

Arch 142

The Mind of a Building

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I walked across the mat like a prisoner on death row, walking his final steps. As I approached the officials, my heart was beating ferociously. All my efforts were concentrated on repressing the red from manifesting in my face. I bent slightly as the judge put the bronze medal around my neck. It felt like a noose. I almost wished it had been. The cold metal froze my chest. I could hardly breathe. A bead of sweat rolled down my cheek and splashed upon the white ribbon that hung my unwanted prize. My mother congratulated me, saying that third place was great. A lump swelled in my throat. I looked at my coach. He knew.

The air was crisp. Every breath lingered in the air with a cloud of excitement and anticipation. As my car turned the corner into the parking lot, my heart started to race. It was on this particular morning that I would enter a place that would imprint itself onto my memory for years to come. What a sight it was! It looked as though the streets themselves were in motion as hundreds of athletes and even more supporters and fans were swarming the building. White uniforms blended into the snow, only distinguished by their red and blue gloves and excited chatter. I made my way to the front entrance. Great concrete pillars stood in front of me with a distinct grandeur, an intimidating magnificence. The entrance looked similar to the façade of the great Coliseum where gladiators would be glorified with victory or devastated with defeat. I approached the great steel and glass doors as a gladiator, not knowing what the future had in store for me or my hopes of glory. Inside the lobby, vendors selling food and souvenirs inhabited the perimeter. T-shirts, hats, water bottles, and every other kind of trinket was sold

around the room. On one table Karate uniforms, belts, and gloves were piled up waiting for some forgetful Karateka or possibly a martial arts enthusiast to lighten their wallet. The air around one table in particular was buzzing with excitement. I pushed my way to the front and my emotions turned to excitement as well. Gold, silver, and bronze reflected off peoples' faces. I had never seen medals of this caliber before. Japanese writing shot across the top, encasing a central figure. A Karateka stood triumphantly in the middle with their leg, impressively stretched out in a roundhouse kick. The figure's stance found a way to reflect the balance between the athleticism and the spirituality of Karate. Glossy red ceramics worked itself into the shaped metal as eloquently as a harmony does to a melody. My face shone with the same inspired look that a child gets when seeing a magic trick. How magnificent it would be to win! How great it would be to receive just one of those medals!

After I was finished drooling over my coin-shaped hopes and dreams, I signed in and made my way to the change rooms. At the time I was only a green belt, but today I would be black. The difference between a green belt and a black belt was quite significant, but this was a significant tournament. My sensei did not want the judges to make pre-conceived decisions about my ability to fight based on the color of my waist. He lent me one of his black belts.

When Karate was born, the Karateka had only one belt throughout their career. It was white. The "Gi" covered the rest of the body and was washed regularly. The belt was never washed. As years of blood, sweat, and dirt accumulated on the belt, it stained darker and darker. This was a testament to the time dedicated to training. Masters would emerge, with black belts.

Holding the belt tenderly, I handled it as though it were made of glass. I ran my fingers down the composition of cotton, polyester, and silk. It had with it a compelling contradiction. The belt displayed years of abuse and, at the same time, years of love. The edges were frayed, exposing the white material used within the belt. I smiled at the ironic inversion. A master's belt used to transform from white to black. Now the black belt would turn white.

Every object has a story. I longed to know the one that lay within this belt's venerable threads. This belt had an endearing story, but one I was not fast enough to witness. I joined Karate only one year after my Sensei retired from competing. I read the Japanese characters that were sewn onto the belt, "Shotokan Karatedo - Banzai Dojo". It stated my style of Karate and the name of my club. This was my chance to not witness, but actually become a part of this belt's story. This was my chance to write a chapter in its life. To me, the dynamic and carefully placed symbols contained everything my actions would either uphold or bring to shame in the next twelve hours.

I entered the main gymnasium. Instantly, I was humbled. I stood alone in one small doorway, looking out on what seemed like an entire city of commotion. Ten regulation-size rings blanketed the hardwood floor. The walls were all concrete. Different from the usual drone of eye-torturing florescence, incandescent lights illuminated from the ceiling. They beamed down onto the mats like spotlights. The show was about to begin. The exaggerated size of every beam, every wall, every column worked in unison to make me feel the pressing force of intimidation. My eyes panned across the over-sized gym. There were giant blue circles with

white figures in them that littered the walls. They were crude representations, diagrams of various athletes playing different sports. I imagined how many people had moments, in the very spot I stood, that would resonate in their memories for years afterward. How many volley ball championships were won here? How many basketball games took place? How much sweat and hard work remained embedded in the concrete walls, the hardwood floors, and in the steel beams that supported the lofty ceiling? I looked down at my black belt, the one I wore with such pride. It now seemed to disappear, as it blended in with the hundreds of bustling figures wearing white pants, a white coat, and a black belt. I was a ghost.

