

New Fiction by Tod Denis: “Drilling Position”



Brendan always felt smaller than the other guys in the locker room. Probably it was their triceps, military tats, and/or their ability to call each other “bro” and sound natural. It didn’t help that the locker room was cramped with guys who paid no mind to the “Please Change In The Stalls” sign and took off their street clothes to put on their rash guards, grappling shorts, and gis. Nobody made any bones about walking around with their cock out, either. “Look at the floor. Look down in your gym bag. Look anywhere else,” he told himself when he caught sight of someone’s penis. Even so, he couldn’t help but make a note of how big many of them were. Even the guys with smaller ones seemed totally at ease as they changed. It wasn’t that he himself was that small; he was tall enough, broad enough in the chest and shoulders. These guys were *big* big, though. He wagered that most of them were at least 6’2. Chest hair covered their impressive pecs. Rippling veins traced up their arms to their pronounced biceps. The width of their backs and torsos narrowed into tight waists, which then thickened out into massive thighs.

Being the only one changing in the dressing room felt like calling attention to himself, but stripping in front of everyone was out of the question. He hadn’t even sparred with anybody yet, and he figured somebody was going to call him out for it at some point. Hopefully not tonight. All this said, any potential risk of exposure was out of the question. He stood silently in the cramped room, attempting to look anywhere but at the mirror. Once again, he asked himself: What am I *doing* here? With *these* guys? It was, admittedly, a little

bit that he wanted to fuck them. More than that, he wanted to be them deep down. These men looked impenetrable, unbreakable, and he wanted people to see that in him. When Coach asked why he decided on jiu-jitsu in the first place, Brendan said he wanted to learn a new skill and step out of his comfort zone. He wanted to push his body and expand its capabilities. When Coach asked if he had any previous combat sports experience, Brendan mentioned that he did taekwondo for a few years as a kid, even reached brown belt, though he felt that hardly counted. That was more like a participation trophy. It's not like he remembered any of the moves. It's not like he felt stronger.

"Hey, I wouldn't fuck with you," Coach said. He was probably just being nice. He might as well have said, "Oh, that's cute."

Brendan left out that he wanted to feel safer in his own skin. He didn't want to appear any weaker to Coach than he already did. Hell, Brendan was too anxious to meet guys on Grindr, let alone hold his own in a fight. He'd heard about guys getting catfished and beaten up after going over to someone's apartment. With his luck, he'd be another of those stories. He thought maybe if he learned how to fight and physically hardened up in the process, he'd be less afraid of putting himself out there. There was also, of course, the sheer contact of the sport – close, sweaty, intense contact with other men. At least here, he could get some of that energy out of his system, even if it wasn't quite fucking. Maybe he would even meet somebody. Maybe things would be nice, for once.

Brendan put on his gi and worried about how it hugged his stomach but billowed at his chest. He always had a hard time figuring out what he looked like, if he was actually skinny or actually chubby or actually built, and a surefire way to send that confusion into a full-blown spiral was to put on clothes that accentuated the inconsistency of his features. As he stepped onto the mat, he wondered if everyone else could tell

how uncomfortable he felt. If they could, they did a good job of not letting it show. Daniel stretched out his hips and cracked his joints so loud that Brendan heard it from the other side of the mat; he hoped his flinch wasn't visible. Jose did push-ups and grunted his count out loud. Kelley bowed to everyone and shook their hand.

"Oss," said Kelley when he shook Brendan's hand.

"Huh?" asked Brendan.

"We say it to show respect. Not really sure what it translates to. Guess it means whatever you want it to mean," Kelley replied.

"Oh. Oss." Brendan worried that his palms were too sweaty, but also gripped hard to show that he, too, gives Firm Handshakes.

