

Gilbert Allen

Standard Kung Fu Mayhem

Scene One

On opposite sides of a small, square table, Mr. Magee and his Executive Intern sat in the restaurant of the Greenville-Spartanburg Airport. Ten minutes ahead of schedule, they were waiting for a screenwriting consultant unlucky enough to live in South Carolina. Juliette could feel her shoulder blades sticking to her new silk blouse—the local air conditioning had gone on summer vacation. But for the grace of God, she could've ended up licking envelopes for a non-profit agency in a noplacelike this. To keep her mind off the heat, she fast-forwarded through her considerable blessings, while her boss was indulging himself in a post-production review of their recently completed LAX-to-Atlanta-to-Greenville flight.

"I didn't insist on the private jet. Hey, I'm a regular guy. Ask anybody in the business. Did I complain in LA? Did I complain?"

"You didn't complain," Juliette said. Mr. Magee seemed to like hearing his questions repeated as definitive statements.

"I can handle First Class, Juliette. I handle First Class all the time. Then Atlanta dumps us into that puddlejumper, right next to Jihad Kaboom."

"The guy in the white serape?" Although she'd completed her second year of Communication Studies at a small college in Sacramento, Juliette had grown up in Lubbock, Texas, in an emerging multicultural environment. When she'd mentioned this fact to Mr. Magee, during her interview at Digital Donnybrook Productions, he hadn't believed her. He'd insisted on seeing her driver's license for verification. Then he'd muttered that she didn't *look* old enough to be an organ donor. After her solemn assurance that her organs were indeed under her personal control, he'd hired her for twenty dollars an hour, for the whole summer.

"Whatever," Magee said. He wiped his wide, sun-freckled brow with his cloth napkin. "I thought Juan Valdez was gonna break into the cockpit and fly us into that goddamn peach. It wouldn't've taken a major course change."

While they'd been circling to land at GSP, the pilot—a woman—had banked the small plane sharply, to give the starboard passengers a better view of the Gaffney water tower. Its crowning Freestone, Juliette remembered, had a tiny dimple and a small green leaf.

"Did you see the soles of his shoes?"

"The soles of his shoes," Juliette said.

"You could've wedged a couple sticks of dynamite in there."

She took two menus from the triple-chinned waitress and passed one of them to Mr. Magee. Intermediary Handling. It was part of her job description. Her boss glanced at the laminated plastic and rolled his eyes. "This everything?"

"You caught us between dinner and supper, sir."

"Lost your lunch, huh?" He turned his head to look at the unbroken expanse of runway beyond the tinted glass. "Why they call this place Windows?"

"Our grilled chicken salad is on special."

Juliette said, "I'll take that, with the raspberry vinaigrette."

"Something to drink, honey?" the waitress said.

"Unsweet tea."

"What else you got? To drink," Magee said.

"Sweet tea."

"Make it a double."

The waitress beamed under her big hair, tore off their order slip, and leaned it against the combination salt-and-pepper shaker before she left for the kitchen. "Windows for Greenville," Magee laughed. "Sounds like Microsoft for Rednecks. Every cunt in this town wears cubic zirconia and smiles like a hyena with a carcass. They won't even tell me to go fuck myself. Drives me nuts."

Juliette could understand his frustration. In less than a full week, she'd already discovered that Mr. Magee had a formidable talent: He could make anybody swear at him, at any time. "How often do you come here?"

"That depends," Magee grinned. "Looking for a performance bonus?"

Before Juliette could answer definitively, the waitress returned with their drinks. "I asked for a double, honey," Magee said. "Bring me another glass." He peeled the paper off the tip of his straw, took a short swig, and grimaced.

"Lemme warn you. This guy we're hooking up with, he's a real nutcase. Never takes credit for *anything*. But he's been in the business forever. Fucking genius. He only works here, and he only works face to face. Like he's afraid you're gonna die—before you can pay him?"

"Before you can pay him," Juliette agreed.

