

Warrior Under the Weather

by Janine Gong

Chapter 1

In late 2007 my well-meaning mother announced that I needed a new thing. We are the royal family of things: the four of us have hobbies out of our ears. Every room in the house is strewn with our useful clutter; for having so many interests, we have a disturbing lack of storage. We coexist, side by side, knowing each other's diversions of the moment but only slightly interested in them. Every room in the house plays a different genre of music: jazz in the kitchen, indie down the hallway, classic Motown trailing into R&B in the garage. The house is split into pockets of personalities, just like the people who live in it.

My father is a systems engineer by day and a photographer and car enthusiast all other times. We have shelves of mismatched Leica lenses and a garage full—actually full—of bike parts; he has, in fact, outfitted most of our extended family with some fixer-upper or another and converted all of his brothers-in-law to the Way of the Bicycle. Our summer trips to Tahoe and Tucson have been planned around his Team In Training century rides: he goes to raise money for leukemia; we tag along for the buffets. A good cook, it's not unusual for Mom to call us up on any given Saturday afternoon, having come home to an empty house, to discover we are at a food truck gathering an hour away. From my father I learned the art of being a foodie and doing things with my hands.

My mother herself is no unassuming housewife. She planned her share of not-to-be-missed birthday parties: my 6th was the social event of the year. She taught me to sew, to knit, to cook, and she loved it, but as soon as she was sure my brother and I wouldn't burn the house down (with me getting a free chemistry lesson in the process, as was his style), she went back to work at her formidable UCSF lab. Since I entered high school she has joined not one but two local gyms and picked up long-distance running as if she'd been training for years. From my vantage point on the pool deck at swim practice after school, I could see her lapping the cross-country team on the track, waving to my childhood friends and asking after their mothers. From my mother I learned the effectiveness of being a dynamo.

My brother Andrew, five years older than me, has always been an enigma. High school valedictorian, CalTech graduate, now working for CalTech and applying to graduate school, he's had his share of the limelight. But it doesn't seem to suit him at all. Left-brained all the way, he was one of those boy wonders no one knows how to deal with. My dad has more than once laughed, only half-jokingly, that he doesn't understand his own son. The high school guidance counselor Andrew and I shared years apart didn't even realize we were related. "I remember his transcript! We almost framed it! Wow so now he's a chemical engineer? And you...but you're so...you." I kid you not, this woman was perplexed. From my brother I learned that just because a brother and sister are related doesn't mean they have to think alike.

The first half of my life, though happy, would be best described as uneventful. No exhilarating achievements, no trauma. I went through my pink stage and then viciously rebelled, refusing to

wear any shade of it: it was inexplicable even to me. As the youngest cousin on both sides of my family, for a time I was both doted on and picked on; I was quiet by comparison, a bystander even in my own home. I saw nothing wrong with that—in fact I believe I enjoyed it. Piano and clarinet lessons were minor nuisances in what I imagined to be a full canvas, but what must actually have been quite a plain one. I regret for my parents' sake more than my own that I wasn't a more interesting child, that I became at times so painfully shy, but at the time I was pretty unabashed of being me. There is a meme somewhere that reads, "Be glad you aren't the person you were in middle school." I may as well have written that myself for how well I can relate to it.

In terms of athletics, mine is an active family. There is no history of soccer moms here; no, we weren't mainstream enough for that. The one minivan we ever owned we brought back within a year. Our parents have their own sports to take time for: my dad has his cycling and my mom has her Zumba and yoga and running and new things she's taken up since I've left home. Andrew ran cross-country and track in high school and college; he once qualified for an invitational in Hawaii that we didn't know about until he called us from Oahu. And I bounced. If my life can be simplified into a timeline of starting and failing new sports, it is a highly interrupted one. Starting with Daddy & Me swim classes at two years of age, I went on to become a hula dancer, with minor blips that were gymnastics, tennis, and soccer lessons. The contents of my closet rotated every season: the poi balls and grass skirts were replaced with swim caps and tennis balls that were all equally lost to the depths of my disinterest. After quitting dance at twelve, I floated around, inactive, the mini black sheep in my family of cardio lovers. I quit before I got good. I quit so I wouldn't have to commit—commit to longer hours and the competitiveness that I loathed.

For a shy, diminutive girl, a sport encouraging aggression and violence would not be an obvious choice. The martial arts world is not very well integrated into American society, although new references like *Kung Fu Panda* help. But my mom, on her mission to get me involved in something, probably figured this wouldn't matter; I had nothing to lose. It was a leap we weren't sure I could make, but she signed me up for classes, and this is where the real story starts.

Chapter 2

There are points in your life when you zone out of being and come back feeling as if you don't know how you got where you presently are, physically. There are times in your life when you realize that you are purely miserable, be it because you're rounding out your seventh hour of homework or because you're standing in four feet of melting snow and you'd rather be anywhere else. This is the time when you ask, "What the heck am I doing here?" or possibly, "Am I really here?" Coming out of these stupors and stumbling into realization can be disorienting, bewildering, and unsettling—I know. I drifted in and out of blankness consistently on the day of my first black belt test.

Five years before, I had learned to throw a punch. I punched a nice boy and have always felt bad for it, though the feeling has been dulled by the countless other ways we've temporarily disabled each other in the time since. Meet my sparring partner, Joey, bruising contributor for five years running. One belt color behind me, he had seen me evolve from an inadequate girl, tentative to

put my fist through a board, embarrassed to almost miss the pad with my roundhouse, to someone at least resembling a martial artist. He was now my cheerleader, the one who told me the news that I'd been nominated to test the following spring.

