

Becoming the Teapot

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Joey James was a small guy, said Sifu Campos, but quick and clever and willing to learn, which made him dangerous. Joey James's legs were a little short and his endurance wasn't good—yet—but that was exactly why Campos Dojo Wing Chun Kung Fu was a perfect fit for him. The Campos school took the best of what traditional Wing Chun had to offer and combined it with modern fighting techniques and scientific principles to produce the most practical and efficient martial art in the history of the hand-to-hand combat. It was at once theory and discipline, with concept to go along with method. There was ruthless simplicity in its repertoire of motions. The footwork was economic and smart; the striking blows were supple and devastating. If Joey James applied himself like he had over the past few months, then he was sure to mature into a formidable fighter. In such a short time, the Sifu beamed, Joey James was already one of the school's most promising students.

Joey was a hard worker and took this all to heart. When Sifu Campos shouted, "Move faster, Joey James!" Joey would clench his teeth, scrunch up his toes in his shoes, and double his pace. When the Sifu asked the class to do thirty pushups, Joey would do forty-five. When the Sifu reminded his students to practice outside of class, Joey took the Dojo home with him. He memorized the drills and repeated them after class. He practiced the set forms every morning and considered the application of each and every motion in a virtual melee played out in his imagination. He scrawled painstaking notes on the Cantonese names for all the moves he was learning (*sil num tao* = "little idea", *lap sao* = "pulling hands", *bong sao* = "wing arm", etc.). He studied the Campos Dojo's fundamental tenets and proud lineage, learning that the legendary Yip Man, grandfather of modern Wing Chun Kung Fu and heir to the deadly art that had trickled down from the original Shaolin Temple, had passed his knowledge onto star protégé Wong Shun Leung, who'd himself trained an extraordinary fighter named Harry Chiu in Hong Kong in the late 1970s, and that Sifu Chiu eventually went on to Monterey Park, California, where he would shake up a troubled but talented former gang member named Gary Campos and turn him into one of the best martial artists in the Greater Los Angeles area. This was the heritage that powered every one of Joey's punches and grounded his defenses.

But Joey had a vision and a goal, and he knew that his martial path did not end with Campos Dojo Wing Chun. Mounted above the official Dojo sash on Joey's bedroom wall was the sweating, ready figure of Bruce Lee, martial arts revolutionary, who had disdained rote technique, who revolted against tradition when he mixed Wing Chun with Ali's rope-a-dope and taekwondo kicks, who dwarfed and subsumed the teachings of Sifu Gary Campos and Roy Jones Jr. and Royce Gracie and Cung Le and all the other minor gods of war populating Joey's wall.

The best style, as Lee pronounced, was no style at all. The best fighter was the one free to adapt to new situations. Joey tried hard to imagine himself like water. In a teapot, Joey told himself, he would become the teapot. He'd keep an open mind. When he'd mastered all that Sifu Campos could teach him, he would move on and explore other styles. He would scour the library and the internet for new ideas. He would whet his 20-year-old body, already lean and limber from his training, into peak form, into a transcendent sweet spot somewhere between power, mobility, and finesse. He'd save up his spare cash, buy a used car, and drive all over the area, visiting gyms in search of sparring partners to test his skills. With experience he would develop his own insights and methods, and eventually, his own voice. Then, Joey decided, he'd be ready for anything.

That was all a long way away, and for now, Joey was nothing more than a dedicated learner of the Campos Dojo system. Sifu Campos normally charged 85 dollars a month for his class, but he let Joey go for only 50 because he helped out a lot in class, and because Joey could only show up two evenings out of the week. The other nights Joey worked the counter at the Hillview Family Film Center, the video rental store that his mother owned. Since the end of high school, Joey's childhood friends had gradually trickled away, and so the guys at the Campos Dojo became his social mainstay. Most of them were family men and older than Joey, but they shared his enthusiasm for Wing Chun and saw him as another one of the guys. After most Wing Chun classes they'd take him out for beer and pool, and on the weekends they would sneak vintage chop-socky tapes from the video store and watch them in a dusty garage-turned-theater, where they could avoid their girlfriends and wives and kids and talk about kung fu.