Standing in the corner was Coach, tall and broad. His traps and shoulders seemed to want to burst through his gi. His hair was cleanly buzzed and his face was flecked with salt-and-peppery stubble. He stood clutching at his black belt, striped with four pieces of worn white tape wrapped over the red rank bar. Brendan found him outright terrifying; he could have sworn that his eyes turned obsidian black at certain angles when he was observing drilling and sparring. Coach's face was steely and angular, hard and shark-like. Brendan generally had a hard time reading people's faces, but Coach's in particular gave him nothing. He imagined that to hit the mat with Coach was the only way to know him, and to understand him likely required submitting to him.

Coach instructed everybody to start jogging, which felt pretty easy for Brendan. He never liked running before, but found the pace easy, the mat soft on his feet and shins, and his body uncharacteristically loosened. The class went through the motions, switching from light jogging to side-shuffling to karaoking in and out. They practiced hip escapes across the mat. Brendan lay on his back, brought his left foot up as

close to his buttcheek as possible, and jutted his hips towards the left, scooching backwards. He repeated the cycle, alternating left and right, until he stood up and immediately had to steady himself. Only fifteen minutes of the ninety-minute class had gone by, and Brendan was spent.

The idea of drilling different positions made his anxiety about his, well, everything significantly worse. Most jiu-jitsu positions were extremely close and intimate and sweaty and, therefore, kinda gay. Though Brendan was also kinda gay, he didn't feel aroused when drilling, even when partnered with someone he found attractive. He did worry that he was breathing too hard or sweating too much or might let out a fart while his partner practiced "knee-on-belly" on him. No, drilling positions didn't turn him on, but he also secretly wanted to be the most fuckable training partner on the mat, whatever that meant. Sure, most of the other guys were straight, married with kids, cops, Republicans, etc. He knew that he shouldn't want to be desirable to them, as he knew there was no realistic scenario in which anything would ever happen. Besides, he had Good Politics, and many of them had Bad Politics. He shouldn't have wanted them anyway. They'd probably beat him up if they found he was queer anyway.

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"Get your hooks in, put your hands on my belt, push me up, and then bring your knees to your chest." Brendan felt that it should be easy enough; his training partner ("Big Henry") had just repeated the position several times and even regained his guard from it. He arched his feet under his partner's thighs, "hooking" them in, put his hands on his belt, pushed him up, and brought his knees up to his chest. As soon as he stretched his legs to the side to lock him into his guard, he dropped Big Henry back onto him. Big Henry's knee fell directly into Brendan's crotch. Brendan thought he might vomit. A bead of sweat from Big Henry's brow dripped into Brendan's eye. He heard Coach say one word: "Again."

After several more attempts to trap Big Henry in his guard, Brendan was granted a reprieve when Coach called for a water break. He picked up his dented Hydro Flask, adorned with a singular sticker that announced "This Machine Kills Fascists." It occurred to him that his sticker potentially identified him as a Woke Liberal to his Probably Fascist peers. Despite the proclamations of his water bottle, he did not have the confidence in his convictions to debate with a Scary Stronger Straight Guy about them. He knew he didn't have the courage to punch his local nazi. Could everybody see through his posturing? Did they want to teach him a lesson? To shove him into the proverbial locker? He couldn't focus on drinking his water like a normal person while his mind raced. In turn, his water went down the wrong way, and he coughed it out onto Big Henry's chest.

"Oh fuck. Oh fuck. I'm so sorry," Brendan said. He grabbed someone's sweaty towel and tried to dab the water off of Big Henry's gi.

"All good, brother," said Big Henry. "Happens to the best of us." Big Henry patted Brendan on the shoulder. "You know what this means, though?"

Brendan's stomach tightened. He rubbed his palm down the side of his leg, as though to massage some pulled muscle in his outer thigh. Whatever humiliation Big Henry had in mind for his punishment was going to be painful and likely public. The idea of it kind of turned him on, which made him feel dirty.