Thank god! I saw a group of people, all wearing my Banzai crest. I rushed over and was greeted by my Sensei and fellow athletes from Calgary. It is amazing what confidence a familiar face can provide. They directed me to where we would be sitting in the stands. Oh god, the stands. Any confidence inspired by reuniting with my friends was obliterated by the sight of the tumultuous stands. It would seem that the bustling heterotopia I saw in the parking lot was just the tip of the iceberg. Row upon row of strange faces filled the spanning wooden seats. Excitement and anticipation radiated from the stands. For such an early hour in the day, the room was alive.

It was time to warm up. I would probably not fight for another six or seven hours, but it was a good way to calm myself. I plugged my iPod buds into my ears and strapped it to my Gee. Linkon Park blasted as I made my way across the arena. This band in particular has a peculiar way of producing surprising amounts of raging adrenaline while simultaneously calming me

down. I suppose the experience is similar to my karate. I am always fighting with insurmountable amounts of aggression, and yet when I fight, I am always more focused, more calm than anywhere else. I stepped onto the mat with my bare foot pressing into the soft floor. My toes stretched out as I transitioned from the cold hardwood to the more forgiving surface of the mat. I use the words, “more forgiving” ironically as it is clear in my mind that no harm will come to me while I stand on the wooden surface of the gym. Once on the mat, all bets are off.

I forced my legs apart. I felt the stretching of my tendons and muscles. I gazed around the room as I stretched. People were sparring, practicing drills, stretching, and eating. The place was frantic with movement. My heart started beating louder than my music. I felt the heat of the lights cover me like a blanket. I felt the hair on my neck rise as if everyone were looking at me, judging me. My body was suddenly pumped full of adrenaline. I was suffocating. I needed to find someplace where there were no eyes, no spotlights looming over me, someplace I could expel this unwanted energy. I slipped out a side door and found myself in a long corridor. Instantly I was transported. I pulled my ear buds out. There was no one in sight and nothing to hear. My head buzzed, similar to the sensation after a loud rock concert. I stared down the concrete tunnel that was dimly lit by cold fluorescent lights. The corridor extended farther than the borders of the gym. I lowered my head, took three slow breaths, then burst into flight. I felt the cold draft filter through my hair. In seconds I was at the other end of the corridor. Without missing a beat, I turned and sprinted back. Out of breath, I thought my heart would plunge out of my chest. Hands on my knees, I raised my head and witnessed the long corridor mocking me, as if to say, “What? Tired already?” I took a breath and ran again, and again, and again.

At half past five, I was sitting in the endless rows of stands eating an apple. The process of eating was like walking on eggshells. Starving yourself is a great ingredient for passing out in the middle of your fight. On the other hand, a full belly would certainly inspire your meal to propel itself onto the mat. The fact that you could be called up at any moment resulted in eating fractions of lunch ditheringly over the course the day. Suddenly, “Simon McKenzie” resonated from the speakers throughout the gym. I was summoned to a room where I would wait anxiously next to my opponents for the next half hour.

Finally we were beckoned out onto the arena. I witnessed the gymnasium from a completely different perspective. As we were marched into the gym the crowds erupted in noise. I glanced over to the section where my friends were, but their faces just blended in with the mob. I would be the first up, against an athlete from Portugal. With so much commotion it was hard to remain focused. I stepped up to the line, along with my opponent and the referee. The judges sat behind a long table waiting eagerly for us to begin. Five men sat in chairs. They surrounded the ring. In their right hand was a blue flag. In their left was red. I looked down at my blue gloves and the blue strip tied to my black belt. If a flag was raised, the corresponding competitor would receive a point. There were different points for different levels of skilled moves. I then looked up and prayed for their right arms to be tired from moving habitually up and down throughout the fight.

The referee beckoned the two of us to bow. Bowing in Karate is a symbol for respect. There are different ways to bow and if done incorrectly, can be more disrespectful than not bowing at all. The great significance behind bowing is the idea of trust, through respect. With great posture, one must put their legs together with their heels touching and toes pointed at forty-five degrees outward. Hands firm at the side, the head and upper body must bow around thirty to forty-five degrees. The more important the person you are bowing to, the deeper the bow. The less important individual stays bent until their counterpart is standing upright. Some Martial arts maintain constant eye contact as a form of courtesy. This is an extremely important detail. In my style and all the styles of the tournament eye contact is forbidden as it implies mistrust. The idea is that by breaking eye contact you are showing enough trust to say, "I respect you and trust that you respect me enough not to attack when I am not looking".

