

A Candle That Burns Twice As Bright Burns Half As Long

I first met young Brandon Lee when I was the head instructor at Ed Parker's Kenpo school in Santa Monica, California. Bruce used to drop by the school on Saturdays, and from time to time brought Brandon with him. Back then Brandon was around the age of two, and even at that early age it was evident to everyone how excited he was to be with his dad.

Bruce would proudly watch his son racing around the mats, then suddenly stop to demonstrate a stance or kick/punch combination he had learned from his dad. It was readily apparent from the outset that this child had his father's charisma, keen focus, and determination, even though at an early age he exhibited his famous signature smile that exuded the sheer essence of peacefulness so few of us ever embrace in life.

From adolescence Brandon never wanted to be a martial artist, but instead wanted to make his mark in life as an actor. After his father's death, this road would prove to be a difficult path because so many in the JKD world naturally assumed that Brandon would step to the helm as the captain of the ship. While Brandon clearly had the charisma, athletic ability, and determination of his father, the martial art was not his inner calling. Brandon was marching to a different drummer.

When in 1988 Linda and I began dating, the time came for me to become reacquainted with Brandon, who I had not seen since the late 1960s. I still remember as if it were yesterday walking into the house. The kitchen was immediately off to the left of the front entry, and I was no sooner inside the house than I was looking straight at Brandon. He was standing in the kitchen beside a blender, whipping up a round of Margaritas (I would point out that during the years that I assumed the role of his stepfather, I never knew him to abuse drugs or alcohol). Brandon had a gregarious nature and greeted me with a warm smile. We shook hands, and he handed me a salty Margarita. Within moments I made the mistake of bringing up his father. I just thought it would be a nice entree, but I could tell immediately that it was the wrong subject. I later came to learn that it wasn't that Brandon didn't like talking about his father, but rather than he was selective about whom he entered into such a dialog with. Too many years of everyone bringing up Bruce. As I recall, I casually mentioned that Bruce had one day, while giving a demonstration of his JKD at the home of Blake Edwards and Julie Andrews, kicked me the length of their swimming

pool. The news didn't faze Brandon. And Linda simply looked at me and remarked, "Yes, Bruce certainly did have focus."

Six months later Linda and I were married and, as one of the wedding party, Brandon, looking handsome in his gray tuxedo, walked Linda down the aisle and gave me her hand. That day will remain to the end of my life as one of my most memorable days.

As the weeks and months passed, Brandon began spending more and more time at the house. Since divorcing from my first wife, actress Jennifer Edwards, nine years earlier I had not enjoyed a family group environment – father, mother, and kids. I think Brandon missed this in his life as well, for he had been without his father for fifteen years. One day I was working on something around the house, the usual weekend honeydew list, and Brandon accompanied me to the local hardware store. I kept placing things on the countertop, and Brandon helped by retrieving items from my list. When it came time for the cashier to total out my purchases, he looked up at me and tossed a glance at Brandon. "Are the two of you together?"

"Yes. Actually he's my son," I answered matter-of-factly.

When Brandon and I walked out of the store and headed to the car, I noticed that he was a little choked up, if not teary-eyed, which wasn't like him.

"You all right," I asked.

"Yeah. It's just that no one has called me that in a long time. His reaction and words meant a great deal to me then, and still does.

I soon learned that Brandon had a competitive streak in him. Being a martial artist for over 25 years, I had little difficulty playing into his hand, which turned out to be the local family billiards place where the two of us became weekend regulars.

I don't think I had a chance from the get go. Looking back, Brandon was a real hustle. It had nothing to do with the money, because we didn't bet nickel-dime and who was buying burgers or a pitcher of beer. But he was smooth, and it was rare that I beat him. And he was smart enough not to run the table. I think he sensed that had he done that, I'd quit. But he loved ribbing me, and he was great at the casual verbal jab in the ribs, always followed by that innocent smile. "You want me to rack 'em?"

To rub salt into my wounds, after pool we would return to the house where I often ran into Linda's Uncle Vern, who sat at the kitchen table shuffling a deck of cards. "Care for a few hands of gin, Tom?" If I won one out of ten hands, I was fortunate. And that man was as smooth as

Brandon was. The two of them had me nicely positioned in their cross hairs. That first Christmas our families were together, I gifted Brandon with his own pool stick.

I am often asked about Brandon's personality. To this day, there are three memories of him that stand out in my mind. The first has to do with a computer game called "Where In the World Is Carmen San Diego?" I'm sure that many readers are familiar with this game, but for those who are not, the game is basically simple, and yet at the same time complex. The idea is that Carmen San Diego is a fugitive, and the player is pitted against the computer to find Carmen San Diego before the allotted time runs out. In order to capture the fugitive, one must follow a trail of clues that require the player to know geography and the flags of the main countries throughout the world. The game seems a whole lot easier at first glance than it really is. Besides the player's game score that is posted at the end of the game, player points are cumulative, and the computer keeps a list of the highest scoring players who receive promotions. The lowest is the equivalent of a "Gumshoe," (it's been awhile, and I no longer have the game) and the highest ranking is something akin to "Chief of Detectives." Between these two rankings are a half-dozen other ranking from Inspector to Captain, and the like.

