The Pick-up Line
Susan Vogel, 2007 Linda Flowers Literary Award Recipient

~for Amanda

IT’S NOT WHAT IT SOUNDS LIKE—not the magic words for singles slinking down a bar, blue umbrella drinks clinking. But if you knew that already, it’s not just because it’s dated, but because we’re all too tired and gravity-bound to even think of it anymore. No, of course the pick-up line is where the car-riders are split off from the bus-riders, the sheep from the goats, to go home from school. I used to think the pick-up line split the hot-house flowers from the tough-enough latchkeys, until I wound up driving through it myself.

At the boys’ old school, the car-riders were bafflingly called “walkers,” as in, they walk to the car-line, because no one actually walks to school anymore, or would even dream of running the gauntlet of traffic and candy-baited kidnappers to cross the entrance road. Back in my elementary days, when only a killer highway kept us from walking the mile each way, the P.A. would daily crackle out “The Walkers may leave please, the Walkers may leave.” I was all the way to third grade before I discovered that the Walkers were not an actual family.

I’m in a good spot today, at the end of the first coil in the long snake of cars—you have to get here twenty minutes early if you don’t want to emerge from its slow digestion process twenty minutes late. From here I’m close to the playing field, where signs guilt dog-walkers into picking up their droppings. The kids are still out on the field, which festers with recess and P.E. both; today, like every day, a great number of kids and teachers are also walking laps—too many and too cheerful to be punishment, so it must be some kind of recess-lite, or for the girls, who walk tossing hair and dismissive wrists, a way to ensure that the gossip never stops.

There’s a newly clipped silver terrier peeking out the window behind me; in the car ahead, a grandfather’s row of veterans’ caps line the back window. A number of cars, especially in the teachers’ aisle, have bumper-stickers saying Pray for Dicus, with the “o” a baseball, for the school’s former student, baseball champ, and bone cancer survivor. Is it because he’s an athlete that he’s last name only? Or for the charm of toughness it might confer?

Across the parking lot, in the snake’s second coil, there’s the little girl, maybe three, who’s always unbelted and climbing around on her mother’s lap, head and arms hanging out over the door. I’ve seen them drive in this way, so maybe it shows how far we are from maternal police-state suburbia that everyone just smiles and waves back, instead of scolding about seatbelts and boosters. Whereas I feel guilty if I even scoot up a car-length in line without reaching my seatbelt, as if the traffic monitor in her cute capris is going to rap on my window and lecture me over her headset microphone.

Further guilt: should I leave the engine idling after a couple of premature move-ups, when the car line, like a giant accordion, squeezes in? There must be some eco-formula to compute wasted gas and emissions, but like so many other things here, I’m ignorant. And what is the
etiquette and/or liability of pulling around someone who seems rooted in place at the pick-up point?

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We’re here in the North Carolina mountains, this school district half the royal offspring of gated-community realtors, one-fourth professors’ kids (the new pc-PK), and one-fourth self-proclaimed hillbilly-redneck-punks. The hardwon new dress code can’t begin to blur those distinctions, although now-condemned flip phones and rebel flag T-shirts alike have gone the way of spaghetti straps. So why, then, between the princess blondes and the arm-punching inciters, is there a boy walking the track with a Hare Krishna haircut? And I don’t mean just a mohawk—it looks like the real deal, complete with a topknot and orange T-shirt. Maybe I’m showing my age to label it this way—there are sporadic Hare Krishna hauntings of our university campus, but, Wiccans aside, as extreme as this place gets is a bankrupt enclave of contentious Transcendental Meditators, trying to sell off a half-developed mountaintop.

I’m of the professor breed, of course—who else would be bothering to divide people into these taxonomies, noting cars and clothing like the markings of birds?

I wonder if all these cars are crusted with snack refuse, as mine is, the kind of permanent Kraft-colored orange rind that cannot even be foamed off. I wonder if other cars have crayons melted into the seatbelt straps and the rubber tubing peeled away from the door. (What else in a car comes off quite so satisfyingly in a child’s grip?)

But I doubt it. Most of these are probably real parents, with rules against such things. Perhaps they actually live by the Pearls of Love and Logic wisdom the school sends home every other week, with Stepford children who ruminate balefully on their mistakes, feel bad about failed spelling tests, and actually answer questions about how they think they’ll handle it. But I haven’t figured all this out, much less the car-cleaning secrets. I’m a part-time, hybrid parent, another untellable, incredible story altogether. Not a stepmother, but the kind who can be called “second mom” in a classroom with no one thinking for a second of the infamous Heather book. (If her tale has ever made an appearance in this region, outside the private Montessori school, at least.) A former foster mother, four years on, lucky enough to remain regularly “involved,” as they cautiously say, in the lives of the boys that visit me. The emotional highs of this life are the very highest, while I try to curb the lows by plunging into the realm of the practical—that is, into the realm of the senses that engulfs all parents, real and otherwise: Laundry is never lacking and it’s more productive and less tearful than meditation; the Happy Meal toy trove needs purging; and it’s never too far from the next visit to start another round of snack preparation. Hence, here in my husband’s unhappily conceded car, it’s clear that anything goes as far as food and sticky drinks, with the exception of Lunchables Mini-Pizzas and scrambled eggs that are not cheese-glued to a trans fat biscuit.