"Hashime". This word has the power to change everything. In Japanese, it means "Begin". The referee yelled, "Hashime", and my world changed. The space around me which had once been a stadium of crowds cheering and endless amounts of space, all vanished. It was as if someone had turned a light switch and the rest of the world became engulfed in darkness. My world transformed into a little circle, barely large enough for myself, my opponent, and the referee. Suddenly all my anxiety diminished. My nervousness evolved into power. My scattered mind became focused. As I stared into the eyes of my opponent it became clear what I had to do. I did not hesitate.

I became deadly. I fought Portugal, England, China, and America. Fight after fight, I eliminated anyone who stood in my way of that gold medal. All of my senses heightened and I began to slip into moments of blissful ecstasy. This is what I loved. The exhale after a strong punch, the wet snap of my gi on my bare skin, every strike, every movement became instinct, a natural reflex ingrained in my body's muscle memory from hundreds of hours of practice. Each fight became a meditative exercise as I exhaled a steady stream of air after each strike. My cry would resonate through the room and into the crowd as I executed each one of my deadly blows. But wait. There was another. An American who had my same demeanor was trampling over competitors even faster. In between bouts he and I would exchange glances knowing that one of us would be stopped by the other in a matter of time. We would meet in the finals and only one would receive the glory that we both desired. Every time I stepped off the mat I would be kicked back into reality. The stands would holler and whistle and my friends would cheer from the side. As buzzers, screams, cheers, and every other exuberant sound would echo from other rings and resonate through the air, my coach would speak to me in a low, calm voice.

It was semi-finals. This meant one fight away from competing for the gold medal. My opponent was from Japan. As the two of us stepped back onto the mat, my world once again turned miniature. As we bowed, he towered over me. His height meant that I would have to be particularly careful of his long reach. Like me, he used his strength and power to defeat his opponents. I would now have to rely on my speed more than anything.

With thirty seconds left, I was winning eight to four. I had been charged with two penalties, one for stepping outside the ring, and one for lack of control. One more would toss me out of the tournament. All I had to do was hold on for thirty seconds, twenty nine, twenty eight... He lunged at me with a tremendous force. I was ready. I was too ready. From a crouched stance, I shot my left arm forward to meet his jaw. I felt the impact reverberate through my entire arm. His body was instantly straightened, before he collapsed onto the ground. The referee stopped the match. I felt a rush of blood shoot into my face. I knelt down. My dark bubble of concentration that was constructed through the spirituality of the sport was penetrated by a medic who checked my opponent for a possible concussion. I stared across the way at the American. He and I did not break eye contact for a small eternity. I tried desperately to hold on to my little black bubble of space. I knew that if I let the rest of the world emerge into my line of site, the match would really be over.

My bubble disappeared. Slowly, the stands of people, the other rings, and the table full of medals assembled into my line of sight. I was disqualified. The room started spinning. People would talk to me. I could see their mouths moving, but I did not hear a word. Finally my Sensei, my coach, broke the silence. He looked down at his belt that was so carefully tied around my waist, and then his eyes met mine. Without breaking eye contact he pointed behind me at the competitor from Japan who was now fighting the American. "You were not beaten by him," he said to me in a frustrated voice. "You were beaten by your own self." His voice pierced the silence in my head like a sharp razor. I turned around towards the ring, fighting back tears. Japan looked exhausted. It did not take much for the American to finish him.

I stood there perversely on the mat with bronze on my chest, glossy eyes and a look of exhausted anger on my face. I looked around and studied the room that encouraged my emotions to do these gymnastics. I could not speak to anyone. I could still hear my Sensei yelling instruction from the sidelines. I could still feel my fist snap rigidly into the jaw of my last opponent. I could still see the referee forming his arms into an “X” and then pointing at me to get the hell off the mat. My eyes panned across the stands of people talking and cheering. I looked at the floor, the walls, the ceiling. Each architectonic element came together to orchestrate my emotions. Every brick, every beam, all the twists and turns that constructed the building were all instruments; the entrance, the corridor, the gymnasium, and the ring. Throughout the entire day, I was learning over and over how each one of their sounds could penetrate the mind. I learned how space can perpetuate the deepest of human emotion. My feelings did not manifest through event, but through environment. I remained inert for what seemed like hours. Then with a deep breath, I left. As my feet transitioned from wood to snow, I looked back at the entrance with perplexed amusement. For the first time, I had travelled through the mind of a building.