
Self-Defense

I put up with the red-haired girl until the day she cut me off doing laps in lifesaving class; then I grabbed onto her leg, climbed onto her back, and pushed her red head under water. Unfortunately, I went under, too. The karate lessons I'd been taking did me no good as we struggled, but for once the six-foot beauty was my height. I considered the prospect of her head never rising higher than mine again. Keep her down, keep her down, I thought.

After she escaped, I sat on the edge of the pool and stared at my feet and at nothing, feeling relaxed and unburdened and dazed, until the teacher laid her hand on my shoulder. I flinched away from her, my heart leaping. My fellow students, ringing the pool like white seals, were glancing at me as if I were a visitor from *The Twilight Zone*. "Go to your counselor," the teacher said, pointing at the green tiles leading to the locker room. "Now. Bring me a pink slip tomorrow."

I dressed imagining how much worse things could be: I could be a landless Brazilian tenant farmer, living in a shack of tin and cardboard; I could be a political prisoner, tortured daily in Argentina. Or, a vision more heart-stopping because I could imagine it more clearly, I could find myself back in my old neighborhood and walking in Nigger Park, so named by the black kids because whites weren't allowed there.

Stepping from the locker room into the empty hall of Redford High, I felt a sudden, strange longing for that place I'd left behind—not Nigger Park, but the surrounding city, Highland Park, where I'd lived most of my life. We had moved from there right after I finished tenth grade, four months after I was attacked outside the high school by a group of forty black girls I didn't know. Highland Park High was ninety-nine percent black by then, and I was one of three white students left there who weren't poor.

At my new school, somewhere among my thousands of white, middle-class peers, I would fit in, I had thought. But after eight months of floating from group to group, I'd begun to realize that, despite my being of the majority color and class, I might not fit in at Redford, either. To make things worse, the red-haired girl and her three big boyfriends wrestled in the hall during every class break, knocking into anyone who was in their way, and since my locker was right next to theirs, they always came slamming into me. I'd try to keep my balance and get my lock open before they messed the numbers up. Or I'd get out of their way, fuming, and wait to get my

books until after the late bell rang. I had taken for granted that at my new school I would not be harassed in any way, and, no matter how I tried to prepare myself, it scared me when in the midst of twirling my lock I was suddenly jolted and sent flying. For a second I would think I was back at my old school and truly being attacked; my shoulder or back or wherever I was struck bothered me less than the wild beating of my heart.

My counselor was eating a meatball sandwich when I walked into her faded office. Such food seemed much too robust for her—she was a quiet, poised, wrinkled woman—but she was eating the sandwich with a knife and fork and chewing with her mouth delicately closed. Mrs. Rubin swallowed her small mouthful of food and pushed her sandwich in its nest of foil aside. “Is it raining?” she asked, glancing to the side of my head and back to my face.

“No,” I said, “I was swimming. In lifesaving class. My teacher sent me.”

“Why don’t you have a seat,” Mrs. Rubin said.

She was sitting on a straight wooden chair pulled up close to an ancient oak desk. Behind her, elegant windows rose almost to the ceiling. I sat down on another straight wooden chair and tried to look like a responsible student.

“Why don’t you tell me why you’re here,” Mrs. Rubin said.

I looked into her pale blue eyes. “I pushed a girl’s head underwater and tried to hold it there,” I said.

“What precipitated this?” Mrs. Rubin asked, staring at me glassily, as if bored.

“You mean in the beginning?” I asked. “Or today?”

“Let’s start with today,” Mrs. Rubin said, and I saw a glittering coming from deep inside her eyes. Suddenly I liked her pretty well. In fact, I realized I’d liked her all along, from the moment I’d first seen the lizardy wrinkles of her throat. Once when I was complaining about a teacher to Wild John, my Highland Park counselor, he said that I always did one of two things with people: I either took them into my lap or I threw them against the wall. I wondered what Wild John would tell me now.

Mrs. Rubin cleared her throat so delicately it sounded like humming. I paused before answering, trying to steady my breathing, thinking that someday when I mastered karate I’d be able to steady my heartbeat.

By the time I got out of my counselor’s office, school was over. I considered stopping at my hall locker but could not rid myself of a disturbing picture: the red-haired girl’s three hard-muscled, hard-eyed boyfriends leaning on the hall lockers to either side of mine. I flipped the picture out of my head as if out of a stack of Polaroids, not looking where it landed, and left the school, walking down Grand River, a street, not a river, a desert, really, six lanes wide and treeless, as hot and blowing and gritty as if it were already summer.

