

# Pacing the Nightmare

by Sean McMullen

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Training has become a nightmare, yet I must face it again tonight. I am Melissa's sensei, so I must remain good enough to keep her loyalty. I must spar with her again.

I have never liked training. This may sound odd, coming from a black belt in Shotokan karate, but I have only persisted with it because it is good for me. I had been lazy: karate taught me self-discipline. I had been a bit on the heavy side, and inclined to be short of breath: karate melted the fat away and increased my aerobic capacity. I had been afraid to go out after dark: karate gave me the confidence not to fear London at night-- and the sense to avoid fights.

We train in a large gym in the University of London's new sports centre, but wherever we train defines the dojo. Melissa is already there as I enter, along with some of the beginners who are starting tonight. The beginners mill about nervously, glancing at the spectre that is Melissa and trying to work out how to tie their white belts. At the sight of my black belt they come over, even before I have bowed my *re* at the dojo threshold. They have the usual questions.

"Excuse me sensei-- "

I smile, but cut him short. "I'm not the club sensei, I'm only a black belt."

"Er, can you recommend a book on karate?"

"Akira Suzuki, Shotokan Karate Explained. The club can rent you the CD or hard copy for 50p."

"Where can I buy a uniform?" asks a girl.

"Give me your name and size, I'm putting in a bulk order for the club next week. We get a 30% discount."

"But I want one for the next lesson. Do they sell them in Harrods?"

Melissa sees me, smiles, and gives an almost imperceptible nod. I return the gesture, and she continues doing chin-ups on the bars. It is obvious why the new students are unsettled by her: face all sunken hollows and shadows, skeletal hands and feet. Her *gi* is a size too large, helping to hide her thin arms and legs, and she is generally self-effacing about her appearance. All the classic signs of anorexia nervosa, yet that is not Melissa's problem. I am still senior to her, and she is obliged to obey me within the dojo, but I cannot slow her progress. I can only try to stay ahead, yet I am not too proud to use delaying tactics.

"Melissa, could you show these beginners how to tie their belts, please?" I call. She stops her chin-ups and comes over. Her brown belt is tied with a perfect knot around a disturbingly thin waist. The two ends reach almost to her knees.

Other karatekas arrive. There is a sprinkling of black belts and the club sensei himself.

"All right, good lines please," calls our Japanese sensei in his Yorkshire accent, and six dozen karatekas line up in rows by belt colour. The black belts are at the front, facing the rest of the class.

We start with warm-up and stretching exercises: jumping on the spot, head-rolls, arm stretches, leg stretches, twisting, and bending. I am still stiff from my afternoon training, in fact I am constantly in pain from pushing myself too hard. There can be no rest for me, however, not while Melissa is my student.

I did not pay her much attention at first, but then there was nothing remarkable about her three years ago. It was the start of the academic year, and she was one of twenty beginners, just like these here tonight. Our beginners are usually first year students from the University, some anxious about keeping fit while studying, others anxious about being mugged at night.

Melissa had been one of those not wearing a proper *gi* on her first training night. She wore a black bodystocking with a fluorescent red and green trunk and a pair of pursed lips on each buttock. That is all that stands out in my memory for the first few months, until the night that she was awarded her yellow belt. Her parents were there, and after training they accosted me at random from among the black belts. They asked why she was becoming so thin, they were worried that she was displaying symptoms of anorexia nervosa. I laughed off the suggestion, and explained that many karate students lose weight during the first year of training, but that it comes back as muscle.

They were reassured. Melissa was very precious to them, they explained. She was an only child, an in-vitro fertilisation baby from a program in the early 1990's. I promised that I would take a special interest in her. I had just begun my PhD in cytology, and the combination of this and my recently acquired black belt made them trust me well beyond my competence.

Legs apart, push down, stretch, stretch. I would stretch better with a few days of rest yet I cannot afford that.

The warm-ups are over. "Floor, please," calls the sensei, then he turns to me. "Would you look after white belts, Greg?" That accent! Asian, African and Arabic academics with Oxford or even American accents are understandable, but a Japanese from Yorkshire?

