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Outnumbered: The Big Family

This is how grocery shopping goes now: One-year-old Audrey and four-year-old Owen are riding in the cart with the zucchini and baby carrots and whole wheat bread that I hope will not be dented before we even get to the checkout lane. Newborn Sadie is asleep in my sling, and seven-year-old Abigail is walking and dancing and choosing jam for sandwiches. My husband Dane has gone off in search of the package of frozen peas we forgot to grab.

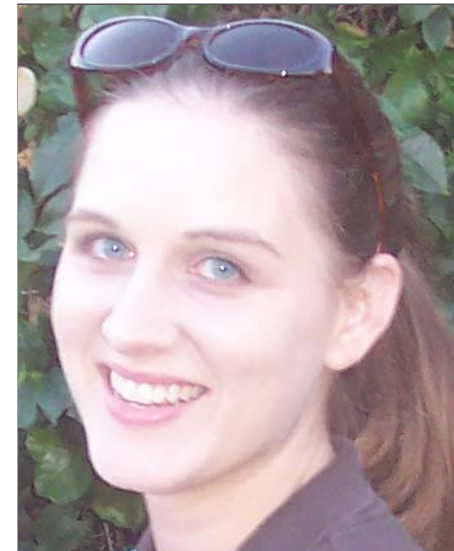
And so I'm alone with the kids when Ms. Vocal and Opinionated comes around the corner, pushing her cart full of cranberry scone mix and coffee beans, peppered lunch meats and exotic cheeses. She stops cold when she sees us. "Holy *smokes*, that's a lot of kids!" She purses her lips and shakes her head, just in case I mistakenly took that for a compliment. Or even a neutral observation.

Got it, lady, I want to say. Kids: bad. Imported chocolate: good. Thanks for your input. I want to shake my head right back at her: *Do you need a refresher course in how to hold your tongue? Or: Are you not a fan of the species?* But instead, I smile and nod, even though I'm certainly not raising a football team over here, and push the cart quickly in whatever direction she isn't headed.

I know, I know. I ought to shrug it off. Who cares what one woman at the grocery store thinks? But I'm not that highly evolved. My general preference is for people to like me, or at least not to be annoyed by my very existence. I'm perfectly nice, if a little whiny. And my kids are delightful—they're interesting, creative, thoughtful. They're also noisy, persistent, and wiggly, in fairly age-appropriate ways.

And this is Trader Joe's, where people are usually friendly, blissed out, maybe, on the free samples and the wide selection of cookies. When Owen was first born and Abigail

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was barely three, she had one spectacular meltdown here because I wouldn't buy all the fruit leather in the store. (I offered to buy three—the same number I always bought—but that day she felt strongly that we needed to take the whole display's worth of fruit leather home with us.) An older gentleman came over to help. "Hang in there, Mom," he said, pushing my cart to the cashier while I held both my newborn and my sobbing preschooler.

But now it's, "My, you have a *large* family" every time we venture out, mostly from older women, noses pinched and brows drawn. Not so much from other parents of small children. The mothers on the playground might ask whether the kids all belong to me, and they might tell me they don't want any more kids themselves—but they never suggest that I ought not to have had mine. Mostly they want to know how I get dinner on the table before I pass out from exhaustion each day. (Answer: We eat the same damn thing every night. Or at least it seems that way to me.)

I didn't even know I was getting a Big Family when Sadie was born. I just thought we were getting one more kid than we had the week before. And I had no idea I would become a representative for all things large-family, or that large families apparently want commentary from complete strangers. Consider me a reluctant ambassador.

And really, what's the big deal about having a big family? There's nothing particularly objectionable about the kids themselves: They're reasonably attractive, we bathe them regularly, they don't take up that much space. They don't breathe especially loudly or snap chewing gum or throw spitballs or anything. Is the mere notion of siblings so offensive?

"It's classism," my friend Megan says when I tell her about my grocery store encounters, and, of course, she's right. It's just new to me. I'd prefer to imagine that Ms. Opinionated and Company are trying to inquire after my own well-being—my mental health, maybe, or my level of fatigue (I'm fine, thanks)—but the message they're conveying is not so much one of *concern* as of *distaste*. So I've been practicing an expression of detached incredulity—a raised eyebrow, a tilted head; *did someone ASK for your opinion?*—instead of smiling and walking away. I've never actually done it; I've just practiced.

I practiced, in fact, all the way to IKEA this weekend. I anticipated having the opportunity to try it out a good six to eight times, given my current grocery store average of four. I only needed it once.

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At the Swedish Outlet of Retail Goodness, Abigail and Owen get to play with the toys stationed strategically throughout the store, Audrey and Sadie get to ogle the bright colors (so much orange!), I get new candles, and Dane gets to make me happy by coming along for the ride and lifting the flat-packed end tables and whatnot. It's fun for the whole family, really.

By the time we hit the checkout line this weekend, Sadie was sleeping in the sling yet again, Audrey and Owen were sitting and chattering in the double umbrella stroller, and Abigail was walking alongside, carting miniature pots and pans to bring home for the play kitchen.

A man in the next aisle glanced over at us. He looked at Dane, at me, at the kids. And then he leaned in toward us. "*Four* kids?" he asked me. "You've got *four kids*?"

"Yup." At that moment I was technically in possession of just one kid, since Dane was pushing the stroller, but I didn't think I'd argue. I smiled and turned away, which he apparently took as a sign that I wanted to chat.

"All different ages—no twins?"

"No twins."

"Really? Four separate kids?" I resisted the urge to point out that most twins are, in fact, separate kids. I nodded instead. He poked the woman in line in front of him. "Hey!" he said. "Hey! That woman over there? She's got *four kids*! No twins."

"Yeah?" she asked. "Four kids?" And I thought I might go ahead and cry because—hey, whatever happened to *live and let live*? Now you're all going to gang up on the nice woman (ahem, me) with four kids? Seriously? But instead of giving me a dirty look, she turned to the man behind her and said: "*I've got five.*"

See, my family's got room to grow.

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