I walked holding the slip my counselor had signed, turning around every now and then to make sure that no one was behind me. Nothing written on the slip even hinted at what I’d done; Mrs. Rubin had written the time, the date, her name, my name, and that was all. I could forge my mother’s name to the slip, or I could confess to my

mom that I was in trouble, as I really was, for being light years behind on my hooked rug for Home Ec. I would not tell my father anything, as I wasn't talking to him during those years unless I had to. I was angry at him—because he blasted opera from his Cobo-Hall-sized speakers every morning at six, when I didn't have to get up till seven; and because he denounced racism, poverty and the war in Vietnam, but spent too little of his own money and time in ridding the world of these things; and because he had a mistress, a fact I'd deduced on my own, but that I never thought about except for sometimes at night when I was struck by my mother's face, closed down over its pain, and realized that my father wasn't home.

By the time I got home from school, I was sweaty and flecked with grit from the street. It was Thursday, my night to cook dinner. I washed my hands and arms, then opened cans of tomatoes for chili, thinking of R. T., my recently dismissed boyfriend. I had told R. T. goodbye for good two months ago, but I missed his white people jokes—they were simply black people jokes turned around—and I missed lying on my mother's couch with him while he sang Al Green songs—"You Ought to Be With Me" and "Let's Stay Together." R. T. had followed me home from Redford High one day, and I'd liked that, too—usually I chose my boyfriends, and it felt like being on vacation, to get a boyfriend without having to do any maneuvering.

But once R. T. had won me over he revealed some disquieting notions, such as that when white "girls" and black men were "keeping company" the white girl had to "look really good" or else black people would think the man was only interested in her because she was white. R. T. tried to talk me into not washing my hair—he liked how my hair, when dirty, lay flat against my head—and he tried to talk me into losing weight. He'd open his wallet to the picture of Wanda, a rail-thin yellow-hued girl he'd left behind in Alabama. "Don't you think you'd look good about this shape?" he'd say.

R. T. had also tried to talk me out of taking karate; he said that the black and blue marks covering my lower legs were too ugly, and that I didn't need to know how to fight, that he would take care of me. In the two months since we'd parted company, my legs had stopped bruising—upon being struck, they swelled instead—and my body had grown leaner and harder. R. T. called me once and said he wanted to get back together. I told him no.

Now, though I still didn't want to get back with him, I imagined R. T. pitted against the red-haired girl's boyfriends—R. T. whose skinny legs I'd feared would snap when he played basketball with my brothers, R. T. who carried a phone, not a gun, in his car. He'd pretend at red lights that the phone was connected and he was talking to someone. R. T. had the laugh of a loon. He was not a fighter, and even if he'd been a black belt and still my boyfriend, I would not have felt happy about having him for a protector. I didn't want to count on him or on anyone, because sometime or other I'd be sure to be caught alone. I'd been lucky on that day I was attacked at my old school—some of my classmates had stepped forward and saved me. I was grateful, but I wished that I'd been saved sooner—before what seemed like a hundred hands strained toward me, before those hands pulled my hair and tore my clothes, forced me into the street and onto my back and gouged the flesh around my eyes—

and I wished even more that I had saved myself. I wondered, if I would have been attacked at all if I had been an expert at karate. My karate teacher said that if you learned karate well enough, you didn't have to use it, that once you learned to defend yourself, you rarely needed to.

As I separated garlic from its skin, giving each clove a sharp whack with the butt of my big chef knife, I thought of all the people I'd known in Highland Park who hadn't been able to defend themselves—neighbors, classmates, and friends who had been knifed, and hit with brass knuckles and bricks, and raped, and one who had been shot in the head and killed on his own front lawn.

I was mincing the garlic, rocking the big knife up and down, when my brother came home from his job at the Grand River and Kentford McDonald's. "More meat—oh no," he said at the ground beef frying on the stove. "If only it weren't so greasy. If only it weren't so gray. If only it didn't invade my dreams and every minute of my waking life."

"I didn't forget you," I answered, touching the tip of the knife to the little pot of chili that I'd separated out from the big pot and set on a back burner.

"Oh good," Arthur said. He opened the refrigerator, took out a beer, and chugged half of it down. His straight dark blond hair, pulled tightly back from his face, exaggerated his huge eyes and his large nose and mouth. Arthur was eighteen, a little more than a year older than me, but he'd graduated from high school at sixteen because the Catholic school where he had transferred to get away from his Highland Park druggie friends had found it easier to graduate him than to kick him out. Since then Arthur had worked in a diner in Indiana and a mental hospital in Ohio, and camped in the Keys, living off fish he caught. Between times he'd come home for two and three weeks. He'd been home now for two months.

