Oregonauthor.com
Jon Remmerde
4,441 words

Weapons of Defense

When I was thirteen, I carried five knives and a pistol. I carried the biggest knife, eighteen inches long, in a sheath on a strap I wrapped over my left shoulder and around my chest. I carried two hunting knives on my belt and a folding knife in my pocket. I carried the knives in winter, so I wore a jacket, and the knives didn't show.

Nobody delivered newspapers in my neighborhood. I knocked on doors and signed up 75 people, and I started delivering the Eugene Register Guard and the Sunday Oregonian.

That first summer, the newspaper route was good. Western Oregon's wet winter hit, and it wasn't as good. I wouldn't have minded the rain, but most of the time, if I got wet, tonsilitis hit me hard.

Duane and Chris, brothers, lived two blocks over, on 31st Street. I showed them the paper route. When I was sick, I called them, and they delivered the papers.

Duane and Chris were both pale and thin. I thought they always looked sick, but they got on their bikes, pedaled through driving rain, and delivered the papers when my throat was so sore I could hardly swallow, and a high fever laid me down in bed.

Halfway through the winter, Duane said, "Me and Chris deliver the paper more than half the time. What would be fair, it would be fair if you gave us the route. You can't do it most of the time, anyway."

I said, "No, I'm not giving you the route. You don't deliver half the time or anywhere near half. I pay you more every day you deliver than I get for that day. I collect every month. I lined this route up. I went door to door and got the subscribers, and I made all the arrangements with the office. You can quit if you want to."

I didn't know anyone else I could get to substitute. If they quit, I might be out of luck. My dad took me around, and I delivered from the car a couple of times when it rained, but he wouldn't do it anymore, and he wouldn't let Mom drive the car. Even if I wore good rain clothes, when I delivered papers in the rain, tonsilitis usually laid me down.

Duane and Chris didn't quit. Once in a while, Duane brought it up again, "We deliver so much of the time, you should give us the route."

"Quit if you want to. If you keep bringing it up, I'll fire you, anyway."

I picked up the newspapers at the small airport north of town, loaded them in the canvas bag on the handlebars of my bicycle, pedaled up the paved road through the big S curve, turned right off the paved road, and pedaled over the railroad tracks onto the gravel county road, past the cornfield on my left, and started delivering newspapers.

Sundays, I delivered the Portland Oregonian, a huge newspaper. My bicycle wanted to skid and fall over on the loose gravel road, with the weight of all those big papers in a canvas bag over my front wheel. I thought I might spill bicycle, papers, and all, but I was okay once I got the first 25 papers delivered.

Daylight peeled back the darkness while I pedaled around the gravel streets and shoved the rolled up Sunday Oregonians into metal boxes next to the road.

Heavy rains settled into the Willamette Valley. Tonsilitis knocked me off my feet. I didn't want sickness, but there it was. I didn't know anything to do about it.

When Duane said I should give them the route, I would have gone out and delivered papers anyway, sore throat or no sore throat, rain or no rain, but my mother said no. I don't know if I really could have delivered papers. I was pretty sick, in bed, without much desire to get out of bed.

Two girls lived across the street from each other at the end of my route, Elaine and Sharon. They were about my age. Elaine was well developed for her age. They told me a lot of stuff, some of it crazy sounding. Sharon said they sat in Elaine's garage, on a bed stored there.

In the evening, a man walked up the road, and Elaine called out, "Hey mister, do you want to come in here and fuck me on this bed?" but he just kept walking up the road, didn't even turn to look their way.

I thought, why not me, but then I decided I wasn't interested anyway. For one thing, I had five knives strapped onto me, and I'd have to take them off. I didn't want to do that. More than that, I didn't want to try to explain why I had them strapped onto me.

They probably didn't call out to the man. They probably giggled in the darkness and dared each other but didn't do it.

The smallest knife was a K-Bar skinning knife with a white bone handle, a well-made knife, about eight inches long. I made the scabbard for the K-Bar in leather crafts class in school. I lined the part where the knife edge rested with brass, because the knife was so sharp, it might cut through its case.

