

Reflection and Prayertime: Stranger Graces

February 8, 2021

My kids used to come home from school a bit rattled once a year telling me they'd had their annual "Stranger Danger" talk at school. The women who led it was some security or safety office and probably had ample reason for lacking any drop of gentleness in her very hardcore warning about the dangers of the world. I appreciate her commitment to her duty to warn but I knew every time that no child was going to ease into slumber on those nights. Today I'm going to share a couple stories I've read the past week about lovely stranger encounters, stranger graces you might say.

The marine who escorted Lady Gaga ahead of her performance at President Joe Biden's Jan. 20 inauguration is opening up about both the lighthearted and heartfelt moments while — literally — supporting the pop star just before her delivery of "The Star-Spangled Banner."

Marine Capt. Evan Campbell was assisting other A-listers to their seats when he was asked to help 34-year-old Gaga, who was dressed in a custom Schiaparelli fitted jacket adorned with a symbolic dove brooch, to the microphone for her performance.

"There was a concern — obviously she was wearing this very beautiful, very large dress — and there was a concern that she might need some help getting down the stairs," Campbell said. "So they basically looked around and I was one of the taller, larger individuals, and they just asked if I would be willing to assist and I was more than happy to." Campbell said that he didn't tell anyone he would be escorting Gaga before it actually happened, saying he "wanted to make sure that I didn't screw it up before I went hyping it." Campbell said he and the pop star "shared a laugh" ahead of their walk out: "She looked at me and she's like 'a fair warning ... we have an equal chance of tripping on this.' "

Sensing that Gaga was nervous, Campbell said that he reassured her by telling her she would do a great job. She asked if he wanted to pray with her backstage inside the Capitol, in a touching moment that was captured in photos.

"It just seemed like a very natural human thing to do to look over and go, 'Hey you're going to do great. You always do well, you know, you're a performer, you're going to do great,' " Campbell said. "It just seemed like she needed to hear a relaxed voice."

Campbell said the way Gaga approached her role struck something in him as well.

"As a person, that was an amazing thing to hear. But as a service member too, the way she prepped to sing the national anthem obviously resonated with me very deeply as someone that's sworn an oath to defend their country," he told the *Times*.

Campbell said the singer was "incredibly genuine," telling him that the day was "the most important day of her life." Campbell — who deployed to Iraq in 2016 and to Syria in 2017 - said he was proud of how he was able to represent the Marines at the inauguration.

"The biggest thing for me is when those memes came out — you know, find someone that looks at you the way Lady Gaga looks at a United States Marines — I took a lot of pride in that," Campbell told the publication. "I think at the end of the day, we all want to do something that represents the Marine Corps well ... people were sending me posts from *Vogue Paris*, *Cosmo*, I mean millions of people have now seen a United States Marine with Lady Gaga, so I'm just glad I did the Marine Corps proud on this one."

And another story from someone who called themselves Swarm Tendon who shared this story on Reddit:

A while back I was working in an office that allowed dogs. It was an open floor plan and since customers never came into the office, we kept the dogs food and water bowls right by the front door just because it was the most convenient space and no one else would see them but us who worked there.

Of the six of us who worked in the main office area, I was the only one who didn't have a dog (no pets policy at the apartment) and always felt horribly left out.

To make matters worse, across the way was a doggie daycare. One day a very frantic woman came in and she had an absolutely massive basset hound with her. Usually the only people who came into the office were associates who had appointments with someone working there, but it was rare they brought their dogs.

She ran up to me and said "Do you work here?" And I said "Yes, how can I help you?" And she said "I wasn't sure if you took walk ins but I read online I could just drop him off? I tried to call but no answer." I didn't know what she was talking about at that point and I said "Come again? Who did you call exactly?" Thinking if I could just saddle her off to whoever she came to see, I wouldn't have to decipher her problem.

She said "Well it doesn't matter now. Look, something urgent's come up and I really need to leave him here. Here's his food he likes and I'll be back in a few hours and—" at this point I wasn't thinking of the doggie daycare. I thought maybe she was a friend of someone here.

I said "Well alright, can I get your name please?" And she said her name and then asked if I needed her to sign anything and I was so confused at this point I just said "Why would I need you to sign something?" And she left almost immediately.

So I took Otis (the dog) to the back and showed him to my coworkers and no one knew the woman or dog. I was worried she wouldn't come back, but at the same time, my wish for an office dog had been granted! And Otis was supremely chill. All he did all day was lie around and drool onto his own ears. I just freshened him up every now and then, took him out every couple hours, and he was happy as a clam

on a big cushy dog bed we thankfully had an extra of. He just loved attention from anywhere he could get it.

