

Busting the Myth

by R. Rochelle

Puis-je moi, une femme en fauteuil roulant, me défendre lors d'une attaque violente? Suivez-moi lors d'un cours d'auto-défense pour femmes atteintes d'un handicap. Partagez mon scepticisme. Regardez-moi et mes compagnes de classe briser notre cycle d'impuissance. Venez à notre «graduation», là où l'on découvre les vraies sources de notre pouvoir.

If other women feel like a target for assault, then I feel like the bull's-eye. I use a wheelchair, and I figure if someone's out there looking for an easy hit, it's me.

Before my disability, I crisscrossed continents with nothing but adventure on my mind. At 25, the whole world was my backyard. At 45, I'm too afraid to go to the corner store after dark on a junk food run.

kick, can't run away. *Your strength, maybe, not ours.*

Small hopes die in me as staff review the 1989 study by DisAbled Women's Network Canada.... Disabled girls and women are assaulted far more frequently than their able-bodied sisters. The more disabled, the higher the frequency.

You wouldn't think anybody would pull a woman out of her wheelchair to rape her, or hit a little kid with her crutches, but it happens. Boyfriends do it, spouses do it. Strangers, friends, families...teachers, doctors, even the counsellors and caretakers supposedly there to help, do it. It happens in homes, hospitals, schools, in accessible buses and taxis. If a woman with a disability seeks help from services for victims of violence, she'll find most are not built to accommodate her physical needs.

The bottom line is that most of us are assaulted eventually: at

Our attackers see us as weak, vulnerable, unfeeling, and unlikely to resist or report an attack. The worst of it is, we often see ourselves that way.

I tried self-defense for women once, back when I used only one cane. They adapted to my disability—"whack 'em over the head with your walking stick." Just after Lesson Seven I was assaulted. My cane-whacking bounced off this guy like rubber. I remember him laughing at me, just before he knocked me out.

More recently I heard about a Wen-Do project, self-defence for women with restricted mobility. I signed up, but I couldn't quite picture it. *Maybe the others aren't as disabled as me....*

We're a slow parade, coming into the community centre. We are silent, but for the soft whirr-err of electric wheelchairs and scooters, the clicks and thumps of walkers, canes, and crutches. We circle the room, seeking distance from one another.

Two instructors and several assistants mingle, making cheerful noises. They flit, we sit. They introduce, we answer in tiny voices. I wish for a crutch to prop up my sagging confidence.

As staff rearrange furniture, I transfer to a regular chair, stagger and stumble. *I'm going to defend myself against a 200 pound attacker? Get real!*

"Wen-Do is not based on strength against strength," our instructor explains. "We assume you are weaker than your attacker. Wen-Do will build on your existing strengths." She dangles her foot over the metal frame, playfully swinging the demonstration wheelchair side-to-side.

I look down at my numb feet. I look around, see feet supported with metal braces, and motionless feet that can't dangle, can't

least one in four women with disabilities are sexually assaulted as adults, one in two as girls; one in three are physically battered as adults, two in three as girls; two in three are assaulted by medical practitioners... as we listen to the numbers, I count faces and do some quick math. *Who among us...?*

We are offered the opportunity to share personal experiences. Nobody does. Faces turn down, bodies sit limp and silent.

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Staff, fit and agile in stretchy exercise clothes, lead us in warm-up exercises. I try, but my marshmallow body follows their direction no better than mine.

"Please say if you can't do something," we're told, "so we can better understand where we are individually." Finally, we speak—"I can't...I can't...I can't..." *This is pathetic. He-e-e-e-!p!*

There are no wimpy pleas for help in Wen-Do strategy. There is the "kiyi"—a loud, clear "HUT!" It stimulates deep breathing, and scares hell out of the unsuspecting. As the instructor explains this technique, her assistant sneaks up from behind, grabs her wheelchair, whips it around.