"You owe me a roll now!" said Big Henry. This was the worst thing he could have said. A roll meant six unbroken minutes of sparring. He had seen guys get submitted multiple times in one match. No matter how much it hurt, how many times they tapped, how close they came to being choked unconscious, how exhausted they were, they were expected to get back up and kept fighting. The guys used rolls to experiment with different positions and try out what they've practiced for real, met

with actual resistance. Real competition. Brendan knew the application would be harder than the trial run.

“This is only my fifth class.” Just saying “fifth” was humiliating.

“Five classes and you haven’t rolled yet?” Brendan shook his head.

Big Henry squinted and looked over at Coach, who was pouring seltzer water on a spot where someone had cut themselves and bled out on the mat. “Better save that seltzer water for after rolling,” Brendan thought, as Big Henry was likely going to drop the nice guy act and disembowel him right there. The other guys would watch, laugh, probably call him a few slurs, and then bow and shake each other’s hands and say “oss.” Out of respect, obviously.

“Coach, is this guy good to roll tonight?” shouted Big Henry, putting a friendly arm around Brendan’s shoulder.

“Yeah, it’s about time. Can’t keep holding out, Brendan. You’ve got to dive in at some point,” Coach said. The driplets of blood mixed with the bubbling seltzer in a grotesque melange. Brendan wondered how much of the blend was composed of sweat as well.

“I’ll go nice and easy. We’ll flow roll,” said Big Henry. Brendan couldn’t tell if he was just saying that to appease him, or if he was genuinely trying to make him feel more comfortable. He searched desperately for some excuse to bail himself out, but people were pairing up and starting to take their positions on the mat. This was happening.

“Let’s do it, ” Brendan said.

“Hell yeah, brother!” Big Henry laughed and stuck his fist out to be bumped. Brendan managed to miss most of Big Henry’s knuckle. As they walked to find a spot on the mat, Brendan

attempted to convince himself that this was a good thing, actually. He knew that the expectation was that new guys would spar after their first or second class, even if just to go over the few positions they'd learned so far. It was, frankly, impressive that Brendan had been able to avoid it for five classes. He usually feigned an upset stomach and hid in the bathroom, figuring if he put on enough of a show, Coach wouldn't push him on it. Nobody wanted anyone to shit themselves all over the mat. The gym had only recently reopened after a nasty staph infection, so there was a vigilance in the air that Brendan could typically capitalize on. Tonight, however, he was stuck.

"If you're not rolling this round, keep an eye out and make sure nobody gets their heads cracked open," said Coach. Brendan imagined Big Henry throwing him down headfirst from a standing position, his skull smashing into someone else's. He considered what the rest of his life would look like with a traumatic brain injury. His parents would have to change his diapers and wipe his drool. Were the waivers he had to sign after his trial class not a strong enough deterrent against getting folded like laundry by a guy named "Big Henry" and risking permanent disability or death?

"Once the timer starts, shake hands and get to work," announced Coach. There were six other pairs of guys getting ready to roll. Brendan noticed how many of them were laughing with each other. He wondered if anybody else felt paralyzed with terror. He expected the colored belts to be comfortable, but even the other white belts seemed right at home.

"Oss." Big Henry stuck out his fist for knuckle bumping.

"Oss," replied Brendan, laser-focused on not missing this time. He pounded Big Henry's fist and then mimed it exploding back. What the fuck was that? Big Henry didn't seem bothered; he chuckled and then grabbed Brendan's hand for a quick handshake.

“Do you have any injuries I should be aware of?” asked Big Henry. Brendan gave it some thought. He had never broken a bone before, but the scene where James Franco broke his bones to cut his arm off in *127 Hours* did make him pass out in the theater. He wanted something to say though, just to have some battle scar under his belt.

“I got my appendix taken out a year ago,” he replied.

Big Henry nodded. “Ok. I’ll keep that in mind.” He gestured to his left knee. “I tore my ACL on the mat back when I was a first stripe white belt. I did physical therapy and everything, so I should be fine. Just try to be careful.” This struck Brendan. For one thing, he didn’t consider an ACL tear as a potential outcome here; now he had another thing to worry about. He felt stupid for not thinking this through. For another, his feeling that this brought Big Henry back down to Earth was quickly replaced by an awe that Big Henry would come back and keep training after that. Big Henry, now a two stripe blue belt, had overcome his injury, and that both amazed and frightened Brendan.

