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# WHAT'S IN MY BAG?

JR 371 Feature Writing Class

## A STUN GUN AND AN AXE

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At first, Keaton Belle's TikTok seems innocuous as she unzips a pink Dior purse below the heading "whats in ur bag." Then she reveals the arsenal inside—pepper spray, a set of throwing knives, brass knuckles, a switchblade, and a pocket axe. In the video's caption, the 21-year-old proclaims, "I keep all this on me at all timez."

Carrying tools of protection, namely the ubiquitous pepper-spray keychain, has long been the norm for most women. Now, it's becoming increasingly mainstream for women to step up their self-defense game with heavy-duty weaponry.

A Twitter thread that went viral in 2019 asked women what they carry with them for protection when they go running, and those that didn't have a dog to fend off potential attackers usually opted for a switchblades or concealed knives.

"In case you wondered what being a woman is like," says Amanda Deibert in the tweet that started the thread.

It's certainly disheartening that the simple act of going for a jog requires women to consider ways to fend off an attack, but that's the reality of the world we live in. However, it's clear that until systemic change renders it unnecessary, women can and will fight back.

Hunter Enriquez, a 19-year-old student from Los Angeles, rarely leaves home without her hatchet and knives loaded into her backpack. They were gifts from family members who knew they'd be up Enriquez's alley.

"I'd originally asked for a sword—specifically a katana. I love anything that can help me protect myself and others. They look cool and just make me feel safe—it's a comfort for me," she explains.



Enriquez is rarely without members of her family, many of whom she says come off as intimidating—"like gangsters or bikers"—so she hasn't needed to put her self-defense tools to the test thus far. However, if a would-be attacker were to make it past her father and uncles, Enriquez says, "I've got the back-up."

Valerie Simmons (not her real name) began carrying a stun gun her freshman year of college. Her father, who shoots recreationally, bought it at a gun show and put it in her Christmas stocking.

"So, it's hardcore, it's not like those little plastic stun guns you can get at a gas station. When I turn it on it sounds like a BB gun. I think the noise alone would scare someone off," she says.

Simmons, a 22-year-old college student living in the Boston area, would often carry the stun gun with her when she knew she would be walking at night.

"I've never actually used it on someone, but I've had my hands on it," states Simmons.

She describes one instance where a man began following her through the Boston Common early one morning when she was on her way to jury duty, and became aggressive when she ignored his attempts to engage with her. In another, Simmons was subletting from a friend in Allston when a man moved into the basement level of the building. He would peek through her curtains, bang on her door screaming late at night, and was rumored to have broken into the apartment across from hers. One night, he stood outside her window and began shouting profanities and threats.

"I was up all night with my stun gun in one hand and a knife in the other, sitting straight up in bed," Simmons recalls. "I could see him pacing outside the window. But I was like, if he came in, there's no way he could fight me if I had this. It straight-up shoots electricity, and it's technically a firearm."

Simmons' weapon of choice looks like a hot pink flashlight, with spikes at the top where the electrical current runs. The recent uptick in brands specializing in self-defense tools marketed towards women is indicative of a larger trend of women gravitating towards more hands-on methods of self-defense.



Mulling over the reasons behind this, Simmons says, "I think people who are going after women are probably going to anticipate them having pepper spray at this point. I'm also tiny, and if there's a big guy, there are certain things that just aren't really going to do anything. I just felt like I needed something they wouldn't expect."

Female-focused self-defense brands have names like "Defense Divas" and "Style Me Tactical," and they sell weapons in shades of pink, cat-shaped keychains that double as sharp, two-fingered brass knuckles, and blades hidden in pieces of jewelry. The popular brand TigerLady specializes in a discreet, hand-held set of retractable "claws" that are specifically designed to collect an attacker's DNA.

Defense Divas' mission statement is to "educate and empower women to embrace their personal power to be aware of their surroundings and protect themselves from violent crimes and domestic abuse." This is certainly a noble goal, but even as viral self-defense tips and tools become more widespread, none of these solutions address the underlying problem: even when women adhere to "guidelines" and take precautions, they are still targeted.

Women are still being killed at alarming rates. Worldwide, 1 in 3 women have experienced sexual violence. A recent survey from Runner's World found that 84% of women have experienced some form of harassment while running that made them feel unsafe. And even in the face of these sobering statistics, the burden of preventing attack is placed on women rather than perpetrators.





Until there is a change in how most people look at gender-based violence, Jennifer Cassetta, a self-defense expert and creator of the Stilettoes and Self-Defense DVDs, says that women should focus on empowering themselves so they feel stronger and more confident out in the world.

After a female jogger was killed in Washington DC in 2018, she told Good Morning America, "I'm not personally going to wait around for men to stop raping. That's not going to happen in our lifetime so it's about how we can get ahead of that and be empowered to do what we want to do and live our lives. It's about knowing you have that power."

In many states, legal restrictions hamper the kind of empowerment Cassetta champions—if you want to remain on the right side of the law, that is. Until 2019, it was illegal to possess a stun gun or taser in Massachusetts. Now, it's legal only if you already have or can get a license to carry, the same as you would get if you wanted to register a firearm.

Simmons' stun gun isn't licensed—she wasn't even aware of the requirement until recently, and says that the price of getting a license along with the additional cost of the safety courses has kept her from going legit.

"The majority of the people who are carrying these are women, so while I think a safety course and a background check is reasonable, it shouldn't be necessary to have to pay \$300 and sit through a bunch of expensive safety courses just to shock someone. I also think they should be moved to a different class than guns, because I am not the same as someone who's trying to acquire a handgun. I just want to feel safe," says Simmons.

**"I fully encourage women to protect themselves and have those safety measures available to them," says Enriquez.**

In Massachusetts, you have the right to defend yourself if you are attacked or believe your physical safety is in immediate danger. However, you are legally obligated to take reasonable steps to avoid physical contact before resorting to force. There's also a laundry list of weapons that are considered dangerous and are illegal to carry, which includes brass knuckles and most knives.

Still, these weapons aren't illegal to sell and buy, so much of their legality is a matter of circumstance, up to the discretion of law enforcement officials. And, while the typical contents of Enriquez's bag may not be entirely above-board, she understands her weapons and was taught how to use them.

"I fully encourage women to protect themselves and have those safety measures available to them," says Enriquez. "The world is so dangerous, and you shouldn't care about how people are going to perceive you or if they'll think you're being overdramatic. At the end of the day, if something does happen, you're going to be thankful you have that protection and you have the ability to fight back."