A couple months into Joey's Wing Chun training, a guy called Steve joined the class and started hanging out with Joey and his friends. Steve was a film student at the local community college and was notorious there for hogging loaner equipment from the A/V lab for his own extracurricular purposes. Following his conversion to the Campos Dojo, Steve had taken to making 90-second digital video action shorts starring his new kung fu friends. The production quality of these films was unselfconsciously awful. The plots and acting were on par with the cheapest pornography, and little attention was paid to composition, lighting, or costumes. Their best work, "Cotton Fist Sunset", was a lamentable, wordless showdown between a peripatetic martial arts master (Joey James, in a ratty *Use Your Illusion* t-shirt tucked into grey sweat pants with missing pull-string) and a band of hapless ninja brigands (Philip Turner, Max Cohen, Will Mashourian, Tommy Young, and Jesus Garcia, all from the Dojo, sunglasses and grimacing) in a rock quarry (actually a real rock quarry in the outskirts of Hillview, backgrounded by mechanical earth-moving anachronisms in full view). Steve had framed their heads out of most of the fight scenes, which was a surprisingly effective visual trick, and he would later brag that he'd done so intentionally. While Steve was clearly the only guy who had any idea how to

operate the cameras and editing software, it was Joey who emerged as the true creative force of the films. His knowledge of martial arts lore, apocryphal, factual, and everywhere in between, was second to none. He had an instinctive feel for the conventions of kung fu storytelling. He understood that multiple attackers, no matter how numerous, could never overcome an enlightened, superior fighter. He knew exactly how much time a master would take to toy with his foe before crushing him. With no explicit acknowledgement, Joey was the choreographer, de facto director, and star of the films. For computer technicians and auto mechanics mostly past their physical prime, the others passed for competent thugs and throwaway villains, but Joey was made alive in the presence of a camera. He whooped and bobbed from foot to foot with his back hand tucked at his jaw, imitating Bruce Lee imitating Cassius Clay imitating a jungle predator. Though his motions were objectively amateur and not so silken smooth like his idols, he felt every step and every sway in the very core of his being. And upon reviewing the footage back in Philip's garage, the others could swear they felt it as well.

Before the films, Joey had essentially been a passive member of the group, not much more than a favored tagalong who was easy to beat at pool and had access to free videos. After debuting "Cotton Fist Sunset", which received raved reviews from the likes of Joey's mom and Jesus's 9-year-old son, Joey finally felt confident that if he spoke, the others would listen. Thus, the proposal that had long been gestating in his mind: the group ought to put together its own Wing Chun training dummy. For months, they'd all been talking about having one to play with when they weren't at the Dojo, but nobody was willing to put up the space or the thousand-dollar check for a manufactured dummy. Why not just build one themselves, Joey suggested? They could install it against the back wall of Joey's mom's bungalow and swing by anytime they felt like practicing. Joey admitted he knew nothing about woodcraft, but there was a book on Sifu Campos's shelf on how to construct a dummy, and with a little elbow grease, they could make it happen.

For the guys training at the Campos Dojo, making bad video shorts was one thing, and constructing a tangible, functional object—not to mention one demanding substantial investments of time and/or money—was something entirely and categorically different. The idea met with unanimous but merely vague enthusiasm from the group; the others expressed their perfunctory approval and failed to look Joey in the eye. Joey came out of the Dojo's next class with the Sifu's wooden dummy design manual and took it home by himself. This proved more and more discouraging with each read. At first glance, the basic Wing Chun training dummy is no more complex than a coat hanger: a suspended cylindrical trunk with three arms and one leg protruding from the front, designed to approximate a human opponent in fighting pose. Proper construction, however, turns out to be a delicate matter. The trunk, arms, and legs need to be milled, rounded, and sanded to precise specification, and then stained and lacquered to

