

Windshield families

“Lock your cars!” Stacey silently exhorted the other moms in the school parking lot. Otherwise you never know when a creepy crawler will be hiding in the back seat and throw a big sack over your head. Why risk it?

She was appalled, but also fascinated, by the casual trust of her new neighbors. Front doors were left unlatched, unchained bicycles leaned against the brick exterior of the Y, purses plopped in the child seats of shopping carts as their owners browsed the vegetables.

Most reckless of all were the windshield families—decals on the back window of a minivan (always a minivan) depicting mom, dad and offspring as stick figures. Sometimes they were accessorized with football or ballet tutu, a dog or cat, perhaps a departed grandparent drawn with dotted lines. It was like a rolling Craigslist personal: “this is what our family looks like, so you’ll know how big a vehicle you’ll need when you kidnap us.”

The minivans mostly belonged to the clique of women she had dubbed The Popular Girls, Populars for short. The town had an intense athletic heritage, producer of state champions, and many of these women had stayed in shape into their 30s. Former rowers sported broad shoulders and biceps as big as a man’s. Distance runners were lean as greyhounds, able to chase down a purse snatcher with ease.

The Populars were one of several cohorts Stacey had catalogued on the pavement near the elementary school, where the moms (and a few outlier dads) waited at 3 pm each day for their kids to emerge. There were the Militaries, stolid and erect, from the base outside of town. The Overwhelmed, moms from the Hollows, young kids clinging as they waited for older

siblings, everyone wearing parkas on the warmest late summer day. And the Populars, chatting and laughing with heads thrown back, clustered around the lithe lioness named Shelly Tate.

Every time she saw Shelly, Stacey remembered her terrible faux pas on the first day of school. On that occasion she had felt a tug on her sleeve and turned to discover Joan, brittle and birdlike with thinning hair and an apologetic smile. “What grade is your son or daughter?” Joan had asked.

“Son *and* daughter,” Stacey had corrected. This chitchat among moms didn’t seem dangerous, so long as it didn’t go too far. “Fifth and fourth. How about you?”

Joan had changed the subject. “It’ll be awhile. They release in age order, starting with the kindergarteners. I know you’re new here. Welcome.”

“Thanks. We’re from the city, so it’s quite the adjustment.”

Now the kids began popping out like spring growth at the top of the steps, scanning the crowd for their parents. Stacey couldn’t wait to hear about teachers and classmates from Jill and John. Her fingers were crossed for a good beginning in this new world and no bullies, please no bullies.

“Mine is... seventh, I mean seven years old,” Joan had finally answered. “But she’s home sick. I came so I could give her a report on the first day.” That’s odd, Stacey thought, then Jill appeared at the door. She had a big smile and was talking to another girl. Stacey waved madly, not caring if her arm fell off.

Jill saw her mom and waved back. She picked her way through the crowd and gave Stacey’s waist a hug. “Hi there, you little punkin,” said Joan before her mom could get a word

out. “How was your first day of school in your brand new town? I know it’s a big change from the city.”

Jill had hugged her mom tighter, and they exchanged a glance. The kid, too, realized this was weird. “It was fine, mom. It was fine.”

Next came Will, his elbow on the shoulder of a freckled colleague. “Mom, this is Jack. He invited me to his house to play Fortnite. Can I?”

“Whoa. Not so fast,” Stacey had responded in her robust mom voice. “I need to hear about your day. Plus I expect Jack’s parents would want to meet us, then we can set something up.”

“It’s okay,” Joan had interjected, literally inserting her head between Stacey and her son. “We’re all one big extended family in this town. Your house, my house, what’s the difference.”

“Look.” Stacey could hear the tension in her own voice, but it was too late to dial it back. “These are *my* kids, and I want to hear about their first day of school. Could you give us a little space, please?”

“Of course. I was only trying to be...*friendly*.” Joan’s lip had trembled as if made of jello. She backed away, and in a moment was lost in the crowd. And only then did Stacey realize that every single mom and dad was watching her with a look of.... Disapproval? Disgust? Quiet superiority? Oh, shit. After a moment, Shelly Tate broke the spell, striding across the pavement in her immaculate K-Swiss tennis shoes. She stood a good half head taller than Stacey. “Joan’s daughter died of cancer last year,” she intoned from on high. “Couldn’t you at least show a little *compassion*?”

