

Allison

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Allison slammed the door of her maroon '94 Volvo 850 turbo and ran up the old logging road towards the woods. Not caring about the fact that she was leaving her car parked on a dangerous curve at the bottom of a steep hill, she had pulled the car to a screeching stop just short of the old road which granted access to the property she owned behind her parents.

When her parents had retired to their vacation house in New Hampshire, they had quickly grown quite accustomed to the absolute quiet darkness of the nights. They had retired here not just for the fact that they already owned this house, but because of the privacy and solitude that it offered. That's why when the 100+ acre plot of land adjoining theirs was put up for sale, they petitioned Allison to buy it. They had told her it would make a fine investment, but she knew that what they really wanted was for someone to buy the land that would not develop it. What better way to ensure that than to have their only daughter buy it. They both knew that she shared their views on how the surrounding land should be used, and that was sparingly, if at all.

Not that she ever regretted buying the land, on the contrary, it gave her a place to get away to when she needed to. A place where she could go and be at peace with the world. She came here when she couldn't go anywhere else, or when she needed to make life altering decisions. She came here when she decided to break up with a boyfriend, and she came here when she fell in love with a new boyfriend. This was her place, no one else's, and it was the only place on earth where her mind could ever be said to be clear.

This plot of land, halfway between nowhere and anywhere else, was her sanctuary. It was therefore the only place she could think of to go, when she finally faced the truth about what had happened.

As she started running around the first curve of the access road, the events of the last week started running through her head again. She couldn't stop the events from unfolding in her mind, just as she had been powerless to stop them from unfolding in reality. In fact the events themselves had had very little to do with her directly. Instead it was their impact on her emotionally and spiritually that they had wounded her in a most profound way.

As far as Allison was concerned, the most important virtues in life were truth and loyalty. Inversely, of course, the things she most despised in life were dishonesty and disloyalty. In fact, more than disloyalty itself, what she could not stomach was loyalty betrayed. This to her was the most heinous of crimes. To give ones loyalty to another, and have it betrayed was akin to having your heart ripped out by the devil himself while he laughed at your disbelief that he could be capable of such a thing. Simply put, she loathed the idea. Death was often times preferable.

As she rounded the turn on the access road, she was greeted by a fork in the road. To the right was the road to a neighbors house. Straight ahead the road changed to merely a path. This path was the old logging road, now much overgrown with weeds, small saplings, and wildflowers. The ruts from years of huge logging trucks lumbering down this relatively short, yet steep hill were still easily seen on the path, but this was far from a passable road, except for perhaps the highest of four wheel drive vehicles.

Without even noticing the other road, she ran up the hill, halfway between each of the parallel wheel ruts, formed so long ago. Except for her sobbing, she was not even winded by her sudden sprint. Eight years of martial arts was certainly good for something.

“How could you?” were the only words she could form in her mind. Her mind reeled from recent events. One week from today she was scheduled to take her second Dan test. The test for her second degree black belt had been her dream since she started her training almost eight years ago.

Allison had started taking Tae Kwon Do when she got out of collage. She had been active in sports in school, and when she reached the real world, there was a void in her life that could only be filled with physical activity. She had always wanted to take the martial arts, and figured now was as good a time as ever, what with CNN reporting that one out of every four women will be sexually assaulted in their lifetime. Why not give some sleaze-bag the surprise of his life if he decided to try and make her his victim.

As she progressed through the ranks, she realized that martial arts was not entirely about fighting or self defense. As time went on, she found that she was doing things she would never had even tried earlier in her life. Suddenly anything was possible if she put her mind to it. Through years of training she learned to focus her energies where they needed to be, be they breaking a board for a belt test, or getting a job done at work. She realized that the principals she learned in class could be applied to just about anything in life.

Two additional things she had learned from her training, was respect for authority and loyalty to those that deserved it. Respect was of course a two way street, something she felt very few people actually understood. A good teacher is respected partially because he or she respects the student. A student who is loyal to a teacher, is usually rewarded with loyalty from the teacher to the student after a period of time.

