

# SHRIMP

by Greg Stolze

March 2008

It would be hard to say why Sensei Ellis looked more relaxed, helping teach the kids judo. He didn't smile, any more than he did in the adult class. His posture remained upright and formal, but when he moved, it was with a little more ease, not quite as calculated and careful as with the adults. With them, even when he was moving from one pair of students to another, there was a firmness to his steps, a gravity that diminished when it was the youngsters.

Had anyone asked him about this, he'd have been totally unaware. But after a moment's contemplation, he might shrug and admit it was possible, that he let go a bit. He might then cite the fact that he'd been injured in adult jujitsu class, several times. Once was pretty serious.

But no one ever asked him. No one paid enough attention to notice.

"Shrimp!" he called out to the children, aged four through thirteen. He pitched his voice low and loud to cut through the babble of giggles and exclamations and over-dramatized complaints. He was leading the exercises while the chief instructor, Sensei Kelly, was on the

phone. He liked to keep it brisk. "First row, go, shrimp! Down the mat, move it!"

As the children squirmed, he eyed Blake, a teenager stationed at the other end of the mat, watching the students and keeping them in their lines as they arrived. With a small nod to himself, Ellis went to the back of the line, where a kid, perhaps eight or ten, was staring rather blankly at the others in front of him.

"The shrimp exercise builds your core," Ellis said without preamble. When the boy didn't look up, he squatted down beside him. "It makes you strong here," he said, slapping himself hard in the belly. The child blinked and turned towards him. "You lie down, like they're doing, head forward? Bring *both feet* up by your, by your hips? Plant them and push forward. Don't use your hands. See how they're doing it? You have to go from side to side, too." The students had taken turns and now it was the last row's chance.

The kid started hesitantly pushing himself down the rubberized nylon floor, face-up.

“No no,” Ellis said, shuffling forward without standing. “Both feet.” He gripped the kid’s ankles and brought them up together. “Push back! Yeah. Like that.” He knee-stepped forward and pinned the child’s soles down again. “This time, bridge up, lift your hips off, it’s a lot easier. Uh huh. Now, roll to one side, then the other.” They pushed in tandem down the mat, with some of the other youths chortling, but Ellis looked up at one laugher and produced instant silence.

“What’s your name?” Ellis asked, and the new student said, “Aidan.”

“I probably won’t remember that the next couple times,” Ellis said.

“Pull the mat!” Blake cried, and Ellis glanced up at him with approval, even as a few students groaned. Blake was sixteen, thick-chested, blonde and starting to bulk up with muscle. The only thing that saved him from looking like the jock-bully from an ‘80s teen movie was a friendly expression of open, unfeigned enthusiasm. He played football, wrestled, and had started going to judo tournaments a year before. He did well: What he lacked in technique, he made up in sheer, springy energy. He was no match for the competitors who’d started judo at age four, but a lot of the boys in his weight bracket were heavy but sluggish. One of the other judo competitors (Rosie) had described him by saying, “It’s like if Tigger got into the steroids.”

Like Ellis, Blake had a fine appreciation for physical training, an enthusiasm many of the kids did not share. Pulling the mat wasn’t a complicated exercise, but it was onerous. One laid face down, reached out, slapped palms and forearms onto the floor, and pulled, with the rest of the body as dead weight. Some kids cheated by pushing along with their toes. Ellis responded by grabbing their feet and reeling them back a yard or so, to a mixture of giggles and groans. Then he stepped over to another line and squatted by a tall, slightly heavyset girl with glasses.

“Charlotte,” he said, voice low. “C’mon, set a good example.”

She gave him a miserable look, but stopped pulling all the way down to her waist and, instead, pulled herself only until her hands were in front of her shoulders. He nodded.

When she reached the other end of the mat, she sat up and polished her spectacles. Ellis removed his own at the same moment, even though he wasn’t looking at her. As they breathed on their lenses and rubbed them with the corner of a uniform, it became obvious they were related. Everyone in the class knew that Ellis was Charlotte’s father. They’d been told, or had heard, but even an ignorant observer would have guessed from that one parallel gesture.

At that moment, Sensei Kelly returned to class and divided them up by experience, and then by weight. With a squint, he gave the largest, highest-ranking group over to Blake, claimed the inexperienced lightweights for himself, and asked Ellis to take the rest and have them practice throws into the crash pad.

