

# Safety

by [Mike Mulvey](#) (February 2025)



Police Car (Richard Estes, 1960s)

**He watches as the well-dressed** customer strolls gracefully past the knives, shotguns, and rifles secured behind the reinforced glass of their cases, wondering what inspired a woman like her to walk unannounced into a gun shop in an undesirable part of town. “Protection,” she told him, but he didn’t believe her. Yes, she was wealthy. Yes, she was older, but a non-committal emptiness had lurked behind her words like a morning haze that hasn’t burned off enough for the beautiful rays of sunlight to shine through.

He buzzes the door lock open so she can exit, and she glances back to smile and nod.

“Thank you for all your help, Timothy,” she says before straining her right forearm and shoulder into the heavy door.

She stutters a few steps onto the pavement before finding a steadier gait. The door shuts and CLICKS the lock into place behind her. He watches the closed-circuit television until she is out of view

"Take care, Alice," he mutters quietly, trying to avoid an echo that only reminds him how insecure he feels to be all alone surrounded by that many weapons. Even the allure of mass destruction wears off after a while.

*No one just walks in and buys a \$1500 pistol on a whim, he thinks to himself. She kept calling me Timothy even though I said, 'call me Tim.'* She must have felt sorry for me. He grips the armrests of his wheelchair. *It helps me get around the store more easily, he told her, but I don't really need it.* That was only half true. He could get himself around – to a point. The more he talked to Alice, though, the more effortlessly the half-truths turned into lies. He didn't go shooting every Saturday morning with his friends anymore like he told her he did, and they never commented on his marksmanship like he boasted. He was aging faster than "the guys" and having a harder and harder time getting around. He understood what he looked like to them, why they tolerated him for so long, and how they were having a much better time since he stopped going. *Mortality may be inevitable, but nobody likes a weekly reminder.*

Tim felt like she was pretending, too, so maybe that's why he lied so easily. More than her complete lack of knowledge of firearms, her voice quavered as it floated past her soft lips and nervous smile. For a few minutes, they created a space to play happy and normal in between the scared and anxious other moments of their lives. *What could someone like her be scared and anxious about?* Timothy knew nothing about the price of fashion, but he recognized the logo adorned to her purse as something he could nor would ever be able to afford. He also knew about the size of diamonds like the one he saw on her hand. He bought a much smaller one, once.

He rubs his now ringless left hand with his right and sighs while repeating another lie: *We were so different, divorce was the best option.* He glances at the closed-circuit TV screen and doesn't see Alice. *I wonder how different we are.* He squints between the "Gun Store" block letters on the tinted window and sees that her car is still there. He wonders about its price tag. *Probably worth a little more than your twenty-year-old pick-up truck.* He thinks about how the value of his house compares to what he imagines hers to be and tries to laugh. The chuckle becomes a long exhale as terms like net worth, disposable income, retirement savings, country club memberships, and gated community circle his head like ugly buzzards eying roadkill from above. *Dollar signs don't change anything...maybe that's what makes people like us vote the same way?*

Tim's descent into the rabbit hole of his own making stops. It's been a while since she left the store, and the car shows no signs of moving.

"Something's wrong," says Tim loudly enough to generate an echo as he rotates his wheelchair toward the door.

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Alice feels more regret than pride or security as she steps into her car. The gun rests in her open purse, looking like an intruder. *Why did you buy this again? Oh, right...you're a 68-year-old victim of peer pressure.* Her thoughts wander as she fumbles for the fab that she doesn't need to start the car but searches for anyway because she's used to keys and not push buttons.

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Alice sat with three other "ladies" trying hard to smile with just the right amount of sincerity and giggle at just the right pitch and decibel level. The three-course Thursday brunch had ended. Alice scanned the dining room in

astonishment at all the white tablecloths and overused maroon napkins. *I wonder how many mimosa and bloody Mary droplets are on those napkins, to keep the tablecloths so white..*

"Something funny, Alice?" asked the woman sitting to Alice's left.

"Hmm..." replied Alice, "Oh, sorry, Barb." Alice caught herself, "I mean Barbara."

"Barbara was telling us about her encounter yesterday," stated Debbie, the woman sitting directly across from Alice, with emphasis on *encounter*.

"It was terrifying," concluded Barbara. "It made me feel so unsafe, so vulnerable. Now, I'm starting to worry about Frond's Bay. Have you seen the types of people on *our* side on the bridge, with the hoodies? We can't be too careful."

"So unsettling," added Cheryl while raising and waving a hand, "we definitely need another mimosa to calm our nerves."

Alice wanted to go home, and she wondered who else did, too. Everyone agreed with Cheryl, though, like they usually do. "Francois" appeared like a rabbit pulled from a hat, smiling as he balanced four mimosas on a silver tray. His name was Carlos, but Cheryl had started calling him Francois during a too-many-martini 1920's themed party. The husbands had let it slide, so Carlos let it slide, too. Alice almost said something. *You're new, not just to the club and all these people but to your husband*, she said to herself, *just play along*.

"I don't mind that he's from Paraguay," Cheryl whispered to everyone once the drinks had been replaced and Francois took a few steps toward the kitchen, "but it's fun to pretend that he's from France."

Alice knew that Carlos immigrated from Columbia and not

Paraguay, but she made sure her begrudging smile matched the other “ladies.” She found solace in believing she understood his point of view. *Cheryl leaves nice tips, and her role as Alpha Female means the rest of us do, too. That must make everything OK.* Conversation quickly returned to the degradation of society and the need for protection. When the mimosas finally emptied and they said their goodbyes with brief embraces, Alice found their fingers, lips, and cheeks particularly cold.

