

## THE ELASTICITY OF BONE

On the morning before my old man left for Kosovo, I fumbled along the banister downstairs to the living room, where I found him adjusting his gunbelt so it wouldn't jostle on his hips. He drew the leather through the buckle, notch by notch, and then forced his stomach out; if the belt wobbled, he'd tighten, repeat. He stood a head taller than me and a shoulder wider. His fists were named "Six Months in the Hospital" and "Instant Death," and he referred to himself as the Kid of Granite, though the last was a bit of humour most people don't quite get. He wore jeans and a sweatshirt with a picture of two bears in bandanas gnawing human bones. The caption read: *Don't Write Cheques Your Body Can't Cash.*

When he saw me he cleared his throat, unbuckled the belt, and mumbled about making sure it was working. —You're up early.

I nodded. Beside him, a square foam pad leaned against the couch. He sometimes used it during practice at the judo hall. I gestured at it.

## ONCE YOU BREAK A KNUCKLE

He grinned beneath his moustache. Once, years ago, he had come home from two weeks of training with the moustache shaved, and everyone watched his bare lip with a wary eye. Coworkers hesitated in shaking his hand. Men who were his friends forgot what beer he liked. His sister called him from Winnipeg: *I had another bad dream.*

He hefted the pad and flipped it to me. It was larger than my torso and along the back was a strap for my arm. —Hold it like a shield, he said.

—Why?

—Just hold it like a shield.

I brought the pad up. He squeezed his hand to a fist then let the fingers unroll, muscles tense. Eleven years of kung fu had taught him to strike with the heel of his palm – the second-hardest impact point on the lower arm. He jabbed the bag in quick succession: right, left-right, right, his lips whitened to an O, his breath pumping with his arms.

—That all you got, old man? I said.

He flicked his wrists so the joints ground and the fingertips whipped in the air. —Brace yourself, boy.

He coiled his right leg toward his left and held it there, perched on one leg, the arch of his foot nestled around his kneecap. Then he kicked out in a way he had taught me would break someone's knee, because you only need fourteen pounds of pressure to break someone's knee.

I bounced against the closet door behind me and knocked it from its track. My old man doubled over and growled his bear laugh. I pushed the pad toward him. I told him I had to fight in the tournament later. I called

him a jackass. He asked me if I had a preference for his right or left fist.

I went into the kitchen and poured myself some coffee. The mug I picked had a picture of one of his friends tending a bonfire with a caption that read, *Burn, Fat Man, Burn*. I put it in the microwave. It was five twenty-seven in the morning and the coffee was already cold.

—Will, he called from the living room, —let’s take the trunks to the detachment before the tournament starts.

I told him to wait until I had my goddamn coffee and he told me to get my ass in there or he’d break all the knuckles in my left hand. I told him whenever he’s ready he’s free to try, so he came into the kitchen and shortly thereafter I was helping him move the trunks. The microwave beeped.

The trunks were police-issue chests fastened with two silver Macedonian locks. The plating peeled around the keyhole and silver flakes speckled the RCMP crests. Letters spelling his name were engraved beneath: JOHN A CREASE. The brass handles left my palms smelling like loose change. We hauled the trunks out, then the boxes from the garage, then the duffle bags from his police room in the basement. He told me to disregard any incriminating evidence I saw about anybody. I asked him what the information was worth to him and he told me pain was a good way to make people agree.

He didn’t let me carry the gun. Never has.

We loaded the last of his stuff into the back of the truck — a 1989 Ranger with a rusted door and missing tailpipe. I

fiddled with the radio while he fought with the ignition. It was a good truck as soon as you could make everything work. It finally chortled to life and I got some Ozzy playing. The extra weight in the back strained the shocks as we scaled the small lip of our driveway onto the shitty streets of Invermere. The tires dropped into potholes and the trunks rattled in the back.

The detachment was a red brick building that used to be the public library. One of the RCMP cars had a series of stickers on the side that looked like bullet holes; this was fifteen-Charlie-seven, my old man's car. He fingered one of the stickers and peeled it off, stuck it to the trunk, and I threatened to tell the police. He shook his fist at me.

He had joined the RCMP twenty-three years ago and spent all of those posted in small towns on the fringes of B.C. He served seven years in Cranbrook, four in Kingsgate, four in Fort Nelson, and eight in Invermere. This turned him into what he dubbed a *CFL* – a constable for life – since promotion opportunities meant he'd drag his family (me) through shit and broken glass: corporal status, if he'd live in the Yukon; pay increases and living expenses if he'd police a backwater dump he'd have to get to by seaplane, where his son would turn into a user or a gang member and he'd probably end up dead. Promotions, he told me, are a lot like blowjobs: easy to get if you're willing to go somewhere dirty.