Linda and I often played this game on weekends. We both loved to cook, and so while one was cooking, the other often ended up in the family room watching television or in the den playing on the computer. Linda and I enjoyed the competition, and I recall our individual rankings seemed to seesaw, depending on who was cooking on that particular night, which allowed the other to rack up points and attain a higher ranking.

One Sunday evening Linda was busy in the kitchen, and I was amusing myself at the computer. I heard Brandon enter through the front door. Minutes later he was poised in the doorway to the den, eyeing me at the computer. After we exchanged greetings, he asked casually, "What's that you're playing?"

"Where In the World Is Carmen San Diego," I replied as I continued to race against the clock, glancing now and again at a chart of flags positioned nearby on the floor. "It's not as easy as it looks. Besides having to know your way around the world, you need some basic detective sense." The computer clock ran out, and I racked up another 1500 points. I checked the master list and only had another 200 or so to outrank Linda. "Care to try your skill?"

"Sure." Brandon replied. He strolled over to the computer and took a seat. I explained the basics of the game, which I was convinced he didn't clearly understand. I clicked the start button

and Carmen San Diego took off, and the clock started running. Three minutes later Brandon had made one of the worst performances to date.

“Nice try. As I said, it takes –”

“I heard what you said,” Brandon cut me off with a wry smile. “How do you start a new game?”

“Just click on that start icon. Maybe if you take twenty minutes to learn the flags you’d have a better chance,” I remarked with a snicker. This was my chance to get even for the sound trouncing he gave me the day before at the pool hall.

“Yeah, maybe I’ll do that.”

I left the room and joined Linda in the kitchen. I jokingly told her not to be surprised if Brandon’s moaning and sniveling from the den intruded on the Frank Sinatra tape that was playing in the adjacent family room. I’d seen that game frustrate the calmest of people. I wasn’t surprised an hour later when during dinner Brandon mumbled something about barely tallying up enough points to make Gumshoe.

After dinner Linda and I watched television while Brandon sat nearby reading. He never cared much for the general television programming and was an avid reader of philosophy and psychology. Around ten o’clock Linda and I said goodnight to Brandon, who asked if we minded if he spent some time reading over his father’s files in my office. Because I had co-authored *The Bruce Lee Story* with Linda several months earlier, Bruce’s files were in my office. Brandon was considerate enough to ask, even though he knew I would have no objection. And that was it. We all said goodnight.

The following Monday morning Linda and I enjoyed breakfast together, after which she drove to her job to the local elementary school where she was employed as a kindergarten teacher, and I headed for my office in the house to begin writing.

Early that evening we were relaxing from a long day. I was cooking in the kitchen while Linda worked on a school project for her class. Eventually I wandered into the den and booted the computer and “Where In the World Is Carmen San Diego?” Before launching into my first game, I, as was my normal practice, checked the computer rankings to see where Linda and I stood. For all I knew she might have snuck in a game or two when I wasn’t looking.

When the master rankings came on the screen, at first I couldn’t believe what I was seeing. There just had to be a mistake. Then I realized there was no mistake at all. I was ranked third

with approximately 1300 points and the rank of Inspector. Linda was above me, only slightly, with about 1400 points and heading for a promotion of Captain. And far above the two of us, with a whooping 5000 plus points was the highest rank that a player can achieve – CHIEF OF INSPECTORS BRANDON LEE! Moments later I appeared in the family room.

“Honey, you have to come see this?”

Linda was sitting on the floor, pasting pictures she had cut out from magazines onto a large poster board. “What is it?”

“Just come with me. You have to see this for yourself.”

Linda and I walked through the kitchen and continued down the long hallway to the den. She stood in front of the computer, smiling at the screen. It was clear what had happened. The previous night, after Linda and I had retired, Brandon had spent hours mastering that computer game and literally conquered it. And in so doing he left me in the dust. But the most remarkable aspect of this true story is that Brandon never said a word to me about it. Not the next day, the next week, or ever. He had taken on a challenge of his own and then quietly, yet profoundly, made his mark. Like his father, Brandon didn't waste time with idol talk. He was a man of action, and he was willing to do whatever it took to make his presence known. And then he quietly walked away, inwardly smiling to himself. This is a rare and admirable characteristic, and one that his father had not learned through all his accomplishments and success. And it is a characteristic that would for Brandon, and did as time went on, pay high dividends.

My second favorite recollection illustrates Brandon's unique independence. He was truly his own man with his own sense of himself, and he wasn't about to sacrifice it for anyone, particularly “the establishment.”

At the time Linda and I were married, Brandon had two modes of transportation—a pristine Harley Davidson motorcycle that he took great pride in and an ominous looking black hearse. Much to my dismay, I often arrived home to discover that hearse parked in front of the front door to the house! Brandon just couldn't understand why I found that so unsettling, and when I suggested he park it anywhere but on our front porch, he'd look at me with that thousand yard stare coupled with that innocent smile.