"Look what I got in school today," I said, pulling the pink slip out of my pocket.

Arthur took the slip from me, unfolded it, and read it aloud: "Two-twenty p.m., May 15, 1974, Antonia Carini, H. Rubin—What is it, a raffle ticket?"

"It's from my counselor for getting in trouble today."

"Oh yeah? What'd you do?"

"Tried to drown that red-haired girl."

Arthur got out another beer and palmed himself up onto the counter. "How close did you come to succeeding?" he asked.

"Not very. In fact, I almost drowned myself."

I told him about the red-haired girl running into me with her feet and me climbing onto her back and the two of us struggling underwater.

"So how did it end?" Arthur asked.

"She got away. By that time the two of us were practically dying. Then the teacher swam up and rescued the red-haired girl."

"She saved that harlot and left you to drown?"

"Well, I wasn't drowning as badly. I was only gasping, whereas the red-haired girl was choking."

"The girl should have been shot," Arthur said.

I let out a cry of protest that sounded more like a cry of delight. But my pleasure faded as I started thinking again about the red-haired girl's boyfriends: about how they were all six feet or taller, and looked like football players; about how I'd often seen their muscles as they wrestled with the red-haired girl. Even though they were just playing around, they made the lockers bang and rumble like thunder. Again I flipped the picture of them out of my mind. "What do you think I should do about this slip?" I asked Arthur. "I'm supposed to have a parent sign it and return it to my teacher tomorrow."

"Oh, they're not serious about these things," Arthur said, setting the slip on the counter a fraction of an inch from a pool of water. "It's their job to over-inflate these little slips' importance, and to pretend to feel that they've failed unless they transmit that gravity onto you. I'd either sign Mom's name to it and turn it in, or throw it out."

"And not say anything to Mom?" I picked up the slip, folded it and tucked it into my pocket.

"You'd only worry her."

"But she'd probably want to know."

"Nini, you're nearly an adult now. Are you going to bring all your little problems to her for the rest of your life?"

"It's easy for you to be so casual about it," I said. "You can just take off for Indiana or the Keys whenever you want."

"Actually, I'm thinking of going to California."

I turned back to the stove, and pushed the meat from the frying pan into the big pot of tomatoes, regretting that I'd troubled to keep Arthur's chili separate. But I'd managed without Arthur, and I'd manage without him again. Pretty soon we'd both be grown up, and then he'd always be somewhere far off and I'd be lucky if I saw him once a year.

Just before I left Mrs. Rubin's office she'd said, "I wish I had advice for you, Antonia, but I think you know enough to figure things out for yourself." Figure out what things? I'd wanted to ask. I knew better than to try to drown the red-haired girl before I pushed her under. As for the bigger things, such as what I wanted to do with the whole rest of my life, all the time looming closer, no, I didn't know. And I wouldn't have anyone to talk to after Arthur left. When my mom didn't find life easy, she bore it, and my dad did not expect life to be nice, its major flaw, according to him, that "People are no damn good." When I was thirteen and fourteen and he would say this, I'd remind him that he was a person. He'd answer that he was an exception, he and a few of his friends.

I was able to avoid my parents at dinner that evening without raising suspicion, as I always went without dinner on the nights I went to karate. While my family ate, I sat on my bed and thought about staying home and working on my hooked rug, maybe even getting my mom and Arthur to work on it with me, as they had on a couple of occasions. Hooking along with Arthur on one side of me and our mom on the other, I might ease into the subject of my slip. Arthur was so good at making an

argument—his tone, his words, his gestures would win our mom to his point of view. She wouldn't even have to unfold the little piece of paper, I wouldn't even have to take the thing out of my pocket. "Oh, that's okay, honey, just sign it yourself," she would say.

I buried the slip in my desk drawer that held all the miscellaneous stuff I didn't know what else to do with, left the house by the back door, and drove up Grand River in the station wagon, our mom's car, a five-year old luxury liner that occasionally stalled turning right for no reason mechanics could figure. I'd learned to kick the dashboard when this happened, not death-dealing karate blows, but hard slams with the bottom of my gym shoe to which the dashboard was impervious. This did not make the car start up again, but I felt better afterwards for having expended such cruel force without clueing anyone in to my behavior.