Inside the detachment, a stuffed buffalo head hung over the entrance. It was as large as the door of our truck but not quite as ugly. We unloaded his stuff so it could

be picked up and flown to the base in Kosovo. The whole peacekeeping thing started when he applied online one night during a Christmas party and proudly proclaimed that he would be going to smite evil. When they called, he couldn't give a definitive answer because he hadn't actually considered it; he was almost fifty, and peacekeeping was a young man's job. But, in short, they'd pay him a lot of money for not a lot of dangerous work: law-drafting and applied police science, no guns.

—You want to get some food before the tournament?  
he said.

It was by now past seven, which meant the A&W would be open. We ate scrambled eggs and toast and one of their hot apple pie things each, because this was the ultimate breakfast of champions when I was seventeen.

—I've got to be there for opening ceremonies, I said.  
—I'm coaching the little bastards.

My old man swirled the coffee in his mug, then set it down without drinking. —I'm coaching the not-so-little bastards.

—You calling me a bastard?

—Yeah, he said, and placed his hands on the table, his uneven knuckles enmeshed. Once you break a knuckle, he has told me, you will break it again.

At eight-thirty we went back to the house to get our judo *gis*. He was a black belt, a *shodan*, in judo, kung fu, and kick-boxing, and he had police combat training. I was a brown belt in judo and more sarcastic than him. He wore a Toraki Gold *gi* with a lapel of refolded cotton as stiff

as pressure-treated lumber. I wore a Toraki Silver because they were lighter and I relied on speed. He stood six-foot-three and weighed just over two-twenty. I did not.

I slipped into the cotton pants of the *gi* while upstairs my old man got his stuff together. It's important to wear your *gi* before the actual fighting starts, so you're accustomed to its weight and the way the fabric shifts when you move. My old man came down the stairs with his duffle bag in his right hand. He'd changed into a shirt that said, *Pain Is Only Weakness Leaving the Body*, and he'd donned a pair of sunglasses despite the cloud cover, because he liked to pretend to be Agent Smith. I called him that as we entered the truck. He pinned me against the door and used his index finger to roll my upper lip against my nose. For the record, that hurts.

To the untrained eye a judo tournament is distinguishable from a toga party only by the presence of referees. It is a gathering of people screaming at combatants in white pyjamas, a place where redneck wives cough and turn their heads when their husbands grind their hips and paw each other's chests. It is a place of broken arms and vanquished hopes, concussions, overpriced hotdogs, and eastern Europeans.

Our tournament took place in the gymnasium of the local highschool. We'd laid out two fighting areas on the floor, fashioned into twenty-foot squares with red and grey mats linked like Lego blocks. Masking-tape numbers designated them as I and II. Small factions had already formed in the bleachers - groups of eight or ten people

rallying under homemade banners that declared *FERNIE ROCKS* or *RAYMOND JUDO*. No fewer than two banners read *CRANBROOK SUCKS*.

Our sensei, Herman, greeted us as we entered. He was an old stonemason from Austria who was once injured by a bomb he'd found in a field outside his home. He'd lain on the ground, his eyes seared blind, a four-inch piece of shrapnel through his chest, for seven hours before help arrived. He was eleven.

When he shook hands he clasped them with both of his. —You made it.

My old man let his duffle bag slide off his shoulder. —I thought about staying home.

Herman pushed him. My old man caught the wrist and tugged. Herman beamed. —You are nervous is all, he said, and nudged me with his elbow. —Your dad is a little scared, just like you were.

—I was never scared, I told him. My old man tapped his fist against his palm.

—When do you leave? Herman said.

My old man eased his sunglasses off his face and held them in front of his chest. I thought about calling him Agent Crease, but Herman wouldn't get it.

—Tomorrow morning. My flight is at ten.

Herman ran his fingers against the grain of his barbed-wire beard. —You will enjoy it.

—I hope so.

—Make sure you check out their judo clubs. It is very popular.

## ONCE YOU BREAK A KNUCKLE

—It won't be the same.

Herman clapped my old man on the shoulder. —It will be better.

He stood there with one hand on my old man's shoulder and peered up at him. The white cotton around his stonemason's fingers dimpled. He smiled. —But I must go. They are forcing me to ref. We will talk later. Before you go.

Then he wheeled around and moped to the *joseki*, the administrative table, where he was accosted by a pack of men in blazers. They shoved a dress tie at him.

