

The Sickle Cuts Both Ways

by Antonio Ramirez

Introduction:

I sat outside the hospital wrapped in a blanket. My face lit up red by the flashes of the ambulance. I could see my breath billow out and fade into the night, over and over. It was so, so cold.

23 years ago, on that September night a killer had struck. A killer who had before him two choices. The life of me, or the life of my sister. He could have taken both, he could have taken neither. He could have taken me. For some reason though, he took my sister. And he left me.

It's hard to express the guilt you feel when you and your sister face the same killer and one survives and one does not. You never get over the "why" that leaves behind.

The killer's weapon wasn't a gun. It wasn't a knife. Like the Reaper, the killer wields a sickle.

The killer doesn't break in, he doesn't stalk you from afar. The killer is inside you from the moment you're born. The blood that keeps you alive, is also the very thing that kills you in the end.

It's been 23 years since that night, and my mission, my crusade to avenge the death of my sister, to strike a blow to her killer, still continues. And this paper is a small glimpse into that mission.

I hope you'll enjoy this small history, of what got me started, and what keeps me going.

Chapter 1: Washers & Dryers

The movers' small silver radio played rap music for hours. Finally, I heard the door of the trailer slam shut. Moving day was over. After my sister had passed, the house just wasn't the same. Everything was really quiet. If there's one thing I know from experience is the quiet can drive you mad. We decided it was time to pack up and start over somewhere else.

There was a small problem though. We used a moving company to load up the truck. And they were unhappy. They were very unhappy.

The movers demanded more money from my mother. They insisted the job was bigger than they were told.

We didn't have any money. But my mother, being the kind person she was, offered them a solution. They could take our washer and dryer as payment. They agreed.

That small act of kindness helped to forever change the course of my life. And would help set me on my crusade to beat my sister's killer.

Without a washer and dryer, we would have no other choice to take our clothes to a laundromat. That's where all this kicks off. At a sweaty laundromat in Linden New Jersey.

We'll come back to that laundromat momentarily, but first, we'll take a short detour to a particular day in my childhood that I'll never forget.

We eventually got settled into the new duplex after the move. About three or four blocks from the new place was this little tiny bodega. And for some reason, I still am not sure why, despite being in a really dangerous neighborhood, my mother decided to walk us there instead of driving.

The walk was probably 10 minutes each way. My mother would buy cigarettes and my other sister and I cheese danishes. I still remember those danishes, they were the highlight of my week.

This one sunny, mild day, we came back to the house after walking to the little convenience store, and we found this piece of paper taped to our door knob.

It was a notice from the Linden Police Department. This was before police stations had Twitter to notify the township, the police used to go door to door with written notices if crime was bad enough.

The notice informed us that there were a total of eight home invasions on our block within one week.

My mother, being a single parent with two young kids in the house, was rightfully worried. In the same plaza as the laundromat we were now frequenting, was a small karate dojo called "Osu Karate." It was ran by a young, muscular Japanese fellow whose name still escapes me.

Had we had no need to use that laundromat, and see that dojo every week, I think it would have been highly unlikely martial arts would have even registered on mine or my mother's radar, but we had to and it did. And so here we are today.

Chapter 2: Osu Karate

I attended classes at Osu Karate for about a month or two. I finally found something I really had enjoyed. I remember this one day, my mother sat me down in our kitchen. She broke the news to me that we could no longer afford classes. Our financial situation was pretty much the same as everyone else in that city. Going from bad to worse.

I remember that was the first time I shed tears since my sister passed. I loved going to that dojo, and it was taken away from me so soon.

I wouldn't resume training for another six years. The whole time though I never let myself forget it, I never let myself drop it.

About six years later, my sister was working now. My mother's graphic design business had started taking off. We wound up moving out of that hell hole city. We were, for the first time, in a more suburban setting.