accommodate frequent contact with bare skin. The arms must be mounted at precise angles, and the upper arms have to be fitted with a slight amount of give, so that they can be pulled out an inch or two and wiggled. Some dummies come with floor stands, but these are of limited worth; true wooden dummies need to be fixed to a wall with a large frame, so that the assembly as a whole does not wobble when subjected to repeated blows. For adequate balance and sturdiness, the primary components should be made with heavier hardwoods such as oak, dogwood, or hickory, and these can be expensive, especially with such large, irregular pieces as the one used for the trunk of the dummy. Joey estimated that material costs alone would not be much cheaper than the end price of a pre-constructed dummy. On top of that, he would need access to a fully-equipped wood shop for the various chisels, lathes, and saws required by the construction process. He did not know the first thing about making things with wood.

It was clear he was going to have to get help. Joey reviewed the roster of his friends from the Dojo. For his immediate purposes, it was a poor crew. Steve took remedial math and photo classes at the local junior college. Philip serviced printers and copy machines for Bank of America branches in Hillview. Max was an electrician and rigged gaming consoles to play illegally-copied games as a side-business. Tommy played lots of guitar and clerked at the library. Each of these was even less likely to know anything about building the dummy than Joey himself. Will fixed up hot-rods for a living, which was encouraging except that he was the first to volunteer that he had no idea what to do with wood. Jesus, as assistant manager of a hardware store, became Joey's best and last hope by default.

The next day, before his shift at the video store, Joey met up with Steve at Hillview Hardware, where they proceeded to harass Jesus for half an hour about finding them free wood and materials for the dummy. Jesus thought they were asking him to steal materials from his employer, which they basically were, and reacted sourly to the idea. Joey repeated that they were just looking for any ignored inventory that was going to waste; Steve went a step further and proposed that Jesus was a stooge to the Man and that he was offering up his loyalty in vain tribute to a corporate entity that would just as well lay him off as give him a proper lunch break. Steve sounded disturbingly serious. Jesus responded with profanity, punctuating his refusal with emphatic, arcing swings of his price-tagging gun. Steve was accidentally priced at 99 cents. Some nearby customers tried not to look over in their direction. After apologizing briefly, Jesus accused Joey and Steve of irresponsibility and made particular reference to their age group, and for the first time Joey felt young and immature and embarrassed around one of his older kung-fu pals. It dawned on him that the dummy project was a bust. They left the hardware store. Steve took off for school and Joey waited over half an hour for the bus to the video store.

Business at the Hillview Family Film Center was friendly, loyal, and pretty much dying. Joey saw lots of familiar faces and warm smiles on the job, which sometimes caused him to

wonder how many rentals were made out of pangs of guilt or pity, as customers drove past his mom's video store on their way to Blockbuster. Joey's mother worked long hours, treated customers well, kept the place clean, and took fastidious records, but was otherwise a poor fit for the video rental industry. She barely watched movies, settling on vendor recommendations to fill the store's catalog, and had no feel for marketing whatsoever. An increasing portion of the store's revenue was being taken up by martial arts flicks and adult movies, both of which were primarily under Joey's responsibility. Joey didn't mind working at the store, although it allowed him to see firsthand how far displaced his mother's optimism was from the reality of the store's financial distress. Running the place was a step up from cleaning houses, which had barely supported them, but Joey was not very confident that the store could keep it up for much longer.

Slow times afforded Joey the chance to think about Wing Chun and the martial arts. Eighty percent of the time he kept an old Shaw Bros. classic running on the store's monitors. He had stopped all training behind the counter a while ago—squats, hamstring stretches, shadow-boxing—the moment customers, well-meaning and otherwise, started referring to him as Karate Master. Hey Karate Master, do you guys have the new Star Wars yet? Kill anyone yet, Karate Master? Or they'd use a few jabs in the air to greet him, or do a Mr. Miyagi crane kick when they thought they were within his field of vision. Joey felt violated that people were acknowledging his art in a manner that was so thoroughly out of his control. He decided he would wait until he had something to show for it all before he'd expose himself like that again. In the mean time, he could visualize it all in his head. It didn't matter as much to him if people thought he was just staring into space.