Young *judoka* rampaged around the mats, climbed on the bleachers, shoved each other down and called it practice. Somewhere in this mess of bobbing heads and white belts were the ones I was supposed to coach. A kid I recognized came running off the mat with wet circles around his eyes. He accused another kid of punching him. I told him he could complain when his head hangs off backward.

My old man smiled beneath his moustache. He had put his sunglasses back on.

THE JOSEKI SUMMONED me over the loudspeaker. I was screaming like a bookie at a pit-bull fight because the kid I was coaching kept charging his opponent. The other coach – a redneck named Ferman who made his *judoka* call him Sir – was yelling to his kid to use my kid's momentum against him.

I picked my way through the *judoka* rimming each mat and presented myself to the *joseki*. Herman was there with

a rolled-up schedule in one hand and someone's misplaced green belt in the other. He told the girl at the table that he had been reffing for the last four hours and wanted a break. She shook her head and shrugged because she really had no say in the matter.

—Sensei, I said. —You called?

He threw the green belt at the girl and tucked the schedule into his blazer. —Will, he said. —Nobody's in your division.

—So split one.

—There's nobody to fight. Under seventy-three is empty. You win gold.

—I want to fight.

—That is too bad.

—It's the last tournament before my old man goes to Kosovo, I said.

Herman tapped his chin with his thumb. —I can put you in the next division. I can put you in under eighty-one. What did you weigh in at?

—Sixty-eight.

He licked his fingers and flipped through registration sheets. —No, eighty-one is also empty. Under ninety. We will put you in under ninety.

—I might as well fight my old man.

Herman fumbled for the schedule in his chest pocket. He held it out in front of him at arm's-length, tilted it sideways. —He is in the senior open division. It is him and one other *shodan*.

—Put me in.

—It is the senior division.

—I know.

Herman crumpled the paper up and shoved it back into his blazer. He was the only person at this entire tournament who would accept this idea. We approached the head table and Herman asked the girl to pencil me in. She told him that she couldn't do that without the consent of the competitors in the category. I told her she could tell the other guy but for God's sake not my old man. She told me it was against policy. Herman told her for God's sake not his old man. He had the green belt in hand again and he brandished it at her. She paged the other guy to the head table.

Judo tournaments grow more intense as they continue. Tottering kids give way to adolescents with a degree of skill, white-belt wrestlers give way to teenagers with the competitive edge. It took hours for the tournament to progress to the masters and the seniors – the old guys who rub A535 onto their biceps and calves after each fight. *Joseki* called my old man's division to standby.

He asked if I'd help him warm up. I told him no problem and he looked at me funny. We started with *uchikomi* and a light *randori* – repetition of technique and a little sparring. He asked how the coaching was and I bitched about it. I bitched about not being able to fight. He told me there were lots of tournaments.

*Joseki* called, —On deck: Dan Simmons and John Crease.

My old man and I finished warming up. I grabbed him a red sash and told him to put it on. He'd been to dozens

of tournaments but never fought in one before, so he was familiar with the details, but things are always different doing than watching. Whoever's name is called second wears the red sash so the referees can identify him.

The Dan Simmons fellow was a black belt in his mid-twenties. Short, clean-shaven, straight hair – he looked like a military cadet who pumped iron to get stronger, not better looking. Probably weighed thirty pounds less than my old man. I watched him do some *uchikomi* against the wall and informed my old man that he would probably try a *seo nage*, a shoulder throw. I told my old man not to be scared. He said if I didn't stop patronizing him he'd make me pay. I warned that idle threats spawn malicious foes. He told me not to quote Shakespeare.

*Joseki* called my old man and Dan Simmons as “now fighting.” I wished him luck.

It was a long, brutal fight. Dan Simmons tried a few tricks by swapping to a left-handed grip midway through. This lost him the match because an opposite grip only works if you are stronger than the other guy, since you're both grappling for the same lapel, and one person is left clutching a paltry piece of fabric on the outside of the shoulder. My old man blocked his *seo nage* with a display of brute force. Dan Simmons was fast – he was young – and he expected to win the fight that way, but my old man is not as slow as he looks. He stepped around Dan Simmons's sweeping legs, his bobbing knees, and though he didn't throw him, my old man, at the end of the match, won by decision.

All in all, a decent first-ever fight.

My old man dabbed his forehead with a yellowed training towel. He squirted water into his mouth from a Judo B.C. water bottle that read: *No Pain, No Gain*. Five straight minutes against a guy half his age was enough to make him see that he was not as young as he remembered. He placed his forearms on his thighs and leaned forward. His back rose and fell with every breath.