As I drove an idea came to me: maybe my mom would let me drop her off at work every day for the rest of the school year—then I could drive to Redford and use the car to store my books between classes. Redford High was huge, with over four thousand students. If I avoided the hallway where my locker was located, quit my life-saving class, and kept a careful watch besides, chances were that I could avoid the red-haired girl and her boyfriends until they graduated. Since I was short, and Redford was mostly white, I could easily lose myself in the crowds.

But I doubted my mom would let me keep the car unless I gave her a good reason. My mom had never been in a fight, had never even got into trouble in school. It would be difficult to explain to her my trying to drown one of my classmates and wanting to use the station wagon as my hall locker.

I parked on Grand River a block from the gym. Nam, my karate teacher's 18-year-old son, was sitting outside the gym door in his street clothes, drinking a take-out coke with a straw. Nam looked up as I walked in the door and flashed me his usual stiff but friendly smile. Good, I thought, he hadn't heard about what I'd tried to do.

Nam often trained at the gym; he occasionally taught his father's classes, and he was one of my locker partners at school, but I didn't know him very well—I was only his and his sisters' locker partner because, having begun karate lessons during the summer, I knew Nam, Chi, and Shim at the beginning of the school year better than anyone else at Redford. I'd never talked with Nam about the red-haired girl, or about much of anything else. He didn't speak English well, and at school he was always in a hurry, head scrunched to the lock, wing-like shoulders braced as if by magic against the red-haired girl and her admirers.

I skirted the gym, brushing the wall as I passed sparring green and red belts until I reached the women's dressing room, a tiny, curtained-off space the size of a walk-in closet. I was thinking of the locker boys again and wondering if Nam would at any point step in to save me. Surely at some point he would, but his idea of what that point should be might be different from mine. I'd heard a rumor that Suk, the second-to-youngest Park, had angered his father because he'd fought with classmates at his junior high. The story was that the other students had said, "Show us some karate, you little runt," and Suk Park, who looked like a furious whirlwind when he worked

out on the bag, had laid the three bigger boys on their backs. Only twelve years old, Suk was an upper-level red belt, ready to test for his black. But his father had banned him from the gym and delayed his examination time indefinitely. “Walk around trouble,” Mr. Park had admonished the class more than once. “When to use MooDoo-KwanTangSooDo is much important as how.”

I changed into my uniform, removing my jeans and replacing them with white karate pants before taking off my outer shirt, pulling on my tunic, and tying my belt over my flat, hard belly. As a plump, slow-moving eleven-year-old, I’d dreamed of taking off to the woods and living on wild foods; I’d imagined myself losing weight and becoming graceful and swift—at one with my body and my surroundings, I would run like an Indian girl, or even a deer. I had abandoned that dream long ago, but now, learning karate, my body had begun to achieve the grace, speed, and strength that I had imagined. It was only a matter of time, I thought, before my purple belt was replaced by a green belt, then a red, and finally a black. I’d been taking karate for the eleven months since we’d moved from Highland Park, attending classes two or three times a week, practicing kicks and punches and katas almost daily.

I parted the curtain and stepped out of the dressing room, and noticed that all of the sparring had stopped. This was unusual—most evenings, the gym was a lively place in the minutes before class began. Five red belts were doing standing stretches, spread out along one wall, but all of the other twenty or so men were sitting cross-legged on the two mats farthest from the front of the gym. Some were talking and listening to each other with a keyed-up, solemn interest; those that were silent gave off an air of gravity and disturbance. Mr. Park stood at the front of the gym, hands on hips, alternately talking with Nam and looking out over his seated, uneasy students.

I walked to an empty mat, sat down grasping my feet, and pressed my heels together. A wave of heat infused me—the atmosphere of the gym suddenly seemed like that of the pool room after I’d dragged myself out of the water to find the whole class trying not to stare at me. But my thought was ridiculous—these fellow students could not know what I’d tried to do; except for a new white belt, who had glanced at me without recognition when I’d first walked in, these students were all post-high school age, and even Nam, my own locker partner, hadn’t heard about what I’d done. Mr. Park, Nam, the others—none of them knew.

I bowed my knees up and down like wings, a warm-up I’d come to perform without thought. Then, stopping bowing, I rolled my head—slowly, slowly, slowly, always slowly, Mr. Park had warned. Even he still rolled his head slowly, he said, the neck was so very delicate.

