I'm with my family on an isolated stretch of the Metolius River in Oregon. Lush vegetation clings to the bank, ferns and clover and elephant grass, willow trees and aspens, but the air hangs hot and dry. Insects burr. A woodpecker taps like a slow metronome. This is before my parents' divorce, so we're all there—my father, my mother, my three younger brothers, and our Dalmatian, Sparky. We've hiked in, and now we sit together drinking strawberry sodas and eating cold fried chicken from a paper sack and marveling at the dog, who wades in the shallows. We've lost tennis balls in lakes trying to goad him to swim, yet here he is today, high-stepping, sniffing the surface, pausing now and then to drink. My brothers keep complaining he's too close to the dangerous part of the river, and Dad keeps responding that Sparky knows what he's doing, that dogs have instincts.

The river is shallow and dark at the edge, where there's a rock shelf, and at the center the shelf drops into a swift channel as startlingly blue as my father's eyes. It's the pale blue of the channel I'll remember best, the force of the water there, its depth and danger. Mom has warned that its current can yank and swallow us. She used to say the same thing about the undertow at a California beach we liked. I knew an undertow took you down, but whenever I pictured getting caught in it, I imagined myself borne along the ocean's surface, watching my family pick shells and pieces of jade from the pebbles on shore, receding. It was a fantasy I could afford only because it was false—I knew I would cry out if it happened, and that my father would charge in and pluck me from the water's clench.

But I'm twelve now, and recently I've started to doubt my parents' abilities, their authority. They aren't gods anymore. I understand that my father can't outmuscle an undertow, and activities that would horrify my mother are often thrilling—small acts of vandalism, theft, mischief. So I understand the legitimacy of the river's threat, but it doesn't prevent me from tightening my Tevas and shuffling toward the channel, icy water biting my ankles and shins. I stop when I feel the current's pull, feel my tread grip the toothy rock. I look into the blue abyss. Translucent bubbles swirl and shoot downstream. I picture myself sucked into its depths and sense the burning fear and confusion, the struggle against suffocation, the sudden prospect of death.

I'm returning to shore when I hear the splash. It's a thump, a gulp. My brothers burst into panic, point, jump, terror in their voices as they call, "Sparky!"

I turn to the channel. Sparky's spotted head bobs in the blue water, fur matted, wet, bright with sunshine, front paws clubbing the water as he moves downriver. Panic blossoms inside me, because I've felt the current's power, and I know we will witness a drowning.

"John," Mom says, a command.

Dad is in his early forties at this point, an entrepreneur with a trimmed mustache and soft shoulder muscles, the type of man I'd expect to comb his hair before responding to an emergency, or to pick his way along the river's shelf slowly, wincing at the jagged footing. But he is without hesitation. He charges through the shallows, bare-chested, barefoot, spraying sheets of water, his stride smooth and certain as he chases the dog downriver. He veers toward the underwater ledge, where the dark water ripples and eddies beside the swift channel, and in one
motion he kneels and reaches into the blue void and hoists Sparky by the neck and flings him onto the shelf.

Sparky trots back to shore. He shakes himself dry, then blinks calmly in the hot sunshine, panting, the corners of his mouth curled like a smile, pink tongue dangling.

In the river, my father rises.
"You're bleeding," Mom says.

He looks down. A bright red trickle runs from his wet knee. "Damn dog," he says, and begins picking his way to shore, where we wait for him, gaping.

"Alive," by Lauri Lynn Drummond (from Brevity.com).

There is a serial killer at work in Baton Rouge, and so, as I drive into the city on this rainy mid-August afternoon to visit family, I move from simply alert to hyper alert. In addition to the three murdered women, there have been four attempted abductions in the past two weeks; the last woman fought her attacker off with a machete. Yesterday, a line of women snaked out the door of a police supply store, waiting to purchase pepper spray. The store sold out by noon.

For once, I am not in the minority. Alert is a natural state for me, and the quick transition to hyper alert is easy. I worked as a police officer in this city in the 1980’s. I know, intimately, what one human being can do to another. And I’ve seen crime scene pictures of the serial killer’s first victim, examined the evidence, learned details withheld from the press.