Forty minutes of muscle development follows warm-ups. Much of it is for the abdominal muscles, because a karateka's strength comes mainly from the abdomen. Fifty leg-raises, thirty jackknives, two hundred sit-ups, I do it all, I push myself to do it all. Most beginners do a fraction of what is required, and even the senior karatekas do not push themselves particularly hard. Melissa does more of everything: eighty leg-raises, fifty jackknives, three hundred sit-ups, and I know that she has already trained at least twice today. Her eyes are huge brown disks in a gaunt, drawn face, and her arms are like thin, hard robotic manipulators. For all her skeletal frame, though, she is surprisingly heavy.

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As white belts karatekas learn the basic movements, as yellow belts they work on adding power, but more subtle considerations come at orange belt. Students have to become conscious of good style, and to maintain and improve it in everything that they do. Upon reaching orange belt Melissa decided that she needed a personal sensei. Through sheer coincidence a PhD student in cytology was the instructor that she imprinted on.

On nights that I do instructing I stay back to do extra training for myself. Melissa often stayed to watch, and finally she came over to ask if she could train with me.

"Why not, but remember that I'm doing this to maintain my own technique. I won't give you much time."

"I understand, thank you." She stared at the floor. Something was bothering her. "What... do you think of me?" Her words came with difficulty.

"You train harder than anyone I've ever known. I'm impressed. At first I didn't think you would even reach the second lesson."

Something seemed to burst within her. "Greg, please help me, I need someone who knows about karate to... to tell me if I'm... all right. Please understand, I've given up so much to be a good karateka, and I don't know why! Now the instructors ignore me, I'm still losing weight, I've stopped menstruating without being pregnant-- "

Her outburst, her distress was a surprise. She had seemed so self-confident until then.

"All right, calm down and we'll take the last one first. Some women do stop menstruating when they train very hard."

"They do?"

"They do. I did a sub-thesis on it. As far as your technique goes, it's very good, the best in your group. If the instructors ignore you it's because you need little correction. Don't take things so seriously."

A week after she was awarded her orange belt her parents returned to ambush me again. They were comfortably rich, yet they did not have the smug, bland, boring manner that I have come to expect from

such people. They were alarmed, frightened: something was still wrong with their daughter, and was getting worse. She was thinner, and she had broken up with her boyfriend, who was the son of the Duke of somewhere and about 200th in line for the throne. She had also broken his jaw in two places during an argument.

I remembered her boyfriend, who had often picked her up after training. When we had been introduced he had given me the usual face-saving line about having done aikido for a couple of years (why is it always aikido?).

Melissa's parents took us to dinner at a club with private dining rooms. She had shed several kilograms since getting her yellow belt, and the muscles, bones and ligaments showed beneath her skin.

"She's our best student," I told them.

"She's good?" exclaimed her father. "Have you seen her without her clothes lately?"

"I've never seen her without her clothes," I replied, vaguely annoyed at the implication. The poverty induced by postgraduate studies had broken up my previous two relationships, and I had sworn myself to celibacy until I could call myself *Dr. Carter*.

By the end of the dinner I had conceded that Melissa should see a specialist if she continued to lose weight. In the weeks that followed I watched with interest as Melissa's fists thudded into the felt and canvas *make-wa* punching mats. Was she hitting more forcefully just to harden her knuckles, or did her mind project somebody's face onto the canvas? When she was finally forced to see the specialist, she recruited me as a sympathetic authority.

I took a 3/4 inch board along to his rooms, and she began the examination by breaking it with one punch. She then lay on the floor and counted to fifty while I stood on her stomach-- I weigh ninety kilograms. The doctor was impressed.

"Superficially, Melissa, it's a case of anorexia nervosa, but that's as far as it goes," he concluded. "You are obviously fit, strong and confident, and you eat well. What is really strange is that your weight is normal for your height, yet you *look* so wasted. Mr Carter, what do you think? Does this happen often in karate?"

