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The Molester Who Lives on the Lane

When a registered child sex offender moved in across the street, I did what any responsible parent would do—I panicked. Would the man strike again? Did he have his eye on my four-year old son?

A few months earlier, a neighbor had told me about the online state registry of sex offenders. Just enter your zip code and a map pops up showing the addresses of all of the parolees who have been convicted of sexually assaulting children. I asked her if there were any such people in our Berkeley neighborhood. Her reply: “They’re everywhere.”

I resisted the urge to log on to this website, which was created under a law whose enactment I vaguely recalled opposing on civil liberties grounds many years ago, when I was a childless, politically active attorney. But one night, my son Liam upstairs, snug in his astronaut pajamas and Barney bed linens, I found myself Googling “Megan’s Law.” When the map of our neighborhood appeared on the monitor, I was stunned—seven blue squares, each representing someone who had been convicted of doing something awful to a child, within three-quarters of a mile of our home. One blue square in particular made me gasp: It belonged to a man I’ll call Frank who lived in an apartment building across the street, next door to the elementary school Liam would attend next year.

When I clicked on Frank’s blue box, a head shot of a startled-looking, 65-year old white man slowly materialized. Frank had been convicted of “sexual penetration with an object by force” and sexual battery on a child under the age of fourteen. To say a chill raced down my spine might sound like the worst of clichés, but that’s exactly what

happened, followed by the nauseating sensation of bile rising up my throat. And because I'm prone to what my therapist calls "catastrophizing," my mind immediately launched into a series of grizzly visualizations of all the things this man, given the chance, might do to my child.

I called my husband over to the computer. We had a 10:00 p.m. cutoff for raising disturbing topics, but this was news I couldn't hold back. Of the two of us, he is by far the more even keel, not prone to freaking out about improbable calamities as is my wont. I was counting on him to take a look at Frank's profile and then reassure me that the risk he posed to our family was minimal. He didn't. Upon reading the short but stark list of Frank's offenses, he let out an uncharacteristically elongated "Jeee-sus!"

We were both struck by the fact that Frank had chosen to live so close to temptation, his apartment literally overlooking the school's playground. On the other hand, we reasoned, perhaps he had been living there for a while without incident. Surely, we would have heard if something had happened and, since we hadn't, Frank was in all likelihood rehabilitated. By the next morning, I felt more level-headed about the whole thing. Later that day, I left voice messages for our two neighbors with pre-school age kids and left it at that.

But everything changed a few weeks later when I was walking down the sidewalk with Liam in tow, and we crossed paths with Frank. He was coming toward us, and I recognized him from his picture. He seemed unaware of my scrutiny so I kept looking. As we passed, he stole a fleeting, peripheral glance at Liam as his lips tightened into a thin, bemused smile—it was a look that was at once curious and guilty, his expression not overtly sinister but vaguely devious.

The encounter unsettled me and left me anxious to find some way of removing this menace from my son's life. But this "menace" was a human being with all kinds of needs, such as housing, and interests, such as privacy, of his own. What was a politically progressive but overwrought mother to do?

The next bit of information came a few days later from the principal of the school. She made a habit of monitoring the state registry regularly and last she had checked--less than two months earlier—Frank had not been listed. That meant he was new to the neighborhood, and our hopeful theory--that Frank had proven himself reformed—was in shambles.

It was at this point that I panicked. I called the police and demanded that they disclose every detail of Frank's past. Sgt. Hart in the sex crimes unit was sympathetic to my request but, by law, could tell me only that Frank's conviction was over twenty years old and that the police considered him a low-risk presence in the community.

Next, I went up and down our street, knocking on every door where I knew young children lived. I briefed the parents on the situation, struggling to maintain an air of enlightened objectivity despite my growing zeal to find a way of sending Frank packing. To the credit of my legendarily fair and just Berkeley neighbors, few had any such thoughts—they were well aware that doing so would only serve to harass Frank while exporting the problem to another neighborhood. I knew this too, but I still wanted to see him go.

During one of my neighborhood alert sojourns, I saw Frank get out of his parked car and enter his building. I quickly jotted down the car make and license plate number and even took a moment to peer inside his car. I'm not sure what I thought I might find

in there—a stack of kiddie porn, a bag of candy to lure small children? I was now stalking Frank.