I stop at City Newstand to pick up a newspaper. A nice-looking man--bald, early thirties, dark shirt--in a green Chevy Blazer is backing out of the space across from mine. His car stops, and I feel his gaze as I retrieve my wallet, open the car door. Our eyes meet, and he smiles. I keep my face blank and walk briskly into the store. Creep, I think. And then I’m ashamed. I’ve worked hard since I left police work to cultivate tolerance and gentleness, to not live suspicious 24-7.

I grab my newspaper and glance at magazines in the rack beside me. When I look up, the bald man is in the store. He smiles again. My throat constricts. Don’t be a silly panicked female, I chide, it’s just coincidence. He leaves as I pay for my newspaper and hovers outside, head down as though he’s reading, but his eyes are on me.

And I know, deep in my gut knowing, old habit knowing, that this isn’t coincidence. This man is stalking me. That’s when the minuscule tremble in my knee kicks in, the tremble I haven’t felt since I wore a uniform. If I were still a cop, this wouldn’t make my knee tremble. But I am simply a civilian. A female civilian.

I track right, pretend to study a magazine. Five minutes later, when an older gentleman leaves the store, I am right on his heels, walking tough to my car. The bald man paces me step by step to his own car four spaces down.
My hands tremble, my mouth is dry, and I hate, with every screaming fiber of my being, that I gave up all guns two years ago.

I wait for the bald man to leave first. He drives to the far exit, turns right. I expel a deep breath and turn left at the nearest exit, stop at the traffic light. When I look in my rearview mirror, he is behind me. Fear flutters frantic against the walls of my body.

I reach for a pen and piece of paper, jot down a detailed description of him, his car, curse Louisiana for not requiring front bumper license plates.

He follows me through five intersections. Resolve tightens in my gut. Okay, buddy, I think, you’ve picked the wrong woman. I will stop at a convenience store, call my friend Ike, a homicide detective. I’ll get the whole damn department out here.

We approach the interstate, and he suddenly veers up the entrance ramp.

And he is gone.

For the next two days, I’m well beyond hyper alert. I hate being this way and cut my visit short. Tension dissipates as Baton Rouge disappears in my rearview mirror. I turn on the radio, roll down the window, smile.

Thirty minutes later I am crossing the Atchafalaya Swamp, headed toward my home in Texas. When the Whiskey Bay exit sign appears, every particle in my body constricts. This is where the third victim was found, naked, with her throat cut.

And that’s when I finally get, really get, what I have always known. Alertness, tolerance, compassion, suspicion: none of it matters. I am vulnerable simply because I’m alive.

“Man in a Blue Shirt” by Roger Sheffer, from Riverteeth: A Journal of Nonfiction Narrative, Volume 9, Number 1, Fall 2007, pp. 42-4

The morning I became a murder suspect, I was wearing a blue shirt. I should have worn white or brown. This happened in Schenectady, New York, the rust-belt city where I grew up and where my mother still lives. I had been visiting my parents for a month, sharing their calm early summer routine. On Tuesday mornings they would drive downtown to return library books—on time, never a fine. I rode along, as I intended to visit several bookstores on Jay Street, two blocks from the library, one of those closed street malls that somehow survive. Since 1985—the year this happened—the German bakery has closed, but a folklore shop has moved in and the two bookstores have stayed open. I had already stopped at Bibliomania (antiquarian) and was browsing at open Door (good fiction and nonfiction) when someone in the store commented on a news item that had just come over the radio. “he did it right in front of the little girl,” and “they haven’t caught him yet.” thus, it should have made perfect sense to me a few minutes later,
crossing Liberty Street in front of City hall, when a half dozen cops swarmed me and pushed me against a utility pole.

The killer is described as white, of slender build, about 5 feet, 10 inches tall, with brown hair and a bushy mustache. He was wearing blue jeans and a light blue shirt, police said, his clothes reportedly stained with blood. No age has been determined. (All extracts are from the Schenectady Gazette.)