"No, but Melissa trains exceptionally hard."

"That may explain it... I mean, as far as I am concerned, Melissa, you're not sick, in fact you're the fittest patient that I have ever examined."

"Then why not tell my parents that?"

"Why not indeed?" he breathed, shaking his head. "What effect is all this training having on the rest of your life: your friends, your studies?"

"My studies are going well. The discipline that I have learned in karate has helped a lot. My assignment results are up from an average of B+ to a A-. My boyfriend and I have broken off, but I have new friends, like Greg."

I felt myself blush, but they were not looking in my direction.

"So what drives you to train so hard?" he asked.

She did not reply at once, and when she did she chose her words carefully. "I have read up on anorexia nervosa, doctor. I know how those with the syndrome starve themselves because it gives them the feeling of control over their bodies. Karate does give me that control, I admit it and I like it. At school I was forced to develop the body beautiful, not too lean, not too flabby, but through karate I discovered that I really enjoy pushing myself to the limit."

"Anorexia karateka," I joked. Nobody smiled.

"This just might be the first recorded case of a new syndrome," he said, with the slightly vacant stare of someone already planning a paper for *Nature*. "Would you consent to regular examinations? I'm willing to certify you fit for now, but I would not be acting ethically if I did not monitor your condition."

He was offering a deal. Melissa accepted.

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We are doing pushups.

"Pushups are done with a straight body, and on the top two knuckles of your fists," I tell the beginners. "I don't care if you can do only two or three at first, just do them properly."

A few of them can indeed only do two or three proper pushups. The sensei counts. Five groups of ten, ten, ten, rest. I do fifteens. Melissa does twenties.

Melissa is good, but her excellence did not come without hard work. Exercising at one's limit always hurts, and it is during the pushups that I can see her under the most strain. I see her arms, her whole body shaking with effort, but she persists until she has done whatever she has set for herself. I also do more in each bracket, pushing myself until a small intense ball of pain flares at the core of my biceps. She is so fresh and I am so tired, yet I must spar with her tonight.

\* \* \*

I began to develop an academic curiosity about Melissa's condition, and after several months of being her private and unofficial sensei I asked her to come to the laboratory for some tests. Athletes doing training in extremis to break world records often have lowered resistance to disease, so I expected to find Melissa's immunity level depressed. It was normal. A CAT scan revealed that the section modulus of her bones was normal too, although the muscle attachment was unusually deep. The cells of her muscles were where the really dramatic differences showed, however, and this was my speciality.

In weightlifting one's muscles must provide the maximum force possible, but in sprinting the rate of doing work is more important. Thus speed sports do not require the large cross-sectional area of muscle of a weight-lifter, it is the rate of contraction that is critical. Muscles generate maximum power when contracting at an intermediate rate-- but not Melissa's muscles. I found that they worked in an optimised dual mode, so that they could generate close to maximum power at a very high rate of contraction. Physiologically it was a contradiction in terms.

I did biopsies of Melissa's small, hard muscles, and these indicated that membranes called the sarcoplasmic reticulum were releasing calcium faster than in normal muscles. The calcium is what causes muscular contraction, and its release is triggered by a protein. With Melissa the protein was chemically different, and its interaction with the membranes caused a faster outflow of calcium. Thus both her muscle structure and chemistry were enhanced, so that her muscles were small and light for speed work, yet very powerful when sheer strength was required. Tiny, dense muscles: that was why she looked emaciated, yet was in perfect health.

I told Melissa little of what I was learning, only that I was working out why she looked the way she did while remaining healthy. She seemed relieved, if only because it might pacify her parents.

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There is a short rest before the formal training begins. Tonight an orange belt is due for an upgrade to green, and for the final test he has to break a 3/4 inch board. Two examiners hold the board as he squares off for a *gyaku-tsuki* punch, then snaps his whole body behind the leading knuckles of his fist and shouts his kiai. The board breaks, everyone claps.