The next larger was a Case, about ten inches long, with an orange plastic handle. The pocket knife had a single blade and a leather thong through the handle. It had " Sod-Buster" etched on the blade. I stole that knife from a store in Eugene when my older brother and I went in, to show him I could do it, maybe to show myself I could do it.

I carried a throwing knife I'd made from a planer blade in shop class, pointed on both ends. Most of the time, when I threw it at wood targets I fastened to the garage, it hit wrong, bounced off, and fell on the ground, but I carried it anyway.

The big knife was too big to be a skinning knife or a knife for gutting game. It wouldn't take a razor edge the way the K-Bar and the Case would, but I liked to have it hanging against my chest and stomach in its heavy leather case.

I met Jack Roth on my route, before the rains hit. He lived two roads over, on 35th Street, in a run-down house with no lawn and two dead cars in the yard. Jack was fourteen, built strong. Some kids I knew said Jack was a bully. He smoked cigarettes, and he wore a black leather jacket.

He came out from his house and talked to me when I rode my bicycle down his road and delivered newspapers. He came over to my house to see me. We sat out by the pond that filled the lot next to my place.

He said, " I'm going to get my own car. Then I can go wherever I want."

"When?"

"About a month. The middle of next month. You know Donna, down the road? She likes Bruce cause he has a car. When I get a car, I get Donna. You got to have a car and a big dick to get a girlfriend."

"You're not old enough to get a driver's license."

"No, but I know how to drive. If you drive right, you could drive till you're sixteen and never get pulled over."

Two of my brothers and I argued pretty seriously that morning, and we hadn't come to a settlement. I dug a rock out of loose dirt and threw it into the pond. We watched ripples spread toward the shores. I said, "I've been mad at my brothers all day. I'm still mad."

Jack said, "Want me to kill them for you?"

I looked up at him. He grinned at me. He said, “I could drown them in this pond. I’d probably have to do it one at a time. Get one drowned, if his body didn’t sink, if his body floated, get him out, hide the body, then get the other one to come down here close to the water and start over.”

I said, “No. I’m not that mad.”

A bunch of us played softball in a field in the middle of the neighborhood. Jack walked over from his street and joined us. He didn’t do very well at the game, so he started making his own rules. “I get four strikes.” After four strikes, “I get to bat twice.”

Jack was bigger and more muscular than anyone there. Everyone was afraid of him. He wouldn’t give up the bat. Grass had bleached yellow in the fall of the year. I walked through calf-deep grass. Seeds stuck to my jeans and my socks. I stopped in front of Jack.

I said, “You can play if you want, but you can’t make up your own rules. Either you go by the rules like everybody else does, or you don’t play.”

Jack looked at me and grinned. I wondered if he’d hit me with his fist or maybe with the wooden bat. I stood close in front of him anyway and waited. He handed me the bat and walked away.

I carried the pistol in the newspaper bag, sometimes. The pistol took up too much room, and it was heavy. Friday papers were small, so I could carry it Fridays, but it wasn’t really what I wanted. If I could carry it against me, like I did the knives, I might have wanted to carry it, but I didn’t have the right kind of holster.

I worried about the pistol in the canvas bag. It could get wet. I was afraid to get more than a few steps away from my bike. Somebody might come along and find the pistol.

If my dad ever went to get his pistol and it wasn’t there, he would make some big trouble. After a while, I left the pistol in the drawer where he kept it.

Maxine lived on the west road, about halfway through my route. Elaine and Sharon said she told them she had started her periods. Sharon said, “She said she stands in front of her mirror in her bedroom and stares at herself naked.”

I could see that image in my mind. More than anything else, imagining Maxine standing naked in front of the mirror started me thinking about her. Maxine was blond and thin. She had breasts, but just barely. Her pale, long face always looked unhappy. She looked like she might cry at any moment, but I

never saw her cry.

I wanted to be in love with her.