Loyalty combined with respect can make for powerful people. History says that power corrupts. Until this past week, Allison would have believed that of anyone but her teachers at the Tae Kwon Do academy where she trained.

A week ago she had heard from her head instructor, Mr. Peterson, that one of the franchise schools had closed. For many years now, Master Park (The head of all their schools) had sold franchises to very loyal members who were of the appropriate rank, and who had shown great loyalty to the schools. Allison was of mixed emotions about this, feeling on one hand that a school should not be bought, but on the other hand understating that for a business to thrive, franchises may be a great help. The Master had in fact offered a school franchise to her, but she had declined, feeling that making a hobby into a job could kill the enjoyment of the hobby. Now, for entirely different reasons, she had discovered her decision to be a smart one.

Allison did not understand how a Tae Kwon Do school that was running under the expert tutelage of Master Park could fold. From everything they had ever told her, a

school run by Master Park's methods could never fail. After all, in the 2000 Olympics, Tae Kwon Do was to become a medal event! People should be flocking to Tae Kwon Do schools as the sport became more and more of a household word. Why then would a school close? As she understood it, money was plentiful to those loyal enough to stick with it. Sure there was the start-up slowness that accompanied any new business venture, but this particular school had been in operation for about three years! Plenty of time for a school to become known and established in a community. Why then the closure?

She had wondered this for days, but not knowing the owner of the school very closely (She had never trained with him), she had decided that it was not her place to ask. The oriental culture has very strict rules of etiquette regarding the relationship between student and Master, and asking the Master about business dealings was not considered proper. As such, she decided that this particular event, however strange, was not her concern. It had not changed anything concerning her training, so she ignored it. Besides, she had her upcoming test to worry about.

Life had progressed normally for the next few days. She had trained hard in preparation for who knows what could be asked of her at the test. She had gone to work each day, and gone home every night after class. Having decided the school closing did not concern her, she didn't waste any more thought about it. Thursday's events had changed all that.

She had left work at her normal time, the drive to class having become as much of a ritual as the class itself. After the usual forty minutes of wonderful traffic, she had pulled into the parking lot where her *do-jang* or Tae Kwon Do school had been for close to eleven years. Only today it was gone.

As she pulled the Volvo into her usual spot, she looked over to the school doorway, just as she had every class for the past six or so years that she had been assisting the head instructor, to see who would be standing outside the doorway to ensure that the children of the previous class arrived with their parents safely. Only today there was no one standing at the doorway. In fact the doorway was closed, the lights were off, and as far as she could tell from her parking lot vantage point, nobody was home.

Baffled, she pulled her gym-bag from the passenger seat and exited the Volvo wondering what could be amiss. Had she forgotten a holiday? It had happened before. Once you get used to a training schedule, you tend to neglect such trivial things as minor holidays when the schools are closed. No, today was not a holiday, it was merely Thursday. As she walked up to the door, she saw Frank, one of the students that had been training with Mr. Peterson for about two years. He was about average height with hair and a beard of reddish blond hair that made him look deceptively unthreatening. Having sparred with him on many occasions, she knew this to be a simple impression that she had soon overcome when he had surprised her with his quickness and decisiveness in the ring.

As she walked up to the door, Frank was bent over slightly, his hand shielding his eyes from the bright rays of sunlight which impeded his view through the glass door.

"Frank, how are you today?" This was her standard greeting to students. She had learned quickly on in her teaching that it was very hard to give each of the hundred or so students she saw every day a different greeting.

Frank quickly turned around and after standing up straight, gave a quick bow to Allison and replied “Good evening Miss Kenwood. I’m fine, how are you?”, this being the expected answer from a student.

“I’m fine, thanks. What’s going on?” She gestured towards the school, which by all accounts should be teeming with happy children, eagerly awaiting their parents after an hour of discipline, training, and fun.