I am reminded of the night that Melissa broke her first board as part of her green belt tests. She had everything mastered and passed easily, yet there was a subtle imperfection with the flow of her movements in katas and sparring. She was smoothly mechanical, more like a perfect computer simulation than a human.

"Your style is too mechanical," I said abruptly as we worked alone after training. "For gradings and competitions it's fine, but not in a life-and-death situation."

"So what can I do?" she asked, very concerned.

"Just keep training. Some things only come with time."

I was saying this for myself, not Melissa. I was years ahead of her, but she was closing the gap too fast. There *had* to be some stylistic subtleties that only came with time.

"But there must be something that I can do," she pleaded. "How did you solve this problem when you

were at my level?"

"It was never a problem with me. Just be patient, and keep training."

I had fobbed her off, I had scored a cheap point. It would return to haunt me.

The break is over, and the sensei calls for good rows. Before the formal *re* that begins training proper there is the conferral of belts. The orange belt who broke the board is called by name, and he walks forward to be given a certificate and a green belt.

The sensei calls another name. "Melissa Jennison."

I almost gasp, and my heart sinks. She has caught up with me, she is being awarded her black belt early. That can be done without formal tests in exceptional cases, and Melissa is exceptional. She takes her belt from the sensei, they bow, and everyone claps. What will become of humanity now? I must--

"Greg Carter."

Me! I must stare and gape like a gaffed fish for a moment. I walk to the sensei, step forward, take the belt and certificate, shake hands, step back, we bow to each other, the class claps, and I walk back to my place. Everyone stands patiently as the three upgraded karatekas drop to one knee, undo their old belts and put on the new. Mine is a black belt with two red stripes. Second *Dan!* While pacing Melissa I had not noticed my own style improving.

There are two belts that most karatekas remember particularly well: yellow, because it is the first step up, and black because of what it symbolises. Not so for me. Second *Dan* is the scrap of driftwood thrown to me just as I had reconciled myself to drowning. The sensei addresses the class.

"Melissa and Greg are excellent students, hard working and dedicated. They are models that everyone should watch. Greg, will you train white belts tonight, please?"

The beginners stand in five ragged lines. At the formal *re* some bow with exaggerated depth, others just give an embarrassed nod.

"Greg is a tutor at University," the sensei continues. This is reassurance for the beginners, it tells them that I am well-educated and responsible, not some psychopathic streetfighter. "At first you will find training hard to keep up with, and you will ache all over. It becomes easier after a few weeks. You must never let yourselves lapse. Karate is all about continual improvement, and the moment that you begin to feel comfortable is the moment that you have to push yourself harder. Tonight you are going to learn a few points of etiquette, then work on stances and blocks. I want you to give these basics close attention. They can mean the difference between a pass and a fail in gradings, and could even help you win your division in the *kata* competitions."

Except if Melissa is in your division.

"Greg, your class."

When Melissa was a green belt she carried off both prizes in her division, and finished with more points than the winning black belt. That was enough for the sensei. She was awarded her blue belt the next week.

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Our club runs film nights every month, generally of 20th-Century martial-arts classics. It was at a double bill of Enter The Dragon and Yojimbo that I discovered another change in Melissa. As usual she had bailed me up in the foyer during the interval to complain about sloppy choreography in the fighting scenes.

"There's something wrong with the projector, too," she added. "Every time the action became interesting the image broke down into a series of still pictures."

That simply had not happened, unless... My realisation of what might have really happened came as a cold, stabbing sliver of fear: she could distinguish the projector's 24 frames per second.

"I want you to come back to my lab," I said urgently. "Now."

My measurements showed that Melissa had learned to speed up her brain's visual refresh cycle at will, so that she could effectively slow down her view of the world. She also had a reaction time of 0.014 seconds for the tests that I ran, a tenth that of a normal human. Karate can teach amazing skills, but

nothing like that.