Mr. Park clapped his hands. We fell into lines unhurriedly, the more advanced students at the front, the white belt, me, and two leftover green belts ending up each of the four long rows. Mr. Park said “Good evening,” and we answered him. Some of the upper-level red belts inclined their heads. I was lost between two thoughts: deciding that I couldn’t tell my mother about the red-haired girl because she would tell my father and he would break our silence with some psychologically insightful but

snide remark, and I was also thinking about Herb Hills, the neighbor of ours in Highland Park who had been killed on his front lawn. I hadn't yet figured out a way to phrase the question, How do you prevent a bullet from reaching the head? I doubted very much that Mr. Park had an answer. I was lost in the murk that exists between uninspiring thoughts when Mr. Park snapped me alert. Instead of leading us in warm-ups, as he usually did, he was speaking.

"I have been hearing whispering," Mr. Park said. The room grew still, and it already had been still. The shushing of uniforms quieted as if a wind had ceased. "And I like to say, Yes, it is true that one of our students had an unfortunate thing. . . ." He continued to speak—I could see his lips moving—but I couldn't hear him. How had he found out? From Nam? How much did Nam know? How much had he told? I imagined Mr. Park calling me to the front of the gym, saying something quiet and grave, then sending me to the dressing room; I imagined that street clothes were the only kind of clothes I would wear again.

But no one was thinking about me. I could hear Mr. Park's voice again; my heart flapping like a bird, I shifted so I could see him.

"If this student not panicked, he not been hurt. It is very fortunate that the thieves were interested in his wallet only. He could been hurt very badly. This student very good student, has knowledge—fight well." Mr. Park opened his left hand and beat it lightly with his right fist. "Students," he said, "the mind must go with the body. We making fight simulation here, yes, but is not game, is not game. You will use what is learned here very well if keeping your head." I thought of my Highland Park neighbor again. No one knew if Herb had panicked. There had been no signs of struggle. I was torn between hoping he hadn't known what hit him, and wanting him to have made an avoidable mistake, besides stepping outside in a neighborhood where violence was commonplace.

Mr. Park proceeded to lead us through warm-up, spending a long time on easy, single kicks and grapples—straightforward, unfancy defenses that untrained people might effectively use. Twice he stopped the class and made several red belts move through single front kicks to harder, but still basic, combinations: front-back, side-back, round-back. You could see that Mr. Park was disturbed about the student he hadn't named, yet his movements as he demonstrated what he wanted to see from us were as fluid and swift as on any other day. His karate pants floated and snapped, his body blurred like a hummingbird's wings, then clicked into focus. He made karate look natural, as graceful as dancing, but faster and stronger and more intense.

After basic instruction, Mr. Park led us through the first kata, a series of karate moves executed flowingly, slowly, but without pause. As we moved, separately and together, the occasional screech of a bare foot on the wood came to me as if from a long distance, muffled as it was by my own slow breath. I understood my own body, that it began at my center, and extended outward to the limits of all my skin. And I knew so well by heart each next step I would take that my mind and body seemed to drift together, indistinguishable from one another.

After two more katas and runs at the bag, it was time for the part of class that I dreaded. Mr. Park pointed to ten of us, and we lined up facing our designated op-

ponents. I didn't look my opponent, the big new white belt, in the face. I would have had to tilt my head back, and I didn't want him to see the defeat I was already feeling—even if I won against him, my legs would ache and swell, as they had every time I'd sparred this month.

I waited for Mr. Park's beginning signal trying to calm myself, my heartbeats tripping into a blur. It felt as if my single heartbeats might become one long, drawn-out beat that was the same as no beat. I knew this wouldn't happen, I knew I wouldn't die, but I was afraid I might get smashed by a misaimed elbow or foot or fist.

Mr. Park asked the ten of us to bow and then said, "Okay, fight." The white belt and I began to shift from foot to foot. His long arms swayed, reminding me of clubs. We sidled around each other, pretending to spar, throwing a kick and a punch here and there to make ourselves look good, but keeping our distance.

"C'mon, you purple belt, white belt, fight!" Mr. Park called. I saw that my opponent would not dig in first—though a head taller than me, and a good thirty pounds heavier, he was afraid of me, of my colored belt. So without thinking further I faked a front kick with my left foot, then snapped a right side kick at his thigh and leaped at him, striking his right arm down and grabbing his uniform at the throat, bringing my left arm up as if to snap back his head.

"Nicely, very nicely," Mr. Park said, but I couldn't look to see if he was complimenting me or someone in one of the other fights heating up on all sides.

