

## EIGHT

# State of Alert

On the street, let no stranger take your hand.

To allow a potential assailant a firm grip on your right hand is to give him a possible fatal advantage. Use your eyes. Do not enter unfamiliar areas that you cannot observe first. Make it a practice to swing wide around corners, use window glass for rearward visibility, and get something solid behind you when you pause.

—Jeff Cooper, *Principles of Personal Defense*

WHEN BARRETT AND I SIGN OFF from our many daily phone calls, we sound like a lot of couples—*Okay, bye, love you*—that sort of thing. But Barrett often tacks on *Remember, stay in Condition Yellow*. Barrett has studied Colonel Jeff Cooper's self-defense maxims for years. He's done this since long before 9-11 and long before the Department of Homeland Security established the color-coded threat-level system in March of 2002. Telling me to stay in Condition Yellow is Barrett's way of reminding me to remain on guard against the many potential threats he perceives all around us.

Before 9-11, Barrett's watchfulness often got on my nerves. If Barrett and I were outside—in front of our house, say, or at a sidewalk café—it frustrated me when he would break eye contact to visually sweep our surroundings. If we approached a lone young man as we were walking the dogs, Barrett would slide his hand along the edge of his safari vest, pulling it back to provide better access to his holster. I would question him. "That guy? C'mon, what was suspicious about *that* guy?"

"He's wearing a winter jacket and it's August."

I'd think of harmless reasons to wear a warm coat. I'd say, who knows, maybe the guy has a fever. I didn't like that Barrett was choosing to perceive what could be innocuous behavior as something potentially scary. There are two reasons I objected to the way Barrett visibly tensed: first, I thought it made Barrett's life full of fear, and second, I thought that sometime Barrett would inevitably be wrong, and in those times *Barrett* was creating an injustice. A small one, perhaps, but nevertheless a hurt in a world too full of hurt. Basically I believed it was important to telegraph a sense of openness, of trust, and—dare I say it—love to the world. I believed that if you did, then *largely*, you got pleasantness and love back. If, on the other hand, you communicated suspicion, you got hostility.

But then 9-11 hits. And it ignites a war inside me. Maybe 9-11 is an extremely scary but also extremely unlikely occurrence, and my ideas about giving people the benefit of the doubt still make sense. But *maybe, just maybe*, 9-11 means something else. Maybe it proves Barrett's philosophy right. Attacks can come anytime, anyplace, often from unexpected quarters, from people who don't give a damn that I am kind, smile at homeless people, rescue stray animals, and work to give low-income people more opportunities. Mohammed Atta's neighbors thought he was a nice guy. So which of my nice-seeming neighbors might turn out to be evil? How many "sleeper" cells are out there? And in what ingenious way will terror be wrought next? First it was airplanes and then it was anthrax. Suddenly plastic knives, box cutters, manicure scissors, shoes—are all potential weapons.

Just in case, Barrett and I stop going to San Francisco when we get a rare date night together; we don't want to be separated from Niko should the bridge go down. Each time I step onto a BART train, I momentarily hesitate, wondering if there will be a bomb on it. The West Coast seems like the obvious next place to hit. Will it be the Golden Gate Bridge? Or the "Hollywood" sign? After the anthrax scares, I agree to be careful with the mail, to avoid touching anything, especially a parcel, that comes from someplace I don't recognize. I no longer protest when Barrett warns me never to wear headphones while running because I can't hear an attacker approaching. I don't object when he tells me not to look down at my watch if someone asks me the time because he may be trying to

distract me prior to an assault. I nod when he says not to open the door to someone I don't recognize even if they are screaming for help. It could, after all, be a ploy to get me outside.

In the months after 9-11, as the United States invades Afghanistan, I spend many nights home with the baby while Barrett works late. He is now the safety coordinator for the Training Division and also one of the lead firearms instructors. He runs the department's Patrol Rifle Program and of course he is on the SWAT team, so there are many night shoots and call-outs as well as plain old preparation for teaching keeping Barrett working long hours.

Increasingly, I imagine intruders hovering just beyond the penumbra of our front porch light. When I hear a knock at our door one evening, I mimic Barrett, evaluating the intruder through the thin edge of light between my window frame and the shade. Stranger. Male. Big. Night has fallen. Oscar is asleep on his dog bed, his hearing starting to go. The stranger pushes the doorbell again and the loud clanging sounds aggressive. I know Barrett would not want me to open the door. In fact, when Barrett is home he motions me away from the door and approaches it with his hand on his gun.

Most people would think that's an overreaction, but Barrett doesn't. True, it's probably not going to be an assailant, but if there's any chance it could be, why not be ready? And yet I am aware of a shift in my own trust in the world that troubles me. I still essentially ascribe to nonviolence from a practical as well as an emotional perspective. In political struggles, violence often just doesn't work—it continues a spiral of pain, humiliation, and anger. I sincerely believe the Palestinians would have far greater success in their quest for statehood if they were to pursue it through Gandhi-like satyagraha instead of suicide bombings. And I believe in bringing compassion and kindness to everyday interactions as well. But if I imagine—as I increasingly do—a violent assailant or assailants coming after me or my family, then there's a rub. In the long term we must work toward peace and justice, but in the short term I'm going to protect my family.