All the while her karate continued to improve, sometimes dramatically. Once the sensei was demonstrating some point about the structure of katas and asked six black belts to have a free-form sparring bout with Melissa. Impossibly, she beat them all. The fight was exquisite karate, yet heart-stopping excitement as well. Her technique was close to perfect yet she fought with ferocity and tenacity. In return for skinned knuckles she inflicted a black eye, a cracked rib, a dislocated shoulder, two bleeding noses, and another injury that made every male in the dojo wince. The sensei was incredulous. The slight rigidity of Melissa's style had been replaced by a lithe, tigerish flow. How? The answer would not occur to me for many months. Meantime, her brown belt was awarded early.

By now I was beginning to suspect that there was a link between Melissa's strange syndrome and her in-vitro conception, but... manipulating genetic material in a fertilised human egg cell is difficult enough today, so how much harder would it have been in 1992? Nevertheless, it was possible. Wonderful work had been done back then, even with the crude techniques available. Was Melissa the result of an experiment to breed an enhanced soldier?

If such an experiment had been carried out, it was certain to be a closely guarded secret. I explained my suspicions to Melissa, and she agreed to help-- although without enthusiasm. It was as if she would help out of loyalty to me, but for no other reason. This would not improve her karate, so it did not interest her. For the next month I did some detailed research on the medical team that had conceived Melissa, and I decided that my most promising suspect was Dr. Graham W. Corric.

Corric's rooms were in Birmingham, not far from the software company where my brother Alex worked. I contacted Alex and gave him a false but plausible story. He also agreed to help. By the time we took the train for Birmingham, Melissa's body was a caricature that clothing could no longer disguise, yet she was eating more than me and blazing with energy.

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Corric was in his mid-Forties, balding and carrying more weight than was healthy, yet he was sharp, alert and perceptive. His manner was a little surly, but then I could allow a few foibles to someone who had pioneered the first reliable molecular probe for the cells of higher vertebrates.

As with the nutritionist, we started with a demonstration. Melissa squared off and punched through two boards that I held up for her. This confirmed that she was no ordinary teenage depressive. She then stripped down to her underwear, revealing a body that might have belonged to a prisoner from Belsen. Corric was gratifyingly unsettled. He responded by calling up files on his database computer, and he spent some time studying them.

He was old fashioned about his computer equipment, as my investigations had shown. He used an old networked ICL file server running an even older Unix operating system. The screen was not visible to either Melissa or me as he logged on and typed commands. Finally he logged off and turned to face us.

"I've always had a bad opinion of all those Eastern martial arts," he stated baldly. "My cousin was into karate when I was doing my early research. He used to go on about meditation and Zen, and the whole thing sounded like metaphysical mindgames. He would sit naked under a waterfall in the Cotswalds in the middle of winter to practice self-control, that sort of thing."

"Karate is karate," I replied.

"Explain."

"It's like sex. There's a lot of rubbish spoken about it, but you have to actually do it to know what all the fuss is about."

"Have other students of yours become obsessed?"

"A few, but not like Melissa."

The conversation continued to meander pointlessly until Melissa said that she had to telephone her parents, then left. Corric had regained his confidence. He attacked.

"You would not be here unless you suspected that my early IVF work was responsible for Melissa's condition," he snapped. "Out with it, what are you accusing me of?" I attacked too.

"You must agree that Melissa could be a very effective soldier: she's strong, fast and light, and has amazing reflexes. She could be an excellent pilot, a deadly commando, anything. Was she part of some military project?"

"Mr Carter, I-- are you suggesting that I performed genetic manipulations on a human zygote?"

"I am asking if anything out of the ordinary happened-- "

"Do you know just how vast the human genome is? Even today, with the mapping project complete, we know little more than the sites specific to a few dozen disorders. If I'd been able to engineer a super-warrior like Melissa back in the early 1990's I would have been shouting it from the rooftops. Human embryos are not like bacteria, they are delicate and complex, very difficult to work on. All right, so it's 2012, not 1992, and we can engineer children to be a bit taller and to be resistant to a few diseases, but that's all. The ancient Chinese had toy gunpowder rockets, but it does not follow that they could have sent astronauts to the moon. It's the same with genetics today. Bioengineered warriors are a long way off in the future."

