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opening extract from

How to be Popular

written by

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Popular: adjective
Widely liked or appreciated;
Liked by acquaintances;
Sought after for company.

Popularity.

We all want it. Why? Because being popular means being liked. And everyone wants to be liked.
Sadly, however, not all of us are.

What do popular people have in common, and what makes them all so popular?
They all have:

– A friendly way about them.
– An eagerness to pitch in and help get the job done.
– An interest in everything that goes on at work or school.
– A look that's fresh and neat.

These aren't traits popular people were born with. They've cultivated the characteristics that make them so popular . . .

. . . and you can too, by following the tips in this book!

Saturday, August 26, 7 p.m.

T-Minus Two Days and Counting

I should have known from the way the woman kept looking at my name tag that she was going to ask.

'Steph Landry,' she said as she pulled out her wallet. 'Now, how do I know that name?'

'Gosh, ma'am,' I said. 'I don't know.' Even though I did.

'I know,' the lady said, snapping her fingers, then pointing at me. 'You're on the Bloomville High School women's soccer team!'

'No, ma'am,' I said to her. 'I'm not.'

'You weren't on the court of the Greene County Fair Queen, were you?'

But you could tell, even as the words were coming out of her mouth, she knew she was wrong again. I don't have Indiana county fair-queen hair – i.e., my hair is short, not long; brown, not blonde; and curly, not straight. Nor do I have an Indiana county fair-queen bod – i.e., I'm kinda on the short side and, if I don't exercise regularly, my butt kind of . . . expands.

Obviously I do what I can with what God gave me, but I won't be landing on *America's Next Top Model* any time soon, much less the court of any fair queen.

'No, ma'am,' I said.

The thing is, I really didn't want to get into it with her. Who would?

But she wouldn't let it go.

'Goodness. I just know I know your name from somewhere,' the woman said, handing me her credit card to pay for her purchases. 'You sure I didn't read about you in the paper?'

'Pretty sure, ma'am,' I said. God, that would be just what I need. For the whole thing to have shown up in the paper.

Fortunately, though, I haven't been in the paper since my birth announcement. Why would I? I'm not particularly talented, musically or otherwise.

And while I'm in mostly Accelerated Programme classes, that's not because I'm an honours student or anything. That's just because if you grow up in Greene County knowing that Lemon Joy goes in your dishwasher and not your iced tea, you get put in AP classes.

It's actually sort of surprising how many people in Greene County make that mistake. With the Lemon Joy, I mean. According to my friend Jason's dad, who is a doctor over at Bloomville Hospital.

'It's probably,' I said to the woman as I ran her credit card through the scanner, 'because my parents own this store.'

Which I know doesn't sound like much. But Courthouse Square Books *is* the only independently owned bookshop in Bloomville. If you don't include Doc

Sawyer's Adult Books and Sexual Aids, out by the overpass. Which I don't.

'No,' the woman said, shaking her head. 'That's not it either.'

I could understand her frustration. What's especially upsetting about it – if you think about it (which I try not to, except when things like this happen) – is that Lauren and I, up until the end of fifth grade, had been friends. Not close friends, maybe. It's hard to be close friends with the most popular girl in school, since she's got such a busy social calendar.

But certainly close enough that she'd been over to my house (OK, well, once. And she didn't exactly have the best time. I blame my father, who was baking a batch of home-made granola at the time. The smell of burnt oatmeal WAS kind of overpowering) and I'd been over to hers (just once . . . her mom had been away getting her nails done, but her dad had been home and had knocked on Lauren's door to say that the explosion noises I was making during our game of Navy Seal Barbie were a little too loud. Also that he'd never heard of Navy Seal Barbie and wanted to know what was so wrong with playing Quiet Nurse Barbie).

'Well,' I said to the customer. 'Maybe I just . . . you know. Have one of those names that sounds familiar.'

Yeah. Wonder why. Lauren's the one who coined the term, 'Don't pull a Steph Landry.' Out of revenge.

It's amazing how fast it caught on too. Now if anyone in school does anything remotely crack-headed or dorky,

people are all, 'Don't pull a Steph!' Or, 'That was so Steph!' Or, 'Don't be such a Steph!'

And I'm the Steph they're talking about.

Nice.

'Maybe that's it,' the woman said doubtfully. 'Gosh, this is going to bug me all night. I just know it.'

Her credit card was approved. I tore off the slip for her to sign and started bagging her purchases. Maybe I could tell her that the reason she might know me is because of my grandfather. Why not? He's currently one of the most talked about – and richest – men in southern Indiana, ever since he sold some farmland he owned along the proposed route of the new I-69 ('connecting Mexico to Canada via a highway "corridor"' through Indiana, among other states) for the construction of a Super Sav-Mart, which opened last weekend.

Which means he's been in the local paper a lot, especially since he spent a chunk of the money he got building an observatory that he plans to donate to the city.

Because every small town in southern Indiana needs an observatory.

Not.