“Why were you running?”

“I wasn’t running.”

They frisked and cuffed me. A cop car pulled up to the curb, siren wailing. They cupped my head (as required) when they pushed me into the car, then drove the half block to the police station, siren still wailing, past the library where my parents were still picking out books or had already headed for the parking lot. They would be home by the time I made my one phone call.

I sat in a room with a plainclothes cop, hands cuffed behind my back. My shoulders hurt, my nose itched. Through a window in the door I saw a long-haired guy in a blue shirt and jeans, also handcuffed, being led into another interrogation room. I had on a blue shirt, too. Anybody in a blue shirt and jeans, that day, would be guilty until proven innocent.

At about 3 p.m., state police picked up a 33-year-old Niskayuna man who was found walking near the Colonie town line. He was released shortly afterward. The bearded man, who was carrying a violin (in a case) and a bag containing bottles and “supplies,” said he was trying to find a way to Saratoga Springs for last night’s Eric Clapton concert.

“Why were you running?”

“I was crossing the street,” I answered. “The Don’t Walk sign was flashing. Is that illegal?”

“What are you doing here?”

“Shopping for books.”

“Really? Books? Why aren’t you in Minnesota? You live in Minnesota, right?” They had my driver’s license. That’s how they knew where I lived.

“I’m on vacation. I’m a college professor. My faculty ID is in my wallet, too, if you don’t believe me.”

“Why aren’t you taking your vacation in Minnesota? Why are you taking your vacation in New York State and making trouble for us?”

“Visiting my parents.”

“Are you married?”

“No.”
The cop took a minute to mark that down. He must have had a box in which to record such damning evidence.

“What bars do you hang out in?”

“Here?”

“Yeah, here in New York.”

“I don’t drink.”

Even more incriminating. Single guy who doesn’t drink. “Do you have a girlfriend?”

“I share a house with a woman.” This piece of information took him a minute to process. He asked for the woman’s name, and I gave it.

“Do you know what this is all about?”

Slight pause. “No, I don’t.”

“You’re lying.”

Police believe Mrs. Pelton, 40, was killed sometime between 8 and 9 a.m. Tuesday when someone entered her residence through an open side door. Erica Pelton, age seven, saw the assailant and her mother on the first floor and was told by her mother—acting on orders from the man—to go upstairs. The man later went upstairs and tied Erica’s hands, slapping her before he left. Mrs. Pelton was raped, police said, probably on the first floor of the two-story residence. She was killed in the basement, police believe, when the killer struck her with a hammer. Her body was found near a workshop area where an assortment of tools was stored.

Another plainclothes cop entered the room. “Coffee’s terrible this morning,” he said, and poured his cup into the wastebasket. He started chewing peppermint gum. My mouth felt dry. I would have been grateful for a cup of that bad coffee, a stick of that gum. The two cops removed my handcuffs and my hands floated. They took my fingerprints, both hands. The first cop touched my shirt. I wore a blue t-shirt under my blue button-down oxford.

“This don’t look right,” he said.

“I’ve been wearing it all day.”

“You shouldn’t have told us that.”

Second cop: “You shaved this morning, right?”

“Right.”

“Shouldn’t have told us that either.” The second cop rubbed his upper lip, twitched his nose.

I spent two hours in that room, answering questions, trying to sound innocent. Those cops never Mirandized me. I never thought about my rights. Rather, I thought about spending time in prison. New York State had no death penalty, so I knew I would not be executed. Although I had
committed no crime (I might be the least violent person on this planet), the cops considered me guilty of something terrible. Nothing I said could exonerate me. Not married, visiting his parents. Doesn’t drink. Says he’s a professor. Portrait of a murderer. Lock him up.

So I considered the prospect of prison time, how that might go. Murderers got sent to Dannemora, way up north on the side of a mountain. Would I be allowed to read and write? Would I have my own cell? Those were my concerns back then. It wasn’t until a few months later that I thought about other men, possibly innocent, caught in other police dragnets, presumed guilty, and convicted of crimes they did not commit; other men, about whose guilt I had previously felt no doubt.