He liked to put a small notebook behind the cash register and scribble out his thoughts, which were mostly about training. Over time, his notes had grown in sophistication and ambition. He wrote out his latest regimen in detail:

JOSEPH JAMES' WEEKLY TRAINING SCHEDULE

EVERYDAY:

-10 mins warmup run

-10 mins jump rope

-15 mins shadowboxing

-5 mins horse stance

-25 x 5 sets crunches

-20 x 5 sets pushups

-forms.

-(dummy work eventually, how to fit in 60 minutes?)

...

Joey's mind was still on the wooden dummy, so he followed this with a sketch of the

dummy design, a list of materials, and a description of the construction steps. His recall was, on the whole, fairly inaccurate. In the middle of erasing a bullet-point, a customer asked if they could get Karate Master's attention for a second.

Looking up, Joey almost winced. A young woman named Alex Manning stood opposite him, smiling. Joey knew her from high school and had nominated her into a pantheon of women alongside certain fashion models and comic book superheroines. There were many girls as beautiful and as rich, and Joey was clever enough to be wary of those, but he'd never quite figured Alex out. She carried herself without pretense and listened when you talked. She was bright and well-spoken. Joey found Alex incredibly intimidating because he knew, as a primitive fact of his consciousness, that he could never have a relationship with someone like her. It was not possible. Joey remembered his place and asked how he could help her.

Alex said her father had sent her to Blockbuster for movies, which initially annoyed her, because she would've assumed that all computer executives would get their rentals from the internet these days. But she was happy to have come out, because she saw the blue and orange sign of his mother's store on the way, couldn't believe it was still there, and decided on the spot to go there instead. Joey almost winced again. He said the selection here was a bunch of shit unless she was interested in dubbed, flying Chinamen or hot sex with the poolman. Alex feigned surprise and said that that was right on the money. She asked how he knew. Joey couldn't believe how good she smelled. She asked if he was still into running and complained about how hard it was to get rid of "the freshmen fifteen" she'd accumulated at Brown a year ago. Joey had no idea what she was talking about. He chose not to respond. Instead he offered her a copy of *Return of the Dragon* and said that Chuck Norris looked like a shaved yeti in it. Best of both worlds, you know? It might have been the most tired joke he knew, and he desperately felt the need for a second attempt. *If I had a dollar for every time I've said that*, he thought, *I would feed the poor with wooden training dummies*. Alex laughed anyway and rented it immediately. On the way out, she bought a peppermint patty from the Save The Children candy machine, out of which Joey had been stealing Campos Dojo tuition for the past five weeks. She wished him well and meant it, and then she was gone. Through the glass storefront he watched her car move away until it disappeared into a sea of minute, red specks.

Joey immediately retreated to his notebook and spent two hours sketching and re-sketching the wooden dummy design. He ground his pencil into the paper so hard that it left colorless impressions on the back pages. Then the phone rang. It was Jesus, who said he had a plan about the wood.

Jesus wanted Joey, Steve, and Tommy, "the young bucks," he called them, to meet up with him after Wing Chun class on Friday night. He gathered everyone around a pool table at a bar near the Dojo and addressed them in a hushed, conspiratorial tone. He was obviously agitated

about whatever it was he wanted to tell them. Jesus said there was a chainsaw artist that had a cabin on the north edge of Hillview, past the railroad tracks. He said that this lady did a lot of custom orders with the hardware shop and got her stuff delivered out there. According to the delivery boy, a high school junior named Isaac, the woman was something of an eccentric recluse and not particularly in touch with the world around her. He'd hear her talking to herself in her cabin as he walked to the front door with the deliveries. Oftentimes she forgot what she had ordered and would send Isaac back to the store for more stuff, and then she'd completely forget about the order again when he returned with it. Apparently, Jesus whispered sharply, Isaac thought she was a lesbian as well. The young bucks looked at each other.