“I was hoping you could tell me. When I got here, the school was like this.” He too gestured to the vacant, dark school. “I don’t understand. Is the school closed today? I figured they would have told us or at least hung a sign”

“I’m afraid I’m as confused as you are Frank” The truth was, she was baffled. In eight years, she had never seen any of Master Park’s schools closed for any reason except planned holidays. Even when one of the schools owners had contracted salmonella, he had called for reinforcements, and waited at the school until they had arrived. Only then allowing himself to go home. The schools were always open when they were supposed to be. That was just part of reality as Allison, and apparently Frank, had come to know it.

Knowing that Frank was waiting for her, his effective superior, to make a decision as to what should be done, she quickly made one.

“Well, it’s obvious that the school is closed, you might as well go home. I’ll just pop inside and hang a sign on the door so other students won’t go through what we are.” She had been given a key to the school many years ago, as she was one of the people Mr. Peterson had come to trust the most of all his students.

Frank, knowing that her decision was effectively law when it had to do with Tae Kwon Do affairs, provided she was the highest rank present, obeyed without question. “Yes Ma’am. Well have a nice night, and I’ll see you tomorrow”

“I’ll be here. You have a nice night too”

Frank gave another quick bow and returned to his car. After he had driven off, she pulled out her keys and found the one for the school. Slipping the key into the lock, she gave the door the small push needed to let the lock turn and turned the key. Only it did not turn. Not even a budge. She pulled the door and pushed again, assuming that it was being it’s old temperamental self. When she turned the key, it again stubbornly refused to even budge. Annoyed she looked down to the lock and noticed how shiny it was.

When Allison had first started training, she had been given the job of shoveling the snow off of the sidewalk in front of the school. The snow had accumulated from the wind, and the melting of icicles from the strip mall’s overhanging roof had formed lumps of ice like cement along the edge of the curb. This being the area where children stepped from their parents car, it was imperative that it be clear of ice and snow.

Having spent the better part of an hour trying to chisel the accumulated ice from the cement, she had come to the conclusion that her cracked plastic shovel was completely and utterly useless. Still, she had managed to clear away the majority of the hazard. When she came back inside, she had remarked to Mr. Peterson that perhaps it was time for a new shovel.

“Oh, that shovel has some use left in it. You managed to get the snow and ice away didn’t you?” With that he had returned to his paperwork, effectively ending the discussion. Knowing better than to argue with the head instructor, she put the shovel

away, having learned today's lesson that waste is not tolerated, and items in need of repair are used until the repair is a necessity as opposed to a mere luxury.

Remembering her lesson all those years ago, she wondered why on earth the lock would have been changed. She had closed the school only last week and it had functioned fine, certainly no where need needing to be replaced.

Silently beginning to wonder what could be the cause of the mystery at hand, and mildly annoyed that she had come here when her trip could have been avoided, she packed her bag back into her Volvo and went home.

When she got there she called the school to see if Mr. Peterson had left an alternate message on the answering machine. There was no answer. She tried Mr. Parks school, which was the organization's headquarters. Again, no answer. Strange, she thought, what are the odds that both schools would have an emergency closing, this being the only plausible explanation she could come up with. She called another of the six schools that comprised her Tae Kwon Do academy. And another, and another. All her queries resulted the same. No answer.

Confused, she decided there was nothing to be gained by worrying about it, so she went to the garage and practiced for a while on the heavy bag. Years of discipline and experience would not let her sit around on a night when she should be training. After about two hours, she took a shower and went to bed, still wondering what could possibly invoke the schools to close for a day without any notice.

The next day, she called her school, as well as the head school repeatedly throughout the day. She performed her job functions as she normally did, her discipline not allowing her to do anything else, but when she kept getting the same endless ringing that indicated no one was home, she started to wonder what was going on. Sure the school closing unexpectedly for a day was odd, but she was sure there were events that transpired in the head instructors lives that she was not privy to. An unexplained closing of two days however was stretching the envelope of believability as far as she was concerned.

