

MOTHERHOOD IN THE AGE OF FEAR

By Kim Brooks

Ms. Brooks is a writer.

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CHICAGO — I was on my way home from dropping my kids off at preschool when a police officer called to ask if I was aware there was an outstanding warrant for my arrest.

“No, no,” I told him. “I didn’t know that.”

I needed to call my husband, but my fingers were shaking. I don’t remember if I was crying when he answered, only that he was saying he couldn’t understand me, that I needed to calm down, to tell him what had happened.

What happened began over a year before on a cool March day in 2011, at the end of a visit with my parents in Virginia. I needed to run an errand before our flight home to Chicago, and my son, then 4, didn’t want to get out of the car.

“Come on,” I said.

“No, no, no! I wait here.”

I took a deep breath. I knew what I was supposed to do. But I was tired. I was late. I didn’t want, at that moment, to deal with a meltdown. And there was something else: a small, quiet voice I’d been hearing more and more lately. “Why?” the voice asked.

Why did I have to fight this battle? He wasn’t asking to Rollerblade in traffic. He just wanted to sit in the car. Why couldn’t I leave him, just this once?

If it had been warm out, I would have said no. I knew about how quickly a closed car can overheat, even on a 60-degree day. But it was cool and cloudy. I’d grown up in that same town in the 1980s and had spent hours waiting in the back seat of my parents’ station wagon, windows open,

reading or daydreaming, while they ran errands. Had so much really changed since then?

So I told him I'd be right back. I cracked the windows and child-locked the doors and set the alarm. When I got back five minutes later, he was still playing his game, smiling. We picked up his sister and our suitcases back at my parents' house and caught our flight home.

It took me a while to figure out what had taken place in the parking lot — that a stranger had watched me go into the store, recorded my son, recorded the license plate on my mother's car and called 911.

When our flight landed in Chicago, there was a message on my phone: "I'm trying to get ahold of Mrs. Kimberly A. Brooks. I need to speak with Mrs. Brooks about an incident this afternoon in a parking lot."

Once I realized what had happened, I felt like a terrible mother. I felt as though I'd been caught doing something very bad, even if I didn't understand what the bad thing was, exactly, or what the rationale was for its badness. I felt, I think, what just about every woman feels when someone attacks her mothering: ashamed.

Image



CreditEleni Kalorkoti

But had I committed a crime? There’s no law in Virginia against letting your kid wait in a car — though, amazingly, [19 states do have statutes addressing this situation](#). The police seemed to think it was child abuse or neglect — that someone could have hurt or kidnapped my son while I was gone.

When I tried to explain this to my outraged father, he said: “Last I checked, kidnapping is a crime. Someone could break into my house and

shoot me in the head, but the police aren't showing up to arrest me if I forget to lock my door."

"I don't think they see it the same way when kids are involved," I told him.

"The same way," he said. "You mean rationally?"

I contacted a lawyer who said I would just have to wait to see if the police would press charges or contact the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services. And so I waited, terrified, until the morning I received that second call and learned that I was being charged with contributing to the delinquency of a minor (my son).

I spent the next months determining the best legal course of action, and also the best course of action for living with the humiliation of being accused of criminally negligent parenting. My story might have ended here. This is what shame does to women: It isolates us and makes us feel our stories aren't really stories at all but idiosyncratic flaws. The only reason my story continued was that I started seeking out other mothers who had been through similar struggles. I found six willing to speak about their experiences, and I expect there are many more out there. I was not the only one who had paid the cost of parenting in the age of fear.

We now live in a country where it is seen as abnormal, or even criminal, to allow children to be away from direct adult supervision, even for a second.

We read, in the news or on social media, about children who have been kidnapped, raped and killed, about children forgotten for hours in broiling cars. We do not think about the statistical probabilities or compare the likelihood of such events with far more present dangers, like increasing rates of childhood diabetes or depression. Statistically speaking, according to the writer Warwick Cairns, you would have to leave a child alone in a public place for 750,000 years before he would be snatched by a stranger. Statistically speaking, a child is far more likely to be killed in a car on the way to a store than waiting in one that is parked. But we have decided such reasoning is beside the point. We have decided

to do whatever we have to do to feel safe from such horrors, no matter how rare they might be.

