

## With the new year comes a chance to reflect and change

Leonard Cohen sang, "It's four in the morning/the end of December/I'm writing you now/Just to see if you're better..." in the mournful '70s tune "Famous Blue Raincoat". Actually, here in the last embers of 2013, it's more like late afternoon, and we—Ramona, her father Marshall and I—are ready to do better in 2014.

The really stupid parental fight started around, of all things, Ramona's ukulele lesson on Sunday.

Ukulele is the latest Ro endeavor. She's been singing soulfully for the last year (her second grade teacher taught the whole class the song about the doomed "Molly Malone," of all things, and she goes all Billie Holliday over the line about "cockles and mussels, alive, alive o") and strumming tunelessly on a ratty guitar left behind by an old roommate. Fate struck when we happened to be at a swimming party this summer on the Washougal and were thrown together with Larry Yes, old friend to both me and Marshall, separately—back in 1997, when I was 23, I'd sit rapt on the floor of the Satyricon as Larry twanged out his solo set—part Prince, part Django Reinhardt, part William Blake—and absolutely original. In 2006, it was a Larry Yes song that was playing on the iPod in the delivery room when Ramona came topside at Legacy Emanuel.

Imagine our very Portland-specific joy when the circle came round and Ramona and Larry hit it off, splashing in the swimming hole. Would Larry teach her guitar? He would! But they'd start with ukulele—better for small hands. Now Sunday morning is Creative Jazz dance class with Ching Ching at the Northwest Dance Project and Sunday afternoon is the uke in Larry's cheery North Portland house.

They say all growth begins with unpleasant honesty, so here goes. I'm so ashamed of this feeling that I'm going to put it in parentheses. (Even as I'm ridiculously self-critical of the job that I'm doing raising Ramona, I am really, really jealous of Ramona's childhood, and sometimes, that makes me feel like I'm about seven myself. Moody. Needy. Easily frustrated, etc. Thanks for letting me get that out.)

Sunday, we'd just pulled the 5-hour drive back from my in-laws' in Ashland and the double-shot emotional exhaustion of a whole week of festivity/friend/family celebration—Christmas week always ends with a bit of overload, and while Marshall and I love one

another deeply, we sometimes travel together poorly. The mix of my passenger seat anxiety and Marshall's laissez faire attitude toward the dotted white line and turn signals leaves us a little snippy and raw if we're not careful, and we had not been careful. My forgetting to get cash for Larry before Marshall had to leave to drop her off combined perfect storm-style with Marshall nursing a lingering chest cold, me feeling moody after my mom flew back to Michigan, half unpacked bags spilling laundry and light-up holiday headgear into the living room to form a "we're too disorganized/hold up your end, then/I always get the cash for lessons/don't take that tone with me/well don't take that tone with me/why can't you be nice to me, I'm exhausted/why can't you be nice to me, I'm exhausted" non-celebrity death match that spilled into Monday morning with choppy conditions and a seasonable chill around Chez Us.

In the midst of this, Ramona, home from her lesson, plinked out "Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star" on her pink Mahalo ukulele ("Mommy! Check it out!"), which made for an odd soundtrack to the tension. Another strange combination, when I started to think about it, was that one of the central reasons I was (I cop to it) so easily offended that day was because I'd just watched Ramona as Marshall, whom I count the best of dads, hike and sing and giggle and ice skate through another holiday week of bonding, and realized that even though I reflect with regret on my loving mother's inability, single as she was when I was seven, to offer me music lessons, what I really envy about my kid is having a dad who's present and good at it. And I think I have to name that and acknowledge it as a thing before it will go anywhere. Like many people who had un-fantastic childhoods, sometimes I feel like I'm still dragging a deflated parachute behind me, and I'm looking for something sharp enough to snip the cords with. I can see where the struggle against that weight takes me out of the present, makes me impatient, thin-skinned, reluctant to let go of a slight. I'd like to be more like Ramona, whose method of blowing up, calming down, and then picking up a new thread seems to be working for her.

Convenient as it sounds, here's what really happened next: Monday morning Ramona and Marshall had an argument — she was embarrassed when he questioned her choice of apparel in front of the friend who'd come over to play. She yelled at her dad to get out of her room, he took exception to the yelling, etc., until I suggested that Marsh go to work and leave me and Ramona to work it out. "I don't know how to not yell! I was so embarrassed! When I'm embarrassed I get so mad!" she explained. It took us the better part of an hour to tease apart how hard, and yet how important it is to take a minute to understand exactly why you're upset, then explain your feelings to the other person in a way that doesn't give them something to be upset about, too. "But Mommy, when

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you're angry, don't you want to make the other person angry?" I sighed (we were in the car, and I clocked her earnest expression in the rearview mirror). "Yeah, honey, but it's really our job, each of us, to try to not do that. If we do that, everybody stays angry. Nobody feels better."

Ramona then borrowed my phone to leave a message for Marshall: "Daddy, I kind of feel stupid about what I said this morning, because that was kind of a stupid subject. Can we just get over it? Can you give me a call when you get this message, because I really want to know if you feel like that, too." He called back an hour later, and we all agreed to chuck the mood of the last few days and be in love again.

Something is coming into focus. I think this year, I have to slow down my reactions with my people, really reckon with what baggage I might be bringing into the moment like I asked Ramona to do. I also think I have to buy a ukulele for myself — I always wanted to be in a band when I was a child, but I never learned how to play anything. Ramona says that when I get one, she'll show me what she learned when she gets home from her lessons. She says we can practice together.



**Melissa Favara**

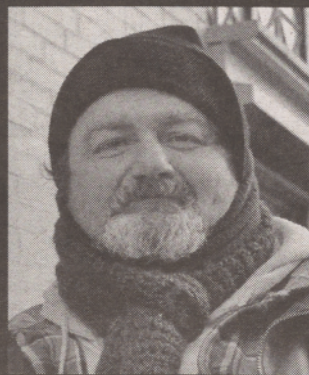
*Melissa Favara teaches English in Vancouver and lives and writes in North Portland, where she parents Ramona, age 7, hosts a bi-monthly reading series, and counts her husband and her city as the two great loves of her life.*

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