

the new hazard on the highway

It's not what you think. With everyone in a hurry, red-light running has suddenly become an epidemic—and a serious threat to our safety. **By Salley Shannon**

Katie Hodge still finds it painful to go into a supermarket—there is no baby to fasten into the seat of the metal cart. Her last memories of her 17-month-old son, Blake, are at the grocery store in Phoenix, Arizona. “He loved to help me shop,” Katie remembers. “I would hand him things as he sat in the cart, and he’d twist his little body to put them in the basket, then turn around and give me a big, happy smile.”

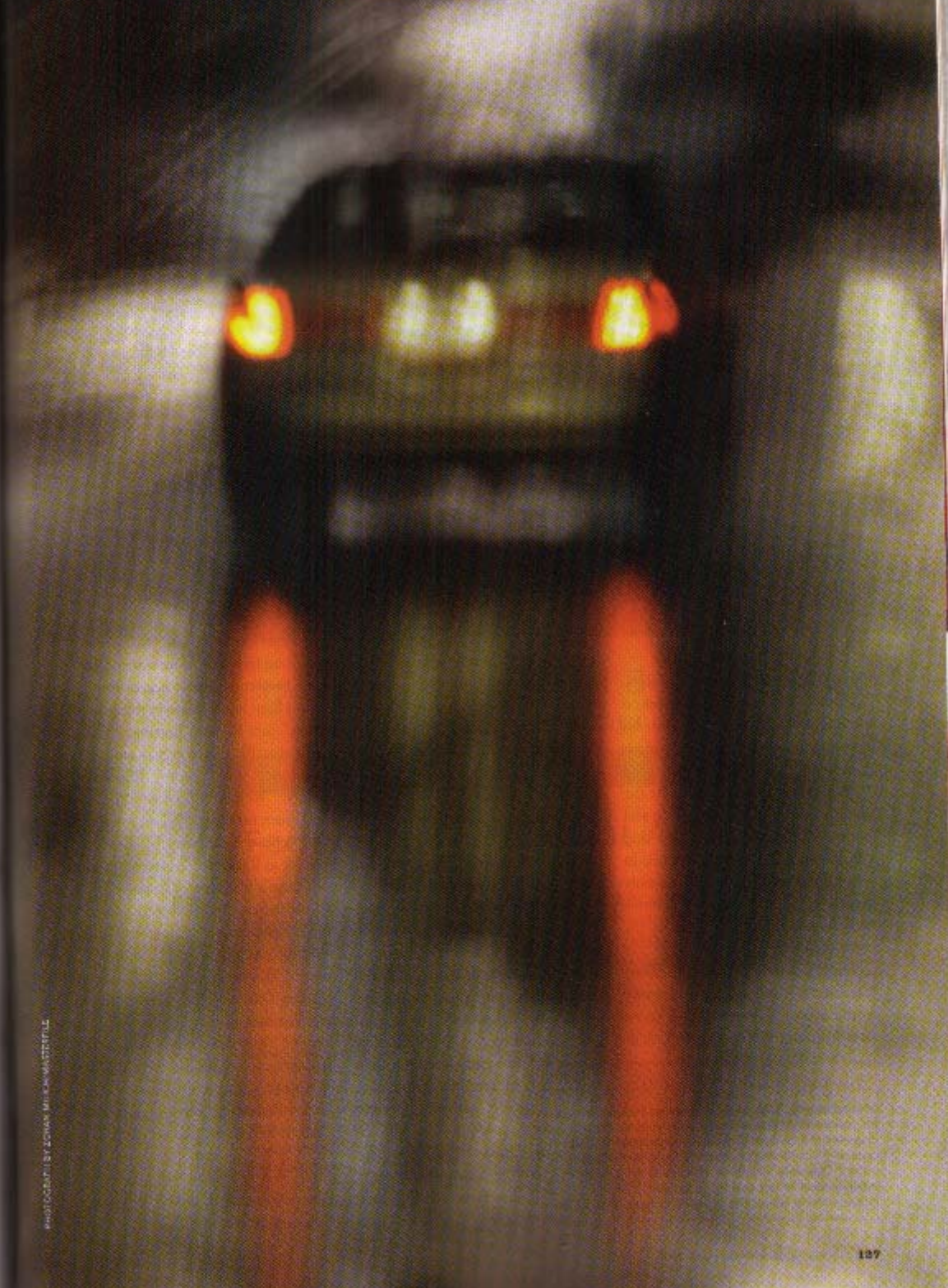
On the way home from that last shopping trip in February 2000, Katie and Blake were in a devastating accident. A woman driving a company pickup zoomed through a red light at 55 miles per hour and slammed into Katie’s car. Blake, although properly buckled into a car seat in the back, was killed instantly. Katie lay in a coma for a week. When she awoke, she knew without being

told that her child was dead. “We had such a deep connection. He just wasn’t there anymore,” says Katie, who was separated from her husband and raising Blake alone.

