

KINDNESS *of* STRANGERS

NICE PEOPLE ARE WORKING THEIR MAGIC EVERYWHERE.
TAKE NOTICE.
AND TAKE SOME ACTION OF YOUR OWN.

Okay, so there's this guy...

I don't know his name. I call him "the Good Samaritan of Maryland Avenue." Every Monday and Thursday night, around dinnertime, he ambles into my driveway and pulls my filled garbage cans out to the curb, so that they're ready for pickup the next morning.

In the fall, he pulls out some 20 bags of raked leaves along with those cans. In the winter, he trudges through iced-up snow. In the spring, like a fresh breeze, he whisks past my open windows, with a broad smile and a peculiar fastidiousness, and wheels away our awful, smelly trash. And in the summer, it's really smelly.

BY DINA SANTORELLI

And it's not just our trash. It's the entire street's—about three or four blocks' worth. Trust us. We know. We've snooped and followed and wondered, Who is this guy? What does he want from us? Why does he do this?

It's distressing to think that a person's immediate response to a seemingly random act of kindness would be to doubt its genuineness. But many of us have been raised to believe that the world proffers no free lunches and that there's always fine print to be found. We've become accustomed to keeping our expectations low and internal antennae always on high.

However, the truth is that there are random acts of kindness

ILLUSTRATIONS BY STEPHANIE WUNDERLICH

around us every day, many of which go unnoticed or unpublicized. How many times have you donated clothing to charity? Or held a door open for a parent pushing a stroller at the mall? Or told the neighbor next door that she looks pretty when she wears her hair up?

"I don't even think we're conditioned to look at how much good is around us," says Dr. Gail Satler, professor of sociology and teaching fellow of New College at Hofstra University in Hempstead, New York. "It's a matter of perception. We're so conditioned to thinking, Hey, if we can't be like Bill Cosby and pay for someone's college tuition, then we don't solve any problems, we're not doing anything. But in a moment when you are in need of anything, even a tissue, if someone gives it to you that you don't know, that's something that will stick with you."

DAWN HILL, 34, OF GREENSBORO, NORTH CAROLINA, would agree. "I was leaving work in the middle of the day because I didn't feel well. This was my first job out of school in New York, so I was chronically broke," says Hill, the director of marketing and development for a private nonprofit agency. "A man came up to me on Third Avenue, first wanting to give me a flyer, then asking if I had a dollar to help pay for some lunch for him. Unfortunately, I had only a five-dollar bill, and that was too rich of a gift for me to make when I had little money myself, so I said, 'No, I'm sorry.'"

"On the bus, I thought about that man and how I am fortunate to have friends I could ask to borrow a few bucks from, if I was in a pinch like him," Hill continues. "I felt bad that he was in the posi-

tion of asking strangers to help him get lunch, and I didn't help. This put me over the edge, and I began to cry. Just then a man came up to me. He was about to get off the bus, when he put his hand on my shoulder and said, 'Tomorrow will be a better day.' It still makes my eyes well up with tears to think of such a kind gesture. I'll carry this with me always."

"Often, a person who performs a simple, seemingly inconsequential act of kindness is remembered 30 years later as someone who literally changed another person's life," says Joyce Schowalter, publisher and editor in chief of Internet-based *HeroicStories* (heroicstories.com), a twice-weekly free e-newsletter that compiles stories of random acts of kindness from around the world. "It doesn't matter how much time or effort the deed took. It's just how much the other person needed it. Some things are so generous. Others are absolutely tiny."

How tiny? A smile. A cheerful hello. Or maybe even

something as simple as a look into a person's eyes. "I teach a class called *The Good Society*," says Satler. "It's about everyday ethics in America, and we talk about homeless people. When I was a grad student, we did a research project that focused on the homeless. When speaking to them, they told me that if people would just acknowledge that they're human beings, not necessarily put money into their cup, but look them in the eye when they passed, that would mean something. So I tell my students now that they don't have to solve the problem of the homeless, but look them in the eye. It doesn't cost anything."

A random act of kindness was worth about 40 cents for Margaret Coufalik, 39, a banquet sous-chef for a New York City hotel. "I had been driving my motorcycle in Telluride, Colorado, and went to the gas station. I was going to go to the bank first, because I had my paycheck in my pocket, but I didn't, so I had only pocket change. After filling up, I had managed to scrounge up enough so that I was only 40 cents short, but it was traumatic for me because I never like to be short for anything, and I was really embarrassed. When I got up to the counter and started explaining my story to the clerk, there was a guy two people behind me in a straw hat who said, 'I have the change you need.' I recognized him right away. It was Keith Carradine. I

didn't want to make a big deal out of it, because it looked like he was trying to be incognito, so I said thank you and left."