By late October, darkness settled about the time I started my paper route. Street lights shone only on four corners in the neighborhood, along the county road.

The gravel road ran by Maxine's house in the dark. When I put the paper into the metal, tubular box in front of her house, I stayed there, out in front, for a while. If I thought about it hard enough, she would hear my thoughts and come out, and we could talk about love.

I wanted to see her naked.

I could take off my jacket and my shirt, and I could show her I carried five knives. I would show her the white-handled K-Bar. I would show her how sharp I kept it. I could shave with that knife, if I had any whiskers.

If I looked at her naked, would she have pubic hair? When a girl started having periods, did she have pubic hair? I didn't know anything except what I heard other kids talk about.

She never came out. Sometimes I saw her in school. I thought about talking to her, but I didn't know what to say. Her face held nothing of childhood. She was no older than I was, but she had the strange, out-of-place face of an adult.

The throwing knife, I carried between my shoulder blades, on the same strap the big knife hung from in front. I could reach over my shoulder, pull the throwing knife from its case, and throw it in one motion. Except it slipped down, and I had to open my jacket, reach under my shirt, and pull down on the big knife in front so the one in back came up high enough so I could reach it.

The throwing knife wouldn't slip easily from its case. When I reached over my shoulder, grasped it, and pulled, it brought the belt up around the back of my head, and the heavy leather case of the knife in front slipped down until it nearly crushed my boy-manhood. I didn't expect to have to get the knife out, so I didn't worry about it. I liked feeling it resting between my shoulder blades.

Six parallel streets ran north and south, actually gravel roads, with the gravel county road across the east end and a gravel road across the west end. A church stood west of the west road. Nobody used the church anymore.

I rode my bicycle into the church parking lot, put it on its kick stand, and walked around the church. Flower beds surrounding the church grew weeds. I looked in the dirty windows. There wasn't much inside the building. I tried the

doors and windows. They were locked, so I got on my bicycle and pedaled back onto my route.

The houses in that neighborhood varied from small and ramshackle, to large houses with nice lawns. The nicer, finished houses stood mostly southeast, up where Sharon and Elaine lived. The unfinished, ramshackle houses occupied the northwest, where Jack Roth lived, with many kinds of houses in between.

Our house was almost middle in the area, above middle in quality, not large, but nice enough, with a lawn. My brothers and I took turns mowing the lawn.

Many of the houses in that six-street neighborhood hadn't been finished inside. People lived in their houses and built them as they lived.

A young couple, named Adamson, lived in a small, unfinished house near the end of the first street. They saw me delivering the paper on a rainy afternoon and invited me in for hot chocolate. Their house, with the interior walls unfinished, studs and insulation showing, open studs for interior walls, smelled bad inside, a rank, fetid odor. I didn't know what it was.

They used water in the hot chocolate, no milk, but I liked them. After I was inside for a few minutes, I didn't notice the smell anymore. It was hot in there, but I kept my jacket zipped so the knives wouldn't show.

James Adamson said they had helped build the church west of them. They had helped keep it going for several years, but people fell away until almost no one attended Sundays and Wednesday evenings.

"We didn't have enough people anymore to pay a minister, so he left. Mary and me, we clean the dust out sometimes and mow the lawn, mow the weeds now, I guess. Otherwise, it just sits there locked and empty."

Days grew short, with winter. I passed the church in the dark. I thought I saw lights from the windows. I left my bike on its kick stand by the road and walked toward the building. I kept to the darkest shadows and walked quietly. I listened and watched, walked closer, stopped and watched and listened again. I circled the building and looked in windows. There was no one there. I thought I must have seen reflections of light from the windows.

The Adamsons talked to me about religion, but it was like trying to get answers to a calculus problem from someone who didn't yet know that nine times nine is eighty-one. Jim Adamson asked me, " Have you found Jesus?"

I said, “I didn’t know he was lost.”

He looked down into his hot chocolate, then looked around at the unfinished walls.

