

2024 HIGH SCHOOL SHORT STORY CONTEST – 3RD PLACE

The Arm-Wrestling Match

By Noah Grosberg

It was a very big day for the Birmingham Elementary third graders. Today was the day that Archie Wood—a strong and pale boy, who was by far the most popular in the grade—and Kirin Acharya—a flimsy lad of Pakistani descent, who was quite shy, to say the least, have the famed arm wrestle that all of the children in the third grade had been waiting for, for over a week.

Last Tuesday, during lunch hours, all of the third grade (which was only 43 students) participated in an arm-wrestling tournament led by none other than the strawberry-blond, Archie Wood. The tournament had lasted for two days, with Archie Wood winning and winning and winning. Archie would prance around the linoleum floors of the cafeteria, flexing his biceps in triumph after each victory. Many of the other boys, and a couple of girls, would follow Archie from table to table, marveling at Archie's brute strength and pulsating purple vein in his right bicep.

If you could not tell already, Archie was a very proud boy. He was proud of his strength. He was proud of his height, for he was the tallest in the grade, if only by half an inch. And he was proud of his golden curls which he said resembled those of Aquaman's hair perfectly.

An arm-wrestling tournament was an event nothing out of the ordinary for the third graders of Birmingham Elementary, or any third graders for that matter. I'm sure you remember a time in your adolescence when everything was about seeing who was the fastest, the strongest, the tallest, and the smartest. This was no different for Archie and his classmates. Just a month before the arm wrestling, the third graders had raced from the football net to the jungle gym, again created by Archie and won by him. Although some whispered behind Archie's back claiming he was too boastful and perhaps a little conceited, they could not deny the boy's strength and brilliant ideas of fun.

So, Archie continued to win and continued to move on from one child to the next. However, Kirin Acharya was the only one who refused to participate in the tournament, but nobody really cared because he was so unpopular. That was at least until Archie had beaten 41 of the 42 other students.

On Thursday, Archie had strutted across the cafeteria, with his little gang of admirers following at his heels, asking who he had beaten in the arm wrestling. Of course, Archie knew, but it was just another way to assert his glory and show off to the girls. He was a king, a pioneer, an emperor, and Archie had just conquered the grade, at least he thought.

Archie went to every table and asked every child until he came to Kirin who was sitting by himself, eating a turkey and cheese sandwich on whole wheat bread, and reading a comic book about Spider-Man, a character he admired dearly.

Now, you must understand that Archie was not a nasty boy at heart. He just liked to get what he wanted. Pompous and overbearing, yes. Unpleasant at times, but Archie was not mean and nasty, at least not most of the time. This time, however, Archie may have crossed the line.

“Kirin, have I beaten you in an arm wrestle yet?” Archie said in an obnoxious tone as he tapped Kirin on the shoulder

Kirin, who was very surprised to be spoken to by Archie, just mumbled and stuttered. Kirin couldn't think of the last time Archie had spoken to him. Why was he speaking to him now? Now, many of the other kids in the grade, in addition to Archie's little gang, had gathered around Kirin's table, watching him with scrutiny.

Kirin finally said quietly, “Uh..uh. I-I don't know.”

“What d'ya mean you don't know? We either wrestled or we didn't,” Archie hissed, now starting to get annoyed. Archie didn't have time to argue with someone so irrelevant and unimportant as Kirin.

Kirin just sat there and took a bite of his sandwich. Unfortunately for him, a bit of mustard had smeared onto his chin, and the other children snickered.

“Kirin, mate, have 'ya lost your marbles? I think he has.” Archie jeered to no one in particular. Archie was a crowd-pleaser and his followers laughed at this.

“Answer the question, man,” Oliver, Archie's best friend, shouted.

Kirin began to quiver and his almond-brown eyes started to water. Finally, Kirin looked up and said shyly, “I don't think I have, but I really don't want to.”

“Bloody hell mate. Ya don't have an option. I want to be the arm wrestling champion of the grade, and that means I must beat everyone in the grade, so ya must wrestle,” Archie roared.

“I said I don't wanna. You've beaten everyone else. Isn't that enough?” Kirin whispered. He looked up to meet Archie's cold blue eyes. That look was as an answer as any.

“You must arm wrestle,” all of the children shouted in excitement.

A small tear grew at the bottom of his right eye. Kirin was about to lift his arm to wrestle when a voice rang over the intercom, calling Kirin to the office. Kirin was relieved to remember that he had a dentist appointment that afternoon.