And so now children do not walk to school or play in a park on their own. They do not wait in cars. They do not take long walks through the woods or ride bikes along paths or build secret forts while we are inside working or cooking or leading our lives.

‘I don’t know if I’m afraid for my kids, or if I’m afraid other people will be afraid and will judge me for my lack of fear.’

I was beginning to understand that it didn’t matter if what I’d done was dangerous; it only mattered if *other parents* felt it was dangerous. When it comes to kids’ safety, feelings are facts.

As one mother put it to me, “I don’t know if I’m afraid for my kids, or if I’m afraid other people will be afraid and will judge me for my lack of fear.” In other words, risk assessment and moral judgment are intertwined.

This has actually been [confirmed by researchers](#). Barbara W. Sarnecka, a cognitive scientist at the University of California, Irvine, and her colleagues presented subjects with vignettes in which a parent left a child unattended, and participants estimated how much danger the child was in. Sometimes the subjects were told the child was left unintentionally (for example, the parent was hit by a car). In other instances, they were told the child was left unsupervised so the parent could work, volunteer, relax or meet a lover. The researchers found that the participants’ assessment of the child’s risk of harm varied depending on how morally offensive they found the parent’s reason for leaving.

Dr. Sarnecka and her colleagues summarized the findings this way: “People don’t only think that leaving children alone is dangerous and

therefore immoral. They also think it is immoral and therefore dangerous.”

“**It’s not about safety,**” Dr. Sarnecka told me. “It’s about enforcing a social norm.”

No one knows this better than Debra Harrell, one of several women I spoke to about their experiences. In 2014, Ms. Harrell let her 9-year-old daughter play in a park while she went to work at a nearby McDonald’s. It was a safe neighborhood on a summer day with lots of kids. None of this mattered when another parent contacted the police. Ms. Harrell was charged [with unlawful neglect of a child](#) and her daughter was put in foster care for about two weeks.

That same year, [an Arizona woman named](#) Shanesha Taylor was charged with two counts of felony child abuse and sentenced to 18 years of supervised probation, all because she had no child care and had to leave her two younger children in the car while she went on a job interview.

In a country that provides no subsidized child care and no mandatory family leave, no assurance of flexibility in the workplace for parents, no universal preschool and minimal safety nets for vulnerable families, making it a crime to offer children independence in effect makes it a crime to be poor.

And yet middle-class and affluent mothers are not immune from this kind of surveillance and punishment, either. One such mother I spoke with was charged with felony child endangerment when she left her napping 4-year-old daughter in the car for a few minutes with the windows open while she ran into a store. During her arrest, she remembers the officer saying, “Stay-at-home mom’s too busy shopping to take care of her kid? Does your husband know how you take care of your child while he’s out earning the big bucks?”

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These women's critics insist that it's not mothers they hate; it's just *that* kind of mother, the one who, because of affluence or poverty, education or ignorance, ambition or unemployment, allows her own needs to compromise (or appear to compromise) the needs of her child. We're contemptuous of "lazy" poor mothers. We're contemptuous of "distracted" working mothers. We're contemptuous of "selfish" rich mothers. We're contemptuous of mothers who have no choice but to work, but also of mothers who don't need to work and still fail to fulfill an impossible ideal of selfless motherhood. You don't have to look very hard to see the common denominator.

I presented this theory of mother-shaming to Julie Koehler, one of the last "bad moms" I interviewed. She had introduced herself to me over email with the subject line, "I am the horrible Starbucks mother!"

One day in 2016, Ms. Koehler let her three daughters wait in her minivan, watching "Dora the Explorer," while she grabbed a coffee. But Ms. Koehler's story diverges from those of the other women because she is a senior public defender, and as she cheerfully informed me, "I cross-examine cops all day long. I'm not about to be intimidated by a badge."

The officer asked where she had been, and when she lifted her cup, he said, "So you abandoned your children?"

That's when Ms. Koehler laughed. "It's not against the law in Illinois to leave your children unattended. You have to prove that I'm willfully endangering their life by going into Starbucks and getting a cup of coffee where I can see them the whole time. Good luck getting that case approved by a state's attorney."

