

This was an early foray into ransoming out stories, because I didn't have any brilliant ideas about where to market a story on two very divergent topics, overlapping only in the character of one woman. I don't think it spoils it to say this has another female protagonist and more martial arts.

Two Things She Does With Her Body

Kay Grigsby wasn't sure what to expect, it was her first time, but she levered off her shoes and climbed into the big chair. She lowered her feet into the basin, and felt the warm water take winter's slight numbness off her toes. The water had something pink in it, something bubbly and pearlescent, something with a lavender smell.

"This is a hot-rock aromatherapy wrap," the beautician said, draping a soft cloth tube full of warm, round stones on Kay's shoulders. It smelled like rosemary. "Do you need anything to drink?"

"I got some water at the front."

"All right. My name's Carol. Have you picked out which pedicure you want?"

"Just the basic one."

Kay's feet had found the jets in the basin and she tweaked her toes around them, then put the balls of her feet on an edge. It was deeper below the ledge, she could push down and stretch her calves. She already liked this.

"Do you have nail polish you like?"

"Let's try something new." Kay smiled. Carol smiled back and brought out a poster board with colored squares all over it.

"Oh my," Kay said. "This reminds me of picking paint for the bedroom."

"Well, they don't look the same in the bottle as they do on your toes. For your coloration, I'd go for something pretty dark."

"Something dramatic?"

"If you want. Burgundy would be nice. It's very popular."

"Mm, I don't know..."

"Well, if you want drama there's always this one, uh..." Carol craned her neck to read the name. "Purple Fuzion."

"Not that much drama. How about one of these reds?"

"Okay, there's... Candy-Apple Red and Fire-Engine Red."

"They look the same to me."

"Candy-Apple's a little brighter, Fire-Engine's a little deeper."

"Fire-Engine Red, then."

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Two days later, Kay stepped onto the judo mat and bowed.

These are nice mats, she thought. This wasn't her first time, so she wasn't afraid, and the excitement was manageable. Mostly she was concerned. It was the first match and she was up against Mitzy Saefer.

Kay was towards the top of the bracket, but Mitzy still had a slight weight advantage. Plus, she was *fast*. Kay always felt it was somehow unfair to be big *and* fast. The gym where Kay trained didn't have a lot of female judo players, so she did most of her training against men. She thought she might be stronger, but Mitzy relied on speed. They'd fought in three other tournaments and Mitzy had beaten her twice.

Mitzy, she thought. *No one this tough should be named Mitzy*.

To top it off, they both fought left-sided. Perhaps twenty percent of judo competitors took left-handed grips and approaches, but Kay felt it gave her an edge. Many people never trained to defend against left-side attacks, it made them a little slow to react, hesitant to counter. It wasn't decisive, but it worked for Kay sometimes.

Not on Mitzy though. Not on a natural southpaw.

"*Hajime!*" shouted the center ref, and they began.

The two women shuffled forward, took a few small steps side to side, and then the grip-fight began. Each reached forward, darting a hand in or out, pawing the air. A good grasp was the foundation of a good throw, so every decent fighter tried to get a solid hold and leave her opponent with a lousy one.

Kay's senses narrowed. Scent, taste, hearing – they remained, but they couldn't penetrate her concentration. Sight and touch were everything. Her vision was loose, centered on Mitzy's shoulders but not focused on any one spot. She absorbed everything she saw, understanding it without having to analyze it. She adapted to each slight shift and adjustment the other woman made.

Her tactile sense was even keener, with every gradual move factored on an instinctive level. Every touch upon the other, every time the other touched her, even the smallest tip or tilt... it all mattered, it was all essential.

Mitzy grabbed Kay's left lapel and Kay broke the grasp. Then Mitzy's hand was on Kay's elbow, getting that pistol-grip she liked, pulling in and Kay went with it, she took Mitzy's collar, high and deep. She tried to jam Mitzy's other hand across, getting the sleeve without letting Mitzy get her jacket, but it was no good, Mitzy had a low connection.

Kay slammed her left hip forward to drive the other woman back, make her step. Movement made opportunity, but vulnerability too. Kay didn't think about setting up a foot sweep, she didn't have to think, it was all trained in. Mitzy didn't step, she sprawled, pushing Kay back and keeping a gap between them, keeping her feet back out of range. Kay felt Mitzy's weight moving into the other woman's arms, a change she would never notice through a touch in other circumstances. She kept her hip moving, turned it into a clockwise pivot and her knees cracked as she squatted,

dropped, looked down at her pedicured toes and yanked the other woman up and forward. Mitzy tried to float out, get around to the side but Kay's pivot was too far, her hip was now blocking the other woman's escape. The throw was good and both of them knew it.

Mitzy rolled up over her and dropped, Kay drove herself in and down hard, piling into Mitzy to keep her from rolling out, keep her from landing on her front and ruining the throw, they impacted with brutal force and a referee shouted, "Mate!"

