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The Drive

Saturday, February 3, 2007

Astronaut Lisa Nowak woke up in her Houston home at the end of a cul-de-sac on Parsley Hawthorne Court that Saturday not intending to launch herself into infamy.

Nowak was alone in the red brick house. Her fourteen-year-old son and five-year-old twin girls were spending the weekend with her husband, who had moved out just before Christmas. Her son's birthday was that coming week.

She looked into the room with her vast collection of stamps for making cards, the stamps with which her girls loved to play. Her crop of four hundred African violet plants and cuttings, many of which she gave away as gifts, were scattered throughout the house, although some were wilting after weeks of neglect. She had propagated them from just eight plants left behind by her friend Dr. Laurel Clark, who had died on board the space shuttle *Columbia*. It was as though, in her mind, the woman's life somehow continued through these plants.

Lining some of her bookshelves were rows of the crime novels she told reporters she liked to read.

She had been thinking about what she needed to do for herself, envisioning it, planning it, for nearly a month—ever since her boyfriend told her he was seeing someone else.

In mid-January, she had logged in to her work computer on the sixth floor of an office building at Johnson Space Center and went to the MapQuest site to get directions from Houston to Orlando.

She had gone to her local Sports Authority and bought a knife and BB pistol, along with ammunition and a can of pepper spray, paying cash for it all.

That week, at her boyfriend's apartment and on his USS *Nimitz* aircraft carrier stationery, she had hastily scribbled his new girlfriend's flight itinerary, her unlisted home phone number that she had found in his phone bill—the number he called repeatedly. Most importantly, she wrote down the hour that this woman, Colleen Shipman, would arrive back in Orlando on a United Airlines jet late Sunday night, February 4.

At home that Saturday morning, Nowak packed her black duffel bag. Like any well-trained National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) employee with an obsessive attention to detail, she had made a list of what she needed: knife, BB pistol, ammunition, hammer, plastic gloves, and a disguise. And cash—a lot of cash to pay for gas and hotels. No need to leave a paper trail of credit card and debit card purchases. She wrote it all down on her astronaut “flight events/history/briefing” stationery.

She got into her husband's blue BMW, with its fading paint, and left her suburban home, the one with the snapdragons planted around the brick mailbox. She headed to her local grocery store, and, at just about 1:00 P.M., she bought a phone card with one hundred minutes, paying \$6.50 in cash. She had left her cell phone, with its tracking device, at home.

It was a cool day on the first Saturday in February. She was leaving behind the famed Johnson Space Center, a place where she had spent ten years perfecting maneuvers in space shuttle and space station replicas, and in simulated zero gravity, packed into the bulk of a space suit. She worked with a team of people who, like her, were the most elite professionals in the world.

And like her, they had perfect credentials, perfect track records, and perfect personal lives. At least to someone peering into their tiny capsule, that's how it all seemed.

Her plan was perfect, too. Nothing could go wrong, she thought.

She merged onto I-45 and then onto I-10, to make a turn that would, nearly a thousand miles later, allow the world to watch her tumble from her privileged pedestal.

But for now, her mind was on one thing alone: finding her boyfriend's new love interest so she could, hopefully, get him back.

Nowak pushed the pedal down, knowing she had a fifteen-hour drive ahead of her. Soon the plains of Texas gave way to the marshes of Louisiana as the sun dipped below the horizon behind her. The streetlights

flashed one after another overhead through Mississippi, Alabama, and north Florida.

Nowak didn't want to be noticed on this trip, didn't want to stop. She didn't want people to remember seeing her, and she was purposely limiting her contact with anyone. So, rather than utilize rest-stop bathrooms, she would later tell an Orlando Police detective, she pulled to the side of the road, grabbed one of her twin daughters' diapers from a box she had left behind in the car years earlier, slid it underneath her, and relieved herself. In her world, it was normal for astronauts to use diapers—called maximum absorbency garments by NASA—in flight suits and training suits. She put two used diapers in a large trash bag on the floor of the rear seat.

Just after 10:30 that night, she pulled off the interstate at DeFuniak Springs, a speck on the map between Pensacola and Tallahassee. It was near Eglin Air Force Base, where she and her husband had done survival training while in the Navy. She turned into a Days Inn parking lot, grabbed her bags, and checked in under a fake name—Linda Turner—paying a little more than fifty dollars in cash for the stay.

She crawled into the bed in the generic room, number 118, with a polyester, floral spread on the bed and cheap framed prints on the walls.

Her Independence Day flight into space had taken place just seven months before. She lifted off on that blistering afternoon from launchpad 39-B at Kennedy Space Center, heading to where only a few hundred others had been before her. All as hundreds of thousands of people watched from the space center, the beaches, and rivers, and on television.

She had worked all her life to reach that pinnacle. Her parents encouraged her and told her she had to be the best, could never misbehave, and must have perfect grades. They expected perfection from their three daughters, and she worked hard to please them. And she expected perfection from herself.

In high school, she watched as Sally Ride was selected as one of the first American women astronauts. She knew that if she studied her hardest and became the best in everything she tried, including excelling in advanced classes, playing field hockey, and serving on student government, she might make it, too. All it required was perfection on her part.

Her trajectory to astronaut was a textbook example of creating a

plan, following it, and achieving it. She graduated as valedictorian of her 1981 class at C. W. Woodward High School in Rockville, Maryland. That achievement, her stellar grades, and her leadership skills propelled her to an appointment to the U.S. Naval Academy in Annapolis, Maryland. That's where she met her husband, whom she married in 1988. A stint at Johnson Space Center before obtaining her master's degree in 1992 put her on the right track to become the right stuff.

She applied six times and was eventually selected in 1992 as a test pilot in Patuxent River, Maryland, learning to fly more than two dozen high-performing aircraft, even as she became a mother that year.

Finally, in 1996, NASA called her name and gave her a royal-blue astronaut's jumpsuit. She, her husband, and their young son moved from Patuxent River, Maryland, to Houston, Texas. Her husband became a communications specialist at the command center. And she went through grueling training sessions in conditions that would make the average claustrophobic lose their minds, in a bulky, hot flight suit to simulate zero gravity. She trained for different life-and-death scenarios, again and again. She repeated the same maneuvers over and over, day after day, even after her friends perished on board the space shuttle *Columbia*.

Another part of her job was to visit the various space centers around the country, where parts of the shuttle were made, and talk to the workers there. She was away from home quite a bit.

But when she was home, she had the perfect life. Or so it seemed to family, friends, and neighbors. A nearly twenty-year marriage. A beautiful house in a quiet neighborhood. Two sisters and parents who loved her and had encouraged her all her life.

Despite fertility problems, Nowak wanted more children after listening to her son pray for siblings each night. She suffered the devastating heartbreak of two miscarriages before giving birth to twin girls in the fall of 2001.

One morning in February 2003, she watched in horror as the space shuttle *Columbia* disintegrated upon reentering Earth's atmosphere. Her friends, her astronaut classmates, were lost in the early-morning, clear, blue sky. The space shuttle *Columbia* accident brought indescribable grief and pain into her orderly life. This wasn't supposed to happen.

At the time, her husband, Richard, a fellow U.S. Naval Academy graduate, had been deployed by the Navy for America's War on Terror.