As soon as five o'clock arrived, drove straight to her school, only to find not only the door locked and the lights off, but the sign in the window pronouncing 'Tae Kwon Do for only \$99.95' missing, the neon sign that said 'Karate' which usually hung just above it was gone, as were the blinds, the little hanging 'We'll be back at - ' sign with the clock that had the movable hands, why even the painting of the school's name and logo on the front door was gone.

Allison stepped back from the door as if she had been punched in the face, reeling from the shock. This was not part of accepted normality. This school was a part of her life. This place was akin to holy ground to her. This was the place where her life's stress was relieved. Where she learned things like loyalty, perseverance, respect. This school, which had been a major driving force in her life for the last eight years, was gone.

Having staggered back a few feet from the door, she noticed for the first time a new sign proclaiming 'This space for rent - Call 555-5039'.

This couldn't be happening. Her second Dan test was next week! How could the school be closed? Had they moved? That would explain the space being for rent, but she was sure she would have known about such an event. Hell, moving to a new location

would have been a big deal. Students would have been requested to come paint! This was something far more worrisome.

Without knowing what else to do, she decided to take a drive to the head school, located about 10 miles away. When she got there, the same evidence of abandonment confronted her. She stood in front of the Master's school, with its larger storefront, and simply stared in disbelief for what seemed like hours.

Eventually she came to her senses and decided she should go home. Driving the winding roads back to her apartment, she tried to make sense of the things she had seen in the past two days. She could not however seem to tie the schools closings with anything that made sense. Why would the schools close? Why wouldn't she have known about the closings in advance? What the hell was going on?

When she got home, the answer was waiting for her in the mail.

Thinking of the strange events in her life, she grabbed the mail from its box outside her apartment door without looking to see who any of it was from. When she got into her upstairs apartment, she threw the mail onto the dining room table, having assigned the urgency of going to the bathroom a priority higher than that of reading the mail. When she got to looking through the mail, what she saw made her sit down involuntarily.

She had the usual junk mail and bills, but what truly took her aback was a letter from Mr. Peterson. After staring numbly at the letter for a minute or two, she opened the envelope with trembling hands.

As she read the letter, one hand came up to her mouth as she stifled what would be the beginning of a long string of tears.

Dear Allison,

I am writing this note to you for one reason and one reason only.

You deserve an answer.

You have no doubt discovered that the schools have been closed. I cannot tell you why specifically, nor can I tell you where to find me or any of the other head instructors. If Master Park knew of this letter to you, I cannot imagine what he would do. Suffice to say I would not enjoy it.

We have gone away, as I'm sure you have surmised, never to return. I am ashamed to admit it, but we have all succumbed to the power of money. I cannot say more, but please understand, I have always held you in the highest regard. Your loyalty has been beyond reproach all these years, and you have been a model student.

I feel that you, more than anyone else deserves more than what you must now be feeling. That is why I have included your tuition costs and second Dan test fee's. I feel that you don't deserve to be left in the cold. I only hope that you can somehow understand. We are talking about A LOT of money.

I ask of you only this; Please do not tell anyone that I have written you, or that you know of what has happened.

Good luck in all that you may strive to achieve,

Carl Peterson.

Sobbing openly, she dropped the letter and the envelope it came in to the table. As it hit, a cashier's check for \$2500 fell out onto the table. Allison didn't even see it as she all but ran to the door, grabbing her keys, knowing only that she had to get to her woods.

That was over three hours ago. Now, as she got to the top of the hill, she stopped and looked at the huge pine that had stood there, on the side of the road, for what she assumed to be well over 300 years. The tree, which had started as three or more trees had at some time in its life joined together to form one tree. The base of this tree still showed the original three tree trunks as being fused into one immense, almost tripod-like structure. About three feet from the ground a branch so immense that it could easily have stood as a huge tree on its own, sprouted almost parallel to the ground for about six feet at which point it angled sharply upward, forming an almost perfect chair for someone to sit in and ponder the doings of mere mortal men.

