

"CAMP SEAFOOD"

by D.C.Benny
April/May 2005

1 980 Washington D.C. The sweltering summer heat had the whole city in a humid headlock. In the fall, I was going into seventh grade at a school I hated. I was too tall, skinny, nerdy, and totally uncoordinated.

It seemed that even something as simple as walking across the classroom would result in me tripping on what was probably myself, flailing out wildly, and accidentally jabbing my finger into the eye of whatever girl I had a secret crush on. Throw in my thrift shop highwaters (courtesy of my artist parents welfare budget not ironic vintage), a bowl haircut, an unpronounceable Polish last name, and features that were ethnically uncategorizable and you have the tsunami of my pre-adolescence. I was looking for a way out and a place to fit in.

Sometime during this mess, I ran into a kid I knew from elementary school named Tom, who had busted off most his front teeth in a skating accident, and what remnants remained were filed down to little white nubs peeking out of pink straightjackets of gum. Tom and I had been put in a "special" class run by a social worker, for kids "who didn't fit in" to help them adjust to society, whatever that meant. All we knew is that we got to leave our last class five minutes early once a week.

Tom told me that a guy named Seafood Greg was teaching kung-fu in his parents' basement, every Tuesday at 4:30, for 15 bucks a month. "Watch this," he said, and threw some kicks into the air, snapping the head off of an unfortunate tulip that was growing in someone's yard.

"Seafood" turned out to be a mispronunciation of Shifu, which means teacher in Chinese, and Shifu Greg was a six foot six, 220-pound Jamaican who loved nothing better than to teach young kids how to punch and kick while preaching peace, harmony, and non-violence. Greg lived, ate and breathed martial arts from his red, flared Chuck Norris kicking jeans down to his Chinese slippers. I started attending the classes religiously, and Sifu Greg never lost patience with my complete lack of coordination. At some point, every kid in the neighborhood passed through. There was the cafe-au-lait colored John Coffey who looked like a high yellow Burt Reynolds and his s-curved 1/2 Dominican

sidekick Dante who was always testing me with Tae Kwon Do kicks wrapped in blue catholic school pants.

There was also Victor Oscar de Kavalias Santana Neta Exel, whom we just called Victor. And for a brief period, even the bird-chested Charlie Stanchyk the Elvis guy, who had a banana seat bike with an ELVIS license plate twisty tied to the back, came by.

During this time, the Park People first started hanging out. We called them the park people because they would hang out all day at the neighborhood park getting high and carving anarchy-themed graffiti into anything wooden. They called each other "weenas," which was a sarcastic take on the word "winner," which really meant loser. Very complicated. Ironically, Tom, who had first introduced me to Shifu Greg, had abandoned kung-fu classes and become a raging weena.

The weenas had their own adult member, a guy named Clay who claimed to be "the only white-trash man in D.C." He was the antithesis of Shifu Greg. He chain-smoked Camels, drove around in a cutlass with a fake rag top, and always had on tennis whites which gave him an air of aristocracy amongst all the riffraff in dirty denim. A rumor circulated that he was gay and he commonly became referred to as "Clayaway" or "Faggin," based on the Dickens character Fagin in Oliver Twist.

Kung fu training was intense and varied in location. Sometimes it would be in Greg's backyard, sometimes in Rock Creek park. We would hit bags, pads, each other, and learned to dread the sound of loud disco music, which meant Greg's Armenian friend Mazzen was pulling up on his motorcycle looking for some light sparring. This meant beatings all around. We'd stagger home every night bruised and sore, ever on the lookout for one of Greg's sneak attacks from the bushes which could come at any time.

Greg would often tell us incredible stories at the end of class about the life of a kung-fu expert. The dedication. The discipline. Every once in a while, Greg had to cancel class because he had to train for a midnight death match with another master that would take place at the Lincoln Memorial building downtown. Once, Victor forgot class was canceled and showed up for practice to see Greg smoking a joint in the backyard with his girlfriend Pam. Greg later explained something vague about the death match being rescheduled. We were reminded to keep our eyes open for any old Chinese men with long white hair carrying swords. Then there were the Chopsticks. Greg pulled me aside one day and gave me a pair of cracked, laquered chopsticks. "You are my prize student," he said. "These were my masters in

China and I am now passing them on to you."

A lot of responsibility. I was blown away. I'd never gotten any kind of award or prize. A couple weeks later I saw the exact same chopsticks in the Peking restaurant. On every table.

Every so often Greg would take us all rat-hunting. We would hunt the army of rats that lived in the ivy by Wilson, the high school famous for pioneering the installation of metal detectors to weed out students packing more than a lunch. Greg would bait the rats with a big bag of Doritos and we would lie in wait with bb guns, bows and arrows and throwing stars. The arts and crafts portion of our summer camp.

We even went on a camping trip to the Shenandoah Valley in Virginia. That was where it was supposed to be. We ended up so lost we slept on the median of some highway, our dreams interrupted by truck horns and Victor's chili farts.

Around this time my relationship with the weenas soured when one was robbed walking home from the park and I was wrongly fingered as an accomplice. When I would walk by the park after kung fu, there was tension from the picnic tables, especially from a weena named Jimmy who all the other weenas called Rage because he had beat up a man.

The long and short was Jimmy and I had four bloody fights that spanned over a period of a year and a half. They became neighborhood events that drew a crowd of 20-30 kids and I always ended up losing, kung fu or not.

John and Dante would try to console me with the observation that each time I'd lost in a less spectacular fashion with Jimmy sustaining more injuries.

I don't know if it was the ass whippings, the realization that most of what Greg said was made up, or the fact that I switched schools and discovered break dancing, but my life changed. Everyone's did. Tom died of a heroin overdose, I heard. The guy who really robbed the weenas got locked up for 20 years on another criminal charge. Clay died of cancer.

Charley the Elvis man is in his 40s and still rides the bike around. Victor Oscar etc became a ballet teacher. Most of the weenas still live with their parents. I last saw Dante at John's wedding, where he reached into his boot and showed me a throwing star. And Shifu Greg ended up making a mint in computers. He kept a lot of kids off the street, kept us busy, and judging by all the guys that aren't around any more, kept us alive in the camp that wasn't camp. I stopped practicing kung fu a long time ago but Jimmy, if you're out there and you still got beef...anyplace, anytime.