“For sure, bro,” said Brendan, cringing at himself for how unnaturally “bro” came out.

“Awesome. Again, I know it’s your first real roll. We’ll go easy. Just practice what you can remember, and I’ll let you work. If you screw up, though, I’m gonna show you what you did wrong. Don’t worry. We’ll have fun,” he said with a smirk. Brendan didn’t feel good about whatever that meant, but he also wondered if maybe this was some straight guy version of negging. What if Big Henry was flirting with him? What if Big Henry actually wanted to see how hard Brendan could go in his first roll? Maybe they’d get so worked up from the roll that they’d both excuse themselves from the mats and have sweaty, rough locker room sex. That could be interesting.

Coach clicked a button on his remote: six minutes on the

timer. Big Henry sat back on his butt, hunched up his shoulders, and immediately grabbed Brendan's lapel. Big Henry scooted in towards Brendan and hooked his feet under his thighs. Brendan felt one of Big Henry's toes briefly stroke his crotch. Before he could think too much about it, Big Henry pulled at Brendan's lapel, bringing him closer. He then used his feet hooks to sweep Brendan from his guard and pin him down into side control. Brendan was stunned by how quickly Big Henry pulled a butterfly sweep on him, and frustrated by how easily he gave up his position.

"Breathe, breathe, breathe," said Big Henry, as he hooked an arm under Brendan's head and held tight. Part of the "fun" of side-control, Coach had said in an earlier class, is using your chest to exert as much pressure on the person on the bottom as possible. Big Henry, with his massive chest, was very good at applying pressure and was, therefore, very good at making sure that Brendan couldn't breathe. "Make a frame and shrimp out," Big Henry whispered to Brendan. Brendan squeezed his left arm out from between their two chests to frame his wrist against Big Henry's giant, hulking neck. He then repeated the hip escape process from warm-ups: brought his left foot up to his buttcheek and the scooped out toward the left. To his surprise, he slid out from Big Henry's side-control. Feeling uncharacteristically confident in his abilities, he grabbed Big Henry's lapel, pulled him in, and wrapped his legs around his waist. He had Big Henry in a full guard. He couldn't believe it.

"Nice! Now start attacking!" Big Henry said.

Brendan remembered what Coach instructed him to do during his trial lesson to perform a cross-collar choke successfully. Reach up to your opponent's lapel and grab the back of the collar so that your thumb touches the back of their head. Repeat the process with your other hand on the opposite side. Flex your wrists out so that the bones jut into their neck. Pull them down towards your chest. Try to keep your elbows as

tight and straight as possible. They should tap out in seconds.

Big Henry was not tapping.

Despite Brendan's best efforts, he clearly missed a step in executing his cross-collar choke. Big Henry, for his part, was beet red and spittling at the mouth. But he was breathing. Brendan, having come so close to landing a submission, felt himself adrenalized by the intensity of competition. His breaths quickened. His grips tightened. He was going to tap Big Henry at least once this round, even if it killed him. Big Henry grabbed at the opening of Brendan's gi just above his belt and slowly began to stand up, Brendan's legs still wrapped tightly around his waist. Soon enough, Big Henry was standing up, albeit slightly hunched over Brendan. Brendan held on stubbornly, tightening his lock onto Big Henry's hips. Suddenly, Big Henry grabbed Brendan's lapel and effortlessly pulled Brendan up off the ground. They were nearly face-to-face. Brendan was stunned at Big Henry's strength. Almost as soon as Brendan could process the fact that he was airborne, Big Henry slammed him onto the mat, immediately destroying the strength of his guard.