The officer didn't end up pressing charges, but instead put in a call to the Department of Children and Family Services. As a result Ms. Koehler had

to provide references attesting to her parenting, her children had to get physicals from a doctor, and the family was interviewed in their home, all before the case could be dismissed.

It's not lost on Ms. Koehler that her ability to refuse to be intimidated is the result of her profession and privilege as a white, affluent mom. In her view, this makes it all the more important that mothers like her, mothers like me, stand up for our right to parent our children without public shaming, investigation or prosecution.

"If this happened to anyone of color," she said, "they could have been shot in the street." She continued, "But no matter what color you are, no matter how much money you do or don't have, you don't deserve to be harassed for making a rational parenting choice."

When I asked what advice she would give to other women in this situation, she said: "I would tell them to ask the officer what law she was breaking. I would tell them to ask why and how going into a store for a few minutes meant she was abandoning her child. I would tell her to ask if she was under arrest, and if not, if she was free to go.

"And if it's not a cop but a person on the street, calling them names, yelling at them that you're a terrible mother, threatening to call the police and have their children taken away, then I'd tell them to be extremely calm and clear with that person. I'd tell them to take out their own phones and start recording the interaction. I'd tell them to say calmly and assertively: 'I haven't done anything wrong; I haven't broken any law. My child is fine. I don't know you, so please step away from us. You are harassing me, and you're harassing my child. If you don't stop harassing us, I'll have to call the police.'"

A mother, apparently, cannot be harassed. A mother can only be corrected.

As I listened to her, it occurred to me that I had never used the word harassment to describe this situation. But why not? When a person intimidates, insults or demeans a woman on the street for the way she is dressed, or on social media for the way she speaks out, it's harassment. But when a mother is intimidated, insulted or demeaned because of her parenting choices, we call it concern or, at worst, nosiness. A mother, apparently, cannot be harassed. A mother can only be corrected.

At this point you might be wondering, “What about the dads?”

Dr. Sarnecka, the cognitive scientist, has an answer to this. Her study found that subjects were far less judgmental of fathers. When participants were told a father had left his child for a few minutes to run into work, they estimated the level of risk to the child as about equal to when he left because of circumstances beyond his control.

I love the way this finding makes plain something we all know but aren't supposed to say: A father who is distracted by his interests and obligations in the adult world is being, well, a father; a mother who does the same is failing her children.

Perhaps all this is beginning to change. In March, [Utah became the first state](#) to pass a law protecting “free-range” parents. Other states may soon follow. Lenore Skenazy, the founder of the [Free-Range Kids movement](#), is the president of [Let Grow](#), a nonprofit that helps parents, teachers and organizations find ways to support childhood independence and resiliency. And among mothers I know, there seems to be a slow-brewing backlash to the idea that we should let our lives be ruled by the twin fears of danger and of disapprobation.

I felt these fears every time I stood at a birthday party with 30 other parents, watching for two hours as our children played. I felt it at the park when, just at the moment I took out a book to read, my son stumbled and bumped his chin, and a woman began shouting, “Where is this child's mother? Is this child being supervised?”

It was the everyday version of Ms. Harrell's terrifying experience. In the video of her interrogation — aired on television news, for all to see — she cries while a male officer [berates her](#), saying, “You understand that you're in charge of that child's well-being.”

As I write this, I am sitting on a bench in a residential neighborhood. It is a beautiful summer afternoon, but there are no children playing on the sidewalks. They are safe at camp, inside their houses, buckled into car seats, plugged into screens, never enjoying what the writer Mona Simpson called “the luxury of being unnoticed, of being left alone.”

Dr. Sarnecka once told me that children may not have the same rights as adults, but “they have *some* rights, and not just to safety. They have the right to some freedom, to some independence.” They have a right, she said, “to a little bit of danger.” And parents, I’d add, have the right to give it to them.

In the end I was lucky. The prosecutor agreed not to pursue charges in exchange for 100 hours of community service. My family and close friends stood by me. I was not placed on a registry of child neglecters. I didn’t lose my job. The truth is, I don’t feel that bad about what happened to me anymore. Instead I worry about all the ways our country seems to be at war with children, even as we insist our greatest responsibility is to protect them.

[Kim Brooks](#) is the author of the forthcoming “Small Animals: Parenthood in the Age of Fear,” from which this essay is adapted.