Jesus paused for a moment and then became more excited. The juicy part, he said, was that there were pieces of wood everywhere around the premises! Pine, oak, fir, you name it, and in sizes ranging from little scraps to uncut chunks of log. Jesus gestured in a big circle with his arms. Isaac had been driving out there at least once a week for months and he believed that 90% of that wood went completely untouched, and that a lot of it was just sitting there rotting away.

Joey asked if Jesus was suggesting that they drive over to a cabin at the edge of town and steal wood worth at least few hundred dollars from the village idiot. Jesus pursed his lips and sucked in air through his nose. He said that he'd thought about it a lot and finally decided that it wasn't a black and white situation, that the wood was technically on the lot, yes, but consequentially speaking they couldn't be doing any harm by taking what they needed. Jesus was speaking full volume now. His fingers were wound tightly around a pool cue that quivered as he spoke. He knew how badly Joey James wanted to see the "fucking dummy" built, and that they'd be forgiven for this little crime. Tommy nervously asked if the police would really forgive something like that. Joey, also skeptical, repeated the same question in refrain. No the cops wouldn't, shouted Jesus, but Wing Chun Jeeeeezus would. He shook so violently with laughter that he dropped his pool cue on the floor. It rattled loudly against the ground. Tommy and Steve looked around the bar self-consciously. Joey said nothing and stared at the empty surface of the pool table. Jesus did not stop laughing for another five minutes.

At Wing Chun class the next week, Joey pummeled the Dojo's wooden dummy. It withstood his blows mutely and made his knuckles bleed. Sifu Campos told Joey James to settle down. Joey apologized and went for a hard run outside the Dojo. By the time he got back, class was over. Steve pulled Joey and Tommy aside and announced that he'd talked to Will about their wood acquisition plan. Will wasn't sure he approved, but said he'd help out by loaning them one of his old machines from the auto shop, so long as they kept the gas tank full. Steve cackled ominously about the pieces falling into place one by one. The three of them decided on Saturday night.

The morning of the wood raid, Joey worked himself into a furious sweat in the grassless

yard behind his home. He hung his training notebook on the wall with a nail and string. He shadowboxed to a warped, old vanity mirror that leaned against the fence. He'd be replacing it with the dummy soon enough. He thought about Campos Dojo Wing Chun and what lay beyond that. He thought about Bruce Lee, Alex Manning, and Joseph James. He caught his own stare in the mirror, skipped back a few steps, bobbed forward, took several liquid jabs at a shorter, distorted version of himself. His form was good. He pounded his ribs, stomped at his knees, threw hook shots at the thin line of his jaw. Ten more minutes of this and Joey decided he was ready for it.

Steve and Tommy rolled up to Joey's bungalow late in the afternoon riding in a 1970 Chevy Impala. Will had completely removed the convertible top and sanded the finish off. It looked like a wheeled, expiring reptile. When Steve turned the ignition off, the engine made a rumbling noise before whirring noisily to a stop. Joey went into the kitchen and threw some old bananas and a flashlight into a brown paper bag. He pulled on a black hoodie and stuffed himself into the back of the car. As Steve drove them across town, Tommy fiddled with the AM receiver, and after a bitter harangue about talk radio and oldies music, decided just to shut it off. After that, nobody said anything at all.

Near the edge of Hillview, civilization grew more and more sparse. There were three miles of deserted, hilly chaparral between the cabin where the wood lay and the nearest gas station. By the time Joey, Tommy, and Steve arrived at the artist's cabin it was almost sunset. Steve parked a few hundred yards up the road so as not to announce their arrival. The three sat noiselessly in the Impala, eating bananas and waiting for the sky to darken. Aside from some trees rustling in the wind, it was absolutely silent. After what felt like a long while, they climbed out of the car and scampered up the road.