The baby’s funeral was delayed for two weeks, until Katie was well enough to attend—in a wheelchair, paralyzed on the right side of her body and suffering brain damage. She spent five months in rehab and has been left with some memory problems and hypersensitivity on the right side of her body. Although she now manages well (and has recently remarried), Katie bristles at the word *recovered*. “You keep going,” she says. “But I will never recover from missing my son.”

Every year, hundreds of thousands of people are injured, and more than a thousand killed, in accidents that involve a driver running a red light. The statistics aren’t precise because communities track numbers in different ways. But one fact stands out: The fatality rate for accidents caused when one driver runs a red light is going up at more than twice the rate of other road accidents.

For one thing, there are more of these crashes. And they are very severe. If you’re in an ordinary road accident, you have about a 30 percent ▶



chance of being injured. But if your vehicle is hit by someone running a light, your chances of getting hurt go up to 45 percent. "These are what we call T-bone crashes," explains Captain David R. Haggist of the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Police Department in North Carolina. "The victim's car is usually hit on the side, where nothing protects you but the door." (Only a small fraction of cars on the road—maybe 10 percent, according to one estimate—have side-impact air bags.)

Also, red-light runners are often accelerating (because they're trying to beat a light), so their collisions are more savage. And impact rises disproportionately with speed: When a driver pushes the pedal from 40 mph to 60 mph, the car's speed goes up 50 percent. But the energy released in a crash—the wham!—goes up more than 200 percent.

WHO'S CAUSING THESE ACCIDENTS?

Eight-year-old Brent Adams of Brea, California, was crossing the street on his way home from school with his twin brother, Nick, when a driver gunned her car from 35 mph to 50 mph through a red light. At the last second, the driver saw Nick and swerved, crashing into Brent and killing him as his brother watched in terror. Four years later, "Nick is only beginning to be able to say Brent's name in public," says Toni Adams, the twins' mother.

The driver who ran into little Brent was a middle-aged woman on her way to the office. "If you want to know who is running all these lights, look in



"You never recover"

Katie Hodge was badly injured and her baby, Blake, killed when a woman sped through a red light. Says Katie: "The driver never even said she was sorry."

the mirror," suggests Bryan E. Porter, Ph.D., an associate professor at Old Dominion University in Virginia and an expert on driver and safety issues. The reason the driver gave for her recklessness is stunningly ordinary, too: She was late for work.

The "hurry up" factor is the biggest reason for the jump in red-light accidents. When ticketed, "most people say they're late for something," reports Charlotte's Captain Haggist. "Everybody is just so busy."

It's also the reason these accidents don't routinely involve the stereotypical dangerous driver. Yes, experts and police will tell you, there is a "hard core" of traffic violators—those speeding, frequent lane-changing, light-running road warriors to whom most of us give wide berth. But such drivers make up just a portion of those going through red lights.

As for younger males, while they do get into more than their share of speeding- and drinking-related accidents, when it comes to light running, "we can't blame them for most of the violations," says Porter.

Older drivers, while statistically "cleaner" than younger ones, can become speed freaks at intersections too. So can women, who are just as likely as men to run red lights.

Overall, Porter found in his latest study, one driver in five had run a light in the last ten intersections. And in a recent survey, when drivers were asked whether they've ever accelerated through either a yellow or a red light, more than one in four acknowledged that they do so regularly.

Lateness isn't the only reason. Crowded roads breed impatient, frustrated drivers. Traditionally, traffic engineers have set lights so that there are a few extra seconds of yellow, to let an intersection clear before the other side gets the green signal and begins to move. Today, though, with so many more cars out there and with people spending so much more time on the road, busy corners may never clear. "A yellow light hardly means a thing anymore," says Richard Retting, a well-known traffic safety expert with the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety. "We still teach our children that green means go, red means stop, and yellow means careful. But we behave as if yellow means hurry up."

