

# The kindness of strangers, and the wisdom of a child

It's been a weird few weeks. Starting with a raccoon and ending with Peter Pan, Ramona and I have been plugged into the karmic wheel from every angle — and it's been quite a ride.

It all started with a trip to the in-laws' in Ashland. A fine Sunday night walk before Labor Day, the fading blue moon over the great trees in the pioneer cemetery on East Main Street that turned dark when a raccoon leapt out of the bushes and charged Vera, our dog. Ramona screamed, my husband tried to pull the leash away and succeeded in slipping the dog's collar off and landing on his own tail in the shrubs while the raccoon jumped, clawing and snapping, on Vera's back. My father-in-law shouted, the dog cried, and just then, an SUV screeched to the curb.



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.

Out of it raced a burly young man in a backwards ball cap, his car door hanging open; he seized the snarling raccoon by the scruff and flung it into the darkness. He was fearless, and he joins a pantheon with the sweet, hippie girl passerby who knelt to comfort snuffling Ramona while we examined Vera for damage and the gruff but gentle vet who came in Labor Day morning to administer Betadine and antibiotics. Bad night, good people of all stripes.

Flash forward: Back in Portland, Vera's wounds had finally healed and it was week two of school for Ro. A busy Thursday rush hour; I had just finished writing lessons for all of my classes and was bustling down Alberta to pick up Ro from aftercare when our 20-year-old Volvo abruptly stopped bustling with a chug and a clang. Then alarming lights all over the dashboard and silence. In the middle of the intersection of Alberta and MLK. At 5:15 p.m. Though I spent a minute and a half enduring horns, hand gestures and harsh words before I could remember how to put on the hazard lights, humanity came off OK when, 90 seconds into the panic, a smiling face atop a freshly pressed button-down shirt was in my driver's side window informing me that he'd be pushing me through the intersection to safety, which he did, pausing to remind me to take my foot off the brake, please, and just steer around that Toyota and he'd have me out of the bus zone.

The next morning, running late via public transportation for a couldn't-miss teacher's meeting in Vancouver, I yipped as the train approached while the Yellow Line MAX spat out error messages at me and my debit card; a man who didn't look like he had much to spare stopped loading his bike on the train to wordlessly feed five wrinkly ones into the machine and silently hand me an all day pass.

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The car turned out to be cheap to fix, Ramona decided she loved her new school, the weather held to keep ripening our tomatoes in the garden and we felt unspeakably grateful and in karmic debt. So we signed up to join Ramona's Uncle Will, my Work Spouse (we trade grammar handouts and gossip at my college) in the Portland AIDS Walk.

To be fair, the motivations were not entirely unselfish. Will and his friends and the owner of the Matador, who sponsored our team to benefit the Cascade AIDS Project (CAP), are a fine smiling group of hilarious young men with nifty tattoos and great style, and we knew it would be fun to walk because we walked last year. Actually, I walked while Ramona rode her scooter, marveled at the costumes and pronounced, "Mama, drag queens are so pretty — can I be a drag queen when I grow up?"

But this year we actually joined Will's team, solicited donations and discussed at great length the importance of what we were doing: The translation that Ramona fully got was that there was an illness out there that was making some people sick, and some other people afraid of the sick people, and this organization was helping people to get better, not get sick in the first place, or get not-afraid of people who were sick. She liked that. Together we checked my donation page each day and were underwhelmed but still pleased when our

total hit \$60 the night before the walk.

Then, as I was putting Ramona to bed, my phone dinged with a message from CAP: "Melissa, we'd like you to know that (your favorite professor who taught you Queer Theory and Victorian literature eons ago whom you haven't seen in years) has just pledged \$100 to your walk."

Seriously? Professor V. just got his wings. And there were many more wings at the march, where Ramona puzzled over the free condom in her goodie bag ("That's a special kind of balloon I'll tell you about when you're older — No, just give it to me") and marveled at the bedazzled fairies, shirtless Roman gods and, yes, the legion of Peter Pans and Tinkerbells who smiled at us and high-fived Ramona as we giggled with Will & Co., glad that our last-minute donations from my mom and my husband had brought our contribution for the day to a healthy \$400 for CAP with our sponsor's generous matching.


I had brought a five for the MAX home from downtown, delighting Ramona with the two Sacagawea dollars we got as change for her allowance. She played with them sleepily as we arced over the river toward home, lunch and a nap.

Walking up Mississippi, we passed a woman in a wheelchair whom we frequently see, who politely asks for a dollar and graciously forgives us when we don't have one; I'd given the last of my cash to Ramona and promised next time. Ramona chewed her lip for the next few steps, then darted back, handed the woman one of her coins and ran back to me.

"What did you do, Ramona?"  
"I gave her one of my dollars."  
"Why?"  
"Because I'm not afraid of sick people and she needed a dollar and I have enough." She held up her remaining dollar. "See?"

## Why Kids Love Hawk and Stoney

by John R. Brown  
A six-year-old boy understands right away Grown men, old men, men working long past retirement age, men named Dizzy and Pee-Wee, Dusty and Rusty and Sparky and Bucky. Years ago, Mr. and Mrs. Herzog and Mr. and Mrs. Ford gazed fondly at their beautiful new-born baby boys and exclaimed, "Let's name him 'Whitey'!" Ty Cobb became the Georgia Peach though Georgia Prick might have been a better fit. The mammoth man-child George Herman Ruth, endowed with a life-force so powerful that he could not pass an orphanage, a speak-easy or a whorehouse without checking in to ask, "Is everybody happy?" Ruth, whose name became an adjective, was too big for just one nickname. The Sultan of Swat and of course the Babe. Which brings us to a man named Scooter, the un-Ruthian Phil Rizzuto, infielder, broadcaster, executive, coot in pin-stripes, never confused with Ivan "Scooter" Libby. Baseball's Scooter never needed a note from the President to stay out of federal prison.

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