It's true that sometimes an act of kindness will have a strange, but still very recognizable

face. For years, my mother has told the story of how George Burns offered to carry her heavy bags down Fifth Avenue in New York City when he saw her struggling as a pregnant twentysomething. Starstruck, she could only point and blurt out, "Gracie Allen!" which made the actor laugh. More recently, Lori Glaessgen of Saylorsburg, Pennsylvania, tells of how Paris Hilton, who had been driving on Montauk Highway in Southampton, New York, last summer, stopped her vehicle, jumped out and halted traffic to save Glaessgen's sister's dog, who had escaped from her yard and was in the middle of the street.

MORE OFTEN THAN NOT, THOUGH, RANDOM ACTS of kindness don't have a high-profile face—most don't even have a face at all. Do supermarket shoppers who live in Middle Village, New York, know that Irene Rhein, 64, has a habit of taking the milk cartons that have the earlier

JUST IMAGINE ARMIES OF DO-GOODERS, QUIETLY PICKING UP LITTER AND OPENING DOORS.



A RANDOM ACT OF KINDNESS ISN'T JUST A CLICHE—IT CAN CHANGE A LIFE.

with their fare. "I had tried that MetroCard three times and couldn't get it to work," says Satler, "and, you know how it is, the people behind you in line are in a rush and are just not happy to see this happen. When a guy behind me swiped his card for me, I looked at him stunned, and he didn't even wait for me to thank him. But that's the lesson. If I ever see that happen on the subway, now I'll do it. I'm not sure I would have thought to do that before, but now I do."

"There's a lot of division in the world, politically or whatever, and people are looking for something that's generally good to do," says Brien Moakley, founder of The Giving Game (givinggame.com), based in St. Louis, Missouri, an experiment in kindness whereby ordinary people go about performing random acts of kindness and then leave a card that says *PASS IT ON*, in hopes that the next person will perform a similar deed. "People like the idea that if they can do a kind act, it can promote someone else to do one, too."

INSPIRED IN PART BY THE NOVEL AND SUBSEQUENT movie, *Pay It Forward*, which chronicled the life of a young boy inspired by his teacher to perform charitable acts for strangers, The Giving Game is all about creating a kindness strain, almost like a virus. Participants log on to the website, can register their card by punching in the unique number on the back and view all the kind acts around the world that have been recorded by the tiny quadrangle in their hands. "Since the launch of the website in September 2003, there are more than 10,000 cards out now in about 500 cities and 13 countries," says Moakley. "It's a simple game, but the people who play find that they start to look for opportunities to do things for other people, which is kind of different than a typical day, where you're out for yourself. These acts change you in a way that's amazing."

American anthropologist Margaret Mead once famously said: "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has." Perhaps there is a small part of us that still believes in the goodness of people in the face of an uncertain world. Perhaps that's why we recount the story of Santa Claus this time of year, because we do believe—deep down—that a magical person we've never met can shower us with wonderful gifts if given the chance.

Or at least take out our garbage cans. ■

expiration date, so the fresher products are left for others?

Barbara Jarvie-Castiglia of Kearny, New Jersey, has had a similar brush with anonymous supermarket thoughtfulness. "I saw the hair color I normally use in a new shade that seemed perfect, but I was hesitant to buy it because the markup was at least two dollars," says Jarvie-Castiglia, 40, the Northeast bureau chief for a commercial real estate industry e-news source. "I looked down and saw a \$7 off coupon that someone had just left on the shelf! I had had a crappy week at work, and it was just the little thing that made me smile. About two weeks later, I was in BJ's [Wholesale Club], and I was looking at some cat/dog food bowls, and once again there was a coupon just left there. I decided this could be a nice mission—cutting out all the coupons from the weekend's paper and just placing them near the items on a supermarket trip. It could be just one of those little bright spots that make a person's day or make a difference to someone who's combating the higher food prices."

Just think of it: Armies of do-gooders everywhere, quietly picking up litter in the street, opening doors for the late and the harried, posting *FOUND DOG* signs on telephone poles, and swiping their own MetroCards through the subway turnstile for someone struggling