There is also the "everybody does it" influence. Over and over, you see other drivers run red lights without getting caught, and it begins to seem OK—or at least unlikely to lead to a ticket. "People who break traffic laws don't expect to get caught anymore," observes Leslie Blakey, executive director of the National Campaign to Stop Red Light Running. She's right: The odds of being stopped are slim.

CUTTING DOWN ON CRASHES

Few of us think of ourselves as law-breakers, much less killers. But ▶

The yellow-light law

In most states, it isn't illegal to enter an intersection on yellow. And if you cause an accident as you make a right turn on a red (where permitted), that typically won't count as a red-light violation either. The only absolute offense is entering an intersection when the light is red. If you're already there when the signal changes, that's OK.

"deliberately deciding to run a red light in a 2,000-pound vehicle is morally equivalent to firing a gun into a crowd," says Retting. "You can't be sure that you will hit someone, but there is a good possibility you will."

Communities are beginning to respond to the crisis. In Kissimmee, Florida, police set up a sting, with cops dressed as roadside homeless people. When the "vagrants" saw a driver run a red light, they'd radio their colleagues down the road to pull the car over. Advocates for the homeless were outraged—calling the operation disrespectful—but the one-day program did yield 171 tickets.

More conventional methods include the installation of cameras that automatically photograph the license plate of light-running drivers (see box, below). In fact, cameras have been the most effective approach so far, though that hasn't kept some drivers from complaining. "They say, 'Don't give tickets, just lengthen the yellow lights,'" says Retting. "Well, no yellow light will ever be long enough for some people."

Stiffer penalties for offenders might also slow some drivers. In rare circumstances, charges against red-light

runners can be upgraded from the usual slap on the wrist: If, for example, the driver kills someone and was also excessively speeding, he might be charged with vehicular homicide, a felony. Far more typically, states view red-light running as simply a moving violation. If you're caught, you pay a fine. If you kill someone, you pay a fine. The accident is seen as unintentional, and a red-light runner is charged, at most, with reckless driving (a misdemeanor) and generally fined about \$100.

That's why many residents in Virginia Beach, Virginia, were outraged in late 2002 when a young man delivering pizza plowed his SUV into a minivan and killed two little girls—and was charged only with failure to obey a traffic signal and reckless driving. Officials said they understood why everybody wanted a villain to blame for the tragedy, but under Virginia statutes, the driver had been properly charged. A more serious charge "requires evidence of criminal negligence"—in other words, showing reckless disregard of human life, according to Virginia Beach Commonwealth Attorney Harvey Bryant.

The mother of one of the girls,



"A hole in our family"

Six-year-old Abigail Greer, right, loved baseball. On a summer evening in 2002, her parents, Lois and John, took her and her sister, Laura (then three), to a Colorado Rockies game. As the family was heading back to their car—Abby holding her mom's hand—they waited for the "walk" signal, then started to cross. John says. They'd made it three quarters of the way when a driver slammed into them. They were all hurt, Abby most seriously: She died that night. The driver had seven recent tickets for traffic offenses; in a plea bargain, he was convicted of four misdemeanors.

understandably, has a different view. "I can't explain what it's like to stand in the middle of an intersection, holding your dead child in your arms like a broken doll. And there is nothing you can do," she says.

Something to keep in mind, perhaps, the next time you're thinking of speeding through a red light. ■

BRAKE! YOU'RE ON HIDDEN CAMERA

As of January, 100 U.S. cities had installed cameras that automatically photograph the license plates of red-light-running drivers at high-risk intersections. You're caught only if you actually enter on red. (The camera isn't triggered by a driver's being in the intersection when the yellow turns to red.) The offender is then sent a ticket, with the proof, by mail.

THE FEAR FACTOR WORKS. According to a federal report, violations drop by as much as 60 percent at photo intersections. Remove the cameras, as they did after an experimental program in San Diego, and red-light accidents go back up.

BUT NOT EVERYONE IS A FAN. There can be technical glitches, and the companies that monitor the cameras (a job often contracted out) can make

mistakes, leading to some tickets being tossed out in court. People also complain of privacy violations. But as Jeffrey W. Runge, M.D., administrator of the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, has remarked, "It doesn't infringe on one's personal freedom to be caught breaking the law."

JUST MONEYMAKERS? Some naysayers also argue that the cameras are little more than revenue generators for cash-strapped cities. They certainly can be that. In three years, the District of Columbia's cameras at 39 intersections generated almost \$24.5 million in fines. But here's another fact: While the city was making all that money, violations also plummeted by 60 percent, and the number of deaths attributed to red-light collisions fell from 17 percent of accidents to 4 percent.