A joke from Marc had popped into her head at the time, something he brought home after one of his alleged business dinners. Seems there was a town with no women, only men, so the men took up with pigs. They would put lipstick on the pigs, dress them up in cunning little pig outfits, and take them out to dinner. Except for one priggish man who was saving himself for human intimacy. Finally, this good man couldn't stand it any longer. He went to the farm, procured a pig, and walked into the town bar with her at happy hour. Dead silence ensued. "What's wrong?" the man protested. "You all have pigs."

"Yeah," one retorted. "But your pig is *ugly*." And that's how Stacey had felt, the fool with the ugly pig (or perhaps she was the pig herself), now and forevermore.

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The funny thing was, she never used to be worried about her safety, let alone paranoid, when she was a single woman in the big city. She would scoot up and down the hills in her battered Kia like a water bug, feeling invisible and thus invincible. She would sit in a corner booth at old school bars and watch the passing parade, easily able to fend off the elderly lechers who wiggled their tongues like angle fish. She would pop into Italian delis and Chinese barbecue shops and emerge with a single sausage or quarter pound of char shiu, then eat it contentedly while she watched foreign standup on Netflix.

But having kids had changed everything. You couldn't very well put a car seat in a Kia without a back seat, a moot point since by then it had replaced by a Prius. You couldn't take a toddler to the Tenderloin, stepping over derelicts on the way to the banh mi shop. Life became a series of carefully proscribed playgroups. And the deeper her love grew for her son and then her daughter, the more mindful she became of the potential for mayhem in the unruly city.

Reading the news online didn't help. Something bad was always happening, somewhere. Toddlers snatched from strollers as the non-English speaking nanny wailed helplessly, and then disappeared because she was illegal. School children mauled in crosswalks by drunken hit-and-run drivers. Bipolar teachers slipping LSD into the kindergarten snack tray. The sensible side of her realized these stories were often invented, ancient, or from far away. But then there was the crazy homeless man in the playground, who had defecated in front of her children when he found the restroom door locked. That was very real.

And what of Marc? What was her husband doing to calm and support her? He continued to go out for his supposed business dinners, as the children passed through one miraculous stage after another. He would come home with leftovers from fancy restaurants wrapped in aluminum foil shaped like a swan, listen politely as she poured out her daily tale of fears and travails, then regale her with news of his latest new business pitch. *What else did you expect*, she regularly asked herself. But couldn't he at least take the trouble to kiss the kids goodnight?

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Her new town had an excellent public library, and she had applied for a job the first week after moving in. Her application was accepted by Theodora, a woman with pink hair reading the New Yorker. Stacey liked her immediately: a younger version of herself.

"We don't get many actual librarians in here," Theodora had commented. "I mean, with an actual library science degree."

"So when can I start?"

“Well, that would require a spot to be open. Which there is not. Very little turnover here.”

“Maybe I could volunteer? Until a job opens up?”

“Sure. We have our used book store, children’s reading clubs, a computer lab. Look around, see what you like, pitch in. Then when a paid position should become available, you can pounce.” She folded back the page of the magazine to keep her place. “So you recently moved here?”

“Yes. My husband took a job at Sterling Pharmaceuticals.”

“Ah. The supplement company. ‘The Glow of Life.’”

“Marc wants to change that slogan. He says it’s generic. Could apply to any number of products.”

“Well, he’ll have to talk to senior management about that. They are pretty set in their ways, I’ve heard.”

He *is* senior management, Stacey wanted to say. As senior as it gets. “So how long have you lived here?”

“All my life.”

“What do you do for enjoyment?”

“Rock climbing. Bicycling. Outdoor opera in the summer. Pretty idyllic, I guess.”
Obviously no kids yet.

“Let me ask you something. What’s the crime situation like? Or let me rephrase it. What’s the worst thing that ever happened here?”

“Ooh. We had a serial killer in the woods up north. He would sneak up on couples in their campsites, and bludgeon them as they slept.”

“And how recent was that?”

“Forty years ago.”

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She had met Marc through her perfect job, as fact checker at a medical advertising agency. Statements of “efficacy” had to be documented or the FDA would reject the entire campaign. Companies spent millions to bring new drugs to market, so a delay of even a day or two was unacceptable. It was hard to imagine a Library Science graduate from San Jose State wielding so much power.

The other account managers lived in terror of her. Marc, on the other hand, liked to play games. He inserted a reference in a brief on a new impotence drug that led to a website on men’s hair replacement, just to see if she was paying attention. She caught that curveball and others like it and gradually came to realize the agency’s biggest rainmaker was flirting with her.