Judo is a sport of wrestling and grappling. No kicking or punching is permitted. Both contestants start out standing, then each tries to grab the other and fling him to the ground. If it's a clean drop—someone hits flat on his back—that's the ideal instant win, an outcome known as an "Ipon." It isn't the only way to win, but an Ipon triumph not only leaves competitors less exhausted than an extended wrestling match, it's a psychological edge that can, for many, turn into a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Though Ellis had never competed in a single judo match, he knew the throws from jujitsu, and the principles on which they were based. So, although he met questions about rules with blank looks and referrals to Rosie or Sensei Kelly, he was well-qualified to critique posture and follow-through.

"Get lower! Bend your knees!"

"Put your hip through a little more."

"Turn turn *turn*! Don't look at him, turn your head and your body will follow."

After a good throw—one good enough that he didn't even comment on it, just grunted and gave a nod—he snuck a glance over at the older and bigger segment. Charlotte was matched up with a younger boy, but he was heavier, already sporting a double chin. They were practicing a turn-over, and when it was Charlotte's turn to pull his elbow and roll his body, he sank and resisted, leaning his weight boarishly down while she strained.

Ellis' nostrils flared and he narrowed his eyes. Charlotte was unaware: She couldn't wear glasses and wrestle, and bare-eyed she couldn't see details more than three feet from her face. She was flushed and Ellis could recognize the frustration creeping up on her. He scowled.

Then he realized two young brothers were doing fake kung-fu kicks in the line in front of the crash pad.

"Hey," he barked, and they instantly stopped, eyes wide as they stared up. He lowered himself until he could glare right into their eyes.

"If I see any of that kind of stupid horseplay again, you will see me get mean and you will not like it one bit."

"Sorry Sensei," one mumbled. Ellis turned the force of his frown on the other.

"Sowwy." The younger brother was tiny.

"Let's get someone sensible in between you two," Ellis said, pulling an older student out of the line and pushing him in between.

"No fair!" said a thin girl with yellow curls, who was now one notch farther back in line. Ellis gave her a stink-eye too.

"It's not as unfair as it could be, Brianna. You get me?"

The blonde didn't, but decided not to engage any further.

"Switch throws," Ellis commanded. "We've all been through once with *ogoshi*? Right, *osoto gari*, you remember that one? Show 'em, Stevie."

As Stevie obliged, Ellis granted himself another look at his daughter. She was working with a girl closer to her own size, he thought her name was Patty. Patty was doing the technique a bit listlessly, but correct.

Ellis had put both his children in the kids' class four years earlier, and had volunteered to help teach at the same time. Kelly had been blunt: "It's great that you're coming in, God knows I can use all the help I can get, but I'll probably give you *other* people's kids. It's nothing about you, it's the same for all the dads. Teaching your own kids can get weird, is all. It's not a hard-and-fast rule, but I tend to make it a guideline."

In the privacy of his own mind, Ellis thought Kelly probably had a point.

Kelly reunited the class and paired off the children to wrestle, starting them back-to-back. Ellis smothered a smile as he watched Brianna smear young Aidan into the mat a couple times. When Kelly broke them up and reassigned partners, Aidan got a smaller opponent, closer to his own level of skill.

"Where's Andy tonight?" Kelly asked Ellis as the kids filed through the changing room. Adult judo and jujitsu was right before the kids' session, so Charlotte had sat on the chairs by the front door doing homework while Ellis worked out.

"He's got band."

"Ach, letting a little thing like music and culture interfere with his studies of the deadly arts?" Kelly said, grinning.

"Kids today," Ellis deadpanned. "Messed up priorities. I better get changed. Rochelle's picking up Char and she hates waiting."

Rochelle was Ellis' ex-wife, and she had custody.

But as it turned out, it was not Rochelle who pulled up, driving a late model Honda hybrid. It was her new husband, Stan.

When he opened the door to walk his daughter out and saw Stan, Ellis froze in the doorway. Stan, who'd put on his blinkers and was parked in the

slush just at the curb, looked at him through the passenger window.

Stan was in his early forties, closer to Rochelle's age than Ellis', but he didn't have a single lost or graying hair to spoil his luxurious executive coif. His face was a bit jowly, and his complexion was a bit meaty, but he had good bones under the flush and sag, and his eyes were a piercing violet-blue. He was used to being handsome, and carried himself appropriately. If you met him in a business meeting, his paunch concealed by a pinstripe vest and his neck held in place with a stiff collar, you'd quickly forget your initial impression and decide he was a confident, powerful man.

