I was going through one of my favorite websites, Humans of New York, when I noticed a portrait that especially stood out to me. The man being profiled stated, “I’m a feminist! So if a woman and I are going for the last empty seat on the subway, I’m not holding back.” I cringed a little bit. Now the point of this speech is not to delve into the subject of feminism, even though it is of great importance in the world of today. Instead, I’m going to talk about a beautiful response I came across. Someone wrote: "So if a woman and I are going for the last empty seat on the subway, sometimes I’ll let her have it - not because she’s a woman, but because I don't mind making another human smile once in a while."

A big part of performing a random act of kindness is in getting over the one million questions we ask ourselves as we consider whether to do something for someone. What will they think of me? Will they think I'm a creep? Will they think I have some ulterior motive? I have 4 Psets and 5 midterms, do I have the time? Won’t that make me seem like a goody two shoes? A lot of making someone’s day better starts with overcoming that initial doubt and inertia. This is something I find myself struggling with again and again. I’ve thought of calling to check up on an old high school friend, telling a stranger how much I really loved her purple trench coat, asking a classmate struggling with an Econ class I really liked if she wanted to study together for the midterm. But sometimes, these things don’t happen, because I let the questions and inertia rule over my will to do something kind.

And what if it just doesn’t go down well? You see, think of the worst-case scenario: you offer to help, to give, to talk about a difficult situation. They refuse. Life goes on. But even then, they know someone cares and that can go a long way.
I, for one, know how much of a difference a random act of kindness can make. Two years ago, I went to visit one of the wonders of the world. What stood out to me during my visit to the Great Wall of China was one of the tiniest parts of the day itself. I went to the train station without my host, Alex Foote. And right away, it was clear that I was not capable of getting to the Great Wall on my own. I wandered back and forth between the lines in the overcrowded station, trying to get some information from any train attendants who could understand my English. It didn’t help that my Mandarin vocabulary was restricted to “Ni Haos and “Xie Xies.” Thinking now, I can’t imagine the plight of the train attendants who had to listen to me respond, just like a dummy, “Yao, Xie Xie” to every single one of their questions. My saving grace that day came in the form of two other tourists who noticed how confused I was and came up to help me. “You look lost, are you trying to go to the Great Wall?” And that was how two college kids from Penn saved my day, helping me get there and back in time to catch my flight back to the US, and in the process being the best tour buddies I could have asked for

Today, I want to celebrate people who have overcome the inertia to perform a random act of kindness. I want to celebrate the Harvard students who stop on their way to class to give to a homeless person, asking about their day as they do so. I want to celebrate the thesis fairies, those who sent nice little presents to thesis writers, letting them know they’re supported every step of the way. I want to celebrate those who distribute free hot chocolate and coffee to Lamonsters, just because. I want to celebrate those who reach out to someone they know is struggling, letting them know they’re there for them.
And I want to leave everyone in this dining hall with a little challenge, which I'll also be working on myself: by tomorrow night, take a moment from the craziness of schoolwork, go out and perform a random act of kindness. Do something you ordinarily would never do; something you think will make someone else's day brighter. Because in the end, “the mere act of kindness is joy enough.”