His true interest, it turned out, was breeding. He wanted to have kids sooner rather than later. She came from strong stock, her teeth were good, and she was healthy as a horse. It was selfish to put it off. And soon after he proposed marriage she quit her job to await Will, who was already on the way.

She had a difficult pregnancy, with bed rest at the end, but the delivery was without problems. Almost immediately after she came home from the hospital, Marc explained he needed to resume his evening schedule which kept him out most nights because he was wooing an important prospective client. His assistant, a woman Stacey had been friendly with at the

agency was now assigned as babysitter. The situation that embarrassed both of them. They reached an agreement that the assistant would go to the movies in the art house downstairs and leave her phone on vibrate in case something went wrong, which it never did.

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Most of the families in her new town were single-earner, which was easy to swing with modest housing prices. One spouse worked in the capital or the slightly closer tech center, while the stay-at-home mom or dad found ways to fill their day. Stacey had given up trying to get a job at the library and was too envious of the paid employees to volunteer. She ended up packing meals at a homeless shelter alongside women with a good heart but very little life experience. That took care of a couple of days per week.

Meanwhile, the children thrived like weeds. Riding their bikes everywhere, thank goodness with helmets on. Showing up for dinner on time and being polite. Eager to talk about school conquests and new friends. Gradually, Stacey began to let go of the notion that disaster was lurking around every corner.

She tried on the idea of being one of the Populars, whom she continued to see every day at school. It would be nice to have a posse, and they were the only cohort she could remotely identify with. She wasn't athletic, but maybe they would accept her as a mascot or something. The first step, obviously, was to get a stick figure windshield family for her own car.

She went on eBay and Amazon, but the decals sold there said things like "My tyrannosaurus will gobble up your stick family" or "My monster truck will run over your stick family" ... so much hostility! She could just ask one of the other moms where she got her sticker but that would be cheating, especially for someone who prided herself on her research skills.

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It was through Yelp she had discovered, when they were still living in the city, that her husband was playing around. Marc had taken up a new hobby, reviewing the elaborate meals he ate almost every night. Often pictures of the dishes on the table were included. Stacey pored over the website in her idle moments, trying to recreate the now-distant memory of enjoying such a meal herself. In one shot, she noticed lipstick on a wine glass. In another, a rose petal which on closer notice was a woman's painted fingernail.

"What's the male/female ratio at your business dinners?" she asked lightly when she got a chance, though she knew the answer since she used to work with him.

"About the same as in the National Football League."

"Any wives ever show up? You know, to cheer on the team?"

He grew cagey. "If it was appropriate to invite wives, I would be bringing you, Stacey."

"I'm not complaining. We'd be quite the distraction at a fine dining place, the little woman with two children running around like Tasmanian devils."

It was not long after that he dropped the bomb. "Okay, you guessed it," he announced after the kids were in bed. "I've stepped outside the marriage. Several times, actually. Looks like I have a sex addiction problem. I'm seeing somebody for it."

Stacey felt like she was being strafed with verbal artillery, one hit after another landing so fast she had no chance to react. She crumpled into a chair as if gut-shot in real life. Marc put his hand on her shoulder and she violently pushed it away. He came around the table, sat down across from her and watched as she fought back tears, then let them flow. "You have a right to be angry with me," he observed, the understatement of the year.

“I have a right to tear your fucking head off! How could you? Leaving your mate trapped in the cave with your spawn while you go rutting in the jungle. I feel so used.”

“No, it’s not your fault, it’s mine,” he said generously. “Like I said, I have a problem and I’ve already done something about it.”

“Chemical castration, I’m guessing?”

“No. I’ve quit my job. My counselor showed me how my desire to excel in a competitive environment caused me to act out in inappropriate ways. I’ve taken a job as CEO of a client company. They make supplements. Very low-drama. Located in a beautiful little town in upstate New York.”

Now she wanted to pick up a fork and jab it in his eyes. “You decided to move our family, and didn’t even discuss it with me?”

“There was no time. I had to make an instant decision. Look, I know how unhappy you’ve been. Once you calm down you’ll realize it’s for the best. I’m solving two problems at once, and we’ll have a safe place to raise our kids. Fun fact, it’s home to the oldest speed skating rink in North America, founded in 1898.”

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There was a truck stop on the outskirts of town, near a freeway exit. Stacey sometimes went there for gas, because it was cheaper, and also to calibrate her paranoia. Increasingly the long-distance truckers looked like tired old guys with back problems, not white slavers who intended to whisk her away.