But dropping by a strip mall to pick up his step-daughter, he was dressed in a bulky gray parka and a Packers stocking cap. He looked like a buffoon, and the flash of dread and apprehension that crossed his face when Ellis met his gaze only multiplied it.

Ellis clenched a fist and rolled it at the end of his wrist, producing a chorus of dry cracks from his knucklebones.

"What?" Stan asked, as Charlotte flung her backpack in the back and climbed in after it.

"Nothing," Ellis said.

"Rochelle said she was going to call," Stan said. "She said she'd call you and tell you I was picking Char up."

"I had my phone turned off," Ellis said, with the withering scorn usually reserved for politicians convicted of indecent exposure.

"Yeah," Charlotte snorted. "You think he'd hear it over a class, anyhow?"

"I'm sure I don't know, hon," Stan said mildly.

"You can't bring a cell phone on the mat, sheesh!" Charlotte said as she slammed the door. She waved at Ellis as they pulled away, and he waved back.

"Hey, let's get a coffee."

Ellis jumped, startled. Kelly was standing right behind him, watching him watch Char.

"Uhm..."

"C'mon, you look like you got kneed in the groin," Kelly said, and started towards the Caribou Coffee five doors down. He didn't look back and Ellis followed.

# # #

"So that's the new husband, eh?" Kelly said sympathetically as they seated themselves at a small, elegant table. He'd gotten a small, white hot chocolate with whipped cream, and had paid for Ellis' decaf black.

"Not that new," Ellis muttered. "Six months after the divorce, that's... all it took, I guess."

“Shit. It’s been... a year now, then?”

“Two and a half.”

“Wow, that went fast.”

“Not for me,” Ellis said. “I’d think you’d remember. That was when I started coming to class three times a week instead of twice.”

“Well, the extra practice really shows. Given any thought to your *sandan* test? I could probably pick up some tips from the *tora niramí* you gave that guy.”

‘Sandán’ was a black belt rank, the third level. Kelly Fiddler himself was at fourth, *yondan*. ‘Tora Niramí’ meant ‘tiger stare.’

“C’mon Kelly, I’ve got an AARP card. Do you really think I should be doing monkey techniques, climbing on people’s shoulders and diving into a sacrifice throw?”

“You’re in shape for it,” Kelly said, “But no rush, I suppose.”

Ellis took a drink. “The class looked pretty big today.”

“Yeah, we had a lot of attendance. I think the competitors, in particular, are starting to... really pull ahead, you know?”

“They’ve got Blake and Rosie to show them the way.”

“Blake’s okay,” Kelly said. “More enthusiasm than... um, insight, I guess.

But it’s probably the better one to have, at his age.”

“Yeah, I’m not sure Charlotte has either.”

Kelly turned to look, brow furrowed. “Charlotte’s fine.”

“She seems... a little unmotivated, I guess.”

“You’re too hard on her.”

Ellis gave a tight little smile. “You’re probably right. Rochelle always said the same thing. Still does, in fact.”

“She shows up, she works, she gets it, she makes incremental improvement... if she was anyone else’s daughter, you’d be telling your kid to be more like her.”

“Fine, fine,” Ellis said, raising his hands. “I give in. As long as she doesn’t quit.”

“You think she might?”

“I think Rochelle and Stan would... ah, forget it.”

“What?”

Ellis just shrugged and drank.

For a while they sat, catching up on former students who’d moved, or who’d simply stopped attending.

“Dino has his own school?” Ellis asked. “I remember when he came into yours as a thirteen-year-old with a what, a Tae Kwon Do black belt?”

“Something like that. He’s MMA training, primarily. Doesn’t make ‘em learn a single word of Japanese.” Kelly shook his head. “Mostly just kickboxing-into-judo, which works well enough I guess. Oh, but he had to throw out his best student over a steroid thing. Man he was pissed!”

“I’ll bet. He was the one who lectured everyone about high-fructose corn syrup, right?”

“The very same. To his credit,” Kelly said, “I bet his abs still look like six snow-covered Volkswagens.”

“Yeah, the kid did work his ass off,” Ellis admitted. “How’d he do in the junior nationals that one year?”