"HUT! HUT!" A quick block, the instructor protects her body, swings her wheelchair free. This gentle face twists into rage, her eyes glare into her attacker's, cold and strong. "BACK OFF," she roars. "GET BACK...I SAID GET BACK FROM ME NOW!"

The assistant startles, stumbles backward, forgets her cue. My heart thumps. *This is a woman in control!*

The image of her, so powerful, using just voice and attitude, stays with me the rest of the week. In my fantasies I do not see her wheelchair, I see her power. Sometimes, I almost see me. I return, hungry for more....

"Close your eyes. Visualize yourself in a familiar place," our instructor guides us. "Some place you know well..." *I'm alone...late at night...downstairs in the narrow passageway to the convenience store...*

"Picture a stranger approaching you." *A huge man creeps out of the shadows...what should I do?*

"Visualize how you will respond." *I don't know what to do! There is nobody around to hear me, nobody to help...*

"Find a safe way to get out of your situation." *IDON'T KNOW WHAT TO DO! My God, how can I fight him? It would only make him mad, make him hurt me more....ple-e-e-ase...*

"Take control, find a safe way out now." *I can't turn around, can't get away....he's coming at me...*

"Open your eyes when you are safe." *He's squeezing my throat...*

"Open your eyes. *Now!*" Her firm command shakes me out of the fantasy. I see that I am not alone in the dangerous dark, and I hear from the others that I am not alone in my fears. We were lost in our own worst scenarios—wheelchair power failures, frozen screams, safe places inaccessible.

"I feel so damn vulnerable," someone snaps. "We are *all* vulnerable," the instructor replies. "Your attacker is vulnerable, too. You will learn where, and how to use it to your advantage."

Wen-Do has three goals to increase the odds of staying safe, she explains. First, *awareness*—knowledge of outside resources, and mental strategies to prevent or cope with an assault. Next, *avoidance*—techniques to prevent danger, or defuse a bad situation. And if necessary, *action*—skills to defend ourselves, or disable our attacker and get away safely. "Each woman here," she reassures us, "will learn to trust herself, to make many choices."

I'm not trusting anyone. That shadowy creep still lurks in my deepest fears. Waiting for me.

I'm tired now, stamina drained. I roll out the blue mat I'm supposed to be hitting, and flop down on it. *I guess this is where I flunk out.*

I watch the instructors adapt defense skills for each woman, try to build on her unique pocket of strength. But all I see is someone tipping on her crutches, another smacking the furniture with her wheelchair. And nobody does the "kiyi" above a whisper.

Jerky moves, little hissy sounds...I roll over and count tiny holes in the ceiling.

"Would you like to learn to defend yourself lying down?" The instructor kneels beside me. I'm in the position where I feel most vulnerable, where I spend most of my time, night and day, but still...? "Is it possible?"

My body is mush, but my arms are free. I learn to use them well. By night's end, I can block, punch, release myself from holds—all lying down, attacked from any direction. I'm learning where my assailant is indeed vulnerable, and where I am strong.

Soon the whole class is down on the floor with me. My limitations give each one the opportunity to learn to defend herself lying down. Women with disabilities are not a homoge-

neous lump. Here in Wen-Do we turn our diversity into collective strength.

The woman with only one functional arm teaches all who might carry groceries, or be pinned against a wall. The woman with only one functional finger teaches all to manipulate the joystick on an electric wheelchair, to use 400 pounds of rolling metal and bodyweight for defense. We are gaining skills, week by week....

We ask questions, bring our worst-case scenarios to the educational sessions. But we can't yet bring our own stories, we just tell "I-have-a-friend-who" stories. The staff teach us strategies to help our "friends" and deal with the "what-if's."

Then one night someone risks, "What happened to your friend, happened to me." And someone else says, "Me, too." From this tenuous opening, come the first untold secrets. One by one, as we unleash our memories of violence, we put our names and faces on the terrible statistics.

Together in the safety of our circle, we draw the strength to shatter our silence and cripple the cycle that has kept us victims. But individually, facing the blue mats during practice attacks, we cannot free our voices.