While she was filling up one day, a display in the truck stop’s store window caught her eye. It was a collection of stick figure decals unlike any she had seen. There was a grandma on

rollerblades, and a little girl kissing a kitten. When she went in to pay, she browsed the wire racks near the register. There were air fresheners and energy supplements, but no windshield families.

“Those stick figure decals in the window,” she began with the cashier. “Where do you keep them?”

“Ah.” The cashier beamed. He was from the Middle East; she had deduced this because there were sometimes little trays of baklava and Turkish delight for sale on the counter. It was refreshing to see a darker face for a change. “They are made to order. By my younger brother.” He nodded toward a little room off to the side.

The room’s walls were covered with returned checks, purchase orders, tire posters and other business detritus. A desk with a computer was tucked into the corner; she didn’t see it till she was well into the room. The brother was perhaps eighteen, with deep set dark eyes. He studied her intently, then made a few strokes on a graphic pad he held in his lap. He turned the screen of the computer so she could see it.

“You’re good!” Stacey exclaimed. There was almost nothing to the drawing, yet it looked like her down to the high but overly sharp cheekbones.

“Tell me about your family,” said the boy, as if he were a mental health professional of some kind. And tell she did. She started with specifics of age and height but soon was sharing John’s pride at bagging his first high peak, and Jill’s newfound interest in the school garden. And Marc. She told all about Marc. The brother listened intently, and every few seconds he would draw another line with the stylus. Finally he leaned back. He had known she was done before she did. “Take a look.” He swiveled the screen so she could see.

“My god. That’s amazing.”

“Shall I print it? Two fifty per figure, so ten dollars total.”

“Yes, please. Print the hell out of that sucker.”

A machine beyond the computer whirred to life, and in a minute a sheet of plastic emerged. He slid it into a flat envelope and passed it to her. “You can pay at the front. Would you like a shower?”

“I... what? What did you say?”

“Would you like to take a shower now?”

“Look, I didn’t mean to give you the wrong idea. If I did, I’m really terribly sorry.”

“No problem.” The boy smiled and passed her a token. “/here, in case you change your mind. It’s free with every ten-dollar purchase. Very popular with the truckers.”

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Stacey arrived at the school early so she could get a prominent parking space.

Technically she didn’t need to be here at all, since Jill had chess club after school and John was on a field trip. Which was good, because the kids didn’t need to see this.

She found a spot within eyeshot of the front door of the school, exactly as she had hoped. She had purchased glass cleaner and paper towels at the truck stop and she scrubbed her rear window, as the clerk had suggested, so the decal would stick better. The plastic was static cling; as soon as it touched the glass it grabbed on like a limpet. She peeled it off and started over, rolling it out from a corner to prevent air bubbles. When she stepped back to inspect her handiwork, it looked pretty darned professional.

She waited under an oak tree by the school entrance, and watched the Populars arrive one by one. They behaved exactly as she had scripted it in her mind. They walked past the car, noticed the new sticker, then came to a dead stop. Soon there was a gaggle of tanned women in a semicircle around her tailgate, chattering with excitement. The last to arrive was Shelly Tate. The other women fell silent. Shelly glared at the ticker, then glared in Stacey's direction. Stacey started walking toward her car, feeling like she was in quicksand, every step drawing her deeper, bringing her close to a bad end.

"How dare you?" Shelly spat out when Stacey reached the group. "And parking right by the school, where our kids can see it! Shame on you!" She slapped Stacey's face with her big palm, propelled by her powerful serving arm. Stacey felt blood shoot out of her cheek into her mouth. How much blood? Would she choke on it, she wondered? And thought about the ripostes she would like to deliver, but couldn't, because Shelly now stormed off toward the school.

"I wasn't going to leave it on till the kids come out," she might have said, "because I've made my point. Just like my husband made his." Or maybe just, "parental guidance suggested." Indeed, the decal looked more R than PG, with a line rising from below stick figure Marc's waist at a 60 degree angle. Even an elementary schooler could figure that out, she realized.

She began to peel it off her window, but one of the Populars reached a hand out to prevent her. "Don't," the woman said. "We would like to take you for a glass of wine. You can park downtown, right on Broadway, where everyone can see it. But how did you know?"

"Know what?"

“That Shelly’s having an affair with your husband. She’s typically too discreet to get caught.”

Another passed her a wad of tissues. Stacey blotted her mouth. Yes, there was a lot of blood. Fuck, Shelly Tate? She had assumed he was seeing somebody at work, since he no longer had access to powerful unattached women. But what difference did it make? For the first time in her life, she was one of the Popular Girls.