There were three referees, as with every judo match, and they conferred briefly before the primary ref raised his hand straight up and said "Ipon!"

"Ipon" means "Single Point." In the scoring system of judo, which has half points and quarter points, an *Ipon* indicates a decisive victory. In one stroke, Kay had won.

She blinked and looked around.

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"This is an exfoliating cream," Carol said, three weeks earlier, rubbing a grainy lotion on Kay's right foot. The left was wrapped in a pre-warmed towel, sitting on the edge of the basin. Everything was pre-warmed. Kay took another sip of water.

"You've got a lot of callus here," Carol said, and Kay didn't reply. Carol was dispassionately giving her a superb foot rub – lots of pressure on the instep with alternate thumb-strokes, then brisk rubs along the heel and up the leg to sluice off dead skin. Back down to the foot for more instep, then pulls and gentle twists to each toe in turn.

The warmth, the candlelight, the barely audible and wordless music... it all slowed Kay's mind to a standstill. Every muscle was limp, her eyelids were at half-mast and long, luxury seconds passed without a single thought.

"It's not too hard, is it?" Carol asked.

There was a pause as Kay recalled herself. "It's just right."

"Do you want me to use a pumice stone on those rough patches?"

Several silent seconds, then Kay's voice was syrupy slow.

"Sure. Why not?"

#

Kay's feet had rough patches because judo mats have textured surfaces – otherwise they get slippery under sweaty feet, or worse, they can get sticky, catch a toe, pull it under and snap it. Practicing foot sweeps, in which the edge of the foot slides rapidly along the mat surface, had led to redness, and soreness, and eventually to toughness. It also gave Kay a pretty good *deashi harai* technique, which she used on her second opponent, Emily.

Kay hadn't fought Emily before and suspected she'd just moved here from somewhere distant, because Emily was good and Kay did a lot of regional tournaments. She'd have remembered.

From the beginning, Emily had disrupted Kay's rhythm. Kay hadn't had a chance to synch up and throw, as she'd done with Mitzy. For all her concerns before the match, there was a communication between Mitzy and Kay. Their bodies understood, they fought on the same terms. If they moved in unison, it was because each was trying to win the same way.

With Emily, there was no such connection, so Kay had to think. The instincts were still there, trained through years of practice, but now she had to reason through which attack to choose, which moves to make. Now her mind was in the match, flipping the switches. In her first match, they had switched themselves.

Frowning, Kay started making half-baked attacks, one after the other, trying to provoke a mistake, but Emily was just as aggressive. The pair of them finally dropped to the mat in a graceless tangle of shins and necks and uniforms. It became a ground fight.

There are several ways to win a judo match. The quickest is to execute a throw with such proficiency and excellence that the judges call *Ipon*. Kay had done that in her first match in just seven seconds.

Another way is to perform a series of imperfect techniques and amass a greater number of half- and quarter- points than your opponent. Emily and Kay had been playing a bit of that game until they fell.

A third way is through submission. Getting an opponent's arm or shoulder locked in a painful, unnatural position can force her to "tap out" and surrender. Choking is also permitted, either until tap-out or full unconsciousness. Finally, one can win by keeping an opponent stuck down and helpless.

Submission, pins and chokes all happen wrestling on the ground. (Standing armlocks were forbidden after a string of broken elbows in the eighties.) Now Kay and Emily were squirming, grabbing and reaching, each trying to immobilize the other for a finishing move.

Kay was on the bottom, in the guard position. She had her neck tucked and her hands on her own lapels – the best chokes use the collar as a ligature. Emily was worming her hands in, trying to get leverage, and Kay worked her legs up to push the other woman away.

Be a ball, she thought. It didn't occur to her that thinking was a bad sign.

On the bottom, she always wanted to roll, to reverse the situation and get on top. Kay's mind was working harder, faster than it did at any other time in her life, judging Emily, interpreting every shift of weight, every leg movement, each turn and reach. Their arms and legs writhed, jamming and shoving and grinding at any yielding gap. Kay switched her grip,

grabbing Emily's probing wrist, and then she stretched around with her other hand to seize Emily's belt in the back, she arched hard and rolled the other woman off her, broke away...

"*Mate!*"

They'd separated. They would resume the match from the standing position. Kay looked down and saw that her belt had come loose. She took her time re-wrapping and re-tying it, trying to regain her breath.

I've got to snap out of this, she thought. She didn't want feelings. Early in her career she'd worked with anger or frustration, but there came a point where they just got in the way. There came a point where everything got in the way, a point where you won because there was nothing except technique. She'd touched that fighting Mitzy but it wasn't a sure thing. With it, a fighter became invulnerable, but the state itself was so fragile that it collapsed under the weight of even one idea.