*Joseki* called the two “now fighting” names over the loudspeaker. Then: —On deck, John Crease and Will Crease.

Maybe I’m dramatizing, but the crowd quieted – a third of them, after all, were from our club – and the lights flickered, and my old man lifted his head from his position of crumple and fatigue. He looked at me and I could hear him telling me how I would pay for this when he was a little rested and not as sweaty and after he’d rubbed on the A535. Herman ran toward us to watch the fight. He had that same green belt in his hand.

Then my old man smiled. He dropped his head between his knees and then threw it back and chuckled.

The kids on the mat finished fighting. They bowed off. *Joseki* called: —Now fighting: John Crease and Will Crease.

I stepped up. I donned the red sash. My old man stood and placed his hands on his hips and bent backward. I did my customary hop and slapped the outsides of my thighs. He didn’t have a customary opening because this was his first tournament. The ref motioned for us to enter the mat. We bowed and moved to the first line, bowed again

and stepped forward. I could see the rise and fall of his chest, the sweat beading on his forehead near the border of his hair. I could almost hear the whistle of his breath through his nostrils. On the sidelines I didn't hear anyone yelling. I didn't look. Never look.

The referee yelled *hajime*.

We are both right-handed. We are both standard grip fighters. I tried to catch his right in my left but he was fast and his massive hand, those massive fingers, curled around my lapel. You only become fully aware of a person's *measure* when you fight him, as though this most base of human activity is the standard by which all people are judged. I clasped his lapel, the sleeve of his *gi*, could sense his patient grip, the complete absence of slack in his arms.

Watching judo is watching two people move in circles until one falls down.

I kicked at his feet a couple times, tried to hook his ankle for a lame win. This pissed him off and he kicked me right back. He was solid and he outweighed me. I tugged, hard, on his lapel and his head bobbed down. I tried to keep him bent over but he didn't like it. He straightened and there wasn't a damn thing I could do to prevent it.

He tugged me and I moved in whichever direction he wanted. He tried to trip me and I stepped over it. Speed and balance. The Gentle Way. I reacted, my feet *fwa-thumping* on the mat, hooked at his legs, the excess length of our belts whipping around our hips and the red sash some rogue colour among the black and brown. He

tugged me again and I moved with it so he put himself off balance backward. This was judo – this was using his momentum and his force against him. Then I was doing my *harai ogoshi*, my Sweeping Hip Throw, and I had all two hundred and twenty pounds of him pinned on the fulcrum of my hip.

This was it. He was tired and old and in the air. I was fresh and young and the balls of my feet were balanced on the mat, my knees bent and my calves tensed and quivering. If I threw him hard enough, if I hurt him, just a little – a sprained wrist, bruised rib, minor concussion – he would miss his flight. He would not go to Kosovo. He would stay in Invermere away from the snipers and the land mines, and he would fight me again.

But then I stopped. I was stopped. He brought his policeman's arms down in a bear hug and my balance disappeared. My momentum slouched away. He rag-dolled me into the air and then I was on the ground, pinned beneath his weight, and the referee raised his arm halfway to full, yelled *waza ari*, half-point.

I tried to twist before he could lock it in. His hands found each other and I could hear someone on the sidelines yelling, *SQUEEZE*. He tucked his head down against mine and his sweat streaked against my cheek. Sourness, the split of his lapels. The referee yelled *osaekomi* – hold down started. I couldn't budge him. I hooked his head with my foot and tried to leverage him back, but he just clenched his teeth against the heel in his face. Pain is only weakness leaving the body.

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The horn sounded. Twenty seconds done. The referee called *ippon* and my old man's arms slackened. I lay on the ground and stared at the rafters of the gymnasium. A pair of sneakers hung over a metal beam. People on the sidelines laughed and cheered. Herman stroked his Austrian beard, the green belt discarded. Of course it is not fitting that the son should defeat the father.

MY DAD WOULD go to Kosovo. He would be shot by a Serbian man while apprehending him for spousal abuse, something he was doing only because the Kosovo police were short-handed. The bullet would enter his torso just above the second rib on his left side and puncture the lung, and he would feel it compress into a ball the size of a discarded tissue. His fellows would gun the Serbian down, rush my old man to the hospital. They would reinflate his lung and he'd recover.

He would keep the bullet. It is not an easy thing to look at.

Even the referee smiled. I stayed on the ground. My old man laboured to his feet and reached down and I caught his hand. He hoisted me up. He patted my back. The referee awarded him the match and we bowed off the mat.

—Dammit, old man, I said.

—Someday, boy, he said, and grinned, the two of us alone in that roaring gym.