I've learned to be hard on myself, to what I imagine is a fault. I don't consider one and a half seasons of being on the swim team equal to being a swimmer. At one swim meet I missed first place by a fraction of a second, a tiny amount in a high school sporting event, and I was furious with myself for weeks. When I twisted my ankle off a flip-turn in a race the week before my test, I kept going, hoping I could shake it off, and I thought I had until I woke up the next morning and couldn't walk. Yes, in terms of athletics, I can be stubborn to a fault.

Stripped down, the twelve-hour black belt test integrates mastery of hand forms, defense techniques, and stamina. You have to be proficient in three weapons: staff, spear, and sword, and in seven animal-based forms that alternate between defense and attack stances. To list off some numbers, in the eleventh hour you are responsible for laying down a total of 400 pushups, ranging from flat palms to knuckles to just barely staying atop two fingertips. Sit-ups get technical in this arena, progressing from crunches to the jackknives so difficult that even those with the most defined of six-packs have been defeated. You push yourself up against gravity at the speed of your heartbeat, at the pace you share with fifty other people, and you can't miss even one. And when your legs are about to fall out from under you, there is the horse stance, a wall-less wall-sit that must be held for three minutes. If you're going for your second degree, it's five. For your third, it's ten. The kung fu master of the world has to hold it for who knows how long. Hold a squat for ten minutes and you'll understand there is no pain that compares to the burning of your quads.

At this point I was getting ready to test with a healing ankle, totally doable. But then I went and somehow got myself a streak of tendonitis in my wrist. And then I slapped on an unsinkable bout of bronchitis. Honestly, that May I was thoroughly a mess. One day I drove to the SAT with crutches and cough drops then headed half-asleep to the academy to work out some kinks in my forms. In the preceding years I'd averaged practices maybe three days a week, but since Christmas I'd been drastically upping my hours. Some blessed people can learn a five-minute hand form in days; I was never one of them. But I refused to become a pity party; I worked for hours to catch up, and I did. I could yell and jump and scare like one of the boys. Or, more accurately, like everyone else: all of the other testing nominees were boys. I was proud of myself for even getting the chance.

My family had also assured me of the amazing effects of adrenaline, how it would help me through anything.

My mom, after her marathons: "It makes running fun!"

"But running isn't fun."

"It's the adrenaline, it's science." This from my brother, who could stay focused, and entertained, even, on his endless loops around the track. Well, science would need to be uncommonly kind to me that day.

The first hour and a half of the test is punching. You don't stop. You shadowbox, you actually box, you block, and you fake out, hitting pads, hitting people, with a synchronicity only practice can give you. And then you move on to kicks, and it starts all over. I had prided myself on my roundhouse, on the straight lines and force and technicality of it all, but I'd never seen those kicks ruined by the body-wracking fits of coughing that plagued me that day. The morning of the test I hadn't been able to breathe. Even the most hardcore and stoic of my coaches wanted me to go home and try again later—try again next year when I'd be ready and healthy and probably wouldn't pass out on the mat. The adrenaline can only take you so far, after all. Bronchitis had stripped me of my sense of taste; I was feeling food more than tasting it. With ears ringing with the echoes of cracking joints and screaming muscles, with eyes aching with visions of collapsing friends, I convinced myself I wasn't ready. I saw the stuffing come out of punching bags and the splinters on my knuckles, scraped raw from breaking wooden boards, and I did not know where I was. Shoes were squeaking on the arena mats, slick with sweat, and it disgusted me. I wanted to leave, and I wanted to stay.

And so I did: I stayed, and I passed.

There was not a second during those 12 hours that I didn't question how I got there or wish it were over. It would be a beautiful thing to be able to say I had fun, that something just clicked into place inside of me, and I passed with flying colors in a rainbow of energy. The truth of the matter is that it was ugly. A black belt is not a glamorous thing. We are not a graceful horde of Jackie Chans bouncing off the walls and disabling each other with chopsticks; we are much more raw, less synchronized than we are simply moving in mutual exhaustion. I faded in and out of reality often, disorienting myself even when I could finally, finally rest. When I was eventually presented to the master of the school to receive the silky black strip, I was teary and sweaty, dispiritedly strapped into hastily purchased wrist and ankle braces that clinked when I moved. A pitiful sight, I'm sure. Even I question it. Who was that barely-seventeen-year-old, raspy-voiced girl to stand among well-built men who so deserved their degrees? I was glad I'd asked everyone not to come see it; neither Joey nor my boyfriend nor my friends were there. They wouldn't have to observe my inadequacy. Constant camera flashes culminated in a buzz of indistinguishable annoyance. A flashbulb went off in my face. Smile for the website, please. I wanted to melt.

But the belt. The belt. I peeked at it as they tied it around my waist; after a day of control, I couldn't help this. Even with my glazed-over eyes I could admire it. My name was embroidered onto it, done intricately, with one thick stripe stitched around the end. It was silky, jet-black, perfect; it ran through my hands, leaving the raw redness miraculously soft. A first degree. I looked up to thank the master, like a supplicant waiting to be blessed.

“You may go.”

Chapter 3

2012 was the year that the Mayan calendar ended, but the world did not. Windows 8 was released, the Summer Olympics were held in London, the first offshore wind farm was built, and

Facebook went public. In San Francisco, President Obama visited and the Giants won the World Series. It was the year I had an experience that would become the topic of this memoir.

My last day at the academy was a hectic mess of sweaty bodies and screaming muscles. I did not know it was my last until afterward; at the time, I only knew I'd done a good day's work. It was a stinking warm California August, just over a year after the test, and the studio was closing for the night. You lose your sense of smell after exercising for a while, but I know it couldn't have smelled good: there are things I've missed since leaving, but that is not one of them. I hopped across the baking asphalt, struggling, as always, under the unwieldy weapons I carried, and dumped them unceremoniously into the backseat of my car. I accelerated down the street, down a well-traveled way that had become a routine.

It has since become a memory.

