “Every challenge is an opponent that you must face with courage.”

I nodded, contemplating his words, thinking about what there was in my life that it could pertain to and wondering where this advice was coming from. My move from Singapore was one. The challenges and sadness it caused were my current battles. And, of course,

there was whatever Mother, Father and Melanie were keeping from me at home.

“Yes, Sir, I think I understand.”

“Good. I remember when I came here from Korea. I had many opponents.” He smiled then stood up. “Now, go back to training.”

“Yes, Sir.” I stood up, bowed and headed back to the training hall. As I started to shut the door, he called me back.

He was smiling, laughing almost. “My niece goes to your school. I think you know her.”

“Oh, really? Who is she, Sir?”

He chuckled and sat back down. “Leave the door open.”

“Yes, Sir.” I stood there for a few seconds, wondering if he was going to answer me. When he didn’t say anything, I went back into the training hall and saluted the flags. The back door opened. Glancing at the mirror, I saw Max walk in. He bowed, saluted the flags and greeted me in his usual way - “Hey Dude!”

“Amy Cho,” Grandmaster Han called out, cheekily, revealing a side of him that I hadn’t seen before or even thought existed. “She is on the field hockey team.”

I turned around again and looked at him. My eyes were wide open and I stood there like a squirrel facing oncoming cars on both sides of the road. It felt like ages, time moving in slow motion, as I recalled every conversation I’d had with Amy and hoped I hadn’t said or done anything embarrassing or, worse, disrespectful. When Amy’s warnings about Serena came up, I said, “Shit!” Not out loud, of course, but in my head. Grandmaster Han laughed again, a childish titter this time, as if he knew what I was thinking.