The problem was the Harley, which Brandon often drove on the freeway in the rain and without a helmet. The reason he didn't drive the hearse when it rained was because the windshield wipers didn't work. Understandably this caused Linda a great deal of worry, and she

was always extremely relieved when he would walk into the house or call her upon returning home safely.

One evening I thought I'd try to remedy the situation. I had that year purchased a new Ford Taurus. I still don't know why I did that. Maybe because *Road and Track* magazine had several years in a row placed it top on their list as the safest American-built car in its price range. Shortly after Linda and I were married we bought a Jeep Wagoneer so that we could transport our two recently acquired German shepherd dogs to the local park, and as a result the Taurus wasn't being used much.

I asked Brandon to join me in the family room and made my pitch. I reiterated how his mother was worried about him driving his motorcycle on the rain-slick freeway. He understood this, and then, as he often did, tried to convince me that he was an excellent driver, conveniently leaving out that he was also a daring driver who had taken several hair-raising falls that had somehow miraculously resulted in him escaping unscathed.

"I have a solution to everyone's problem," I began. "It really amounts to a windfall in your favor. It's simple enough. If you will agree not to drive your motorcycle when it rains, I will *give* you the Taurus. Give as in free. I'll even personally deliver it to your house."

After a thoughtful silence, Brandon casually asked, "You would do that for me?"

"I would. And what are we talking about here—a handful of days a month? And besides, we're almost past the rainy season. What'd you say? Is it a deal?" I said with an encouraging smile.

Brandon thought it over for a few moments, and then asked, "I have one question?"

"Shoot."

"If you give me that Taurus, does that mean I have to dress like you?"

The fact is I was a middle-aged man who lived in Ralph Lauren, Hawaiian shirts, and Gucci. Brandon's question wasn't meant as a put down. It was a serious problem in the offering, and one I hadn't considered. The fact was there was no way on God's earth that Brandon was going to get behind the wheel of a Ford Taurus, even if it were gold-plated with diamond-studded hubcaps. And the fact that the car was offered for free wasn't even a consideration.

I stared at Brandon for what seemed an eternity, then broke out laughing. When I told Linda what Brandon had said in response to my offer, she laughed even louder. Brandon had a very strong sense of himself, and he wasn't about to veer from it. This was a quality of his basic

nature that reminded so many of James Dean. Brandon was a rebel with a cavalier smile. While he could have lived in Beverly Hills or on the beach in Malibu, at that time in his life he chose to live in a rented ramshackle house in an old community of Los Angeles called Echo Park. This endearing uniqueness is what ultimately made Brandon stand out in the Hollywood film industry. Those who have seen his films and witnessed his live theater performances could not help but be highly impressed. Brandon was truly one who stood out in a crowd, any crowd.

The third aspect of Brandon that I found so remarkable is that he sincerely loved and respected women. This is a rare quality in today's youth. In Brandon's eyes and more importantly his heart, women were equals. They were neither property nor secondary human beings. In the presence of women, including his mother, sister, or girlfriend, Brandon was every bit a gentleman, and he was a man who had an abundance of charm. There wasn't an ounce of phoniness in this. He was never after anything. He put women on a pedestal and expected other men in his presence to treat them in a like manner.

I remember one evening Linda and I went out with Brandon and his girlfriend at that time, Lisa Griffen, for Chinese food. Linda knew of a great place that just happened to be in a depressed neighborhood. We parked the car on the opposite side of the street and waited for a break in the traffic, then crossed. As we were hurrying across the street, a carload of young men spotted Brandon's girlfriend, who resembled Pamela Anderson. As the car slowed, heads popped out the windows with a cacophony of rude whistles and catcalls. Brandon spun on his heels and seemingly saw red.

"Hey, who the hell do you jerks think you're whistling at!"

It didn't stop there. He chased the car down the street, with me yelling at his back, "Hey, go easy, Brandon! Jesus Christ, go easy!"

These guys wanted no part of Brandon. They could see that he meant business. It wasn't that he was looking for a physical confrontation, and thinking back I am sure he would have talked his way around a fight while at the same time putting these guys in their place. The point is he was not about to tolerate any man disrespecting any woman in his presence. And it would not have mattered had it been his grandmother or the family maid. It was just that plain and simple. On the softer side, I often observed Brandon spending time in the evening with Linda by the living room fireplace. He truly cared about what she had to say, and he cared even more about her feelings. Brandon gave a woman that he cared about 100 percent of his attention.

I was pleased to know that near the end of his life Brandon had met the woman of his dreams—Lisa Hutton, a Hollywood casting assistant with whom Brandon shared a home in Beverly Hills and whom he would marry on April 17 after filming of *The Crow* was completed. She must be a very special person, and I'd like to think that the day will come when she will write a book about Brandon Lee, perhaps in concert with Linda.