

Wrestling

And this is not what I meant by wrestling, and it is definitely not what I meant by being tough like one of the guys. And I feel really uncomfortable and nauseous, and this is not about winning anymore, not about showing them that I'm tougher than all of them. I just want him off me. I don't like the deep way that he's laughing, and I don't like where he's touching me, and I don't want to be rolling with him in the sand, because this is feeling less and less like lion cubs wrestling for who will be king, and more like him taking advantage of me somehow and getting his hands where they shouldn't be, and I feel humiliated, and the fight is gone from me because I can't remember what I was trying to prove, and I don't like how he smells, and his eyes are crazy, and his laugh scares me, and he keeps saying, so you think you're tough, do you? You think you're stronger than a boy? I'll show you the strength of a boy. Then we can talk about how tough you are. And I wish everyone would look away, some of them cheering (maybe still from my prior victory), some looking confused, some disturbed, some pitying. And I wish they would all look away while I try to get myself out of his wiry iron grip, out of this pretzel he's gotten me into - I think I'm going to be sick - or at least they could get him off me.

And we're all on the beach in Tel Aviv, that's where we are. And it's dark out. We're all clothed in our classic *Bnei Akiva* hiking attire. Some of the girls are wearing long flowing skirts over khaki hiking pants, some wear knee length skirts above their khakis, some wear khaki hiking pants alone, very loose fitting, with lots of pockets, held up by their father or their brother's belt. Pants are mostly for these occasional hikes together, not for day to day in Jerusalem. It wouldn't look right. Skirts are what looks right on girls. And it's all good and well that Abba agreed that it is *halakhically* permissible for a girl to wear woman's pants, that this would not violate, *And a woman shall not don the*

attire of a man, since these are women's pants. And it's all good and well that Abba agreed that given what he calls 'my rambunctious nature', pants wind up being far more modest than skirts in many situations, but it just wouldn't look right, was his conclusion, not walking down the streets of Jerusalem.

But we're in Tel Aviv now, and I'm wearing a pair of Danny's old khakis with lots of great deep pockets that I caught his mom trying to throw out next door, because they were faded and a bit torn, and she said, Sure Ruth, why not? And gave them to me then and there and even threw in an old belt of her husband's to help them fit. And the beach is fine at night, no crowds of men and women in revealing bathing suits, liable to be behaving in ways that might not jive with the spirit of *Halakha*, and we decided to have a bonfire there on our way back from our hiking trip north.

This is when Rami (the new boy) offers to gather twigs.

I'll take Ruth! He yells in his throaty voice, turning to look at me and then back at all the other sixteen-year-old boys and girls, standing as we are in a circle about two meters in from the gently lapping waves. He is wired, Rami, I can see it. I experience his every movement as jerky and sudden, and take it from someone who is rather impulsive herself, if his movements put me on edge, they must really be something. She's the strongest one here! She'll bring back a whole tree! He laughs, reaching in from behind me with both hands and squeezing each of my biceps. I shake his hands off me. I roll down my sleeves to my elbow. I usually roll my sleeves up to near shoulder length because I'm proud of my biceps, and because I'm annoyed by the blanket dictates coming from school and from what seems like the whole entire community, shifting to the right, requiring female arms to be covered at least till their elbows, at all times.

Negia! Yoni reminds Rami sharply, noting my abrupt shedding of his hands. No touching girls! our counselor, our medic, my friend, barks. Rami laughs. She's no girl. She's Ruth.

I laugh too. This pleases me despite myself, or not so much despite myself. I'm confused.

My laughter seems to have a softening effect on Yoni's demeanor. I'll go gather wood with the other counselors, he rules, turning away. Avner, Oren and Idit, our other counselors, follow suit.

Yeah! I shout. Who wants to wrestle me? I roll up the sleeve of my right arm. I clench my right fist in the air - my arm L shaped - turning it right, turning it left, making my bicep dance. Waves of appreciative laughter ripple through the group of boys and girls as I drag two duffels into the center of the circle, piling them one on top of the other, falling to my knees so as to get an arm wrestling competition going.