Kirin quickly rushed from the cafeteria, but not before Archie yelled, “We wrestle after school, in the back alley next Friday. Ya better be there.”

When Archie got into his sister's Ford Puma, he began to cry. It was only Maya's second day back home from University for the winter holidays, and now her younger brother who had been so cheerful, since she arrived, was crying in her backseat. Maya asked Kirin what was going and Kirin told her the whole story. He knew he could always count on his sister to know what to do in difficult situations like this one.

“That conceited bastard,” Maya said aloud when Kirin had finished telling her the story. “Archie Wood...his brother was in my grade, Trenton Wood. Also a conceited and pompous bastard. He always pranced around in a turtleneck, boasting about his A-Level results.”

Archie had stopped crying by this point and laughed a little. He loved how his sister was not afraid to express her opinion about anything to anyone. He trusted her advice the most out of everyone, except maybe his parents.

“You know what you have to do, Kirin? You just gotta not arm wrestle him. Don’t give him the satisfaction of victory.”

“Hey!” Archie said defensively, “What makes you think I can’t win?”

Maya laughed. “You look like a stick, Kir. I’m not trying to be mean. It’s just a fact, but you’ll get bigger. You just gotta give it time,” she said not in a mean way, but rather lovingly.

Kirin hung his head dejectedly but knew it was true.

“I guess so,” Kirin said, “But then everyone will just make fun of me for wimping out. I don’t know if I can not do the arm wrestle.”

“It won’t matter in the long run. Nobody’s gonna remember this in a couple of weeks. Just trust me. Don’t give in. Don’t give that little bastard the satisfaction.”

Archie nodded but wasn’t so sure about what his sister had said. That kind of humiliation of backing down would certainly last a lifetime, he thought.

That night, Kirin decided to not take his sister’s advice. The embarrassment of not participating would be too much to bear. Anyway, he was the underdog. If he lost, no one would be surprised. He had nothing to lose.

Kirin spent the next week preparing for the match. He found his dad’s old resistance bands in the closet and did curls with them. He locked the door to his room and did pushups and situps on the carpet while listening to “Eye of the Tiger.” Kirin envisioned a victory and the shocked faces of his classmates when he pinned Archie’s hand to the table. Maybe, just maybe, Kirin could pull off the unthinkable.

It was now Friday, the fateful day of the arm wrestling match. A little wooden table was set outside in the grubby back alley, in the middle of two scraped stools. Soon, the bell rang, marking the school day’s end and the third graders dashed to the alley to watch the arm wrestling match. It had just rained only 30 minutes ago, so puddles filled the alley, but none of the children cared. Although their trainers would get wet, and although the alley smelled faintly of vomit, all of the third graders were there to watch the much-anticipated match.

Archie walked through the crowd of children grinning rather cockily. He had rolled up the sleeves of his uniform to his elbows, and now took off his tie and handed it to one of his friends. Kirin ambled about 10 feet behind Archie, eyes fixed on the wet asphalt. He had trained for a whole week for this moment but did not feel ready.

The boys took their spots on each side of the table, Archie with triumph already bright in his eyes and Kirin wearing a timid frown. Right behind the table, Oliver stood and procured a whistle, ready to referee the match.

Everyone leaned in with great eagerness, even though they knew that Archie was going to win. It was undeniable. Victory for Archie was inevitable. Bets were placed, and a few hopefuls

placed a couple of pounds on the underdog, hoping to win big. But there was just no way that Kirin would win.

However, every person, whether they're British or Scottish or Welsh, or even American, has a bit of resilience and internal strength that can be someone else's physical strength. That was what Kirin was thinking at the very second before the match began. Kirin had read David vs. Goliath just the night before and envisioned himself as David fighting Archie. It could be a Cinderella story, like Luton beating Man City, Kirin thought as Oliver's whistle pierced the air. He could do this.

Kirin and Archie gripped hands, biceps straining, and tried to force the other boy's arm to the table. Each boy's knuckles whitened in the strain of the moment.

"I can do this," Kirin yelled in his mind. In a way, he felt he had won just being there.

This, however, is no fairy tale, and certainly not a Cinderella story. There was a brief struggle and Archie pinned Kirin's arm to the table. The spectators cheered, and Archie stood up victorious. Kirin had been defeated to no one's surprise.