Things were starting to look up, and of course I used this as an opportunity to find another dojo. There was one local dojo we passed every day in our travels. It was a tiny red brick building, and they advertised their Kempo system was designed "For the street".

Intrigued, my mother signed me up and the journey finally resumed after six years.

Unfortunately, as time set in, the overwhelming sense of dread that what you're learning has no practical utility for a real life hand to hand combat scenario began gnawing away at my 13 year old mind.

Though I was young and inexperienced, I wasn't a naive suburbanite like the rest of their student base. For the better part of my young childhood, the harsh reality of violence was a regular part of our everyday experience. It infested our city, our schools, our streets, even our homes.

I tried hard to ignore the feeling that what they were teaching me was less than useful. This one day though, we were going through knife disarms.

I'll never forget both the insanity and yet the admirable honesty of one of the instructors there. After having us drill a knife disarm repeatedly, he flat out told us it would not work in a real fight, but it was a "cool party trick".

That was the end of my Kempo experience.

If my memory serves me correctly, we tried about three different Tae Kwon Do schools. The first two were Tae Kwon Do schools, the last one was a school that taught Tae Kwon Do. If you catch my drift.

In the upstairs of this old business complex was a small space that was half apartment, half Dojang. The instructor there was a short little Korean man who was probably one of the friendliest people I've ever met in New Jersey. Him and my mother hit it off so well I thought they were long lost siblings.

I thought this was it. This guy was teaching Tae Kwon Do as a legit fighting art. No trophies, no competition, no flashy dobok, just the way of the hand and foot. I was in there. Training had finally resumed.

As I kicked and punched my way across those sweaty blue mats on the second story of this man's apartment, an old foe came back from the past.

The Reaper and his sickle. My health couldn't sustain the rigors of legit Tae Kwon Do. I was struggling, hard.

The gentleman who taught me also had experience in the Chinese martial arts. Namely, Tai Chi Chuan.

Chapter 3: Tai Chi

He knew Tai Chi not only as a health exercise, but as a fighting system. When we found this out my mother and I were ecstatic. We figured, the gentle nature of Tai Chi and it's many health benefits, taught as a fighting art, would have suited me perfectly.

I remember excitedly asking "Master Jeong, could you teach me Tai Chi instead of Tae Kwon Do?"

For some reason though, he refused. To this day I'm still not sure why. Although I see now everything has a purpose. However, at the time, it made no sense to me. We would have

paid him the same amount. Classes would have been on the same day. He just... Refused. He flat out said no. Even though he was well aware of my health situation, and how much of a strain Tae Kwon Do was putting on me, he wouldn't budge.

My mother was sorely, sorely disappointed. She got it in her head though that, due to my health, Tai Chi was the way to go. After exhausting every school in the area, and having some of the worst luck in history, we found a Tai Chi school another few towns over.

Here we go, this is it. I thought. Just as I started training again, a new enemy came forth.

Chapter 4:

My mother was diagnosed with breast cancer. Stage two.

Training, once again, was put on the back burner. The stress, noise, pollution, and misery of New Jersey was getting to be too much for my mother.

A few years prior, my aunt and uncle had relocated to a little town in Florida for my uncle's work. A little town called Palm Coast. My mother's health was not looking good.

After a little convincing, my aunt got my mother on board with the idea of moving to Palm Coast. That way, if something happened, me and my sister wouldn't be without family.

We moved. After we got settled in, for a short time, my mother's health began to stabilize. Me and her talked about trying to resume my training in martial arts again.

I would like to take the opportunity here to give credit to my mother. She never gave up on my training, only until the bitter end did she change her mind.

Anyway, there was a small local casino that my aunt frequented with my uncle from time to time. She told my mother, "Hey I think there's a karate school over by the casino, you guys should check it out."

And she was right. There was a school there. We popped in there one day, and to our amazement, they taught Tai Chi as well.

We couldn't believe it. This is it, I thought. Here we go, after all these years I'm going to get the chance to train!