I thought I should say, “I wasn’t trying to be funny. I don’t know what you mean,” but I didn’t say it. I drank the rest of my hot chocolate. I knew what he asked me had meaning beyond its literal meaning, but I didn’t know what it was. I knew I had failed to earn my hot chocolate, but I didn’t know what had gone wrong, and I didn’t know how to find out more about it.

It was hot in there, and I still had newspapers to deliver, so I left. It was cold outside, and already dark. A breeze grew toward wind. I thought rain might start any minute. I pedaled hard and slammed papers into their metal boxes, and I beat the rain home.

The Adamsons gave me a two dollar tip, in a nice card, with angels, at Christmas. They always paid me on time.

Some people didn’t. Come back next Monday. Then, come back next Friday. Some people moved away without paying. Some stayed there and didn’t pay. But most paid, and I had a good income, for a thirteen year old.

An old couple, who joked with me a lot, ran a café at the small airport where I picked up the papers. I was hungry by the time I got out of school, got my bicycle and picked up the newspapers, and dinner at home came late.

Most days, I ate a hamburger and drank a milkshake at the café before I started on my route. By the time I finished delivering papers and got home, I was hungry again, and I ate dinner with my family.

The man at the café had two sets of teeth, one set behind the first set. I wondered how he brushed them. Sometimes I got tired of his jokes, but he made good hamburgers and milkshakes, so I tried to laugh even when I didn’t understand his jokes.

He held up huge women’s underpants, black and lacy. He said, “My wife found these in the glove box of my car after I was out late last Friday night.” He laughed.

His wife didn’t laugh. She just said his name, like a mother talking to her child.

I said, “Looks like they’d fit a full-grown cow.” His wife laughed a little then. I finished eating and pedaled away up the road.

When November’s monthly bill for my papers came due, I was short almost $30.00 because of hamburgers and milkshakes and people not paying, mostly because of hamburgers and

milkshakes.

The man who brought the newspapers to the airport came to my house and talked to my mother. I don't know what they said, because I sat on the front porch, scared and miserable, and waited. I had a sore throat again, but I was trying to keep anyone from finding out.

I was surprised when they finished talking and I still had the paper route, and I wasn't going to prison. My mother started giving me a sandwich and a glass of milk before I left for the airport, and I soon caught up on the $30.00.

My best friend at school, Sammy, had a cleft palate. I couldn't understand some of what he said, but it didn't matter. He was patient about repeating himself, and we both knew it didn't matter if I didn't understand every word.

I didn't have to deliver papers Sunday afternoons. Sunday, I rode my bike over to Sammy's place. Sammy and I hiked through the cornfield, that was bare, plowed dirt by then, over the hill beyond the field, and down to the river, to see what the world was about.

Night dropped on us on our way back, by the road. Light rain fell from clouds softly lighted by the moon above them.

A car stopped beside us, and the man driving said, "You boys want a ride? Looks pretty wet out there."

I got in and Sammy followed me in. The man asked where we were going, and I told him. He said, "Let's drive up on Spencer's Butte and sit and talk." He put his hand on my leg and then touched my genitals. I was terrified. I didn't know what to do. I clamped down on his hand with my elbow.

I said, "No. We have to go home. If you're not going to take us home, let us out."

I didn't have all my knives. I hadn't seen any need to take them over to Sammy's place, but I did have the white-handled K-Bar. The driver of the automobile moved his hand from my genitals, but he held onto my leg.

I clamped harder with my elbow, unsnapped the K-Bar, and pulled it from its sheath with my right hand. That terrified me as much as what the driver was doing. I wasn't sure I could stab someone, but I was getting ready. The driver didn't see what I was doing.

He said, "It's early. There's a lot of places we could go and have some fun. I have money. You guys want some money?"

I said, "Stop the car and let us out."

He kept driving, and Sammy said, "Cop gis gog gammed caw ight gow."