At the end of the day the woman, thank God, came back. She said “Thanks, you’re a lifesaver. How was he?” And I said “He was a champ.” And was about to say “But why is he here” when she said “That’s a relief. Most kennels say he gets anxious around other dogs. I heard you operated at a much higher capacity, I was thrilled to see you had so few clients in the room at one time. So, how much do I owe?” And that’s when I realized she thought we were a dog daycare.

Now, I probably should’ve corrected her. But I loved my day with the office dog and I did want to get paid for supervising this strange dog all day. I just threw out the number that sounded fair and appropriate “That’ll be \$20.” I said.

She replied “Reaallly?!” In this very high tone, and I couldn’t tell if I’d overshot or undershot. But she paid me and left.

My coworkers were laughing hysterically when they realized what had happened and we thought it would just be a good story for the future.

But the next week... she came back! She said we were so much more affordable and less overcrowded than her other place that she was happy to use us. I was glad for the company so just took him. I didn’t think there was any way she couldn’t have at least some idea we weren’t a dog daycare. The whole ordeal was so strange I just figured “don’t question a good thing.” (I was much younger and dumber then.)

Not long after, Otis started getting dropped off two, sometimes even three or four days a week. I was in heaven. He was such a love. And he made fast friends with the delivery guys and visitors.

One day we took our office Christmas card photo and Otis was over that day, so we included him. In a Santa hat. It was pretty great.

But it turns out Otis’ owner was friends with one of our clients who I guess happened to have the card out on her table or was kind enough to display it alongside her other holiday cards.

Because one day Otis’ owner came in holding the card and walked up to me and said “I can’t even believe I’m asking this but... is that my dog in this photo? This isn’t a dog daycare at all. This is just an office, isn’t it.”

She said it with a note of surprise, as though she was looking around and putting it all together for the first time (no coincidence that this was the first time she wasn’t in some crazy rush either.) She was like “Then who are all these other dogs?!” And I explained.

I was *terrified* she was going to demand her money back, or worse, take some sort of legal action against us for misrepresenting ourselves as a dog care business, or complain to corporate.

Instead she basically said “Why didn’t you ever say anything!” And I explained we just really liked having Otis around. She stopped for a minute and seemed to be thinking and said “Is that right?” And I said yes and told the story of how I was the only one in the office without a dog so loved the company. She seemed a little flummoxed or hesitant, understandably, because the whole thing was so weird. She turned to my coworker and asked if I was telling the whole truth (I don’t know why she thought my coworker, also a stranger to her, was any more trustworthy than me, but hey. Strange times.) Coworker backed me up.

So she said, “Well, I wish you’d said something sooner. Could’ve saved me a lot of embarrassment with my friend back there. Alright, I have to get going. See you at 4:00.” And she left Otis! I couldn’t believe it!

I said “So he can stay?!” And she replied “Where else could I find someone to watch him one on one all day for \$20?” And off she went.

I can share that as we got to chat with her some once it was all out in the open, she’d tell us how she’d never get tired of making jokes about it to people. Like, “I’ve got to pick Otis up from work at around 4:00.” And they’d all ask “what do you mean, is he a service dog?” And she’d say “Nope, he’s an accountant.”

She once went so far as to take a nonbeliever on the drive with her and walk him into our office then walk out without him. She was just beside herself cracking up as she explained to us the joke she was playing.

We could see her friend's puzzled/shocked reaction from the car as she emerged without him and got a kick out of it too.

He'd never want to get up to leave (I think he just never wanted to get up) and without fail, every time she got him, she'd say "What's the matter buddy? Long day at the office?" And laugh hysterically.

Otis stayed my office dog until his family moved away, luckily right around the same time I took a new job.

I'll end with a poem from Jan Richardson called "Beloved is Where we Begin"

If you would enter into the wilderness, do not begin without a blessing.

Do not leave without hearing who you are: Beloved, named by the One who has traveled this path before you.

Do not go without letting it echo in your ears, and if you find it is hard to let it into your heart do not despair. That is what this journey is for.

I cannot promise this blessing will free you from danger, from fear, from hunger or thirst, from the scorching of the sun or the fall of the night.

But I can tell you that on this path there will be help; I can tell you that on this way there will be rest.

I can tell you that you will know the strange graces that come to our aid only on a road such as this, that fly to meet us bearing comfort, and strength, that come alongside us for no other cause than to lean themselves toward our ear and with their curious insistence whisper our name:

Beloved

Beloved

Beloved.