It also means my mother isn't speaking to him, because the Super Sav-Mart, with its reduced prices, is probably going to put all the shops along the square, including Courthouse Books, out of business.

But I knew the customer would never fall for it. Grandpa's last name isn't even the same as mine. He was afflicted from birth with the unfortunate moniker of

Emile Kazoulis . . . although he's done pretty well for himself, despite this handicap.

I was just going to have to face the fact that, just like that red Super Big Gulp wouldn't come out of Lauren's white denim D&G skirt – even though my dad tried. He used Shout and everything and, when it didn't work, finally went out and got her a brand-new skirt – my name was going to be forever stained on people's memories.

And not in a good way.

'Oh well,' the lady said, taking her bag and her receipt. 'I guess it's just one of those things.'

'I guess it is,' I said to her. Not without some relief. Because she was leaving. Finally.

But my relief turned out to be short lived. Because a second later the bells over the front door to the shop tinkled, and Lauren Moffat herself – wearing the same white Lilly Pulitzer low-rise capris I'd tried on at the mall the other day, but had been unable to purchase due to the fact that they cost the equivalent of twenty-five hours' work behind the cash register at Courthouse Books – came into the store, holding a Tasti D-Lite from the Penguin, and going, 'Mom. Would you hurry up? I've been waiting for you for like ever.'

And I realized, belatedly, who I'd been talking to.

Whatever. I can't be expected to read the name on *every* credit card someone hands me. Besides, there are like hundreds of Moffats here in Bloomville.

'Oh, Lauren, you'll know,' Mrs Moffat said to her daughter. 'How do I know the name Steph Landry?'

'Um, maybe because she's the one who spilt that Big Red Super Big Gulp on my white D&G skirt in front of everyone in the caff that one day in the sixth grade?' Lauren replied with a snort.

And she's never forgiven me for it. Much less let anyone else forget about it.

Mrs Moffat flung a horrified look at me over the padded shoulder of her Quacker Factory sweater set.

'Oh,' she said. 'Dear. Lauren, I—'

Which was when Lauren finally noticed me, standing behind the cash register.

'God, Mom,' she said, giggling, as she pushed open the door to slip back out into the evening heat. 'Way to pull a Steph Landry.'

Let's begin by determining your level of popularity, or lack thereof.

Ask yourself how others in your social sphere perceive you.

– Do they know who you are? If so, how do they treat you?
– Do they make rude remarks about you – behind your back or to your face?
– Do they ignore you?
– Do others include you in their outings and activities, inviting you to social events or occasions?

Judging by the behaviour of others around you, you should be able to tell whether you are liked, merely tolerated – or totally unpopular.

If you are merely tolerated or totally unpopular, it is time to take action.

Saturday, August 26, 8.25 p.m.

Still T-Minus Two Days and Counting

This is how Jason has been greeting me lately: 'Yo, Crazytop!'

And yes, it *is* annoying.

Too bad he doesn't seem to care when I tell him that.

'What's the criminal master plot for the evening, Crazytop?' Jason wanted to know as he and Becca drifted into the store an hour after Lauren and Mrs Moffat left it. Well, technically, only Becca drifted. Jason barrelled. He actually swung up on to the counter and helped himself to a Lindt truffle from the candy display.

Like he didn't think this was going to make me mad or anything.

'You eat that and you owe me sixty-nine cents,' I informed him.

He dug a dollar out of the front pocket of his jeans and slapped it down on to the counter.

Then he plucked another Lindt from the display jar and tossed it to Becca.

Who was so surprised when this Lindt chocolate truffle came at her out of nowhere, she didn't think to catch it, so it smacked her in the collarbone, fell to the floor and rolled under the display cabinet.

So then Becca was scrambling around on the A-B-C alphabet carpet, trying to find the lost truffle and going,

'Hey, there're a lot of dust mice down here. You guys ever think of vacuuming this place or what?'

'Now you owe me thirty-eight cents,' I said to Jason.

'I'm good for it.' He *always* says this. 'How long until you can shake this cracker box?'

He always asks this, when he knows the answer perfectly well.

'We close at nine,' I said. 'You know we close at nine. We've been closing at nine every night since this place opened, which, I might add, was before we were born.'

'Whatever you say, Crazytop.'

Then he helped himself to another Lindt.

It's truly remarkable how much he can eat without getting fat. I have two of those Lindt balls a day, and by the end of the month my jeans don't fit any more. Jason can eat like twenty a day and still have plenty of room in his (non-stretch) Levi's.

I guess it's a guy thing. Also, a growing thing. Jason and I were almost the exact same height and weight all through grade and middle school, and the first part of high school, even. And while he could beat me at chin-ups and anything involving throwing a ball, I regularly kicked his butt at leg-wrestling and Stratego.

Then last summer he went off to Europe with his grandmother to see all the sites in her favourite book, *The Da Vinci Code*, and when he came back, he was six inches taller than when he left. Also, kind of hot.

