

The Shopping Mall Misadventure

“You had better get it right this time, Harry,” the Count muttered in a working-class British accent overlaid with affectation. “You had better get it bloody right. It’s ‘alive,’ not ‘online.’ *Alive.*”

He was checking his face for dermal irregularities in a mirror. Some people called them pimples. Cherry Ripes had a nasty habit of bringing them out. Last night he scoffed three king-size bars, a cylinder of sour cream and onion Pringles, and half a lobster that Tolly, the BO-sodden truck driver who lived in the flat above him, had traded him for some karate lessons. His pomegranates were still the worse for wear thanks to a kick from Tolly’s steel-capped boot. An *unconscionable* kick.

“You want me to take off me clodhoppers, mate?” Tolly had asked as they prepared to spar in the flat’s car park.

“There’s no need,” the Count had said. “They’ll never touch me.”

At the time it felt like he’d made violent love to a steam shovel. He winced just thinking about it.

“You don’t kick a man until he’s ready to be kicked,” he told his reflection. He gave it an approving look. For a man of his 40-something years he was gaspingly handsome.

He scanned the poky dressing room, which was sandwiched between an escalator and the stage in the shopping mall’s atrium, and clicked his tongue in disgust. “Sticking a man of my breeding in a bloody matchbox like

this. It's an insult to human intelligence.”

He consulted his watch. Five minutes to show time. A hair unit check—some people called them wigs—was in order. He placed his hands on it, wriggled them about. There was only some minor dislocation. The double-sided tape had proved to be a sound investment. He used to have a metal stud in his head that clicked into a socket beneath the unit, anchoring it to his scalp. Unfortunately, the stud interfered with his mobile phone reception, and made him run to the toilet every time he switched on his microwave oven, so he had to have it surgically removed.

Face and hair unit were impeccable. So were his karategi, white socks, and black sandals. As a rule, he preferred to demonstrate his martial arts prowess barefoot, but corn pads made that a rule meant to be broken.

There was just one last item for him to inspect before he took the stage. He loosened his karategi to reveal a flesh-colored midriff compressor. Some people called them girdles. He ran his hands over its elasticized surface. It was so firm he could bounce a shot put off it. *Perfect.*

As he wiped the Coke-bottle lenses of his black-framed glasses with a handkerchief, a squeal of feedback banged his eardrums. He sighed. "You're supposed to speak into the microphone, Harold, not eat it."

On stage, the Count's assistant, Harry, who looked like a younger, ginger-haired Danny DeVito, leaned warily into a microphone. "Wadies and gentlemen—" A second, louder squeal interrupted his Elmer Fuddesque intro. "Wadies and

gentlemen . . .” He braced for more feedback. There was none. “Boys and girls, put your hands together for the gweatest martial artist in the whole wide world. Here he is, the deadwiest man onwine, Count Meinward!”

The Count rolled his eyes. *Not a-bloody-gain*. He crossed himself and bounded on stage to a huge round of indifference from the 20-strong audience. Pumping his fists, he jogged around, trying to whip up some enthusiasm. The audience said “no” to the whipping. An errant power cable tripped him up, and he fell flat on his face. “Ooh, you bastard of a thing!”

Everything had gone all misty.

His glasses had fallen off!

He groped around for them. After several slaps of empty floor, his hand hit pay dirt, and the fog that had suddenly descended lifted just as suddenly.

Faces, sneering, snickering faces, were staring at him.

He sprang into damage control mode and started doing push-ups, as if this were his intention all along. He stopped at five. If not for his hiatus hernia, he would have done six.

He rose, not altogether steadily, straightened his karategi. “Carry on, Harold,” he said before marching three steps back.

While Harry addressed the audience, the Count engaged in a spot of bird watching. Being a virile master of the ancient Japanese martial art of karate, he often found himself the object of women’s feverish yearnings. Chick magnet? That was much too crude an expression to describe a man of his refinement, but an accurate one nonetheless. He fairly spurted sex appeal. Many a fetching lass had swooned when

he'd come within hormone-firing distance of her.