"I'm strictly high concept," Magee said. "Maybe half of my movies, Charlie's goosed the endings. Classic lines. And not just for me, either. *Do you feel lucky, punk? I'll be back. Yippy Ki Yay, motherfucker.* They're all his."

Her boss liked to exaggerate, so Juliette still didn't know what to think when the waitress returned with her salad and the extra iced tea.

“We’re waiting for a third wheel,” Magee said. “Nice rock you got there, honey.”

“Biggest they had,” the waitress said. “Fifty percent off.” She put the brimming glass in front of the open chair without spilling a drop. Then she extended her left hand, palm down, fat freckled fingers spread. “My husband gifted me last Christmas.”

“Now *that’s* a husband. Somebody who gets his rocks half off at a Wal-Mart.” After their waitress had left, Magee said, “See what I mean?”

“I see what you mean.”

Juliette had nearly finished her salad when an old man limped past the register station, into her line of sight. He recognized her boss from behind and spoke his name. Magee was talking to an executive producer on his cell phone, so he stuck the index finger of his free hand straight up, then angled it toward the unoccupied glass of iced tea. The man lowered his laptop computer to the sloppily seamed carpet tiles before he sat down.

Juliette couldn’t resist. “Did you *really* write *Yippy Ki Yay mother—*”

The old man stopped her with his eyes, which then scanned the vast, empty room. “I had help with that one,” he whispered.

“That scene is so awesome.” Juliette found herself whispering, too. “When Bruce Willis is laying on the runway, and he torches that jet fuel leading to the terrorists’ plane—I mean, it’s one of the defining moments in modern American cinema.”

“Thank you.”

“I studied it in college. Spring term. *Introduction to Action Adventure*. Okay, I signed up because it’s a requirement for my major, but then I got hooked, you know? That’s how I landed this internship with Mr. Magee. Engaged Learning,” she explained.

Magee pocketed his cell phone. “Sorry, Charlie. Frigging producers. You get my email?”

“Yes, Mr. Magee.”

“Guy’s a frigging genius, and he calls me Mr. Magee. *Mister Magee*.” Magee grinned at Juliette. “Didn’t I tell you Charlie Harris was a frigging genius?”

She simply nodded her head. When her boss had studiously avoided the *f*-word, Juliette had been too stunned to speak.

Magee clapped his hands. “So you know the scenario. Mid-budget chop-socky, Charlie. We’re looking for something that pushes PG-13 but doesn’t drop an R. So the junior high kids can put one over on their parents. Think you can handle it?”

“I’ve already handled it.” He passed a typescript to Juliette. After she’d passed it over to Magee, he pulled out another hard copy

for her, and she began to read.

Anglo Hero enters abandoned warehouse at midnight. Dim security lighting. Suspense. Cut to Korean mobster and his twin sister, crouching behind a crate marked POKET CALULATORS. They step out from either side of the crate.

“AIEEEE!” Hero tilts torso left, to evade flying sister.

“AIEEEE!” Hero tilts torso right, as mobster brother flies by. Hero grins at camera. Three minutes of standard kung fu mayhem. Hero power-kicks sister into crate, scattering substandard third-world electronic equipment over blast radius of thirty feet.

Hero approaches her, at a deliberate pace. Mobster brother tries frantically to pursue, but slips and falls on pocket calculator. Hero handcuffs left wrist of dazed sister to nearby forklift. Hero turns to face brother. Hero’s face suddenly changes from supreme confidence to slight confusion. Hero looks slowly downward, until he sees sister’s foot lodged between his legs.

Hero whispers, “AIEEEE?” Hero grabs sister’s foot and twists it until, with a decisive snap, it rotates 180 degrees from its customary position.

Sister screams, “AIEEEE!”

Hero drops sister’s foot and pursues mobster brother once more. Three minutes of climactic kung fu mayhem. Hero punishes every part of mobster’s body, except groin. Mobster finally collapses, backwards, unconscious, before Hero’s triumphant scowl.