The final bit of information my investigation yielded—this time from a neighbor who knew one of the other tenants in Frank’s building--was that Frank’s victim was his daughter and that he claimed that he was innocent and that his ex-wife had fabricated the charges in order to gain full custody. This was (oddly) welcome news, for I had by then learned that the vast majority of sexual assaults against children are perpetrated by known and trusted adults, not strangers. If Frank’s victim was his daughter, as tragic as this was for her, it probably meant that the neighborhood kids would be safe.

And yet...there was that furtive glance. And this: One wiltingly hot summer afternoon when I was fourteen, I was walking home from Giant Foods with my friend Marjorie, our pockets stuffed with candy bars purchased with dollar-an-hour babysitting wages. I was wearing a baby blue t-shirt that said, “Je parle français, la langue d’amour.” My mother had bought it for me in France the previous summer, back when my chest had been flat as a crêpe. But on this day, my newly acquired breasts were straining through the ribbed fabric of the “French cut” top, an effect that pleased me immensely.

A man in a rust-colored Buick drove by slowly, then back again, and then again. When he slowed his car and rolled down his window, I saw a slight, pale-skinned man with a dark beard who looked a tiny bit like our rabbi. Had my mother seen him, she would have described him as nebbishy but, looking back, the only fitting adjective is creepy.

“You girls want a ride?” he asked. There was an intriguingly slippery tone to his voice. The whole situation was more than a little intriguing, which is why I decided to stop and chat rather than marching forth gravely like any sensible adolescent.

“No,” I said, my arms folded instinctually across my chest despite my naïve intrepidity.

“Come on, I’ve got the air-conditioning on. Where you going—I’ll give you a lift.”

Marjorie tugged at my elbow and muttered through a locked lower jaw, “Come on, let’s go.”

“We’re going home,” I informed him.

“Well, we could just ride around for a while and...we could just talk.”

“Talk about what?” I asked. I sincerely wanted to know what this full-grown man thought he and I might have to discuss. It wasn’t like I spent a lot of time chatting with my dad or his friends. Nor, for that matter, with boys my own age—none had shown an iota of interest in me, so why was this man so bent on getting to know me? Part of me knew the answer, but it made so little sense that another part insisted my suspicions were baseless.

“I don’t know—anything,” he rejoined, and I could detect a note of irritation beneath his wheedling. It occurred to me that we were not the first girls he had solicited that day and, incredible though it may seem, the thought of him being repeatedly spurned made me feel something akin to pity for him.

I lingered only a moment longer there on the hot sidewalk, squinting through bright sunshine to see my would-be molester give me one last coaxing half-smile. Then

Marjorie and I walked away, giggling nervously, my heart beginning to flutter as I thought about how far away my house was. In a moment, we would be turning down a path that led through our neighborhood park where, years earlier, a flasher we referred to as “the naked man” had been repeatedly sighted.

The man drove away and then circled back one last time and, as he did, one of us had the idea of taking note of his license plate: CVC590. I know that sequence as well as I know my social security number and, when I saw Marjorie at our 20th high school reunion and brought up the incident, she immediately recited it to me.

I spotted one of our neighbors by the tennis courts, told her what had happened and asked that she escort us home. Safe in my mother’s kitchen, we exploded with the tale of our saga and rushed to write down the license plate number lest we forget it. Curiously, my mother, who is one to worry excessively about all matters great and small, did not contact the police. Perhaps in 1980 suburban Maryland, the thought of a girl being sexually assaulted or abducted was simply beyond the pale.

But today, such horrors are not unthinkable. Within a few years of my encounter with the creepy nebbish, milk cartons began displaying photos of missing children. The indigo faces of those milk carton kids became our regular breakfast companions, and my generation came of age fearing that psychopaths were crouching behind every bush.

That’s why I was preoccupied with Frank, even when all available evidence suggested that he posed very little danger. The abduction or violation of a child’s body is, as local news reporters are fond of saying, “every parent’s worst nightmare.” Though stranger attacks are rare, it only takes hearing about a single incident to feel overwhelmed with fear. And when I replay the scene from 1980 and realize that I may have been only

a half-step away from having my face appear on a milk carton, it's hard to pry my finger off the panic button.

But over the months, reason has prevailed, my analytically-trained lawyer's mind gaining the edge over my various and sundry neurotic streaks. I have seen Frank on half a dozen occasions, and laying eyes on him no longer makes my spine tingle. I've noticed that he walks with a pronounced limp and heard from a neighbor that he survived liver cancer. A blue "disabled" tag hangs from the rearview mirror of his car. He strikes me as a broken and lonely man. I will leave him be.