The white belt tried to imitate my rush, but I knocked his arm away, roughly, of necessity, since his approach had been overly forceful. We fought heatedly for another few minutes, each of us blocking the other successfully. My legs began to ache from all the blocks as they never had before—this white belt's arms were heavy and bony, and he blocked with clumsy force. Each block was a blow, which caused me to kick more and more slowly. My last kick was so slow that the white belt could have grabbed my foot if he'd tried. As he struck it down with his sharp wrist I noticed that my ankle looked very strangely shaped. "Wait a minute," I said. "Stop." He let his arms fall to his sides, and I backed away from him and bent over and lifted my pants legs. My calves and ankles had ballooned. They were inches fatter than usual. My ankle bones and my ankles themselves had disappeared beneath the swelled flesh.

"Don't stop fighting!" Mr. Parks called. "There is no stopping in real fighting."

I walked over to him, feeling too awed by the sudden ballooning of my legs to answer.

"Go back, keep fighting," Mr. Park said.

I lifted my pants legs to show him.

He looked quickly and looked away. "Go sit down," he said quietly, his lips tight.

I sat on the mats and watched the other fighters, feeling defeated and startled and frightened, as well as awed. As I stared at my huge, numbed legs I grew dizzy. My legs had never swelled so quickly, or so horrendously, and I wasn't sure what the swelling meant. I'd always asked my father about my body, even when I began to menstruate, since, being a psychiatrist, he was also a medical doctor. He'd always had answers, clear and complete. But I'd stopped speaking to him, and I hadn't spoken to anyone else, either, about my legs. I'd hoped that, just as they had overcome their

tendency to bruise, they would overcome their tendency to swell. Worrying about my legs, watching the fighters, I felt an invisible boundary spreading between us, a boundary that had always existed, but one that until now had grown narrower, and that I had assumed would eventually disappear.

After class, changing in the women's dressing room, I could hear the men talking congenially on the other side, but not what they were saying. As I walked toward the front of the gym I looked for Nam, but he had already left. I stepped out onto the street. Grand River still looked like a desert though it was beginning to grow dark. The pavement shone light gray with mica glitters as if the moon rather than street-lights were lighting it up.

I had walked a few steps down Grand River when I heard Mr. Park in the doorway behind me. "You take a rest," he said. I turned and smiled at him gratefully, but after I'd turned around again and continued down the street I wondered if he'd meant I shouldn't come back to the gym until I could spar without stopping. Mr. Park did not allow students to come to class and not fight, and he also did not allow us to wear shin guards or padded clothing. He wanted to toughen us, he wanted us to be prepared.

I locked myself into the station wagon and drove, and found myself at home without remembering how I got there. Through the front windows I could see my mom sewing, her head bent, her lips pursed, her hands, below the windows, moving out of my line of sight. I thought of going in the front door and telling her that Arthur was thinking of taking off for California, and that I had been given a slip by my counselor, and that I had tried to drown someone and was afraid to return to school. Then I remembered what Arthur had said about my being almost grown up and my problems being my own, and I walked around to the back door and went straight up to my room.

I closed the door and sat down on my bed. What I would have to do, I decided, was quit lifesaving, and avoid my locker for awhile, maybe indefinitely—I could carry all of my books with me, or leave some of them at home. Beyond that, I would have to take my chances. I understood, but could not put into words, what giving up karate would mean: that my body would never be my own—it could not be my own when it could be taken from me so easily, as it had on that day I'd been attacked. Since that day I'd wanted a power that would extend from the outer layer of my skin down through all my flesh and bones to the very center of myself.

Sitting on my bed, I went over other solutions: getting a dog, or mace, a knife, a gun. But I had already considered these possibilities; I saw again that none of them was good enough. I couldn't bring a dog to school, or later, to a job, and even if I carried a weapon everywhere, it could be taken from me. To be safe every moment, I needed a strength that would remain with me even if I were alone and my hands were empty.

My legs ached and my chest felt hollow. It felt as if something tangible had escaped from me. I had so wanted to be able to defend myself—to defend myself to the last

degree. I had wanted to learn to fight so well that I'd achieve what Mr. Park said was possible: the invincible air that would prevent danger from approaching me.

I lay down on my bed and closed my eyes, and in my mind Mr. Park's foot flashed in a sweeping round kick, carving, in the air between us, a circle as large as himself. Then Mr. Park was on both feet again, as still as if he hadn't moved, the circle he had carved enclosing his body, and his mind and his heart.