My mother signed me up for Tai Chi trial classes, and I took my first one.

My only one.

What happened to my health that day was unprecedented. It never happened before and it never happened since.

Class began with me and a group of others standing in kiba dachi, holding the stance to work on muscles and rooting to the ground. I wasn't throwing, I wasn't striking, I was just standing.

The blood cells in the small vessels in my eyes began to sickle. They cut off blood and oxygen to my eyes. I lost about 50 percent of my vision for two days

The only way I can describe it is, take both your hands, make the letter C with your fingers and your thumb. Now close the C so you have a small hole and put that over each eye and look through it.

That's all I could see, for days. My mother was so spooked she pulled me out of that class and finally, after years of trying and failing, told me it wasn't meant to be. She wouldn't hear another word about martial arts. It was over. Our bad experiences with different dojo lasted years. She was beyond tired of it.

Or so I thought.

My mother knew though after she was gone, I wouldn't give up. She left me with these words

"One day, when I'm long gone, you'll be standing at my grave a black belt. And you're going to say, look mom, I made it."

Those words have been ringing in my head ever since. They won't let me rest. They won't ever let me rest.

And so I knew two things at that point. Number one, this disease was stopping me from doing what I needed to do. From truly living. Like it stopped my sister. I had no choice but to beat it. To avenge my sister, and prove it wouldn't win.

And two, I had to honor my mother's prophecy.

After my mother passed, I moved back into the house she died in after about five months of living with my aunt. The horrors that awaited me in that lonely, empty house are a topic for another day.

Let's just say, the grief, the emptiness was starting to take it's toll. I lost sight of everything. All I knew was how horrible things had gotten and I couldn't see a way out.

Final:

I put my shoes on. I got my keys, and I got in my car and drove. I had a destination in mind.

A brick wall.

I was going to end it. That was it for me. Everything, at the moment, seemed to have ended in despair. I didn't want to live anymore, so I got in my car and was headed for the first solid wall I could find.

Something in the back of my mind that night, said "Try one more time."

That's ridiculous I thought. Everything failed me. Nothing worked out. And now I was alone and in misery. I had nothing to live for, I couldn't see the light at the end of the tunnel.

But the words my mother spoke wouldn't leave me alone. "Try one more time" my head said again.

I didn't commit suicide that night.

I drove to the hospital. After I was discharged, a few days later I called a man by the name of Master George Rego with Jukido Academy... A man today I call Sensei. A man today I call friend.

And now I write this as I test for black belt.

Obviously, this story has a happy ending. Sometimes, in the midst of our darkest moments, when we don't see the light at the end of the tunnel, we take the spark inside of us, and with enough grit and friction, create the light.

And going full circle, today, the Reaper still stands in the corner, holding his sickle. I know one day, he'll be back for me. He let me live that cold September night, and he'll be returning for me soon, to collect what he should have taken 23 years ago.

But when he does come for me, he'll realize something. That his sickle cuts both ways. He cut me mortally, but the Reaper looks down and sees he's bleeding too. I got my licks in. He shot me down countless times....but...

I didn't let him stop me..... I didn't let him win.

For my mother... for my sister... for my Sensei.

At the end of this whole thing, I can say, that yes, look mom, WE made it.

I can't stress sufficiently that I couldn't have done any of this, and didn't do any of this without my amazing Sensei and my dojo family.

Sensei, when all around me seemed lost, you gave me a reason to keep fighting. You gave me hope and a light in the darkness. You saved my life. No words can express my gratitude. I am indebted to you both in this life and in the life to come.

My dojo family, I have never met more kind hearted, inspiring people than you. Without you all in my corner I would have surely failed.

And of course, my God. Thank you for giving me the strength to do all of this in the first place. Thank you for keeping my feet on the straight and narrow. Thank you for my dojo.

I fought the good fight...I finished my course.

I kept the faith.

- Tony