I run to our dresser drawer and pull out a loaded pistol (safety on) which, again mimicking Barrett, I tuck in the back waistband

of my pants. Barrett's off-duty dress consists of tan "BDUs" (tan versions of the standard-issue military fatigues) with a thick leather belt. Whereas I am wearing yoga pants. As I approach the door, the gun slips from my waistband down next to my thigh. I drop to the floor so as not to be observed and wrestle the .38 out of my pants. By the time I've recovered it and my composure, the intruder's walked to the next house. The back of his T-shirt reads "Students for CALPIRG," a well-known California consumer research organization.

In early February of 2002, just a week or so after President Bush makes his famous "axis of evil" comments in the State of the Union address, Barrett and I take nine-month-old Niko on a hike in the hills bordering the eastern edge of Berkeley. It's a beautiful California winter day, the air fresh after a rain. Barrett has finally finished training the latest police academy class. I am determined that we will have some quality family time. I have quit my job to take full-time care of the baby and I love being with Niko. His first six months brought me moments when time itself seemed to sparkle, Niko and I laughing at nothing at all, at just being together, the purest joy I have ever felt. I believe that communion is what the world needs to heal. It's what Barrett needs. It's what I need.

Sometimes at night, standing Niko on his lap, Barrett will begin a countdown: "Five, four, three, two, one . . ." Letting his lower lip rumble, Barrett creates the sound of billowing rocket engines. Niko is the rocket, rising in a straight line, then arcing over Daddy's head. At the apex the sound effects change from blastoff to a *Wheeeeeeee!* Then as Niko comes down, Barrett gently shakes Niko's shoulders and whispers, *Juggah-juggah-juggah*. This is the point where Niko's eyes dance, his mouth opens in a great O, and they both laugh. I gobble up these moments as if I am malnourished. But all too soon, they are over; Niko and I are alone again, and I'm hungry to share something with Barrett that I can't quite name.

Niko sits in a pack on Barrett's back as we hike down a steep muddy trail that tunnels through poison oak, blackberry vines, and eucalyptus. At the bottom we dawdle along the creek bed before heading up into the open green hills dotted with wildflowers. Red-

tailed hawks float on the thermal air currents high above us. When Niko starts to fuss, Barrett points to a hummock with a few flat stones on it. I sit down to nurse, Barrett beside me. The air is so clean I think I can see the individual molecules dancing in it. Barrett's thigh is warm next to mine. I feel his arm around me and his lips grazing my cheek as our baby nurses happily. *Don't miss this, I think. This is a perfect moment: feel it, breathe it in.*

Is it the sluicing of the long green grass against fur that causes me to look over? A dark mass hurtles toward me and the baby. The dog's mouth is open, its pink jowls gleaming. Unconsciously, my body reacts. I drop forward on my knees and arc my torso over the baby. The dog thumps against my back. *What the—?*

When I hear the dog's sharp gag, I look up to see Barrett jerking a big bucking pit bull by the collar. Barrett shouts, "Get this dog away from us *right now!* I've got a gun and I'll shoot it!" A man on a mountain bike—braking too hard with his front brake—pitches forward, briefly flying. The bike continues solo, bumping and finally crashing into a bush, while the man scramble-runs toward the dog saying, "Okay, sorry, man. I got him, I got him."

In high-stress situations, Barrett has explained to me, time becomes distorted; you lose your peripheral vision and also much of your hearing. These phenomena are known in law enforcement and to self-defense experts as time dilation, tunnel vision, and auditory exclusion. In order to optimize his reactions, Barrett must mentally rehearse various lethal confrontations and his own successful response to them. In his rehearsal, he practices looking right and left so as not to miss additional attackers. He imagines the scenario in slo-mo and acts without the auditory clues of gunshots or shouts for help.

When Barrett releases the pit bull to its owner and starts back to where I am still sitting with the baby, I try to catch his eye. I want to return to the tranquility we all felt before. But Barrett is looking at the ground and shaking his head.

Grabbing his arm, I try to laugh with him to release the adrenaline. "Wow," I say, "did you see that guy cartwheel off his bike?"

But Barrett is berating himself, "That dog could have killed Niko, or bitten you. *Christ*, I didn't see it coming, I didn't see it, how could I have been so completely in Condition *White!*"

"But you did great, you got him off us and we're all okay."

"No. I let my guard down. Something could have happened to Niko and it would have been my fault."

"But sweetie, we're in about as mellow a place as can be. It's okay for you to relax once in a while."

"I can't relax when Niko could get hurt."

So that perfect moment we just shared, that beautiful glorious healing moment of connection—that's *Condition White*? We're not allowed to have those anymore?