And what about *Negia*, Ruth? Tzuri puts forth, approaching my perch at the piled duffels.

Who's up for a challenge?!? I shout, my voice trailing off as I absorb my friends' reasoning voice, as I search his eyes, as he searches mine. Sport is sport, Tzuri, I say. You know what my father says about different kinds of *Negia*, different kinds of touch.

True, he murmurs, stepping back even as Rami shoves him aside, getting into position across the duffels from me.

Show me what you got, he crows, dropping to his knees on the sand, lifting his right arm onto the duffel, anchored by his elbow.

I align my right arm with his - elbow to wrist – both vertical, shoulder to elbow flat on the canvas of the large bags, and just before I grab firm-fisted hold of his hand, he reaches forward with his pinkie and draws a soft serpentine line on the inside of my palm while leeringly narrowing his eyes as he looks straight into mine. This has the effect of unnerving me a bit, and weakening my resolve. I swallow hard, narrowing my own eyes while studying his, in as hard a gaze as I can muster while I grab his hand, crushing his pinkie in the process. And he pulls away, a flash of anger in his eyes, readjusting his arm, his elbow, and grabbing my hand himself.

I use the anger in his eyes as my focal point. I breathe deeply and slowly from my core, like Markos taught us in Kung Fu. I center myself internally in such a way that my energy flows focused to my arm, to my right arm, to my right fist. We each falter a bit. We waver to and fro in increments of centimeters. Rami's face looks swollen and red, and I break focus for a brief moment as I note the bulge of a vein on his forehead, seeming as though it might burst on the left side of his neck. I return my focus to his eyes, which dart around now, as though trying to decide which one of my eyes is worthy of the focus of both of his. With a warrior's grunt, I heave my right arm left, pinning his down flush against the canvas with my iron grip. I hold him there, even as I stare him down with my eyes, even as a victorious smile spreads across my lips. A tumult of cheering erupts all around us. I allow myself to relinquish his arm, to turn, to bask in the accolades, enjoying my friends' high-fiving with each other and jumping up and down, until I feel myself pounced upon, as by a large beast, knocking me backwards and onto the sand.

At first my knees hurt. When Rami flew over the duffels at me and tackled me, I was still sitting on my folded knees, my feet in pointed position, and his sudden lunge leaves me no breath to release my knees from under me, nor to bend my feet, before the full weight of him crushed my knees folded, crushed my feet pointed flat, sending lightning bolts of pain zipping through me even as I try to break loose with no obvious anchor in my body to utilize. He has both my hands pinned down in the sand, and the best I can do as I realize, rattled, that my forte is not wrestling in such close proximity, but combat from striking distance, is yank his arms down hard with mine even as he grips them so hard that my fingers feel bloodless, and whack his left cheek with the inside of my right arm, of my right elbow, causing him to relinquish my hands long enough for me to flip us over, myself on top, as I try to get off, but he knocks me back down with a side kick as I rise, and he is on me again, and we are rolling over and over in the sand, arms and legs everywhere, he trying to get the upper hand, me trying to disentangle, to get away.

And I don't want to be in this fight, and this has nothing to do with lion cubs wrestling for the throne, and everyone seems shocked now. We've never had this kind of thing happen in our group. And I feel dirty. And this is no game. And this is no sport. And Yoni runs up, grabbing Rami off me and throwing him onto the sand, yelling, When we get to Jerusalem, you're out of here, even as Rami yells, You're not real life tough, Ruth. You're a bunch of hot air. And even as Tzuri, trembling, pulls me up to standing, asking if I'm okay, even as I'm yelling, I had him, I had him, I could've taken him, as I survey the faces all around me, absorbing the baffled, shocked, uncomprehending looks, feeling shame, such terrible shame, and I run down the shore, along the water, gaining speed as I run, even as I hear Yoni yelling to me to come back, Tzuri shouting, Wait, Ruth. Wait! Till I collapse in the shallow water, soaking my khakis, splashing the cold salty water on my face to cool down, to camouflage my tears.