“You no lead him his lights!” sister screams. “We cop suey!”

Hero smiles, then puts an exploratory Nike in supine mobster’s crotch. One pocket calculator crashlands, to Hero’s left. Another, to Hero’s right.

“No statisticals!” Jump cut to sister’s screaming face, as she picks up more calculators to heave at Hero. “No statisticals!”

“And a one,” Hero declaims, transferring weight to front foot.

“No statisticals!”

Hero readjusts Nike. “And a two.”

CHAMPAGNE CORK POPS. ROLL TO CREDITS. LAWRENCE WELK MUSIC THROUGHOUT, PUNCTUATED BY CRIES OF “HELLO, HAPPY PEOPLE” AND “AIEEEE!”

She looked up from her hard copy. Mr. Magee must have been waiting for her to finish before pronouncing his judgment. “Unbelievable! Every Mongoloid in America will be acting this out in his algebra class!” He stood up in the empty restaurant and screamed in falsetto. “*No statisticals!*” Now he returned to his customary pitch. “You can’t *buy* publicity like that. Not to mention the potential synergy with Texas Instruments.” Magee gazed at Juliette. “There’s a problem?”

Visual Confirmation. That was in her job description, too.
 “There’s a problem,” Juliette stared back, without blinking. “The dog.”

“Good girl,” Magee said.

Charlie rubbed his sparse eyebrows. “You didn’t tell me about a dog.”

“Well, I figured we’d work it out here,” Magee said. “You’ve given us some great stuff. For the sequel. But for now . . .”

Charlie drank his sweet tea, but Juliette could’ve sworn he was thinking. Finally, when he got to the point where he was sucking up mostly ice melt through his translucent straw, he said, “Why do you need a dog?”

“Canine buddy xenophobic chop-socky.” Magee adjusted his gaze. “Virgin territory?”

“Never been done,” she confirmed.

Magee continued. “While this cop’s beating up on the Korean mob, his cocker spaniel follows him around. Lots of *mise en scène* shit with the dog. You know. Barks. Whimpers. Crotch licking. Paws over the eyes. Then, for the finale, the dog does the *coup de grâce*. You figure out how.”

Charlie swirled the straw in his sweaty glass. “Could you make it a cat?”

Magee shrugged, and told Juliette he’d defer to her judgment. She was a lot closer to thirteen than he was.

“Could I borrow your cell?” Juliette didn’t want to waste her own minutes on Digital Donnybrook business. “I’ll call my kid brother.”

“How about *two* cats?” Charlie suggested. “Eastwood and Willis?”

Juliette stopped in mid-punch, nearly dropping the tiny phone into her salad plate.

“I told you!” Magee shouted, slamming his palm on the table. “Guy’s a frigging genius!”

But Charlie was already at work on his laptop. When he’d finished, Juliette stood over Magee’s shoulder, so they could both view the screen.

This time, it’s a supermarket warehouse with a crate full of PREMIUM CAT FOOD. The villains wear baggy ghetto pants as they fly past. Eastwood and Willis meow in unison, giving Anglo Hero a paws-up while he kicks the sister into the crate. Kibbles scatter everywhere. Hero handcuffs the sister’s ankles together, behind her head, and says, “Don’t move.” After her brother finally collapses, Eastwood and Willis sit on his chest.

“*You no lead him his lights!*” sister screams. “*We cop suey!*” Sister drags herself to an open crate of canned cat food. She starts

throwing 3-ounce containers at Hero. Eastwood and Willis wander away.

Hero picks up container and says, “*Tasty Tenders.*” Hero pulls aluminum tab, lifts the waistband of mobster’s baggy pants, and dumps food inside. “*Oh Eastwood! Oh Willis!*” Hero holds open both legs of mobster’s ghetto pants at the ankles. Following their nostrils, the cats approach slowly, from opposite directions.

More cans strike around Hero.