An old lady in a wheelchair who was either asleep or deceased, a prepubescent schoolgirl scooping out raspberry-flavored ice from the bottom of a Slurpee cup, and a 400-pound Greek woman with a barbed wire tattoo around her neck, squawking into a mobile phone, were all the female companionship the audience had to offer. Slim pickings. Although *slim* was hardly an apt term for the Greek woman.

"The Count wants a young man," Harry said. "To help him demonstwate his kawate."

"The old perv," a young layabout with spiked hair said.

The Count stormed to the front of the stage and gave the layabout his dreaded death point. "I'll have you, sunshine!"

"Is that your real hair?" the layabout said with a snicker. The audience chuckled.

The Count's buttery dial turned a redder shade of pissed off. Brick-smashing fists shaking, he yelled, "Hold me back, Harry! Hold me back! Don't let me kill him! Don't let me kill him!"

Harry did as he was told. "Don't wuwee, Count, I won't wet you."

"Up yours, Pom," the layabout said, middle finger erect.

Struggling to break free of Harry, but not too hard, the Count snarled, "Cheeky bloody whippersnapper!"

The layabout's pink-haired, multi-pierced girlfriend coaxed him over to a smoking paraphernalia shop, saving him from certain death. The Count nodded, chest inflating. *Wise decision.*

Harry returned to the microphone and scanned the now 12-strong audience. “Awight. Any vowunteers? Any vowunteers?”

Peering over the top of his glasses, the Count spied an ideal candidate. Over by a glass-encased map of the mall was a 12-year-old kid begging his mother to let him go on stage. Just a little cajoling from Harry was all it would take to convince her that the safest place on earth for the lad—for anyone—was with the deadliest man *alive*.

Harry looked in every direction save the boy’s. “No vowunteers?”

“Harry!” the Count whispered in frustration. He motioned to the kid. “The lad over there with his mother, get him.”

As the Count issued said instructions, the kid and his mother scrambled up an escalator to be with some friends they’d spotted on the next level, and in their place waddled the Greek woman and her hulking 15-year-old son. When Harry finally located the map, this was the boy he saw. “How about the boy at the map?” he said.

The Greek woman tapped the boy on the shoulder, pointed Harry out to him. Harry nodded. “Yes, you, young felwa. Wanna come up here and test the Count’s mettle?” The boy grinned. He looked as bright as a nuclear winter.

The Count was oblivious to all of this. A juicy bird in a pair of derriere-fondling shorts, gliding down an escalator, had cast a spell on him.

The stage quaked.

He wheeled to see the boy tromping toward him. The

stage floor groaned beneath the boy's behemoth footfalls. "Oh my goiter!" the Count muttered. He frowned at Harry, demanding answers, but all he got was a mile-wide grin that couldn't stop bragging about the great job Harry had done.

He looked the boy up and down. The mammoth teen wore gray tracksuit pants, a maroon T-shirt with an ice-cream stain on it, and lime green thongs which his immense blob-like feet had subsumed into near-invisibility. At six feet tall (five feet eleven in all honesty) and 195 pounds (220 in all honesty) the Count was no midget, but standing next to the boy, he felt like Gulliver gazing up at a Brobdingnagian barrel of pork fat.

Oh to blazes with it! What did size matter to a giant of the martial arts?

He plunked the microphone in Harry's hand, swung a finger from himself to the boy and back again. "What's your name?" he asked the boy. Harry held the microphone up to the boy's mindless grin. A *long* way up. Several seconds of excruciating silence later, the Count said, "Well, names aren't all that—"

"GEORGE!" the boy blurted, giving the Count and his wig a start. The sound system screamed for mercy. Members of the audience pulled tortured faces.