A fence made of tree branches surrounded the cabin from all sides. On the far side of the lot was a massive, scattered collection of branches, logs, and beams; from a distance it appeared a gigantic prickly blob. The near side was populated by a cellulose menagerie of chainsaw-rendered bears, buffalo, parrots, totem poles, gnomes, tiki masks, gryphons, and other creatures that Joey could not quite discern. The cabin itself was a gaping black rectangle of wood slats and corrugated tin, about the size of a two-bedroom house. Viewed from the road, the entire structure seemed to lean slightly to the right. When they reached the fence it was nearly dark and everything appeared to them in ghastly indigo monochrome. The dirt around the lot was a pale purple; the windows of the cabin were absolutely black. Out of the silence there was high-pitched creak that lasted too long. Looking over, Joey saw the rotting, rusted skeleton of an iron windmill.

Finally, Steve asked, *sotto voce*, what the hell kind of place this was, anyway, and what the hell century they were in. Tommy snorted and shrugged and made his way to the opposite side

of the lot. Joey and Steve followed, and they began sifting through the wood pile. None of them knew exactly what oak or hickory or dogwood was like, so they relied on Joey rummaging around and testing each gnarled piece for heft. It was hard, painful work, and left Joey's hands scuffed and slathered in tree sap. After twenty minutes or so they settled on four or five candidate pieces; they guessed that any more wouldn't fit into the Impala. They began dragging the pieces back to the car one by one. Tommy was not as strong as the others, and several trips later he began cursing Steve for parking the car so far away. Steve got defensive and let go of the log, which caused Joey to curse Steve as well. Steve then jogged over to a carved statue near the front of the cabin and began to dry-hump it from behind. Joey and Tommy could just barely make out Steve's grotesque mid-coital facial expressions. "Hey Tommy, this is you, you fucker!" he called across the yard.

After the fact, even Steve realized he'd been too loud. There was the sound of motion and muffled voices from inside the cabin. Steve cried out even louder, "Oh, shit, the lesbian!" A blinding porch light came on. At this point both Steve and Tommy broke into full sprint back towards the Impala. Joey, for his part, didn't budge. They'd come too far to abandon the wood now. *How much do you want it, little man?* Joey said to himself. *How much do you want it?* He clenched his teeth, curled in his toes, and then dead-lifted the log. He began to hobble toward the car. Over his shoulder, he saw a teenager, a really big kid, emerge from the front door of the cabin. He wore a camouflage baseball cap and a t-shirt decorated with an underwater scene of whales, dolphins, and submerged Ionic columns. In his arms he cradled what appeared to be a pump-action air rifle. The kid shouted into the doorway of the cabin about someone stealing the wood.

Joey swore under his breath and hurried in tiny steps. His shoulders ached and his lungs were starting to hurt. Further ahead, Steve wrenched the ignition and the Impala came to life with a sick groan. Tommy screamed for Joey to drop the log and run. Joey heard a little pop and felt a stinging sensation in his shoulder blade, but he kept moving. *Become the teapot*, Joey thought over and over again. *Become the teapot*. By the time he reached the car he was repeating it out loud. He slung the log into the back seat and hurled himself after it. Steve floored the gas, and the Impala peeled out.

Back on the road, Tommy turned around and asked Joey what exactly he was mumbling as he was getting in the car. Joey, lying prone on the back seat and panting for air, seemed not to hear. He took a deep breath and shouted hoarsely to no one in particular, "I have just stolen logs from a lesbian and her son, and they shot me with a BB gun!" He looked over to Steve, who was filming Joey with a video camera. Joey told Steve to keep his damn eyes on the road.

They got back to the Hillview Family Film Center near closing time. Steve and Tommy were hiccupping with laughter. Joey was tired and looked like shit, but he felt like a winner. The video

store was his fluorescent temple to victory. Inside, Joey's mom was cleaning up behind the counter. She smiled and said that it was the best Saturday of business that they had had in a while. Her expression faded when she saw Joey. She asked him what happened. Joey shrugged and told her most of the story, minus the part about theft and getting shot, but included the part about Steve fornicating with a wooden gnome. She nodded but didn't really seem to understand, so she changed the subject. She said a girl with long dark hair had come by to drop off a Bruce Lee tape and asked if Joey was around. She told the girl that Joey didn't work weekends, but she would be happy to let him know she'd dropped by. The girl's name was Alice or something, said Joey's mom. Steve and Tommy looked over at Joey with curiosity; they had no idea what was going on.