“*No catstray! No catstray!*”

Eastwood and Willis have become large, invisible lumps, moving up mobster’s legs. Hero makes certain that mobster’s black belt is secure.

“*No catstray!*”

Jump cut to mobster’s face. His eyes suddenly open.

“*Eastwood, meet Willis,*” Hero declaims.

Opening eight notes from “*The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly*” theme, while the two bulges meet beneath the baggy pants.

“*AIEEEE!*”

ROLL TO CREDITS. EASTWOOD AND WILLIS
 ACAPPELLA.

Magee was applauding, with his wallet already in his hands. The muffled thumps sounded like someone hitting a sorority pledge with a paddle. “Both endings, Charlie! How much?”

“The usual. Times two.”

“Fair enough. And as far as I’m concerned, it’s all under the radar. Geeks at the IRS, they like their Adult Entertainment. They owe me. Big time.”

But Charlie wouldn’t take cash. And why did he insist on *two* checks? Both payable to him? Frigging genius, Juliette decided, was something no nineteen-year-old organ donor needed to understand. That was the beauty of Engaged Learning.

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Scene Two

He managed to get inside the Bank of America branch office on Pelham Road three minutes before it closed. He countersigned both checks FOR DEPOSIT ONLY and put them into separate accounts that bore the same name—Charles Harris—but different Social Security numbers. He asked the teller for deposit slips with the current balance for each account. When he saw they matched, right down to the penny, he thanked the young woman for her patience. It was already 5:05. “Just doing my job,” she said. But she followed him to the tempered glass door and locked it behind him as he left the building. The man

didn't take it personally. It wasn't his usual branch. Here, he was just another stranger.

Outside, the soiled cotton-candy clouds had lowered into a slow, steamy drizzle. He shivered, despite the heat, as he walked past the ATM machines to his Volvo 850. In the mist, it looked like an abandoned refrigerator turned sideways. It was the safest car on the road when he'd bought it ten years ago. But now? He'd have to Google it.

He twisted his light stick, then put the intermittent wipers on their lowest setting. When he got back on I-385, he continued driving south. He passed a few cars until he came up behind a minivan with glowing taillights. The mist was getting denser, more opaque. He trailed behind, close enough to see the red halos, far enough away to stop, if he had to, in plenty of time.

As he looked ahead, he tried to keep his mind empty. But he couldn't help wondering what would become of Mr. Magee's latest canary in the mineshaft of modern American demographics. A blond, beautiful child, determined to grow up by yesterday afternoon. He thought of Shakespeare's Juliet, and Friar Lawrence with a leer and a \$10,000 hairpiece. . . . Then he imagined Mr. Magee at something called the *Lay-Ze-Boy Dude Ranch And Bordello* in Climax, Nevada, talking ponies and perversions with his own ex-wife, telling her that Charlie Harris didn't know what bliss he was missing. Charlie laughed aloud. Only God knew what Margitte was doing now. And with whom. He hadn't seen her since—he tried to remember the year. He couldn't.

His mind drifted into the mist beyond his windshield. Now he saw himself younger, much younger, inside a circle of five-gallon industrial buckets, under the suffering live oak in their back yard in Belladonna. The Drought That Wouldn't End. He'd punched two small holes in the bottom of each bucket, then filled them, brimming, with water from the black rubber hose every morning. The most efficient way to safeguard a big tree. He'd read about it in a gardening book, before computers

He was pulling into the trailer park, with no recollection of the last miles he'd driven. It had stopped raining, and the only water still standing slunk in the culverts flanking the gravel road. After he pulled underneath his fiberglass carport, he cut off the engine and felt the parking brake click into place beneath his hand. He closed and reopened his eyes. Something metallic was ticking, erratically, like a broken egg timer. For the rest of the day, he told himself, he would remember everything. He would see, hear, smell, or taste every contingency. Nothing would escape his attention. Nothing.

Tomasa met him at the door. She was a stout, thirtyish woman with stained teeth that almost exactly matched the color of her skin.