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Alice returns to the present and realizes that her hand isn’t chilled by the ladies, but instead by the handgun. The sight of it scares her. The darkness of the barrel draws her attention like a black hole absorbing an adjacent galaxy. Her hand seems trapped by it; the dark circle grows in diameter until that is all she can see.

“Not again,” she gasps while trying to calm her nerves, “my ring always gets caught– “

The real leather of the purse does nothing to quiet the noise, and Alice’s ringing ears distract her from what just happened. The bullet enters her right side at an upward angle, missing her right lung, shattering two ribs, and ripping open her left lung before boring into her left shoulder blade. A moment passes before heat and pain reverberate through her torso. Blood rushes into her mouth, spilling over her shaking lips and running down her chin, staining her pristine, ivory blouse first as droplets before forming ever widening circles. Every breath spews more and more blood from her mouth. She attempts to move her arms but fails. She can barely feel her fingertips.

“Siri ... call ... help,” she mutters quietly but forcefully, causing some red spittle to reach the windshield. Unable to trigger a response from her phone or vehicle, she sits

silently in pooling blood, scared to breathe and hoping for a miracle.

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Even though this is Dave's part of town, the part with the gun store always makes him nervous. *Why does a neighborhood with so much gun violence need a gun shop?* Seeing a car so luxurious on "this" side of the bridge only increases Dave's anxiety. *Must be an appointment*, he thinks to himself, *but usually the police know and are driving around*. His casual walk turns into a trot as he nears the car, but he can't resist a quick peek inside the tinted glass windows.

"Oh my God! Hold on, lady!" shouts Dave as he alternates between pounding the glass and pulling on the doorhandle. He even uses his shoulder for additional force and his foot for leverage. "Unlock the door..."

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Officer Williams tells his partner to stop the car, radio for back-up, and then proceed on foot. His partner tries to argue but Officer Williams shuts him down quickly.

"The guy must be on something," he says, "so we don't want him running. We might have to shoot him." It's clear that Austin is not happy, so Officer Williams adds, "I've got the element of surprise. I'll be fine."

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Dave sees Officer Williams approaching. He turns and points toward him, his other arm raised in a fist. The hoodie of his red sweatshirt falls back, revealing dreadlocks. With ruthless efficiency, Officer Williams unholsters and fires his taser, hitting Dave squarely in the chest. The shock from the taser causes him to stagger. Still facing Officer Williams, Dave falls forward. His knees hit the ground first, followed by his

chest and face. Officer Williams lurches forward and pounces like a tiger upon stunned prey. Using Linda's car as support, he shackles Dave's wrists before pressing his knee onto Dave's back to keep him pinned to the ground.

"Lady!" blurts Dave, "Lady ... lady ... lady!"

"I'm not a woman," shouts Officer Williams, "stop resisting. Do you hear me, stop resisting!"

Dave hears Officer Williams but does not listen, so Officer Williams pushes his entire body weight onto Dave's back. They both hear footsteps running toward them and sirens approaching from a distance.

"Austin," shouts Officer Williams to his partner, "help me subdue this guy. He must be on meth or something."

"Oh no," gasps Austin as he glances through the tinted glass window. Instincts take over. He grabs his baton and starts striking the driver's side window with reckless abandon.

"What are you doing?" asks Officer Williams.

"The lady," gasps Dave from under him.

"You need to help me," says Austin in between heavy breaths and heavier thuds into the window with his baton.

Austin bashes the window until it looks like breaking ice on a frozen pond. Officer Williams removes the glass from the window so they can reach inside and open the door. There's no pulse, and she's not breathing. He tries to console himself. *You didn't mess up. She was most likely already dead.*

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An ambulance arrives shortly after the back-up squad car. Officer Williams explains what happened and wonders about the report he's going to file. Austin wonders about his superior

officer's stretching of the truth and if he should do anything about it. Dave maneuvers himself to a sitting position on the curb and wonders if he's been forgotten or if someone would remove the handcuffs, but he is mostly just scared of the cops. Alice is dead, so she doesn't wonder about anything.

Inside the gun shop, Tim wonders, too. He wonders if what he witnessed through the window was real, and if maybe he's to blame in some way. *Did you remember to teach her about the safety? Yeah, I'm sure I did. How could she shoot herself, then?*

Instead of pondering that question, he decides to close the shop early. Considering what happened, he's sure that the owner wouldn't mind. In fact, he'd prefer Tim not be there when local reporters show up. If he's really lucky, there won't be anything on tonight's news, and things will return to normal tomorrow. Tim flicks off the lights and wheels toward the back door thinking to himself, *he would agree that this was awful, but there's an 11 a.m. appointment and wouldn't want this to affect business.*

Lacking all the grace of her exit from the gun shop, the EMT's lift the gurney carrying Alice into the ambulance. With thoughts and prayers, it heads to the morgue.

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**Michael Mulvey**, originally from Fairfield, Connecticut, is a happily married father of four living in Jacksonville, Florida. His short story, "Replacement Theory," appeared in the winter 2023 issue of *TheBeZine*, "Town Centers aren't Shopping Malls" was published by Dumbo Press in March of 2024, and "Safeharbour No More" appeared in the December 2023 edition of *Portrait of New England*.



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