From about ten feet upwards, the tree was almost normal in its size and circumference. The base however gave the observer the feeling that this tree was as old as the earth itself, and maybe, just a little wiser.

Not sobbing anymore, but still streaming tears down her cheeks, Allison jumped up and sat on the huge lower branch of the mammoth tree. Almost at once she felt a little closer to peace. Her mind calmed, and her emotions relaxed, if only for just a moment.

She went over the events as they happened once more in her mind, this time trying to analyze what had happened, to see if she had somehow missed something that would make it all make sense.

No, it was clear, her loyalty to the school, her instructor, and the master at the head of the whole institution, was obviously worth more to her than it was to them. They had all along been using loyalty and respect as a ruse to get money, which they had no noble uses for. Only selfish ones.

They had quite simply betrayed every thing she had thought they stood for. Nobility, Honesty, Loyalty, all lies. The very foundation of what her life had become seemed to be crumbling beneath her. How could this be happening she wondered. She had basically given her soul to an ideal. The ideas that honor and loyalty were to be held in the highest regard were paramount to the very nature of Tae Kwon Do. Since Allison had committed herself to living the way of the Tae Kwon Do practitioner, she had made these virtues paramount to her own way of life as well. She had naturally assumed that those whom had taught her those virtues, had held them in a similarly high regard. The realization of that mistake shook her to her very core.

She hopped off of the tree, deciding that she could not sit still anymore after sitting in her comfortable, yet restrictive Volvo for the last three hours. Without thinking, she started to pace back and forth on top of the hill, in the middle of the New Hampshire woods, the only sounds besides her muttering "How could this have happened?" being the far away shriek of a hawk looking for dinner apparently unsuccessfully thus far.

As she paced in the space between the wheel ruts, she became more and more agitated, muttering over and over "How could this have happened?". After a minute or

two, her muttering became more animated and had changed to “How could they do this to me?”. Her mind, struggling to understand how her basic values could be so utterly corrupted in so short a span of time, brought every means at its disposal to bear. This included some physiological changes that were very similar to those she felt when sparring. Her body temperature started to rise, and she became more and more agitated as adrenaline was pumped into her blood.

Becoming, for the first time, angry at her instructors for what they had done, she began to scream “How could you do this to me?”. The surrounding forest seemed to quiet even more as if it knew she was a force not to be reckoned with at this point in time. Even the hawk stopped its shrieking. Whether it had found a meal or had decided now would not be the best time to upset Allison, only the hawk knew.

Screaming to the heavens with her fists raised high above her head, her body continued its transformation, readying itself for a conflict that was not coming. Stress chemicals were building, and only partially being released through the tears that glistened on her cheeks.

As her fury grew, she fell to her knees, high on the hill, surrounded by nature. The great tree she had been sitting on, looked on completely unmoved by her outburst. It almost seemed to mock her with its indifference.

New Hampshire is called “The Granite State”. It’s called that for good reason, as during the end of the last ice age, as the great glaciers retreated back to the poles, they left behind all the boulders they had picked up along the way. As a result, the New Hampshire landscape is littered with boulders, rocks and cobbles. They are imbedded in the soil, laying on the ground, and are found especially in the rivers.

As Allison fell to her knees, her right knee struck one of these boulders, which much like the iceberg that was the Titanic’s doom, only revealed a small portion of its mammoth size to the air, the rest being buried in the dirt of the road.

Her anger at the injustice that had been served her, coupled with the unexpected, intense pain she now felt in her right knee, pushed her over the edge. Normally very reserved and controlled, she now lost control of her emotions for what may have been the first time since she was a child.

Pain ripping through her knee, she shifted her weight onto her left knee and scowled at the ground looking for the source of her pain. She saw what appeared to be a stone, about a foot across buried in the ground. Irrationally happy that she now had something to focus her anger on, she scratched at the stone, trying to pull it from the ground so she could hurl it down the hill, hopefully so she could see it smash on another, bigger boulder below.