It was gone, now. If Kay couldn't find it again, it would all be down to strength and speed and who wanted it worse.

"*Hajime!*"

Kay pushed in hard, slamming into the other woman and not bothering with a graceful grip-fight, Emily was fine with that, she did power judo too, they surged and spun and grunted, they were stopped when they went out of bounds and they immediately charged at each other again. The match was now at two grueling minutes and both of them were losing their edge and grace. Emily went in for a leg pick, Kay tried to sprawl but couldn't move fast enough, but she could wrap her arms around Emily's sides and torque, she could block Emily's leg with her foot so that the two of them crashed down side by side, falling hard and flat like an old dead tree. Kay felt something crackle in her neck and saw little yellow sparks behind the dark of closed eyelids, felt that odd brief nausea that only comes when your brain slides a little in its fluid, but she was used to it, she was on top and digging, trying to isolate an arm, an elbow, but Emily was strong and had her arms tucked, she had a foot on each of Kay's hips to push her back, now Emily was the ball and Kay wanted to be a blanket, to spread out on her and concentrate all her weight on one shoulder or the side of the neck. She needed to get to one side or the other. As long as Emily had her wrapped up with her feet she'd never get anywhere. Emily got her hands into Kay's collar, knuckles in, trying to collapse the veins in Kay's neck by pushing inward.

No way, Kay thought. Her head was tucked deep, she had her chin inside her lapel and her neck was too strong, the choke was starting to work but was far too slow to be decisive. It wouldn't seriously threaten her for another five or six seconds. On the mat, that was eternity.

Kay faked left and then shot both arms under Emily's legs, hoping to lift her off and toss her to the side. Kay wanted to stand again and try to throw, her standing game was better, but she didn't get the lift quick enough and then Emily's thighs clamped around Kay's neck, her ankles crossed and now, instead of an awkward hand-

choke, Kay's neck was trapped between Emily's strongest limbs, working in concert like a nutcracker. Kay felt a searing pain shoot through her neck and she frantically started slapping the other woman, tapping out, surrendering, making her stop before she could crush Kay's trachea.

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"You keep them pretty short," Carol said.

Kay didn't reply. Short nails were a courtesy on the judo mat – no one wanted to get the edge of a sweaty toenail in an ankle or across the face.

But all that seemed very far away. Kay wondered if she could even move her arms and legs any more. She didn't bother to try. She didn't need to move. She didn't need arms or legs, they weren't numb but so relaxed that she could barely tell where they stopped and the warm chair beneath her started. Her eyes were closed, her breathing slow and her mind completely at ease.

Carol gently trimmed Kay's toenail cuticles, filed the edges, and buffed the tops to a high gloss. When they were shining like ivory piano keys, Carol dipped the tiny brush in the tiny pot and started making short, smooth strokes. A layer of red, a layer of clear, more buffing and polishing, and at the end Carol said, "That's it. What do you think?"

Kay, with an effort, opened her eyes and licked her lips. She looked down.

My feet have probably never felt, looked or smelled better than this, Kay thought. She shifted her weight, warming up to stand. *It's all down hill from here.*

"They look great."

#

In the tournament locker room, Kay sat on a bench with her head between her knees, but she wasn't looking at her feet or thinking how nice they looked. She wasn't really thinking anything.

Her neck hurt, deep inside. Mostly in front, in the throat, her compressed windpipe. After losing, she'd coughed up a big wad of yellow phlegm. She always had to do that after trachea chokes.

The back of her neck hurt too, a soreness that spread down her shoulders. So much pushing, pulling and labor, against someone working just as hard, always on a surface rolling or moving or sliding. The muscles ached, they were locked stiff and wouldn't relax, they were exhausted.

She could feel a burn on her cheek, an abrasion from someone's uniform sleeve sliding across it hard and fast. She hadn't even noticed. She had no idea when it had happened.

She hadn't eaten since a light breakfast, she knew she'd be hungry soon but right now her stomach was clenched. Too many impacts from falls, too much stomach crunching as she tried to twist out of throws, or into them, or to wrench her way free of a pin.

There was a soreness in her left hip joint too, something that had been there for months and it didn't seem to be getting better, it seemed to be getting worse, a soreness that only came on when she clamped hard. She had to clamp a lot, doing judo.

She took a deep breath, aware of her stink, hearing her joints crack as she stretched upwards, trying to get her locked lower back muscles to unclench.

At least my arms and legs are okay, she thought. *My knees are good*. There was a feeling in her fingertips, not quite a tingle, but an exquisite sensitivity. The hard gripping, the scrabbling and scraping and friction of fabric being wrested from her grasp, it left her hands more awake and alive than they were at any other time.

Her final record was one win, two losses.

"Excuse me?"

Kay looked up. Another woman had walked in, tiny, someone she didn't know, someone from two or three weight brackets down.

"Is that Fire-Engine Red?" the stranger asked.