Gathering his black-belt aplomb, the Count said, "Pleased to make your acquaintance, er, George. Thank you for joining me on stage. Don't worry, you're in good hands." He showed off the curiously unblemished tools of his trade with great pride. "Take a look. These once saved Princess Margaret from

some angry sailors in Barbados.”

He turned to his dwindling audience. “Ladies and gentlemen, what I'm going to do now is—”

“BARBADOS!” George shouted.

The Count jolted. His glasses skipped off his nose and landed on his bottom lip. He slid them back. Undeterred, though a trifle irritated, he carried on. “What I’m going to do is demonstrate the superior strength of a karate master by chopping a timber beam in two with my bare hand.”

“Borrrrrring!” said an unappreciative and profoundly stupid fellow in the audience. He copped the Count’s next-stop-oblivion stare. Served him right.

“Now, George, if you’d kindly follow me over here,” the Count said, stepping behind two cinder blocks spanned by a length of two by four.

George stayed right where he was. Grinning his non compos mentis grin.

“George, if you’d come and join me. George?”

The Count wondered what on earth was wrong with George. Did he have trouble understanding English? In any event, the universal sign for “come here” was hurriedly employed. That did the trick. (Thank the dear Lord above!)

The Count displayed the two by four to the audience. “Ladies and gentlemen, to prove this piece of wood hasn’t been tampered with, I’ll get our friend George to examine it.” He placed it in the oven mitts George had for hands. “Take your time, George.”

A smug look kicked back on the Count’s face. A

reverberating SNAP shot it dead. Holding two shorter pieces of timber now, one in each oven mitt, George grinned and said, “SNAP!”

The Count looked like a political candidate who'd been sprung torching an orphanage on Christmas morning.

A guy in the audience yelled “Fake!” over and over again. Others joined in. The old woman in the wheelchair choked back a snore as she fell awake.

The Count was at a complete loss. He had to do something to win the audience back and quickly, but what? *What?*

Take charge, Albert. Take charge.

He recognized the soft yet commanding voice straight away. It was his inner-sensei. Only his inner-sensei called him Albert.

Take charge.

Take charge. Just like he did when he choku-zukied a robber holding up a 7-Eleven. (Who would have believed a cross-eyed midget would turn to crime at age 80?)

Take charge. Just like he did when he stopped a school bus from careering off a mountain road. (Thank God he woke up in time and jumped on the brakes.)

Take charge. Just like he did when he dive-tackled a crazed activist who lunged at the Prime Minister. (He'd been drinking and had fallen off a second-floor balcony.)

Take charge.

He closed his eyes, filled his lungs to the maximum, and shook like a bowl of jelly on an epileptic's lap as the limitless power of chi infused his body.

The audience watched the supernatural top-up in hushed awe.

Fuming at them, teeth gritted, the Count snarled, “This. Is. Not. Fake.”

None dared say a word.

With the modest crowd back in the palm of his steel-hard hand, he lightened up and said, “And I’m going to put the next one who yells ‘fake’ in a headlock. And when Count Meinrard, the deadliest man . . .” he cast Harry an admonishing glance, “*alive*, puts you in a headlock, you stay in a headlock!”

“HEADLOCK!” George shouted excitedly. Before the Count could react, his head was being constricted by George’s anaconda-thick arm. Was that the audience clapping and cheering?

“HEADLOCK!” George exclaimed to his growing fanbase.

“Arrrrgh!” the Count howled to no one in particular. His hair unit had been squashed into something resembling Animal from *The Muppets*.

Some smart-arsed bastard in the audience hollered, “Use your karate on him, Count!”

Good advice however.

The Count stomped on George’s size 14 foot and whapped him in the solar plexus. The effect of this was on par with swatting a charging rhino with a balloon on a stick.

“HEADLOCK!”

Sparing no thought for his own safety or the Count’s, Harry launched himself onto George’s back. “You weave the

Count awone!” George shrugged, trying to ditch his unwanted passenger. The Count grunted as he shuffled back and forth to George’s thoughtless rhythm.

The audience reveled in the onstage action. Shoppers dashed over to see what was entertaining them.

