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*Passion gives rise to motion. Without passion, we merely bob like flotsam on the ocean of life. One can survive without passion, but in mistaking this condition for living we deny ourselves lives of adventure and verve. Newfound passion is to life as springtime is to nature: it rejuvenates, creates and continually surprises.*

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IN CAECUS TERRÆ, LUSCUS REX EST

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IN THE LAND OF THE BLIND, THE ONE-  
EYE-MAN IS KING

## 1. THE PURPLE BLUES

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Wrestling boots and other kit packed, we decided to leave for the USA. The grappling bug had sunk its fangs into me and I was busting to hit Rigan Machado's new mat in California, where he and his brothers had relocated from Rio de Janeiro. It was one of the best-kept secrets of the martial arts world at the time: four of Brazil's national champions teaching around a dozen or so students in a small matted bungalow in the back of a house on Avenue D in Redondo Beach. This was like finding huge gold nuggets lying on top of the ground, and I was there before the rush began.

My school in Geelong was being seen to by several of my more advanced students and was by this time financially viable enough to stay afloat during my absence. The rent was being covered and few dollars were left over each week. I even had some small savings in my pocket as Melissa and I met up at the airport to be seen off by both her parents and my own only a short while after Christmas Day. I can only guess at how worried and unsettled they all would have been on that singular day. This was not only a new chapter in our respective lives; it was, if I am to stick with the metaphor, an entirely new book for both of us.

Between the two of us we didn't have much money, but we pooled what we did have and felt absolute confidence in our ability to make our new relationship work. At the writing of this book we have been together for nearly twenty years, and our commitment to each other, our love and our friendship has only grown and deepened over that time. I

would have to say that finding the right partner for life may well be the single most important decision a person can ever make. At that time though, our financial prospects were grim and the future looked very uncertain. It was a mildly scary time and there was an element of doubt about how we were going to fund this training adventure. We were, though, very fortunate, in that my good friend Richard Norton was away on a movie shoot at the time and so made his apartment and car available to us for the duration of our stay.

Los Angeles is a hot, smoggy, sprawling and impersonal city. Pretty much everyone I met there told me they had a plan to leave. But it's a love/hate relationship that those people have with the city of angels, because even though it may lack the aesthetic charm and ambience of a city like San Francisco, LA is where the money is. And at that time, it was where the Jiu Jitsu was also. For better or for worse, it had temporarily become our new home.

Richard's apartment was located in the San Fernando Valley: the hot, flat suburban sprawl that is comprised of suburbs like Tarzana, Encino and Thousand Oaks. The 'valley' is contained by a range of hills on either side that do a very effective job of trapping in the smog that it's so notorious for. On most days you can look down into it from the terraces on either side and wonder how life can survive in the pea-soup thick blanket of pollution that fills it almost to the brim. It took us nearly a month to acclimatise to breathing in that smog during our evening training sessions at Wall Street Plaza - the small shopping plaza where the Machados had opened up their public academy in Tarzana. The air was bad, but the location couldn't have been better.

The mat was set up in the back of Wall Street Plaza, above the 'all you can eat' Souplantation buffet, only several kilometres from Richards place. Our living expenses were almost nothing, thanks to friends like Richard and eateries like Souplantation. We were literally able to live on about twenty dollars a day, if we kept the driving down to a minimum. The Machados were very fortunate to have been offered free rent in Wall Street Plaza, due to the fact that it was owned by Bob Wall, the martial artist who played the character O'Hara in hit movie Enter the Dragon. Bob was a good friend of Chuck Norris, and both were hopeless addicts of Brazilian Jiu Jitsu. So the first professional Jiu Jitsu Academy in the United States was off to a good start, with Chuck, Bob and a whole swag of big names in martial arts queuing up for nightly training. It really was a fun place to be.

In fact, there were two mats running at that time. Even though the public academy was operating out of Wall Street Plaza in the valley, the Machados were living down in Redondo Beach on the South Bay, about an hour's drive toward Mexico. Redondo Beach was a great place to live, with clean air and a real beach-lifestyle feel to it. They had a small bungalow matted-out in the backyard, where they taught private lessons and small group classes by invitation only. The biggest expense for Melissa and I was the fuel for the twice weekly trip down to be a part of those classes. That was money well spent though, as the trip was like an outing for us. The drive down in Richard's Mustang convertible was a pure joy; the training was the best possible training you could get, with four of the five Machado brothers all teaching class, and the drive home in the cool of the evening a mixture

of physical relief and wide-eyed wonder at how life was unfolding for the both of us. It was a magical time indeed. I was lapping up the Jiu Jitsu technique like a man possessed. The Machados were great instructors and seemingly had solutions for every grappling problem imaginable. I wrestled, lost, asked questions, got answers and wrestled again. I would always head to the Wall Street Plaza mat early, and, more often than not, I was the last to leave. My body was beginning to adapt to the rigours of training and for the first time I felt I was developing a glimpse into the underlying structure of the art.

Learning BJJ was similar to learning a new language, albeit a language of 'movement'. And like any language, once you understand how the grammatical rules work, you can start putting things together in more meaningful ways. The ebb and flow of the fight was absolutely fascinating to me, it was a thing of intricate beauty that spoke to the core of my being. Each day brought with it not only an understanding of new techniques but a deeper understanding of where those techniques fitted into the overall scheme of things. I was just beginning to make that realisation that all artists must eventually make: the more I learned, the more I realised I didn't know. It was an exciting time; it was a daunting time. My days as a Jiu Jitsu white belt were coming to an end.