It was like sparring with someone who did a lot of kiais, and knew many fancy moves. You just had to keep calm and aim at the openings that inevitably appeared.

"You did a lot of work on Huntington's disease," I began. "It involved Chromosome 4-- "

"You seem to know a lot about me."

"That I do. Chromosome 4 was also thought to contain the gene for senescence, and in the early Nineties some researchers suggested that it was the key to a delay or even a cure for ageing. Did you do any experiments involving an immortality treatment?"

"No, no, no! I wouldn't have known the gene for senescence if it had jumped out of my breakfast and bitten me on the testicles! Do I make myself clear?"

It was all fast jabs and light blocks, both of us too evenly matched to do any real damage. He finally asked me to leave. How could he have known that I was sitting there, insulting and antagonising him merely to give my brother time to do a cybernetic smash and grab on his database.

"Was it difficult?" I asked Melissa when I met her outside.

"A challenge, but not difficult. I phoned your brother as soon as I was outside and gave him Corric's ID, password and a description of how he had moved around his database."

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As Corric had typed in passwords, database commands and file names, Melissa had accelerated her brain's scan rate to the limits of even her own remarkable powers. To her, his fingers moved with painstaking, deliberate care over his keyboard. She had memorised every key that he had struck.

The results from our raid on Corric's data and records were inconclusive. There was evidence that he had been doing experiments on the DNA of embryos, but not that he was doing genetic manipulation for any specific traits. He worked exclusively with the so-called junk DNA in rats, introducing a selective catalyst through the cell wall on a folic acid carrier to delete specific but unimportant nucleotides. This left his mark on all the rat's cells, yet it was outwardly normal. He was experimenting with a technique, he was not engineering specific traits.

Had Corric experimented with human embryos? If so, he might have done far more than he had realised. Had he introduced a catalyst into a human zygote, meaning to delete a dozen junk nucleotides as a test? In 1992 the knowledge of genome chemistry was more limited than his technique. Perhaps he had unknowingly sheared a much larger number of nucleotides, turning on dozens of genetic characteristics. Whatever the case, he evidently decided that the genetic catalysis technique was unreliable, and he began work on the molecular probe that later brought him fame.

The changes resulting from such an experiment might remain latent until the subject had been given intensive, military-style training to focus upon: karate, for example. So was it an experiment... or a standard procedure for a science far more advanced than Corric's. If some unimaginable recruiting brigade was to medicate a group of unknowing human parents, their children would seem normal until introduced to a regimen of training, and they would be gathered up before that happened. Were the early

hominoids introduced to this world to provide a breeding population for warriors? If so, for who? Would *they* return and turn the genetic determiners on when there was some conflict requiring humanoid soldiers? Had it happened before?

Melissa had to be told, but I felt foolish and kept putting it off. Then one night I decided to shower quickly after training and meet her at the main entrance. I was just in time to see her leaving. I followed without hurrying, I only had to call out as she reached her car, after all. She had not brought her car. She walked briskly, and through increasingly dangerous streets. She was headed toward her parents' townhouse, yet walking home was simply... asking for trouble!

"Melissa!"

She stopped, and I caught up. "I'm going to walk you home. I know what you've been doing."

"I do not follow," she said, but her voice quavered.

"It must have been my remark about your style being too mechanical. Have you killed anyone?"

She looked down, yet she was as proud as a cat with a large rat in its jaws. "Nine."

Nine murders. Worse than Jack the Ripper. Melissa the Hitter. I teetered on the brink of hysterical laughter as she earnestly reassured me that there was currently a drug war in London: her contribution of dead muggers was lost in the overall toll.

"Melissa... you prowled the streets to find muggers to kill?"

"No, I just walked home."

"But the streets are too dangerous to walk at night."

"Muggers have no monopoly on darkened streets."

"You did it to learn good fighting spirit for karate. It's my fault. I told you that your style was too mechanical."