Having just told her ex-husband to go and get stuffed, the Greek woman pocketed her mobile phone and then shrieked. Her son was being brutally assaulted! She galumphed toward the stage. Anyone unlucky enough to be in her way was summarily skittled.

Harry had George in a choke hold as firm as grilled cheese. “Wet him go!” he demanded, struggling to stay attached to George’s tree stump of a neck.

The Count managed to pull his head free. His hair unit had been squashed into a limp mohawk. He gazed about, trying to get his bearings, groggy from his oxygen-stealing sojourn near George’s ripe armpit.

WHAM!

Screeching, the Greek woman decked him with a running clothesline.

George lit up. “MUMMY!”

Reinvigorated by her presence, he judo flipped Harry.

The now packed audience was going mental. Best mall show ever!

Glasses askew, the Count wobbled to a standing position. He located the Greek woman, who was busy examining George for injuries. His eyes narrowed into vengeful slits. “Madam, a word in your rear.”

Rear? Was that right? She didn't hear it, anyhow.

"I said, Madam, a word in your *EAR!*"

She still wasn't listening.

The Count stormed toward her. In his haste he stumbled over Harry, who was lying on the floor, moaning, and careered into George's back. George lurched forward, clipping the Greek woman. He reeled off the side of the stage as she belly flopped the floor. Unable to stop his momentum, the Count splashed down between the vast acreage of her butt cheeks.

A laughter bomb went off. In seconds, video footage of the mortifying configuration was being uploaded to every social media site known to man. In minutes, it was amassing likes.

The Count's nose alerted him to the alarming real estate he was inspecting. He shot to his feet.

"Count! Count! Count! Count!"

They were shouting his name. The people were shouting his name. They knew an expert in hand-to-hand combat when they saw one in action. Bless them.

Microphone in hand, he stood at the very front of the stage. "Friends, what you have just witnessed is a real-world example of why one should never tangle with a black belt. Tenth dan."

Someone tapped him on the shoulder. He turned to see a flying fist. The next thing he knew, his posterior was wedged in shopping jeep belonging to a very upset Vietnamese lady.

"When I want my bum kissed," the Greek woman said, "I'll ask for it!"

Upright again, Harry strode in her direction. “Hey, wady, you can’t do that to the Count.”

George jumped in front of him. “MY MAMA!”

Harry suddenly found himself in a brisk airplane spin.

The Count fought to extricate his backside from the shopping jeep, but it was stuck tighter than a bowling ball in a drain pipe.

The Greek woman had the microphone. “Hah! Serves you right, you big turd. Just remember you brung this on yourself, not me. I needed all this crap like I need a kick in the head.”

WHACK!

George spun Harry a little too close to her. She dove off the stage, landed atop the Count. Together they spilled onto the atrium floor, scattering some audience members and liberating his rump from the shopping jeep.

A cool breeze made his scalp tingle. His hair unit was dislocated. He put it back where it belonged, though not as seamlessly as he would have liked.

“Couuuuunt, help!” Harry cried.

The Count scrambled back on stage. “I’m coming, Harry!”

George took one look at the Count and dropped Harry like a leprous girlfriend. Spaghetti western music played, or should have, as he and the Count stood staring at each other through cold gimlet eyes.

The audience clapped their hands and stamped their feet. “Fight! Fight! Fight! Fight!”

Needing no encouragement, the Count charged the monstrous brute and rained karate chops on his chest,

announcing each with a “Haiya!”

Oh dear.

The merciless flurry should have leveled a dinosaur. If only George had been a tyrannosaurus.

The Count skulked backward. His attack strategy needed a serious rethink.

With a spiteful tremor of his head, George poked his tongue at the retreating legend.

“Why, you insolent dullard!” the Count said. “All right, you asked for it.” The *it* was his jaw-breaking mega-kick. He only ever used it as a last resort because it could kill very badly, but on this occasion he was happy to take the risk.