Shortly after Mrs. Pelton’s body was discovered, police called in state police for assistance. Troopers searched heavily wooded areas near the Pelton home by helicopter and also brought in tracking dogs to comb the woods. Police set up four traffic checkpoints, stopping some cars and giving drivers the description of the man sought. Police dogs picked up several tracks in the fields, though they could have been made by someone not connected to the murder.

“You act nervous,” the first cop said.

“I have no idea what I’m doing in here,” I said.

“Sure you do.”

They had the name of the woman I lived with in Minnesota. Maybe they’d called her already and she’d told them what she thought of me. I think he tortured my cats.

I had ridden in a cop car only once before—a ridiculous situation, probably around 1960. I had been trespassing on unfenced property just south of the dead-end street where I lived, a patchwork of cow pastures and small woodlots. John Equi, Gary Austin, and I had been looking at a pile of junk behind Mr. Hammond’s chicken coop—mostly sheet metal, motor parts, old flashlights. Gary had already pocketed a flashlight. We knew the risks. Several years earlier Mr. Hammond had shot and killed two dogs from our street, guilty of stealing chickens. This time he called the sheriff. Gary ran into the woods. I stood and watched while they put John Equi in the back of a pickup truck. They didn’t handcuff him, but it seems as if they did something, maybe tied him up with rope because he resisted. He squealed, called out for help. I slowly walked away, and arrived home fifteen minutes later to find my mother standing in the front yard, arms crossed. We were supposed to go meet with the sheriff at Mr. Hammond’s house. We drove there, and from Hammond’s driveway some of us ended up riding in the cop car to the back of the property. I remember two specific lines of dialogue. I asked the cop, “Will I go to reform school?” After a short pause, he answered, “Probably not.” those are exact quotes, the only complete lines of dialogue that I can reproduce from my entire childhood. Actually, there’s one other line, from sixth-grade playground. I said to George Isaacson, a boy in my class, “I’m not really a moron.” I can’t remember what he said next.

“You’ve probably done this before,” the Schenectady cop said to me.

“Back in Minnesota.”
“I teach college.”
“What subject do you teach?”
“English.”
“That doesn’t impress me.” Cigarette smoke filled the room, a trace of body odor, the stink of bad coffee. Cops probably can’t smoke in 2007—a violation of the suspect’s rights. They’d probably have to step outside.
“My parents can vouch for me,” I said.
“That’s a good line.”

Aaron Carter lives with his mother, Ruth Carter, at 2675 Balltown, the house where young Erica Pelton ran after she discovered the body of her mother. “She was a nice person, didn’t bother anybody,” he said of Mrs. Pelton. Carter has lived on Balltown for ten years. Crime, he said, has never been a problem. “This neighborhood? Hell, no,” he said. “The most you get is a speeding violation. If this becomes a crime neighborhood, you better believe we’re in trouble. It’s just a sick situation, that’s all.”

Aaron Carter might have worn a white shirt that morning, or gone shirtless. The cops brought in several more suspects that morning, brown-haired young men in blue shirts who happened to be walking around the city, acting guilty. The problem was, when they apprehended me, I had been running. The Walk light had shifted to Don’t Walk. I must have seemed as guilty as any of the brown-haired men apprehended that day.

I began to snap out of my nightmare. I had to do something to save myself.

“ Aren’t I allowed to make a phone call?” they consulted with each other, as if unsure of the law. “One call.”

So I finally called home and my mother answered. I told her where I was and she laughed. then I had her talk to the cop, and evidently she told him how we had watched Wheel of Fortune together that morning—Channel 10 used to run the show at 9 a.m.—and she was telling this cop some of the details from that morning’s episode. he put her on hold. “She says you solved one of the puzzles with just a couple letters showing.”

“ Uh, yeah. Let me think.”

He picked up the phone and told my mother, “I’ll call you back,” then hung up.