At this Joey frowned thoughtfully. After a moment, he announced that it just occurred to him that he had no idea how they were going to do the machine work for the dummy. After studying the plans in-depth, he had a rough idea of how to proceed, but they still needed the tools and the skills to apply them. Tommy patted him on the back and said he thought the hard part was over, which wasn't very reassuring. Joey seemed to despair momentarily. Then Joey's mom made a small noise. She asked Joey if he remembered his father's brother, Hugh James. Joey grunted in the affirmative, and asked what of it. She'd heard that Uncle Hugh had moved back to his family's land on the reservation in Riverside County to work on conservation projects, and he had helped the tribe set up a workshop out there. It was a long drive out, but worth a shot. Joey could take work off from the store for a few days and go check it out. Joey looked up at his mother, unsure if he should accept her offer. Without waiting for his response, she said she would call Uncle Hugh in the morning.

The Dojo guys were sufficiently impressed that Joey had in fact escaped from the jaws of wilderness doom with his wooden treasure, and even more impressed by the tape of his delirious pack-mule marathon—they played and replayed the part with Joey muttering “Be the teapot, become the teapot...*ugh*” and hucking a log into the back seat of the Impala. This went on for a good ten minutes, before Will stood up, still snickering, and offered Joey one of his trucks for him to take out to the reservation. The rest of the guys said they would pitch in to pay for gas and sandwiches. Joey left the next morning.

Before reaching Hugh's place, Joey drove through a tiny village called Pine, although it was probably a hundred miles from any such thing. Pine was a sorry, dissipated assemblage of painted-brick hovels and plywood shanties that seemed to huddle together for warmth, or to feed off one another. Someone had socked the place right in the mouth. Graffiti covered the side walls of every building along the one road through town. The houses were decorated with bent-wire TV antennae and kerosene tanks, and they emitted an ambiguous, foody odor like overcooked dough. Joey slowed the truck to a crawl, as the children playing in the street didn't

seem to heed oncoming traffic. He counted four other cars in the entire village. A couple miles out of Pine, Joey reached a collective of shacks ringed by barbed wire. Nearby was a camping trailer, which he supposed was his uncle's place. Immediately beyond was a blighted, discolored wasteland, a dirt ocean of rusty brown interrupted by weedy patches of vegetation and a too-green bog that lay absolutely still. Fifteen years before that time the whole area was being used as an illegal dumping ground by several cities bordering the reservation, and the soil was still contaminated with leaked car batteries and toxic waste.

Hugh James came out of the trailer and waved a slow hello. Joey thought his uncle, a rail-thin man with thick glasses and large hands, looked almost exactly the same as when they'd met for the first and only time when Joey was in the third grade. Still, he was mostly a stranger, and Joey felt like he didn't trust him. Hugh showed Joey around and told him to be as much at home in the trailer as he could manage. They tried to make small talk for a couple minutes, but Joey turned the conversation over to the dummy. He showed Hugh the plans out of his notebook, and the wood in the truck. Hugh chuckled sheepishly and said it had been a while, but he thought he might be able to help Joey out. They carried the wood over to the workshop and Hugh went straight to work. Joey watched from a corner and tried to be patient. Hugh sawed and filed the oak down to size, which took much longer than Joey would have guessed. After rounding out the trunk piece, Hugh called it a day. They resigned to the trailer.

Over a dinner of cold, canned spaghetti, Hugh interrogated Joey about the dummy. He asked Joey what it was used for, and why was it that the arms had to be just so, why the top two arms were set at that particular angle, and why they were placed one above the other instead of on a level plane. These were purely technical questions and Hugh was legitimately curious, but Joey found he had a hard time answering. He felt like he was being asked for make excuses for himself. That was just the way it was, Joey said as a conclusion. Hugh continued anyway. He wondered why training against the dummy was any better than training with broomsticks, or benches, or perhaps a low tree. Actually, none of those fought back at all. Wouldn't it just be better to practice against real people?