He raised his right leg at the knee to execute the deadly move. The Greek woman seized it. “And what were you planning to do with this, you fat old bastard?”

“Unhand my person, madam,” he huffed. “And you’re in no position to call an elephant seal fat, let alone myself.”

Furious, she bent the limb in a direction it didn’t want to go. He bellowed in agony.

Deeply distressed by his predicament, the audience laughed their guts out.

The Count made a mental note never to grace a shopping mall with his towering presence again.

The Greek woman retested his leg for flexibility. “How do you like that, *baldy?*”

He lost his balance, swung backward, accidentally kicking her in the jaw with his free foot. She reeled into George’s arms. A quick, excruciating wriggle of her chin confirmed the

worst. “Hebwokemyfwigginjaw,” she mumbled.

George freaked. He dropped her, leaving her to plop unceremoniously to the floor, and tromped toward the Count. “FWIGGIN JAW!”

Right leg out of commission, the Count slid away from the drubbing giant on his rear. “Stay away from me, you daft brute. Can't you see I'm an injured man?”

“FWIGGIN JAW!” George leaped into the air. The Count rolled out of the way just before George's size 14s crash landed.

Nostrils flaring, George stood over him. A second attempt at an ICU-quality stomping was imminent.

This was it. The Count didn't have enough petrol left in his tank to roll, crawl, shuffle, shimmy, or wriggle out of this one. The Angel of Death, in the guise of a gelatinous cretin, was about to extinguish his noble flame, and there wasn't a bloody thing he could do about it.

Or perhaps there was.

Harry had just bungled to his feet. If the Count could get Harry to assume the position, he might be able to neutralize George with a quick but emphatic boot to the groin region.

He gave Harry the signal, a crooked index finger. Harry nodded, crouched behind George. Now all the Count had to do was push George over Harry. But first he had to stand. His brutalized leg mightn't let him.

Solving his problem, the Greek woman yanked him up by his karategi. The fire in her eyes could have melted tungsten. “Youbwokemyjaw, nowI'mgonnabweakyourballs.”

She rammed a knee between his legs. His eyes spun up like poker machine wheels. “Ooooh me pomegranates!”

Giddy with pain, he collapsed into her arms, and she staggered backward. They collected George. The three of them piled on top of Harry, flattening him against the stage floor like a beef patty on a griddle. The floor creaked and groaned. Its load rating had been exceeded. With a terrific crash it collapsed, casting all four of them into the pits of hell, three feet below.

An echoing chorus of “This is awesome!” started up.

* * *

Who turned out the bloody lights?

The Count had just come to. But come to what? He couldn’t see a damned thing.

He reached up to ensure his hair unit was where it should be. It wasn’t. He fumbled around for it. It was hugging his face. He relocated it to its proper place and could see again, but not much. Where in blazes did the rest of the world go?

Voices filled with urgency. He could hear voices filled with urgency.

“What’s all the kerfuffle about?” he murmured.

Something heavy, planetoid heavy, was dragged across his chest. It squashed all of the air out of his lungs and tested the breaking strain of his rib cage.

Light flooded the hole in the stage floor. He looked up to see four dark figures gazing down upon him. “Stay back,” he

warned, “I’m a master of the marital aids.”

Two mall security guards climbed into the hole. One grabbed the Count’s legs. The other grabbed him under the arms. “What do you think you’re doing?” he said. “Unhand me or suffer the consequences.”

As they lifted him feet-first out of the hole, he felt an explosive release of pressure on his stomach. Then, without warning, a disgusting blob monster lunged at him.

Flailing madly at his copious paunch, which had escaped the confines of his midriff compressor, he cried, “Oh my goiter! Get it off me! Get it off me!”

* * *

The next morning, the front-page headline of the *Herald Sun* read MALL BRAWL: MOTHER AND SON BEAT UP KARATE EXPERTS. The Count objected to it in the strongest possible terms. Harry wasn’t an expert. No way known.

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