But whether it’s car cleaning (surely no 21st-century parent actually forbids food in the car) or how to get the Love and Logic Pearl spat back out at you, there are secrets that the real parents in this line must know that I don’t: whether “EOG” is pronounced as an abbreviation or like one Hagar the Horrible curseword; how you know which Friday is Hat Day; or maybe that daily life actually could become mundane, one routine among many, instead of a luxury? But maybe that’s another thing the Pray for...cancer bumper stickers are here to remind us. To remind me, at least, in the slough of self-pity, that I’m hardly the only one to grasp at mere ordinariness, leaping at the chance to bring the kindergarten snack or to find the perfect shirt for spring photo day.

(Not that I can pick the right snack when I get the chance, even after Talmudic fretting over the line between crowd-pleasing and county-mandated “healthy” and individually wrapped. But in Michael’s old school, my best consumer efforts got him only “We hate your snack and we hate you.” And this in response to Shrek-shaped Cheez Nips—what more could a kindergartener ask? Apparently, Michael told me, they demanded the girl-consensus favorite food—pizza dipped in salad dressing—for breakfast, lunch, snack, and party.)

These everyday privileges I grasp at are not so different from the constant envies of my own grade school years. Back then, I longed for the icons that could make me magically complete and normal, from the glittering braces and navy windbreakers of sixth-graders to the squared-off cheers, three-snap Vicerays, and wet-look purses that seemed so ordinary to most, yet just out of reach to me. Now, years later, the markers and mysteries I yearn for just take a
different form—this exhaust-spewing pick-up line, for one.

Like everyone, though, homework is the one chore I’d ask for less of, especially when it comes to Justin, Michael’s brother in third grade. Creating Ben Franklin’s head out of a too-tight swimming cap and doll hair, and rigging his famous electrocution experiment with a Spiderman kite, was our great homework triumph; along with the completion of the month-long Moon Journal, first assigned when the moon did not rise before 9:37 at night. And the spelling words are baffling, with a high proportion of tween-consumer brain-washing words, for example, in the prefix unit: Preshrunk? I’d asked, and preorder? Prepaid? What third-grader needs to know that? Of course that became clear when the cookie dough sale came up. Then the near-obscure rewind and resume, which I could only explain in terms of VCRs and DVD players. Next came splotch and plunk, and then even drunk.

EOG!!

“Back up, back up,” a PE teacher shouts to the kids on the field, not the cars. “Y’all are missing playtime.” She’s wearing black shorts and a white V-neck tee, sunglasses—a far cry from the droopy sweatpants of the PE teachers of my youth, but fairly close to the realtor moms who have stepped out to take a few power-strides around the track while their parked cars hold their places. “Two outs, pressure’s on,” she hollers.

The outdoor P.A. muffles some commands and kids start to shuffle themselves into a line, although the jump rope continues to hit, hit, hit the asphalt walkway.
whom I recognize more by exhaustion than age; they leave their sunken Chevy Novas empty in line like the rapture has struck, as the bumper stickers say, to go pull a flush-faced grandchild out and beat the rush. And here, as there, I see a few dads tipped back in their seats, unashamed to nap in public view. But there are half as many work trucks and twice as many forest-green Subarus like mine (apparently the only color of snow car they ship up here), and by far more gold SUVs and, needless to say, minivans. So far here, not one car with airbrushed flames—and why is it those muffler-dragging cars never look like they have more than a few mph to their name?

This school must have printed out the cards that so many people have in their front windows—last names in ornate black-bordered certificates on cream paper, disturbingly like something you’d see in a funeral parlor. But sign or no sign, the teachers seem to know whose car is which by this time of year, and can even distinguish among the army of green Subarus halfway down the lot. Today’s traffic-duty teacher walks down the row of cars and back up again, calling out names into a microphone headset—some wear it, some hold it. The thought of Britney Spears on stage probably never enters their heads.

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There’s nothing like the slow transition from foster-parenting, with its black-and-white decrees, crash course-reversals, and value-free language, to a new family re-woven with spiderweb strands each day. There’s nothing like it to make every sappy platitude you’ve ever gagged on seem suddenly and totally true: I want the ordinary, want to be the ordinary. Five spare minutes and a clean car is the last thing I would ever wish for; even hours lost to observations of a fogged-out moon and spats over how to compare fractions are far better than an empty afternoon. And so it still seems miraculous that, ordinary of ordinaries, I can just give the names and pull up to the curb beside the school’s awning, and there the boys I could have lost forever, the boys for whom I could have long since faded to a shadow, instead, beyond a miracle, are standing there on the pavement, backpacks jiggling with impatience, just waiting to climb in.

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The High Country Foster and Adoptive Parent Association is a new organization of foster, adoptive, and kinship parents who work together to support the safety, well-being, and nurturing of the children in our community’s foster care system. For further information, please visit the association’s website at www.hcfapa.org.
The Winner of the Linda Flowers Literary Award receives a cash prize of $500 and a stipend towards a Writer's Residency at the Weymouth Center for Art and the Humanities in Southern Pines, NC. While the author maintains copyright of the work, the winning entry is published in a Council publication with the understanding that the Council may publish or republish it at any time.
“That my book about Eastern North Carolina might touch a chord with some people, and with several ready-made audiences—teachers, social workers, health personnel, civic organizations, book clubs, readers in general… I had not anticipated. What these groups are responding to in Threwed Away, I think, is its human dimension: the focus on real men and women having to make their way in the face of a changing, onrushing and typically uncaring world…. This humanistic apprehension, I tell my students, is as necessary for living fully as anything else they may ever hope to have…they must recognize and nurture it in themselves…to realize more fully the potential of the human spirit.”

~ Linda Flowers,
letter to the North Carolina Humanities Council Membership Committee, July 1992