Not Mark Finley hot, of course, Mark Finley being the hottest (also nicest) guy at Bloomville High. But still.

That's a very disturbing thing to realize about your best friend, even if he *is* a guy – that he's got hot.

Especially since he's still trying to gain enough weight to catch up with his height (I know. He has to *gain* weight. Poor thing. I feel so sorry for him. Not).

The only thing I can beat him at now is leg-wrestling. He even figured out how to cream me in Stratego.

And I think the only reason I can beat him at leg-wrestling is just because lying next to a girl on the floor gets him a little flustered.

I have to admit, since he got back from Europe, lying next to him on the floor – or in the grass on The Hill where we go a lot to look at the stars – gets *me* a little flustered too.

But not enough to keep me from being able to flip him right over. It's important not to let hormones get in the way of a perfectly good friendship. Also, to keep your mind on the task at hand.

'Stop calling me Crazytop,' I said to him.

'If the name fits,' Jason said.

'Shoe,' I said. 'The expression is, "If the *shoe* fits . . ."'

Which caused Becca, having found the missing Lindt ball at last, to come up and go, 'I love the name Crazytop,' all wistfully, while picking dust mice from her curly blonde hair.

'Yeah,' I said grouchily. 'Well, that can be *your* nickname from now on then.'

But of course Jason had to be all, 'Excuse me, but not all of us can be criminal masterminds like Crazytop here.'

'If you break that display glass,' I warned Jason, because he was still sitting on the counter, swinging his feet in front of the glass display case beneath it, 'I'm making you take all those dolls home with you.'

Because behind the glass are about thirty Madame Alexander dolls, most of which are based on fictional characters from books, like Marmee and Jo from *Little Women*, and Heidi from *Heidi*.

Can I just point out that it was my idea to put the dolls behind glass, after I figured out we were losing about a doll a week to doll collectors, who are notoriously light-fingered when it comes to Madame Alexander and who carry very roomy tote bags – generally with cats on them – into shops like ours for the sole purpose of adding to their collection without the pesky burden of actually having to pay for it?

Jason says the dolls terrify him. He says that sometimes he has nightmares in which they are coming after him with their tiny plastic fingers and bright blue blinking eyes.

Jason stopped swinging his feet.

'My goodness. I didn't realize it had got so late.' My mom came out of the back office, her stomach, as usual, leading the way. I truly believe my parents are going for the state record in child-producing. Mom's about to pop out their sixth child – my soon-to-be new baby brother or sister – in sixteen years. When this latest kid is born, ours will be the largest family in town, not counting the Grubbs, who have eight children, but whose mobile home

isn't technically situated in Bloomville, as it straddles the Greene-Bloomville County line.

Although actually I think some of the younger Grubbs got taken away after child services found out their dad was mixing up batches of 'lemonade' for them with bottles of Lemon Joy.

'Hi, Mrs Landry,' Jason and Becca said.

'Oh, hello, Jason, Becca.' My mom smiled glowingly at them. She's been doing that a lot lately. Glowing, I mean. Except when Grandpa's around of course. Then she glowers. 'And what are you kids planning on doing with your last free Saturday night before school starts? Is someone having a party?'

That's the kind of fantasy world my mom lives in. The kind where my friends and I get invited to fun back-to-school parties. It's like she never heard of the Big Red Super Big Gulp incident. I mean, she was THERE when it happened. It's her fault I had the Super Big Gulp in the first place, on account of her feeling so sorry for me after having taken me to get my braces tightened, she surprised me with a Super Big Gulp to drink in the car on the way back to Bloomville Junior High. What kind of parent lets a sixth-grader take a Super Big Gulp to *school*?

Which is just more evidence for my theory that my parents have no idea what they're doing. I know a lot of people feel this way about their parents, but in my case it's really true. I realized it was true the time Mom took us on a trip to a publishing trade show in New York City and my parents spent the entire weekend alternately lost

or just stepping out in front of cars, expecting them to stop because people stop for you when you step out in front of them in Bloomville.

In New York City, not so much.

It would have been OK if it had just been my parents and me. But we had my then five-year-old brother Pete with us, and my little sister Catie, who was in a stroller, and my youngest brother, Robbie, who was just a baby and still in a Snugli (Sara wasn't born yet). It wasn't just me and my parents. There were little children involved!

After about the fifth time they tried to just mosey on out in front of a moving crosstown bus, I realized my parents are insane and not to be trusted under any circumstances.

And I was only *seven*.

This realization was cemented as I entered puberty and my parents began to say things to me like, 'Look, we've never been the parents of a teenaged girl before. We don't know if we're doing the right thing. But we're doing the best we can.' This is not something you want to hear from your parents under any circumstances. You want to feel like your parents are in control, that they know what they're doing.

Yeah. With my parents? Not so much.

The worst was the summer between sixth and seventh grades, when they made me go to Girl Scout Camp. All I wanted to do was stay home and work in the store. I am not what you'd call a big fan of nature, being basically a human chigger and mosquito magnet.