"Mr. Charlie!" She freed the laptop from his hand and looked back over her shoulder. "Your father is home!" The woman walked with him into a long, narrow room filled with Scotchguarded sofas and chairs. Cartoons were blaring from behind a closed door. "I can stay until six-forty-five," she said. "He never take his bath if you no here."

"Sorry," he said. "Complications."

"Tell me about it," Tomasa smiled. She tapped the highest button of her blouse three times. "*Tres hijos*. Mr. Charlie, I know the complications. But my husband is early from work today for the rain. He can handle thirty minutes." She walked to the bedroom door, opened it, and shouted over the television. "Charlie, your father is home! I put your pajamas next to the sink."

The cartoons poofed into silence. Tomasa came back out of his son's room, reaching up to guide Charlie by one shoulder. His son's other arm lagged behind at its customary, bizarre angle, a hieroglyphic that defied translation. "Hi, Daddy!" Charlie shouted. "You make my day!"

"Hi, Junior." He walked up to Charlie and ruffled what was left of his son's hair.

Tomasa led his son down the short hallway. Charlie shuffled from the carpet to the ceramic tile, his Spiderman slippers barely clearing the threshold strip. While the spigots creaked open, a head popped out again through the doorway. "I'll be back!"

Because three people couldn't fit inside the small bathroom, he sat down in his recliner with the local newspaper, and he pretended to read. After a long drive, his bad foot always felt better when he fully extended his legs. The sound of splashing water came through the sheetrock behind his head. Tomasa was laughing. "Clean yourself, Charlie. Or I have to clean for you."

"No statisticals! No statisticals!"

"Then you wash," Tomasa said. "You take the rag."

Ten minutes later, Charlie emerged—his skin still warm-water rosy where his neck peeked out from his collar, where his hairy wrists stuck out from the ends of his flannel sleeves. "I don't like these," Charlie said. "I want Spidermans."

"They don't make those pajamas in your size," he said. "I'm sorry."

"Sorry. Sorry Charlie. Spiderman is big, too."

"Not as big as you, son."

Tomasa checked to see that all Charlie's buttons were fastened. After she sat him down at the breakfast bar with his spill-proof cup, she whispered, "I make him pajamas, Mr. Charlie. For his birthday."

"They have Spiderman fabric now?" He looked up from the Lifestyles section, which he had just begun to read. Tomasa's brown

eyes were brimming with light.

"In Kmart I see the bedsheets. Cotton. One hundred percent. I can use them. Mr. Charlie, you pay me so much. It is a little I can do."

He'd moved to this trailer park, twelve years ago, because it was the only place he'd discovered where no one—no one—ever tormented his child. Tomasa lived a half-dozen families away, with her own family. With Jorge and their *tres hijos*—boys who looked like Guatemalan translations of Russian dolls when they stood side by side. She'd been helping him ever since he'd broken his foot trying to get his own son out of the bathtub. "I'll buy the bedsheets," he promised. "Go home. It's seven o'clock."

"The food is in the blue dish. Auto Reheat. Five minutes."

"Thank you, Tomasa. *Gracias*. Now go home."

She'd made a rice casserole with chicken, in a white sauce that didn't stain Charlie's pajamas. After they'd finished, he filled two plastic bowls with cat food and watched his son put them out on the front porch.

"Oh catstrays!" His son was shouting as if he wanted every small animal in the world to hear him. "Oh catstrays!"

Eastwood, an old ginger-colored tabby, came slinking up the stairs first. When Charlie unfolded his arm and dangled it behind the cat's ears, he said, "Be careful, son." Eastwood sprawled on the poured concrete, his big front paws hanging over the lip of his dish. Willis, late as usual, preferred to chew standing up.

"Time for dessert, Charlie." They left the cats outside, licking their bowls. When they got to the kitchen, he opened the refrigerator and took out a tall can of whipped cream. He shook it to make sure it was fully thawed. Then, like a gunfighter, he drew it up from his belt and pointed the nozzle at his son's face. "You've had this coming for a long time, mister."

