

# The Wrestler

BY LISA ST. JOHN

**F**rom the bleachers the athletes looked like young gladiators. Skintight uniforms, soft cloth shoes, headgear.

I was a spectator witnessing the ritual sport of falling and rising backs, arched spines, and limbs flailing in the steamy air. Two boys marched onto a mat and shook each other's hands as a referee joined them to form a human triangle. The whistle blew. Young men stared each other down, then pressed each other's heads away with their hands, shifting in circles, each around the other.

As they moved in and out, the audience was breathless for a first move; it was a violent chess match. Other mothers like me smiled, unable to look too long at the blue mats and yet, perversely, unable to look away. A match finished. I clapped half-heartedly, witness to the faces of grueling defeat and ecstatic victory. A referee took the winner's arm and raised it into the air like a torch.

Wrestling, like raising children, sharpens the skill and virtue of waiting. This man-cub son of mine, grown too fast, circled the gymnasium beneath the stands waiting the call of his name, his turn to attack, defend, pin or be pinned. I watched Burke and swore I could feel his heart beating in my chest.

I was reminded of the seemingly biological need for boys to wrestle. The innocent claim, "Mom, we're just fooling around," as if there is anything just or simple about this impulse, this need for contact. Then my admonition: "Boys, no wrestling in the house, please." This was followed by the escalation of contact and intent, resulting in tears and last-minute punches. The words



Burke St. John, Peekskill High School, winter 2003.

heard often in a household of three sons, "You started it," were usually spoken by the youngest, who vowed to get even when he thought I was out of earshot.

There was no fooling around today. This was wrestling with a single-minded objective: defeat the opponent quickly and efficiently.

Burke looked up into the stands and saw me. I reminded myself that this increasing physical separation is the natural, necessary space required for him to take wing. He observed me at a distance in our daily round, like I observed him, as a spectator. He did not know that there were nights that I kissed his forehead while he slept. I watched him monitor his opponent jumping rope across the gym floor.

Parenting is a dance. Knowing when to make a move, or not, at the right moments, attuning to my teenager's unpredictable receptivity requires skill that I am refining. As Burke's bull-strong 190-pound body continued to pace, spectators made small talk with each other, pointed proudly at their sons, and waited for their matches.

Years ago our babysitter Lucy would wait in our driveway for my return

from work, holding Burke in her arms.

"It's a miracle he did not break a bone on my watch," she would say in her deep Russian accent. "He is going to kill me yet," she'd say.

Today his countenance was stony; his eyes bored into anyone in his path. Later at home, the boyish expressions would return; the mischievous eyes would spark.

Our sons paced, rivals unknown to each other before the call to mats, the call to war. Time moved in pearls of sweat.

When Burke's name was called I sought out a respite up high, above the bleachers, where I gripped a railing. As the referee spoke about fair play, the wrestlers jogged in place. I bit my lip, as they battled for position, time, and air, and fought to leverage their weight and maintain balance. They waited for an opening to "shoot" and attack the other's legs, get him to the ground by pinning elusive shoulder blades down like flat pancakes in a silent declarative checkmate.

The referee slapped his hand on the mat to signal a winner when two shoulder blades finally touched the ground. The opponents stood to face each other and shook hands. The winner joined his teammates and parents, breathless, beaming, spent. The loser, on that winter day, disappeared far inside some locker room or hidden corner for time and reflection.

Eventually my son returned to the stands, where I was waiting. There was much time for him to develop. Time for me, also, to learn the fine art of leaning in and out of his life.

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