

Heated

Already it is hot. Late May but it feels like August, and my daughters are at each other's throats.

All morning they fight over toys and cry repeatedly for snacks. I have a work deadline but first I need to call the bank back. This time they want a signed form, but the printer won't work. An hour later I finally get the form printed, signed and sent. Then it's time for a Zoom call with my daughter's preschool class. While the girls use my computer for the Zoom, I clean the house and find some old kids' clothing I can send to a friend. I assemble a package, then start hanging the laundry as I wait for the Zoom call to end so I can look up the address on my computer.

But when the preschool call ends, I realize it's almost 11 am. On a normal day we'd be taking the dog for a walk by now, but today I've got errands to run before that happens. My husband can't help out, either, because he's got meetings all morning and a 1 pm conference call. So once again, I'm on my own with the kids.

Hanging up cloth diapers and tiny socks on the line, I tick off everything in my head: errands, dog walk, making and serving lunch all need to happen in the next hour and a half so I can get our two-year-old down for her nap.

At 11 am everybody uses the potty and we climb into the car. I hand out containers of raisins and cheerios, plus water bottles. The sun beats down and it feels like high 80s even though it's not even noon yet. The sky is a giant furnace.

We drive three minutes to the post office. There's no line, so I send my package while the girls sit in the car, listening to their favorite song with the windows down.

Next stop, Co-op. I look for a shady spot in the lot but they're all taken, so I park as close to the entrance as I can. I glance at my list. Just eight or nine items in a store I know by heart, squeezing in before the lunch rush. I turn up the girls' mix of Disney songs and promise to get them a special treat: dried mango. Then I tell them I'll be right back, and I mean it.

Still, I hate leaving them. As I hurry into the store I remind myself that bringing them in would go against the Co-op's Covid policy. Plus, the car windows are fully down. They have snacks and their favorite songs are on. I'll be back in less than ten minutes.

I swoop through the Co-op like a humming bird. Milk, eggs, curry paste, cheese, bread, dried fruit. Pinto beans from the bulk section. It takes a few minutes to fill up the balsamic vinegar jars because the spout on the bulk vinegar container, as always, is slow.

I hop into a checkout line just as someone else is checking out, and the cashier rings me up. After a brief chip malfunction on my card, I pay and walk back out the sliding doors. My bag is unexpectedly heavy, and as I enter the parking lot I feel something crunch against my side but it barely registers. My eyes are fixed on my car. My pulse ticks up. *What is going on?*

As lunch time looms, a line has formed to enter the Co-op. It stretches almost to the car, and an older woman is hovering just outside the window where my two-year-old sits. As I approach I see that the woman is holding her reusable bag up, trying to cast shade into the car. A man is talking on his cell phone a few feet away. They both stare as I walk up. The people in line are also watching, their eyes blinking over their colorful cloth masks.

Heat rises to my face as I hear the man reading the numbers off my license plate. I don't even register the rest of his words. I am livid.

"Hi! Yeah, I know," I say as I walk up and yank the car door open. I can feel their eyes. "Mother of the year right here, I know. But I had no choice! My husband is working this

morning, and I can't bring them into the store. I was only in there a few minutes!" I realize, too late, that I am yelling.

"It's so hot out," the older woman says as she backs away. Her eyes, and all the others, burn with judgment.

The man on the phone shakes his head.

"Christ," I curse as I shove the groceries into the passenger seat. I can't put them in the back because there are people blocking the way. "There was no other option! I mean, what am I supposed to do with a two- and a four-year-old? I don't even have their masks with me."

The woman just stares.

"Thank you, anyways," I say. I don't wait for a response. I climb into the car and turn the key, skin seething. My two-year-old, Gini, starts to cry. She has never seen me act this way.

As we pull out, I try to reassure her. "It's okay, Gini. Are you scared? It's all right. Do you want some mango?"

We turn onto the main road and for an instant I gas the car, loud and hard. I feel like a pressurized can, constricted by anger. I want to scream curses. I pass the girls their mango.

At the next turn, I barely register a policeman biking past.

"Were those people being nice to you guys?" I ask.

No answer.

"Were they nice?"

"I wanted them to leave," says my four-year-old, Beth.

"Yeah. They were just trying to help. It's okay."

We get home and I grab the grocery bag. I notice a dent in the egg carton and realization dawns: the crunchy crackle against my side. I bite back a growl and pop the carton open. Luckily only one egg is broken.

I ask Beth to carry the egg inside for me, then let Gini feed it to the dog. At the kitchen sink I rinse the remaining eggs, then find a new carton for them. I put the refrigerated stuff in the fridge and turn to Beth.

“Was Gini crying at all before I came out?” I ask.

“No.”

I check the clock. It’s lunch time, but we still need to take the dog for a walk.

“Okay guys, time for a walk!” I muster a perky voice and lead the way to the door, gathering the leash, poop bag, sun hats and sunglasses for the girls. I help Gini find her shoes.

Coming around the brick path to the front of the house, we come upon someone standing at our front door. A policeman.

Our dog starts barking, back raised, and I fumble with the poop bag, pulling back on her leash. With the house on one side and the wall on the other, the policeman is blocking our way.

“Hi!” My skin prickles with dread.