“Second place. It was a pretty busy bracket, too.” Kelly leaned back. “He talked about UFOs the whole drive up there.”

“I’d go crazy,” Ellis said.

“What do Andy and Charlotte talk about when you’re driving them to tournaments, then?”

“Usually they do homework in the back seat,” Ellis admitted. “All iPod plugged.”

“Mm. Andy’s making nice progress in the adult class.”

“Still won’t switch to jujitsu though,” Ellis said.

“That’s fine. It’s good for a teenager to have his own thing. ‘The hunter

who chases two rabbits will miss both,’ that sort of thing.”

“I guess. I think he’s... internalized it. Char, now, she’s the one who really needs it.”

“You think?” Kelly asked.

“She’s a teenage girl,” Ellis said flatly. “If she doesn’t go off to college confident in her strangling, I’ll consider it my biggest failure as a father.”

Kelly said nothing.

“The other week, you know what Andy asked me? He asked me why I got into this stuff.”

“Into jujitsu?”

“Yeah. It was after that shoulder thing, with Rudy.”

“How’s that feeling?” Kelly asked.

Ellis probed the meat of his left deltoid with a thumb tip, gave it an experimental roll. “It’s okay. Not, y’know, like it was, but about what I expect.”

“Ice it,” Kelly said automatically.

“Way ahead of you.”

They were almost finished drinking.

“So what did you tell him?” Kelly asked. “Andy, I mean.”

“About why I started? I didn’t really have an answer.”

“Huh.”

Ellis leaned in a little. “You want to hear something awful?”

“Um... sure?”

“Okay.” He settled himself, so that he could speak quietly in comfort.

“When I was a little kid, I was terrible, all right? A bully. This was when I was ten or so.”

“Right.”

“So one day I was walking to school. It was morning, kind of dark, snowy... like this, pretty much.” He gestured out the window, but didn’t look away from his teacher. “I was walking along the sidewalk by the street, and there was a little ditch or a drainage trough or something on my left side. Then some trees and a fence, and on the other side the baseball field.”

Kelly just nodded. He could not remember the last time Ellis had said so much.

“So this car pulled up and a guy called out, ‘Ellis Miller?’ And like a dummy, I stopped and said, ‘Yeah’ and he got out of the car.”

Kelly’s stomach clenched.

“The guy walks over, no big hurry, takes me by the arm, and pulls me down into the the little, like the low spot? Between the trees and the sidewalk?”

Kelly dipped his chin again, still mute.

“He had on a stocking cap and a big scarf over his face, and even though it was a dark day he had on sunglasses. At least, that’s how I remember it. Anyway, he just kind of pulled me down into the snow. He wasn’t even that rough about it.”

Kelly wondered if he should reach across the table and take Ellis’ hand, but he didn’t.

“So anyway, he leans over me and says, ‘You’ve been a little shit, Ellis. Punching kids, pushing them around.’ I started to argue—yeah, I know, right? Arguing!—but he just put his other hand over my mouth and said, ‘One of the kids you’ve been picking on, that’s my kid. I’m not going to tell you which one. But you’re going to apologize to every kid you’ve done stuff to, understand? Because if you don’t, I’m going to put you in the trunk of my car, and cut you into pieces, and I might send a hand back to your parents so they know what happened to you, but no one will ever find anything else of you.’”

“Jesus fucking Christ.”

Ellis nodded. Then he blinked, and his eyes lost the look of distant memory.

“So then what happened?” Kelly asked.

“He got in his car and drove off.”

“Did you believe him?”



"I did then, that's for damn sure." Ellis raised his cup, and gave a small, disappointed frown that it was empty.

"Did you apologize to everyone and, and stop... what you'd been doing?"

"Yep."

"Did you ever tell anyone?"

"Not 'til just now."

"Fuck Ellis, why not?"

He shrugged. "I was scared, then. And when he didn't come and kill me, I eventually got embarrassed. But that's what I thought of when Andy asked me why I took up jujitsu."

"Shrimp" is released under a Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike-Noncommercial license. Copy it, share it, turn it into a puppet show but leave my name on it and don't try to turn a buck on it without my consent.

This work was paid for in 2012 by a fundraiser run through Kickstarter.com.

If you'd like to read other stories that my fans have subsidized, you can find them at [http://www.gregstolze.com/fiction\\_library/](http://www.gregstolze.com/fiction_library/)