The staff bellow—"HUT!" We sputter—"htt...htt..." "Imagine someone's face on the mat," the instructor suggests. Thump, thump. "htt...htt..." "Maybe the face of someone real."

Then, from a far corner of the room, "Hut...HUT! GET OUT OF MY FACE YOU MOTHERFUCKER, GET OUT, GET OUT NOW!" Thump, thump, thump—"HUT...HUTHUTHUT!"

We freeze. Then I see her—face red, sweat shining, body shaking. We know her story. The room explodes in loud cheer. "HUT! HUT!" We find our voices, loud and clear!

When we gather together for the last time, we are a jovial bunch, high-spirited and ready to roll....

We review strategy and skill. Staff "attack" us—by ones, by twos...with weapons, without...from every direction, in every circumstance. Helpless, terrified, unaware victims don't have choices. But we do, and everyone here responds swiftly, each according to her unique strength, judgment, and situation. *But is all of this enough in a real attack?*

I've blocked, punched, sliced-and-diced that shadowy guy in my visualization a thousand ways. I know what to do. I know I will do it. *But am I strong enough to stop an assailant?*

Our instructor stands up front, holding a board she has broken in two with her bare hands. She is slight, soft-spoken. "This was done with concentration. Each woman here tonight has hit the mat in practice with enough strength to break this wood."

I am first to try. She lays a fresh one by twelve inch board across two cement blocks. *What if I can't do this?*

I look out to my friends for encouragement, but I see worried eyes. Old fears creep in, chew on my newborn confidence. I stare at the wood, it seems to grow thicker in this anxious silence. *If I back out now, I'll always be afraid...*

I fold my hand into a hammer fist, squeeze out all the air. I raise it high, dead centre over the board. *MY FLESH CAN'T BREAK WOOD!*

My helper whispers in my ear, "Discover the strength you already have, Rochelle." "HU-U-U-TTTT!" Two pieces of wood lie in place of one.

I watch an odd graduation procession. On canes and crutches,

power wheelchairs buzzing, they circle the perimeter—hesitating, watching, deciding—until every woman, each in her own time, claims her splintered prize.

Many of us have difficulty fixing a meal, or tying our shoes. Yet with skill and concentration, we each summon the strength to break our boards—more than twice the power it takes to break the biggest bone in an attacker's body.

"Makes me wonder," someone says, "what else can I do, that I didn't think I could?" I push my two pieces of board together, snap them apart...together, apart.... *We've learned to bust far more than boards and bones.*

We pull into a tight circle for the last time. We close our eyes, our instructor speaks. "Visualize your broken boards. Recall the strength you felt when you shattered them. But this is not about pieces of wood. What you see is the shattering of the myth that women can't fight back."

Against assault...against fear...against silence and helplessness. *All women. This woman. Me.*

As a young woman, my world had no boundaries. I travelled freely from one country to the next. I worked hard, writing and directing children's theatre in California. Shortly after settling in Canada, an accident turned my life on end and rearranged the pieces. Home is my world now, paper my stage. I enjoy resurrecting old skills in new forms—freelance writing, cartoons, and illustrations. With creativity and humour I can still jump the fences!

ALICE AISGILL

Full Circle Deli

A root breaks—one is born.
Blood flows a while, then
body floats back to ground and home
to roots of clean good clay.

What is proven in between?
What is this we laud as life?
A sigh, grunt, groan, work
lurk come go come work work.

A sentient sandwich,
with dirt and soil as bread,
breathing as the meat so briefly sweet.

But who what where CHEWS?
What being or grand game
actually eats the meal?
Shall meat, aping thought (or theology)

discover? No, the riddle does tread
much closer to root and sweet dirt of bread.
In before and afters' bakery is the key to We.

Alice Aisgill is a freelance poet/artiste from Vancouver, B.C. She prefers cats and other animals to most people.



Winsom, *The Game*. Dye on silk, 145 cm x 85 cm.