

Through the eyes of a child, an old scene is new again



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.

I don't know if it's the aging process or just evidence of how great my neighborhood is that I'm finding it increasingly difficult to leave it for any reason. Evenings and weekends, the kid, the husband and I can typically be found on or near Mississippi Avenue, if not in our actual house three blocks away. We have restaurants, parks, food carts, a bodega, the Rebuilding Center, and the greatest neighbors I've ever had. According to my husband, the 10 blocks surrounding us is the most diverse census block in the state of Oregon, and we like that just as much as we like our easy access to Thai food and Unthank Park. We've been here 12 years, and though the demographics have shifted in those years to include many more ironically mustached hip twentysomethings on the street and more SUVs parked at the curb, there seems to be, between the newer folks and the families who have been here decades, a vibe of living and letting live that saves our increasingly hip little Mississippi from feeling too precious. All of my neighbors say hello in passing, and all of the baristas and shop owners know my kid by name.

The downside of contentment, though, is complacency. Add Mississippi's many qualities to my own perpetual state of overworked, and I get into a space where I have to challenge myself to get my family out of our comfort zone and into new adventures. And this week, my husband suggested that we take young Ramona and try something in my discomfort zone: Last Thursday on Alberta.

I have nothing against Alberta — it's a perfectly lovely street, yet I never go there, ever, even though it's less than 10 blocks away. It just feels ... different. Differently hip, maybe? Perhaps it's because no one knows our names there? In any case, I remembered my most recent Last Thursday experience, at least five years ago, as a combination of a 4-lane traffic jam and Burning Man — something oppressively crowded where I felt out of place, most of the men were shirtless (my prudish mid-Michigander surfaces around scantily-

cladness), and most of the women more cleverly tattooed than I. Yes. I know. I am a terrible and narrow-minded person. But I truly remembered the crowd as monochromatic and a lot not-like-me — sort of a Mad Max Beyond Thunderdome aesthetic that just really makes me feel old — and I remembered getting jostled a lot. So it was with raised eyebrow that I agreed to bike over to Last Thursday with my man and Ramona, who'd be witnessing the spectacle for the first time at one week shy of six years old.

Ramona had \$5 in her pocket from tooth fairy loot combined with allowance, and she was eager to deploy it at what her dad called "The Fair." As we locked up our bikes behind the Community Cycling Center. I could already hear the squeals of children and the strains of an old-time band as well as the rhythmic thump of bass and snatches of a rap number. It would become obvious, and quite soon, that I'd been right about the crowded part, but wrongheaded in most other ways.

First things first, there were a bunch of folks there who appeared to have wandered off from Burning Man; there was, in fact, a lot of shirtlessness, etc. But what of it? As I looked east and west at the throngs, I began noticing things that surprised me, and didn't stop noticing for hours. There was, in fact, a bunch of every kind of human there, and the blend was pretty delightful.

While there were many booths selling art that labeled itself as "upcycled" (am I the only one who finds that new word annoying?), there were also better than a dozen booths manned by children selling their own wares — one little girl, a cute blonde cherub hardly older than Ramona, showed delicate earrings made of colored paper, and another gal helped her mom sell the felt charms shaped like acorns that they'd made together. A pair of stout little brothers sold soda and water; their hand-lettered sign advertised that they were raising money for a school trip. Dreadlocked young women offered free samples of homemade cheesecake to suburban moms, and everywhere, strollers negotiated the

thoroughfare with steampunk-modified bicycles.

Ramona, perky even in the heat and bustle, divided her time between carefully examining the items offered for purchase and stepping in and out of the little pools of music, charmed and grinning. On one corner, a young rockabilly man played jangly guitar and sang Buddy Holly; half a block later, and (shirtless!) Latino rapper rhymed nonstop, and on the next corner, a Luther Vandross ringer belted out R&B that bobbed heads all around. And a cultural and generational rainbow paused before each performer. It began to feel like I could hang here, because there was no dominant theme — just food, music, and people watching each other people-watch — a pretty good scene for both me and the kid.

Ro finally decided how to spend her stash as we were preparing to bike home. We met a little girl whose nice dad was selling jewelry he'd designed with metal rings and sturdy rubber bands — stretchy chainmail! Ro picked a lovely pink and purple bracelet which the dad, a pirate-reenactment buff who looked the part, customized for her little wrist with a pair of needle-nosed pliers. She took her dollar in change and dropped it in the donation box in front of the R&B singer, smiling and giving him a little wave, which he acknowledged with a wink that made her blush.

Will we go back to Last Thursday? Yes, I'm pretty sure. But maybe not next month. Thursday night revealed to me that my jaded ex-hipster former self has the opportunity to see lots of things through the new prism that is my child's perspective. We'll see what she thinks of First Thursday.

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