Hugh admitted that it was probably because he didn't understand martial arts very well since he was just an engineer and watched mostly comedy movies. When he'd been in fights, as a kid and in the war, it was a bunch of disorganized flailing and wrestling and chaos. He did see a Shaolin Monk show in Vegas once and thought those guys were amazing dancers, but he didn't get the mystical power nonsense with the bricks broken over heads and such. That was all a bunch of smoke and mirrors as far as he was concerned. They were great dancers, he affirmed, but they were charlatans all the same.

Joey didn't like where the conversation was going at all, but he measured his words. He said that he wasn't sure about *qi gong*, the "mystical power" stuff, either, but he was currently

studying something really practical with Campos Dojo Wing Chun. It was derived from the same style that Bruce Lee had started out with, Joey explained.

Hugh drew a blank for a moment. Then he remembered. Joey meant Bruce Lee, the *actor*?

Joey blinked. True, he conceded, Bruce Lee had made his money in the movie studios, but he had revolutionary ideas about the martial arts. He was a visionary. Hugh asked him for specific examples, so Joey went over the difference between traditional and modern styles and the need for an individual path in the martial arts. He talked about a path of no style. Hugh said that he didn't understand, that he still couldn't tell the difference. Joey was getting flustered. He recited Bruce Lee's be-like-water speech. He moved his hands as he spoke. The martial artist should be shapeless and formless. Water could flow, or it could crash. When you put water in a bottle, it became the bottle. When you put water in a cup, it became the cup. And in a teapot, it became the teapot. Joey thought about dragging logs across dirt roads while being chased by kids with pop guns.

Hugh considered this for a while. After a long silence, he asked Joey, "Well that sounds pretty interesting, but what does it all mean?" He raised an eyebrow sincerely.

Joey took it as a direct challenge. He lost his cool and raised his voice. *What do you mean, "what does that mean?"* Joey cried. He was defiant and alive. He began to stutter with tears in his eyes. It meant rolling with the punches. It meant working hard even when you were too small. It meant finding a way even when you couldn't pay for it. It meant being there for your friends and your family. It meant that you could make yourself better and you could be proud one day. Joey knocked over his can of coke, but he continued to shout. Martial arts didn't have easy questions with easy answers. Never. You had to work and think and find the meaning for yourself. Joey swore that he'd looked and he'd keep on looking. Then he covered his face with his fists and became quiet.

Hugh's expression went from shock to softness. He believed he understood, he said. He cleaned up the table and left Joey alone for the night.

The next morning Joey woke up late and found Hugh already working on the dummy. Joey uttered a terribly awkward good morning and searched for something else to say, but Hugh preempted him. He explained that the dummy's arm pieces were less tricky than he'd thought they'd be, and that they could finish shaping the rest of the pieces in another day or two. Joey would have to do all the staining, lacquering, and assembly back home, but he wouldn't need any special equipment for those. Joey nodded and asked Hugh to show him how the arms were made. Hugh took two hours for a thorough explanation.

They finished early in the evening the following day. Joey looked over the pile of disassembled dummy parts in the back of the truck, surveying the fruits of his and Hugh's and his friends' and his mother's effort. He felt no particular excitement. He was happy that he'd

finished a necessary task, and it was nice that he'd learned how to use a wood lathe. But he concluded that the job would not be done until he put the thing together with his friends from the Dojo. Then he could finally take a little satisfaction in his project.

Before they parted, Hugh asked Joey what he wanted to do with his life. Joey thought about his nights at the video store and hesitated for a moment. What the hell. He said he wanted to be a professional prize fighter. You know, like a boxer, only more dangerous. A Karate Master. He was going to be the best. A guru. Maybe an actor.

Hugh said he hoped Joey would find what he was looking for, and asked Joey to write to him about it. Joey nodded and said nothing. He climbed into the truck and headed back home to Hillview.