“Truth or consequences,” I said. “That was the one.”

“What were the two letters?”

“The Ts, I think.”

“That’s very lucky for you,” he said.
The second cop drove me home. I sat in front. he took me the long way, through a terrible neighborhood, Hamilton Hill, as if to imply that I wasn’t any better than the lowlife who hung out there, and then, finally, to our tree-lined street in Niskayuna, third-richest town in New York State, an extension of the city’s east side but very separate and different.

The thing is, the crime had occurred in Niskayuna, in a small house along a peaceful suburban road—Joe Rudman’s old place, about a mile north of my parents’ neighborhood. Rudman had been the stockroom clerk in my father’s chemistry lab at Union College; I vaguely recalled attending a department picnic there, how the backyard sloped away to a swampy meadow crossed by power lines. The house had been sold after Joe’s death, and we had no connection to the family who had moved in and lived there the past fourteen years.

The second cop had told me not to travel far, stick around a few days. “You’re not completely in the clear.” I had a dental appointment later that week in Massachusetts, where my brother practices. He would certainly get a kick out of this one. The next morning, the story made the front page in the Schenectady Gazette. Only then did I find out what I had been suspected of. A woman had been raped and murdered in the basement of that house. Her seven-year-old daughter had witnessed the crime. The daughter had told the cops that the man had light brown hair and wore a blue shirt, silver-rim glasses. Two days after that, the case was “solved.”

Erica Pelton picked the murderer’s picture from a six-photo array police showed her. It was the third such array the little girl had seen during the past three days. All pictures were different. “She immediately identified the individual who assaulted her mother,” County District Attorney John B. Poersch said yesterday afternoon. “She identified him as one Wayne A. Harrold. She said, ‘that’s the man who hurt Mommy.’” Forensic tests still to be completed include testing on blood found in the cellar near Mrs. Pelton’s body, believed to be the blood of the killer, and examination of a fingerprint found on the back of a dresser located on the second floor of the Pelton home, in the master bedroom.

“Well, of course,” my mother said as she put down the newspaper. “That could never have been you. We were watching TV together when it happened.”

“But for that fact,” I said, “it could have been. Right?”

“I didn’t say that.”

By the time Erica Pelton identified the murderer he had already committed suicide. He had never been a suspect, had not been interrogated.

Harrold was a 12-year employee of Browning-Ferris Industries in Latham, a trash collection company that empties dumpsters into large garbage trucks. Police said he had been driving the Balltown road route for the past two or three weeks. “He’s not the regular driver,” Niskayuna police Chief McGovern said. “The regular driver had an eye infection or something like that.”

Harrold was reported missing at about 4:45 p.m. Thursday by his estranged wife, Linda, who talked to Schenectady detectives. She had just received a letter in the mail from Harrold, who spoke about suicide and left burial instructions for Mr. Harrold.
What if the killer hadn’t called attention to himself by committing suicide? What if they’d summoned me back for a line-up of light-haired guys in blue shirts, and the little girl had pointed to me? “That one. That’s the man who hurt Mommy.” My father laughed the whole thing off. My mother phoned the mayor of Schenectady, Karen Johnson, to complain about her police department’s shoddy procedures. She asked for an official apology. “My son was never read his rights.” Since then things have turned worse for Schenectady cops. Many have done prison time, those who got a little too close to the drug dealers on Hamilton hill. I’ve put this incident out of my mind, except when the question arises as to the guilt or innocence of those apprehended by the police. I understand how people will confess to crimes they haven’t committed, how lives can be ruined by incompetent defense lawyers, bad witnesses, compromised juries, bad haircuts, suspicious violin cases. I was certain my trial would not go well, and I remember wondering who would teach my fall classes that year, whether I’d get my job back. I had earned tenure the year before; would I lose it by going to prison?

A colleague at my university likes to introduce me as a “murder suspect.” I’ve used the same line to get the attention of a sleepy classroom. “I was arrested for murder,” I tell them. “The cops really thought I did it.” And my students give me a look, like, well, did you?