As she scratched at the stone, she came to realize that it was bigger than she originally thought. This infuriated her to the point that she was beyond rational thought. For a split instance, she was so incensed by the rock’s refusal to submit to her will, that nothing mattered except the death of the rock.

Pushed to the point of breaking by the shattering foundation of her core beliefs, she was pushed past this point by the simple immovability of a rock. Had she been in a frame of mind to psychoanalyze herself, she would have laughed at her stupidity, taking out her rage on a rock. Nevertheless, none of that mattered to her now. Only the rock. The rock was the central point of all her problems. If not for this rock, which refused to

bend to her will, her life would be going on as it always had. Loyalty would still be a prized value, and money was not the reason for doing something you loved. This rock was the cause of all that was evil in the world, and she hated it.

Raising her body a little off the ground, she took a deep breath, not from training, not from a metabolic reason to keep living, but to feed the primal scream that followed. Raising her hand above her head, and squatting over the exposed surface of the rock, she let out a scream that shook the forest, which still watched silently around her. As she let out her terrible scream, she brought her hand down on the rock, twisting her shoulders to add more impact, as she had learned to do long ago in class.

As her open palm struck the rock, she was jolted back to reality by the oddest sensation she had every experienced. At the very instance of impact, fire seemed to shoot from her brain through her spinal cord, and extend to the very tip of every nerve in her body. For one split second, her body seemed consumed with energy. This was not the energy one feels when pumped up on adrenaline or even drugs. Not even orgasm compared with the flow of energy that had just used her body as a conduit. Later she would think back on the feeling and decide it could only be explained a feeling of pure power from within.

Instantly the pain in her knee was gone, the pains of the last week were also gone, and in fact, the pain that should have been in her hand from the impact, had never manifested itself. The feeling had so completely overwhelmed her, that she found herself sitting on the ground next to the rock which had, until recently, been the singular most abhorrent thing in her entire universe. Shaking off the odd sensation of power running through her body, she chuckled to herself at her loss of control and looked over to rock which had once again returned to its original state of innocence. She had to look twice at what she saw, not believing herself the first time.

The rock had about a one inch crack throughout its entire exposed surface.

Allison, taken aback by this apparent change in her surroundings, rolled over onto her hands and knees and looked closer at the rock, which she had sworn only minutes before was solid and smooth, with no visible cracks. Now as she ran her hands over the patch of granite on the ground, she could plainly see a crack which seemed to extend all the way through this boulder, untold feet into the ground. The dirt surrounding the boulder was cracked too, as if a bucket loader had hooked its giant teeth into the crack and tried to pull half the boulder apart from the other half without having the common sense to pull the entire boulder out of the dirt first.

Noticing these cracks she came to the unlikely conclusion that they had been made recently, as they had not yet been eroded by wind and rain. In fact, as she looked closer, she realized that the cracks had pulled apart not only the dirt they were formed in, but the divots she had made in the dirt only moments before with her nails as she tried to extract the rock from the ground.

She sat back suddenly as the shock of what seemed to be the truth hit her. She had made the crack! The evidence was pretty clear that when she had hit the rock, she had split it in two. That was impossible of course, no one could break a boulder in half no matter how many movies they had seen to the contrary. Yet here was proof.

She looked at her hand, only to find that there was no damage, and in fact no indication that it had made contact with the rock at all. When she had broken boards for

her training, she always walked away with her palms red from the impact. This time there was nothing. Still, as impossible as it appeared, she had just split a huge boulder into two pieces. The cracks emanating from the visible portion of the rock indicated that the underlying boulder was on the order of five or six feet across.

Could it be that she had just accomplished with her bare hands, what a jackhammer probably couldn't accomplish over the course of an hour or more? And what was that feeling of power she had felt at the point of impact? What the hell was going on here?

Her mind reeling with new, improbable conundrums, she stood up and headed back to the car.