The driver stopped the car. Sammy and I piled out into the dark rain and slammed the door. The car disappeared into the dark, wet night. I had wondered if Sammy knew what was happening. He did. He held up a big pocket knife, open against the sky, so I could see it. “He gign’t cop, I wa going to kill gat backarg.”

I showed him the K-Bar, and we started laughing. Sammy said, “Gat som bik ucky ko be alive.” We laughed in the falling rain until we felt weak.

Tonsilitis knocked me off my feet. I wanted all my knives in bed with me, but I was afraid my mother would discover them. I put them under the mattress. I dreamed sweaty, terrifying nightmares sometimes when I was sick. If I could remember my knives were close and bring them into my dream, I was safe.

With my knives, I overcame nightmare monsters. I never had to stab them. I threatened them with my knives, and they left me alone.

Most of the time, I couldn’t remember to bring the knives into my dreams. I woke in panic in the night. I reached between the box springs and the mattress and got the biggest knife and held it against me. I slept okay the rest of the night.

Later that winter, my youngest brother, Bob, and I went into the hospital to have our tonsils out. They put us in a room together. A nurse came in and gave us a shot. After it was all over with, before we left the hospital, we found out what she said, was, “Now go to sleep,” but as she left the room, we both thought she said, “Don’t go to sleep.”

We fought a hard fight. We worked together, trying to keep each other awake. Since the injection was to put us to sleep, we couldn’t win. We thought something fearful would happen to us if we fell asleep.

“Bob.”

“Yeah.”

“You awake?”

“Yeah. But I can’t stay awake.”

“Don’t go to sleep.”

“Jon.”

“Huh?”

“Don’t go to sleep.”

“I know.”

“Bob. Bob. Wake up.”

No answer. This place I’m drifting into, I fear it because the nurse told me not to go there, so it must be dangerous. I wish I had brought my knives to the hospital, but I knew it wouldn’t

work. Fear fades from me, because it is a peaceful, comfortable place to be. I give up all resistance. My consciousness dwindles.

They promised us ice cream, and I wanted ice cream as soon as I came into consciousness, but I couldn't eat it. I didn't know, and my mother didn't know gauze still packed my throat, and I couldn't swallow the ice cream.

I thought it wasn't worth it. I had a sore throat that outclassed any sore throat I'd ever had. Bob didn't think it was worth it, either. He hadn't even had a lot of trouble with tonsilitis.

But it was the last sore throat I ever had. I was almost never sick again. I was sturdily built to begin with. I started a regular program of lifting weights and working out on the bars and mats at the junior high school. I gained muscle and stamina.

I delivered my papers in shorter time. Rain and cold weather didn't bother me. I never needed a substitute on the route anymore.

Not long after I had my tonsils out, I quit carrying the throwing knife on my paper route, and not long after that, I left the big knife at home. Before summer fully developed, I only carried a small, three-bladed pocket knife, for cutting the strings on newspaper bundles, for cleaning fish, whatever necessary task came along.

If I thought about the change at all, I just thought I was strong and confident, and I had no need for the knives I allowed to become just the tools they were meant to be.

I gave the paper route to Duane and Chris, because I started staying after school to wrestle, to practice for wrestling, and I got home too late to deliver papers.

I set pins in a bowling alley Friday and Saturday evenings. I made more money in two days than I had made all week on the paper route. Late in the summer, I picked beans and peaches, apples and cherries for money.

I grew into adulthood before I began to understand what the knives and carrying them meant to me. When I began to understand, I knew muscles, strength, and stamina weren't adequate, either. I traveled through the universe with little effective defense.

I probed deeply into my thoughts and thoughts of others, trying to find defense more effective than guns and knives.

I had much to learn. I didn't trust most of the words people said to me about defense in the universe, because their words often did not sound quite true. Too many said easy-to-say words but didn't live what they talked about.

My family was short on words about love and trust, long on sudden violence and harsh words of threat. The world seemed to reflect that pattern.

Slowly, I learned about defense in the universe, about taking Love and reverence for all Life into myself as I understood more. I got further and further from unfulfillable promises, from guns and knives as I went.