The impact knocked the wind out of him. Brendan wheezed as he looked at the timer: 4:49. 4:48. 4:47. It had barely been more than a minute, and he was totally gassed. Slowly, he crawled onto all fours, noticing droplets of sweat hitting the mat under him. He sat back on his haunches, looked at the ceiling, closed his eyes, and gasped "Fuck me" to no one in particular. To add insult to injury, Big Henry sat in a casual half-guard, slightly on his side, with his hands forming a frame in front of his chest.

"Breathe. You don't need to go 100%," Coach called out from the wall. Brendan took a deep inhale through his nose and let it out of his mouth. He repeated the process two more times and then looked back at Big Henry. Big Henry smiled. Brendan

thought he had really nice teeth, but then wondered if both of them should have been wearing mouth guards.

“Atta boy! Let’s start from side control. You get on top,” said Big Henry, as he lay down on his back. Brendan hooked his arm under Big Henry’s head and held it tight. He pressed his chest hard down perpendicular to Big Henry’s, flexing his hips into the ground. “Good pressure!” grumbled Big Henry from down under. Brendan felt ravenous. He was going to prove that he belonged on the mat. Big Henry was going to tap and tap quickly. He felt so focused that he didn’t even notice his pulsing boner.

In order to stay heavy against Big Henry, Brendan continued driving his hips into the mat, up and down and up and down. It felt good to hold him down so tight. He reached an arm across Big Henry’s chest and gripped palm to palm with the hand coming out from under his head. Big Henry kept bumping up his hips to break Brendan’s hold, but Brendan held him down. Brendan noticed that Big Henry’s left arm was open. He realized he was in a perfect position to try out an Americana. Trap his forearm between yours in a triangle. Grab your wrist. Keep it tight. While dragging the arm down towards his hip, bend it upwards. If you do it right, he’ll tap in no time.

Brendan worked through the steps in his head. He grabbed Big Henry’s forearm and quickly trapped it between his arms in a triangle shape. He gripped his wrist, flexing it over like he was revving a motorcycle engine. God, it felt good to hold him down like this. He kept driving his hips into the mat. His toes curled. He was vibrating all over. He dragged Big Henry’s arm down towards his hip and then bent it upwards. Brendan felt so good, he didn’t even feel Big Henry tapping on his back. Oh fuck. Oh fuck. I’m gonna tap him. Oh my god. Oh my god. I’m gonna do it. Oh fuck. Oh fuck!

Snap.

Brendan rolled over on his back. Everything looked and sounded fuzzy to him. He noticed his pants were wet. He heard someone crying out. He sat up and saw Coach, among others, crowding over Big Henry.

“Breathe, Henry. You’re going to be okay. Just breathe,” he heard Coach saying quietly while Big Henry sobbed.

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Brendan wept on the toilet. He was sure that his classmates would start pounding down the door any second now. It was one thing to accidentally crank a submission too hard in a roll. It was another thing entirely to crank out a nut while obliterating your opponent’s shoulder. He catalogued every humiliation he’d ever been through. Nothing came close to this. He felt like a monster, like a predator. Big Henry had been so kind to him, and Brendan didn’t just hurt him, he violated him. It was stupid to think that jiu-jitsu would fix his shit, make him feel strong again. He wanted to die.

He heard a soft knock on the door.

“Brendan, everybody else has left. Please come meet me in the office so we can talk.” It was Coach’s voice.

Brendan sat down in a rolling chair across from Coach. The office was small. The desks were cluttered with paperwork. Lined up on the walls were boxes of gis, t-shirts, and other merchandise branded with the gym’s logo for sale. He wondered if he should buy Big Henry a new gi as penance. He then considered whether he should buy himself a new gi; he was fairly confident that the stain would come out in the wash, but couldn’t bear the thought of training in it again. Then again, he figured he wasn’t going to be training again regardless. Coach had changed out of his gi and into a blue flannel shirt and jeans. He was scarier in regular clothes.

“The other guys are going to kill me, aren’t they?”

