

Good things can happen when parents are nowhere in sight



Melissa Favara

Melissa Favara teaches English in Vancouver and lives and writes in North Portland, where she parents Ramona, age 5, hosts a bi-monthly reading series, and counts her husband and her city as the two great loves of her life.

Ramona's about ready to turn six: the same age as the star of her favorite book, *Eloise*. It's the tale of a sophisticated, trouble-making little girl living on her own with a nanny on the top floor of New York's posh Plaza Hotel in the 1950s: *Eloise* has a pet turtle and an expensive purebred dog and a palatial room to herself in the penthouse, enjoys pretending to be an orphan, attending gala affairs in the hotel, and harassing the concierge, etc. Ramona loves when *Eloise* annoys the elevator operator by going up and down and everywhere ("She's so naughty!") and dreams of being like her, ordering room service excessively, and saying, "Charge it, please!" while her wealthy absentee mother globe-trots. "Mommy, I want you to leave me at a hotel so I can go to the front desk and skibble up and down the stairs!"

This scenario is largely unlikely to be replicated in Ramona's actual life. What's a loving way to tell a 5-year-old, "Fat chance, darling. You are not the child of a rich, single mother who lets you run feral, but rather the child of two un-rich parents who are pretty busy but prioritize the heck out of your happiness. Please join us in thinking that living with us in a beat-up old Portland house with bad '70s linoleum in the kitchen is as good as living in a New York penthouse on your own"

We're trying to get Ro on board with our main goals in life: not necessarily getting wealthy, but being reasonably happy while doing reasonably interesting things, trying to do what bit of good we can. Being married to Marshall and mother to Ramona have gone along pretty well with those goals for me, as has teaching English at the community college level where some of my students come from traditionally underserved demographics. I feel good about what I do, but I'd be lying if I didn't confess that part of the attraction to teaching is summers off and a flexible, variable schedule that enables extra time and flexibility so I can be with family a great deal.

That was the idea, anyway. However, it's been seven years, and I have yet to have summer off.

Regarding flexibility: I have found the schedule to be flexible indeed; specifically, it's flexible like the octopus that so fascinated Ramona at the Oregon Coast Aquarium last year — teaching extends its long, suckery tentacles into every time of day, every day of the week, as I'm sucked into the maw of grading, planning, revising lessons, answering e-mail, etc. And as Ramona's gone from toddler to "Seriously,

Mommy, that's absurd," in what feels like about 20 minutes, I need to block out my time more strictly if I plan to avoid waking up at her wedding next week. Define a boundary, put the laptop away, increase the time for adventures with Ro.

Which is why I was excited about the week I planned to take off completely from work between spring and summer terms this month — unstructured bliss with Ro! Berry picking! Fingerpainting! Garage sale-ing! Leisure and complete focus on one another!

Ro's going to be in day camp with Portland Parks and Recreation the rest of the summer while I teach, so I was stoked about a week of just us together in the interim. All I had to do was complete grading the 80 or so students under my charge for spring term during finals week while sneaking in time to develop my summer classes — I expected to be able to finish developing my new Intro to Literature course and update my two sections of freshman composition in the moments I'd find here and there. Ro and I could be freewheeling together after that — maybe head downtown and pretend to be *Eloise* and stir up trouble at the Governor Hotel!

Which is why my spirit shuddered and raged and dwindled as obstacles arose: students who plagiarized and took hours to document. Failure to click "save" before closing my new syllabus, costing many more hours of careful work. An old dental nightmare's flare-up equalling two visits to the periodontist: 90 minutes each.

Cuss. Double cuss. That carefully planned week of familial bliss? Poof! Monday morning of what was supposed to be our week, I called Peninsula Park Community Center, pleading with a nice lady to let Ro into day camp this week, too. No dice.

"I am showing no availability, Ma'am. I understand you have to work. May I speak to my supervisor and call you back?"

Yes. Please do, I say. Sigh. Ramona would be heartbroken.

"Hello, Ma'am. I can fit your daughter into Theater Camp this week. Starting at 9 a.m. today. Will that work?"

Half an hour later, I was dropping Ro at Peninsula Park with a hastily assembled box lunch, exhorting her to be brave and accept the loss of our time and try to have fun. Oddly, she raced into the building ahead of me, into the room where other kids were doing their theatrical stretches with nice Miss Sandy, and she didn't say goodbye or look back.

The picture with this week's column? That's Ramona dressed for her end-of-camp role as the Dream Fairy in the original play

her teacher composed. In it, she did a tap-dance routine (when did that learning happen?) and delivered about 15 lines perfectly — while the storyline was a bit careworn (girls fall asleep at a slumber party and awaken in a magical land and need help from a mermaid, a bat, and the Dream Fairy



to get home again — was it all a dream?), the girls and boys in the production nailed it. And right in front, leading the tap number, my Ro, who had become someone even stranger and newer to me in that week. I'd gotten my new classes ready, too.

The thing about *Eloise* and *Nancy Drew* and *Treasure Island* and all of those orphan tales — is that great things can happen when the parents are away. Growth of a certain kind, the kind of finding self that can't happen when your parents are all over you. As it turned out, that theater camp was a half-day, and Ro and I did do some good Goodwill-hunting and neighborhood walking and gardening and cuddles over reading. But we also both got to do our own thing, too. Maybe that's what the balance is — holding each other tightly when we can, but understanding that sometimes what we need to do or learn or find happens when we're apart.



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