"If you're going to shoot, SHOOT!" Charlie said. He opened his mouth so wide that his father could see the fillings in his bottom molars. "Don't talk!"

He pressed the plastic tip until his son's tongue disappeared under a white swoosh. Charlie swallowed, licked his lips clean, and said, "Do you feel lucky?"

"Time for bed, Junior. Man's got to know his limitations."

After his son was under the covers, he sat on the edge of the mattress. He pulled out his wallet and cross-checked the deposit slips, to make sure he had the right one. Then he closed his son's fingers around the tissue paper. "Good job, buddy."

"Good job, Daddy!" Beneath the bedsheets, Charlie's legs were twitching at the random, familiar angles. *Exaggerated deep tendon reflexes*, the Spasticity Clinic had said. They had a name for

everything, and a cure for nothing.

"Say your prayers, Charlie."

"Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul to keep, and if I die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take. God bless Eastwood, and Willis, and Arnold, and Norris, and Daddy, and Mommy." He reached over to his nightstand and picked up a washed-out Kodachrome of a young woman sitting on a pony, holding a laughing toddler in her lap.

Twelve months after she'd started giving riding lessons at the local equestrian park.

Six months after she'd come home to find their son, outside, under the oak tree, in their back yard with the new security fencing, while his father was lost in a screenplay whose title even God had forgotten, and whose options had not been renewed.

Five months after the doctors had told them that more toddlers drown in big buckets than in salt water.

Three months after he'd come off the ventilator, out of the coma, and miraculously spoken their names.

Two months after they'd taken him home—to a front yard full of Belladonna neighbors and banners and balloons!

Eight months before he'd passed all the "developmental milestones" that he ever would.

Twelve months before a counselor had told them that seventy-six per cent of all marriages survive a "near drowning incident" and she'd said, "That leaves twenty-four per cent."

Eighteen months before Margitte had told him that she couldn't live with the tricks he kept playing on the world—a broken bucket that had turned their son into something less than the beasts she guided to and from the stable each day.

Twenty-one months before he'd shouted that *she'd* thought the buckets were a good idea, too. She'd begged him to move to Belladonna. She'd fallen in love with that live oak for its "curb appeal." Where was her wisdom *then*?

Charlie was smudging the glass with his lips. "Yippy Ki Yay, Mommy! Yippy Ki Yay!"

He took the frame by the edges and wiped the glass clean with a tissue. "That's right, Charlie." He stared at the radiant face of the wife, of the mother, who'd finally ridden out of their lives. A posed picture. The backdrop, of course, was painted—a snowy mountain in the distance, shimmering like an exotic, unreachable dessert. "Yippy Ki Yay." But he couldn't speak the obscenity, the one word that had become his enduring, anonymous contribution to American culture.

For five minutes, his son pretended to be asleep. To be more than asleep. It was his favorite game, the one he played every night.

Kestrel

Loud, gurgling, gasping snores, then silence. It always ended the same way. “I’m dead,” Charlie announced, his eyes scrunched tight while his lips moved. “Are you dead yet?”

His father kissed him on his unshaven cheek. He turned off the light on the nightstand and pressed his own lips together in the new dark. Then he stood up from the bedside and wondered if Mr. Magee—if anybody—would ever bring him a script worthy of the six endless words that his beautiful child had become.

Silvia Curbelo

This Rain

Grass this green keeps its own secret.
It splits the world in two, the way love does.
This rain, and the terrible sweetness that comes after.
Beside the broken house of our childhood
wildflowers bloom, tiny embers
in an empty field. Whatever rain comes
is an afterthought, but it’s always enough.
I can stand perfectly still in such a place
and hold that moment open. Not green
but the memory of green. The simple fact
of grass on a hillside. A secret becoming
larger with each telling. But nothing
should ever be that open or that green.
A flower turns away for a moment.
Something is falling inside the rain
and we can’t hear it. And green
breaking the stem.