Coach looked at him. "A few of the guys drove Henry to the ER. The others went home. He'll probably have to take a few months off, at least."

"I didn't realize he tapped."

"That was some serious shit you pulled. You need to be present and listen to what your training partners are telling you. You could seriously fuck someone up if you don't respect the tap. Imagine choking someone out. Imagine me choking you out. All you've got is the tap. The tap is the line between total control and blacking out your opponent. We're in the business of control here. This happens again, we expel you. People don't come here to fuck around. We have a reputation to keep up. If word got out that we kept someone around who couldn't control himself, people would find another gym."

Brendan's leg stopped bouncing. He unhunched his posture and looked up at Coach. He realized he hadn't seen Coach blink once during this meeting.

"All that said," Coach leaned back in his chair and folded his arms. "That was a damn good submission. Very clean." He gave Brendan another once over, up and down. "Very strong pressure."

Brendan couldn't tell what Coach's angle was. He figured if Coach didn't use this private meeting to give him a taste of his own medicine, he certainly wasn't going to spend the time praising him. Coach had him locked in a full guard, and he didn't know how to break it.

"What's kept you coming back here?" Coach asked. Brendan would have been lying if he said he wasn't thrilled by the ways his muscles ached after the trial lesson. How he had stretched parts of his body he didn't even know could move that way. How much he liked being pinned so tightly to the ground that he had no escape.

"I guess I just wanted to try something new. Step out of my comfort zone," Brendan replied.

Coach nodded. "You never grow from a place of comfort." Brendan still couldn't read Coach's attitude. "I think you should keep training."

Brendan looked down at the soiled gi folded up at his feet. "I don't think I can do that here."

"Not if you keep ignoring taps. But Henry once choked someone unconscious in a roll. There's a reason he went easy on you tonight. Everybody is just figuring it out while they're training. That's why you shouldn't go 100%. You're not competing."

Brendan felt a conflicting mixture of relief and further embarrassment. It helped to know that he wasn't the only one who's gotten carried away with a submission, but he had to imagine he was the first to cum while doing so. He wanted an out; he didn't want to show his face around the gym anymore, but he also didn't want to fess up to his "accident." More than anything, he wanted Coach to stop staring at him. He took a sip from his water bottle.

"What's that sticker say?"

Brendan slowly swallowed, remembering how coughing up on Big Henry's gi incited all of this.

"It says, uh, 'This Machine Kills Fascists,'" said Brendan. He felt heat travel up his body and sit right in his forehead just behind his eyes.

"You a Woody Guthrie fan?" asked Coach.

"Who?"

"Woody Guthrie."

“Oh. Not really. I just like the sticker.”

“You should listen to Woody.” Brendan supposed it was reasonable to listen to the artist responsible for the political declaration on his water bottle.

“Ok, I’ll check him out.” He wasn’t sure what else to say at this point. What he wanted was to go home, eat something unhealthy for dinner, take an edible, and melt into his couch. Coach kept looking at him, eyes blank. His mouth sat open, enough that Brendan could see through his rows of teeth.

“You know. You don’t need to drive your hips down as hard to keep the pressure heavy.” Coach leaned back in his chair and put his hands behind his head. “I bet it felt good, though. Real good.” A droplet of cold sweat fell from Brendan’s right armpit. His mouth was dry as hell. His knee started bouncing up and down again. Coach would not break eye contact with him. Brendan looked everywhere else in the room. At the stacks of gis for sale. At the trophies. All the while, he could feel Coach’s gaze drilling into him. In that moment, he realized that despite, or perhaps because of, his fear of Coach, he was hard again.

Brendan picked up his gi. “Put it on the desk,” instructed Coach. When Brendan put it down, he noticed his hands were shaking. Coach locked his gaze on Brendan as he obeyed the order. “I’ll see you back here next week.”

“Yes, Coach.” He stood up, bowed, and shook Coach’s hand.

Coach held the grip for an extra second. “Oss,” he said.

“Oss.”