“Hello.”

“Are you here because of what just happened at the Co-op?”

“Yes. Are these the kids?”

“Yes. My husband is working this morning, and I really just had no other option. I’ve been running around all day, it’s been really busy. I understand why someone called you. They were just trying to help. But I was only in the store for a few minutes.”

“Yeah. A co-officer sent me to check on things. He’ll be here in a minute.”

“We’re on our way to take the dog out for a walk and we’re on kind of a tight schedule around lunch. Does that mean we need to wait?”

“Yes, please. He should be here any minute.”

The dog has stopped barking but she’s still pulling on the leash. I feel trapped.

“Hello,” the officer says to Gini, who is staring at him.

She fidgets with her sandals and pulls up her t-shirt to hide.

“Gini, can you say hi?” I coax.

She hides again.

“I like those sandals,” the officer tries again, and Gini starts warming up.

“They’re my flip flops,” she says. “They’ve got potadots.” She slips her toes back to admire the white dots on a bed of green.

“Yes, polka dots,” I smile. “Can you say polka dots, Gini?”

“Polka dots.”

“Good.”

The officer nods and glances down the hill.

A second officer arrives on a bike, breathing hard after riding up our hill. Our dog launches into a fresh round of barking as the man dismounts and confers with the other officer. I manage to quiet the dog and the second policeman approaches down the narrow path. I feel crowded with my two daughters and frightened dog.

He stands there for a moment, still short of breath.

“I bike up that hill all the time,” I say. “It really stinks.”

More heavy breathing. His tall black boots glint in the sun.

At last he meets my eye. “Do you know why I’m here?”

“Yes. And I’m sorry. I know I shouldn’t have left them in the car. But I had no other option. There was nowhere to park in the shade, so I parked as close to the entrance as I could. I was only in there for about 10 minutes.”

“Yes, 10 minutes. That’s what they said.”

“Then they must have noticed our car right after I went inside!” I hate how lame and improbable it sounds. But it’s the truth.

“It’s hot out. It’s going to get up into the 90s today.”

“I know.”

“Leaving children in a hot car…”

I half-listen, waiting to explain. I can feel the clock ticking. The dog strains at her leash. But the policeman stays put.

“...Our job is to keep people safe, and to educate.”

“I understand. But the girls are fine. They were barely sweaty when I came back out, and my older one says they were fine while I was gone.”

“The people who called said they first approached the car because they heard a child crying.”

“Really?” I frown, steam bubbling beneath the surface. “Well, two-year-olds often cry. She was probably fighting with her sister over a toy or the snacks or something.”

“Well, you know what gets people. Children and pets.”

“Yeah, I know.”

“They were just responding to what they saw.”

“I understand that. But I was only gone for a few minutes.”

“Can I get the children’s names?”

Resisting the urge to ask why, I tell him their names.

“And dates of birth?”

I start to tell him. The girls interrupt.

“No, Gini! These are mine!” Gini is trying to steal Beth’s sunglasses. Beth clings to them, and Gini starts to cry.

I bend down and ask evenly, “Beth, can you let Gini borrow your sunglasses? Or go inside and get her another pair?” Beth turns to go get a second pair. I turn back to the officer.

“Date of birth?” he repeats.

Hugging Gini, still crying, against my leg, I tell him their dates of birth.

“We’re just here to help,” the officer says, after a pause.

“I know. But what we need is a babysitter. My parents live out of state, and with all the Covid stuff we just have no other options.”

“Why didn’t you ask for help?”

“Help? From whom?” I feel my voice rising again.

The officer thinks for a moment. “There are people who can help. The Co-op does curbside pickup.”

“I was running around all morning. I couldn’t call ahead,” I want to point out the half-hung laundry line in the back yard, the basket of wet clothes stewing on the porch. I wish I had a chart to show him exactly when Gini would hit manic stage if I didn’t get her down for her nap soon enough. Instead I vent, “It’s been a real shit storm of a morning!” I never swear in front of my children. I never yell like this. But I can’t help it. “I had no choice!”

The officer keeps trying. “I don’t know what kinds of options there are for wheeling them around in the store,” he ventures. “Like a stroller?”

“They don’t want people bringing kids into the Co-op right now. They’re trying to minimize spread. And I can’t fit both of them in a shopping cart, so my four-year-old would have to be loose. We’d get dirty looks.”

“Well, maybe just go in and get dirty looks next time? When it’s between that and heat stroke...”

“No one got heat stroke!” Tears flood my eyes, and my voice cracks. “I would never, ever put my children’s lives at risk.”

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to make you cry.” The officer fidgets.

Beth rushes to my side and hugs my leg, confused.

Thank you, Beth,” I mutter. Then, to the officer: “I’d really like to take the dog for a walk now. We have a really busy morning.”

He nods and backs up, at last, down the path so we can move.

I’m still crying as we walk out to the sidewalk. At the end of the path both girls pause to stare at the police officers; one getting in his car, the other onto his bicycle.

“Come on, guys,” I say.

They catch up to me and cluster around my legs, their faces creased with concern. I pat their backs, swallowing hard and squat down to hug them both at once.

The dog leans into her leash, pulling us on up the hill.

“Gini, want to hold my hand?” I ask.