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## The Kindness of Strangers

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*The Kindness of Strangers*

In the tunnels below Buenos Aires a little girl, about nine years old, comes into my subway car and walks confidently to its center. Her braided hair is coming loose around her sharp brown face and she seems impatient, or bored. Her spiel is well-rehearsed, memorized and emitted in a monotone. Three red balls appear, and suddenly she's spinning and swirling her arms, catching every ball as it falls. More balls are added until there are six in all. She catches one on her elbow and another on her head, and then, through some complicated motion I don't quite catch, they've switched places. She throws all six balls up, spins in a circle, and catches each one. The last act is to kneel on one knee, so that the balls blur in a circle around her thigh.

When she's finished there is actual applause, which surprises me. After a few months in this city I've grown used to the comfort and ease with which people ignore the ubiquitous beggars. She may be the fourth or fifth to come through this car since I got on—the first were all weary adults selling keychains or tissues, from whom no one bought anything. Big city morality demands this, for of course only tourists and yokels are affected by the parade of the poor. I used to think that it would be different for the people of this city, who four years ago found the line between themselves and subway beggars to be suddenly thin. The economy crashed around them, and proud members of the urban middle-class found themselves living below the poverty line as seven million people in this city alone saw their life savings lost in bank defaults. Jobs disappeared, food prices more than doubled, and people starved. In one famous story, a mob surrounded a wrecked cattle truck on the highway and ripped the cows to pieces for food.

Things have been getting better since then, though almost no one is back to where they were four years ago. Nearly 140,000 people in the city still live in villas miserias, shantytowns made of scraps of metal. At night the streets fill with more than 30,000 cartoneros, whole families of mostly literate, educated people who rip apart trash bags in search of recyclables to sell. But there's a middle class again, growing steadily with the job market, and people really feel that recovery will happen. In some ways the city is still united by this common history of loss, but day after day, I've seen those riding this subway to work respond to the beggars and vendors who approach them not with compassion, but with embarrassment, as if they hate being reminded of what their country has lost, or of the lives that they've so recently left.

But this girl is different. The applause continues, and the boy's cap she wears fills quickly with peso coins. She takes each contribution as if she were collecting taxes or accepting a prize—she expects it and knows she deserves it. She's proud and strong and seems more than a little contemptuous of us, her audience. She looks older than her age, somehow mature and wise and as composed as a movie star. I look around, and see quiet smiles on the faces of middle-aged women and old men. We make forbidden eye contact, grin, and duck our heads. She's so proud and beautiful that I think we all fall a little bit in love. Her hat full, the girl passes to the next car, and soon we can hear clapping and a few whistles. Without her, our brief community of admirers dissolves back into strangers. Silence returns, as does the resolute avoidance of eye contact, and the smiles that remain are turned inwards.

It's only a few minutes after the juggling goddess has left that the carriage door she came through opens again, and our heads turn to watch as a different girl enters. There's a second of shock, and then gazes are drawn back, eyes averted and hasty, empty conversations begun with companions. This girl is a little older than the first—I'd guess fourteen. The skin on every inch of her face is twisted, puckered, and shiny. She doesn't have a nose, or lips, or eyebrows. Even her eyelids are burned, pulling at scars when she blinks. There are no eyelashes, either. The scars cover her entire head, except for a spot in the back, on the right side, where about a 2-inch square section of hair still grows. It makes a braid as thin and lank as a string, tied with a pink bow. She has no left ear and only the bottom half of the right one. The burns cover her neck, interrupted only by a pastel purple sweatshirt with a pale yellow unicorn on it. Below the cuffs of the sleeves, she has no hands at all.

She's talking in the middle of the car. I don't know if others have been listening, but I haven't been able to. I tune in, and the story involves a drunken father and fire and cooking oil and a dead baby brother and other terrors that have been displaced in my memory by the overwhelming image of her face.

She finishes talking. Most people at this point would hold out a bag, and walk the length of the car, but she doesn't. She goes to the nearest person, me, and looks me directly in the eyes. I scramble for my wallet—she's asked for a coin but I give her a medium-sized bill, and try to smile encouragingly. I've probably never felt so uncomfortable. I'm acutely aware of my hands when I put my money in the hat she grips between her stumps—can there really be no kinder word? The overwhelming emotion I feel is not of empa-

thy or generosity. Her story had carried her to a place I can't even imagine. Instead I felt guilty, for my wholeness and for having witnessed her pain like a voyeur. All I want is for her to go away.

She turns her bag and her eyes to the man beside me, and he turns his eyes away, shaking his head and waving her off. I'm shocked—I've just felt those eyes on me, just experienced the overwhelming shame and guilt of being recognized as a witness to a grotesque human tragedy. She's individualized me, made me culpable, made me imagine the life of this girl who has to relive her nightmares every day, placing them and herself out in public to be pitied and feared and judged by strangers. Then she has to politely accept either our guilt or our dismissal—neither of them very appealing—and move along to the next car to do it all again. I am sure that this is the one case that even big-city morality can't ignore.

But I am wrong—neither the girl nor anyone else seems surprised when one after another the people on the subway turn away from her. I can't understand why they don't feel that guilt. Big-city morality usually depends on crowds to function, but this girl's eyes make everyone, in turn, an individual. I thought that it would be much harder to turn away than just to give the few coins that would assuage the conscience, my own cowardly reaction. Maybe it's because they've already given money away, or maybe because they are still so much in love with that first girl. She was talented, and beautiful, and independent, and proud, and everything else the people of this city are hoping to be again. Maybe they are resentful of this girl who carries the past so openly on her face, and who seems to expect to make a living out of a tragic story. And today, without knowing it, in each car she will be following just behind the beautiful, confident juggler, her story not her own but an unwanted reminder. What do I know? I am the stranger, and I wasn't there to witness when the whole city was burned and begging.

—Brooke Jarvis

facing page:

*The Nightmare*  
—Joelle Franchit