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In a Safe Place

by Judy Fort Brenneman

Here's where I am:

Standing at the west end of the downstairs classroom at the karate school, shifting back and forth, miserable, not able to escape because of the rows of lower-belt students who are clustered across the end of the room, blocking any way for me to hide in the corner or run up the stairs. My face is dark red and contorted in anger or fear or whatever emotion it is that comes into play when I want to, when I need to protect my son, and I'm crying and trying not to, and though I can stop the sounds of crying, I can't stop the tears, don't know how to any more, but I don't want anyone to see me, God no one. Barry's rotated me out which means he probably noticed but he knows to let me work it through myself, and at the far distant end of the room, Kyle is getting back to sparring with Mack, after shrieking in pain and falling on the ground. I can't see him from where I'm standing, but I heard Barry tell him to get up and get moving, and I know Kyle has, and I know this is a controlled environment and that Mack is bigger and stronger and faster and older than Kyle, but Kyle's quick, too; even so, all I want to do is run screaming banshee down the line of red and blue mats and scoop my son up and away from this fight, no matter that it's controlled, or mock, or anything else, and give Mack a solid spinning back kick to the head so he'll never touch my kid again, not ever, but I know that rescuing Kyle is not what he needs, would be absolutely the worst thing I could do, and the conflict between the two agonies of waiting and rescuing have rooted me to the floor, my hands encased in the red mitts, the mitts pressed into my face, smearing salt water and nose-run wetness on my face that only makes it hotter, that reinforces the fear, the anger, spilling out everywhere except my feet, the one part of my body that my rational part can maintain control over, keeping my feet rooted to the mat so I don't flee and I don't embarrass my son or myself, so I don't fail in my eyes or anyone else's.

So here's where I was, I explain, when I tell Barry:

I'm in the dining room of my parents' house. The arguing between my father, who has been berating me like he does almost every day has escalated to full-fledged battle and I have stormed away from the kitchen table into the dining room, or else he has chased me from the table, trying to grab me by the throat or the shirt collar and he misses or just barely catches me, but either way, I'm in the dining room, near the corner between the picture window and the arch that leads to the living room. I'm always in the same corner, always between him and the wall; no matter how hard I fight, I always end up in the middle until the very last time I fought him, when I grabbed his shoulders and his back was against the wall beside the arch and *one* I slammed my knee up to his groin, hitting his leg as he brought it up to block and *two* I cracked my foot into his other shin, not even

waiting for one foot to land before launching the other, but that was years later, and now as he's grappling me around to push me against the wall, my mother is hurrying my sister Cindy, who's crying, sobbing, as if she's the one being hurt, to our room, with our other sister close behind, skinny and quiet and clutching one of her stupid dolls, and herding both brothers to their room and closing the doors. My mother returns quickly, we've been through this enough that it's organized, a well-rehearsed choreography, and my mother stands in the other corner, on the other side of the arch, beside the portrait of my grandfather, and she watches my father and me. I can see her out of the corner of my eye, notice the contrast between the pale blue-green walls and her dark hair, between my grandfather's bright smile grinning from the portrait and my mother's worried mouth. She looks like a referee who's forgotten the rules.

And I hit back and kick and try to scratch, and scream out rage, rage at my father who is this awfulness, and rage at my mother for helping him, but especially rage at my siblings for leaving, for escaping, rage at my crying sister and my quiet sister and my hiding brothers for not understanding that they are safe because I am fighting, that he is focussed only here, his fists and feet hitting only me, and my head hits the wall and my arm twists in its socket and I push rage and more rage out with every harsh scream, my bellows drowning out pain and fear and everything else except the rage, except the knowledge that the only way to stay whole is to fight and fight and fight and never quit.

Here is where I am now:

In a safe place. In a controlled environment. In civilized company.

And the only thing I know for sure is that I fought my own battles. Even if those battles saved someone else, they were still my own battles. And even if I saved those others, they still had battles of their own waiting for them, battles that are not mine to fight.

And I am learning—trying to learn—that the hardest part of protecting my son is letting him learn to fight, to defend himself, in this safe place, this controlled environment, so that someday, when his battles are real, he can save himself.