"But you were right. I thought about it for a long time."

My comment, my frustrated, impatient, jealous comment.

"Melissa, this is too much-- this is the end. I'm not going to train with you unless the sensei orders me to do it."

From the look on her face I could see that I had struck home.

"But I still have to get my black belt."

"You can get your black belt without help from me."

"But I need a sensei."

"You have the club sensei."

"I must have my own sensei."

"What gives you the right to special treatment?"

"I work hard enough to deserve it, that's what!"

I walked her home, for the safety of London's muggers, then returned to college and flopped into bed, exhausted by the stress of the hours just past. Sleep came quickly, but dreams came too. I was training alone, in a deserted gym. Whenever I made a move there was raucous laughter, as if invisible, spiteful deities were mocking me. Whenever I glanced at my belt it changed colour, and always with the laughter echoing above. I soon awoke.

I sat awake reading Cytology Abstracts until I could barely keep my eyes open, but with sleep the nightmares returned. I was being attacked by street gangs. At first I could fight them off, but they became faster and more skilled. Some had knives, one had a gun, but even as I dodged past his arm and drove the heel of my palm into his jaw, a foot snared mine, and down I plunged-- into my bed. I stayed awake until dawn.

On the following night the nightmares returned. I was being presented with a belt, but instead of Third *Dan* black I was given white. The class laughed instead of clapping, and I awoke soaked in sweat. Was it Melissa? Was some psychic alarm within her summoning me back to her-- or was it less specific than that? The telephone beckoned. Melissa was calling for a sensei, calling with an intensity that could reach several miles. How much further could she reach: to the stars, perhaps? Might there be a response?

Were humans meant develop a level of technology that would allow them to switch on the warrior genes? Probably not. How would our old masters react to a soldier on one of their reserve planets being



activated and crying to the universe for an instructor? Badly, I suspected. I reached for the phone and punched in Melissa's number. She has had me back as her private sensei since then, and that was a year ago.

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Training is over. Instructing the white belts has been a welcome rest for me. The class performs a formal *re* and there are a few announcements before people start to leave. Some stay: two other black belts, Artim and Jim, besides Melissa and me. At first we do basic movements, then the serious sparring begins.

The other black belts spar with Melissa first. Her movements are not impossibly fast, but I know that she is able to observe her opponent in slow motion. That is an advantage. She lands punches pretty well wherever she likes on Artim, but Jim is more experienced and aggressive. She does several dodges before flashing past his guard to land a kick that would kill if delivered with full force. Still, her technique needs tightening in subtle ways. My turn.

We *re*, watching each other's eyes.

"*Hajime!*"

Melissa attacks. Blocking her punches and kicks is like hitting iron pipes with my forearms. I feint a trailing punch while feigning a feint with my lead fist, but as I withdraw my lead I snap my hips like the handle of a whip. A backhand *riken-uchi* thuds heavily but harmlessly just above her right kidney. It is the first blow to get past her guard in weeks. She is surprised. Not devastated, not angry, just surprised. She has more to learn, I am still a little ahead.

"*Yame!*"

I almost fall asleep under the shower through sheer relief. There are red welts on my arms where I blocked Melissa's punches and kicks. How long can this go on? Another week, another year? What is the terror that I am trying to postpone? Would it really matter if they came, whoever they are? The thought is almost exciting. Not yet, though, not yet. I can still push a little harder, I can stay ahead for a little longer. I slowly dry my thin, hard, bruised arms while weighing myself: ninety kilograms, yet my ribs stand out, and my arms and legs are so thin. Anorexia karateka. I... my concentration wavers, I lose my train of thought.

Melissa is waiting for me in the foyer, waiting to go to dinner and talk about karate. She trains fanatically hard as a rebellion against her background. I train desperately hard to stay ahead of her. Melissa was conceived *in vitro*, but I was conceived normally, that means... another blank-out. Sheer fatigue. I need more sleep, and I shall sleep well tonight. I am still Melissa's sensei, so there will be no nightmares.

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