At the end of the twentieth century, the value of the martial arts black belt had decreased significantly. As a great friend of mine says, 'it's the result of belt inflation – and just like economic inflation; you just don't get today what you used to get for the same amount last year'. And he's right: thirty years ago, a black belt was a serious qualification, one that

was difficult to come by; one that was only earned after years and years of gruelling practice. Today though, we have hundreds of thousands of eight year olds running around wearing black belts that they need their mothers to tie for them. It's a sad sign of the times.

Brazilian Jiu Jitsu, however, is an art that flies in the face of this trend. From the novice's perspective, the BJJ black belt is so far off, that it doesn't usually bear at all on the motivation to keep training. In fact, there are only three stages between the ranks of white belt and black belt in the art: the blue, purple and brown belts. In BJJ you don't 'get the belt'; you 'become' the belt. You don't train for the belt, you train because you become fascinated with the art; you become addicted to the process; you train, you improve and in each session you are able to test and measure that improvement. Progress is not quantified by periodically awarded belts and stripes and certificates designed to stroke egos and gently motivate students toward the coveted black belt; progress is measured by skill and understanding.

And so, even though I had immersed myself in the art for several years by the time I was living at Richard's place and training in the Valley, I had absolutely no aspirations of obtaining any rank, let alone a Black Belt in the art of BJJ. I was quite content to continue wearing my white belt; in fact I was too focussed on the training to even think about the rank.

One Saturday morning Melissa and I made the now familiar drive out of the hot and dusty valley, down to a beautiful autumn day at Redondo Beach for training. There were perhaps a dozen students gathered in the bungalow in

Rigan's backyard, including three or four Brazilians who had followed the Machados up from Brazil. One, a purple belt named 'Peachy Boy', was a good family friend of the Machados and had arrived only a few days earlier. After the class began and we had completed our warm-up, Rigan had everyone sit against the wall, beckoned me to the centre of the mat, and asked Peachy Boy to come out and fight. Perhaps because Peachy had only just stepped off the plane, perhaps it was because my 'game' at that moment didn't have room for hesitation or second-guessing, but the wind was blowing the right way, and the planets were lined up just so, and I won with an armbar in five seconds flat. Peachy didn't seem that upset; in fact he smiled, shook my hand and walked over to sit down at the edge of the mat. I wrestled three or four more students before Rigan called a halt to proceedings. I was wondering where this was all going when Rigan pulled a purple belt out from the folds of his jacket. 'Congratulations my friend' he said, 'put on your new purple belt!'

I couldn't have been more surprised. Getting my first rank in BJJ was a shock in itself and so it hardly occurred to me that I had skipped the blue belt rank and had jumped straight to purple. On that day I became Rigan's 'big fish' - a BJJ term for 'special student' - and my real apprenticeship began.

I did ask him if he could hold off on giving me my purple belt for another twelve months or so, but he was adamant that I was ready. I certainly didn't feel 'ready' as I reluctantly replaced my white belt with the shiny new one. If I had to put a label to the feeling I experienced that day, it would simply read 'unqualified'.



I had only been a purple belt a couple of weeks when I received one of my first incapacitating grappling injuries. Rigan was demonstrating a technique to the rest of the class and as his 'big fish', it fell to me to play the role of hapless victim. I remember 'tapping' but Rigan was so engrossed in explaining the technique to the rest of the class that he didn't seem to notice. My tapping went on and on, his explanation went on and on. I felt the tear as it worked its way through my shoulder and up my trapezius and into my neck. After that little demonstration I was unable to train for a good ten days. I tried sitting around and watching class for a few days but found it to be far too frustrating an experience. So Melissa and I decided to take a drive up to Vegas with fellow student and BJJ brown belt, Cesar Gracie. Cesar and his girlfriend Aurora were taking the one hour flight, but as we hadn't seen much of America apart from the mat, Melissa and I decided to take the scenic drive up via Hoover Dam.

With a bag of ice behind my shoulder and a swag of supplies, we started off in the morning with the top down on Richard's Mustang. Driving up through the desert was just beautiful, and, despite the injury, I really loved the trip.

We arrived at the Hoover Dam Canyon after sunset, and we both still clearly remember the amazing sight as we wound our way up the other side and drove out of the darkness and were met by the blazing lights of the anomaly that is Las Vegas.

Here is a town that has no right being there. The lights dazzled and burned so brightly that we pulled the car over on the top of the range and sat for a while just taking it all in. Surrounded by nothing but desert, Vegas, for all its shortcomings, is proof

that humans can build almost anything, almost anywhere. We drove down through the cool of the desert evening and into the sweltering jumble of lights and sounds that is Vegas. We found our way to the casino where we were meeting Cesar and Aurora, and then onward to the check-in counter. As we left check-in to head to our room I noticed a silver dollar lying on the floor. Scooping it up really felt like a good start to our Vegas vacation. I didn't want to carry the coin as I didn't have pockets in the shorts I was wearing, so I walked over to the nearest slot machine and dropped it in. A few seconds later the bells started ringing and the lights started flashing: I had hit the jackpot.

Silver dollars poured out of the machine and people stopped in their tracks and stared. Finally, the outpouring ceased and we scooped all the proceeds into a large plastic bucket and began to walk away. A security officer stopped us and told us the machine had just run out of coins but the jackpot owed us more, so we waited around while he refilled it and the outpouring continued.

As it turned out, we won nearly four hundred dollars. It doesn't sound like much today but back in the early 1990s - when a Vegas buffet could be had for \$1.95 - it was a veritable fortune. And so our ten day break from training was completely funded by the first Vegas slot we played. Timing is everything.