

FRONT PORCH

Sara Levine

Every Little Thing

Every morning I leave the house at seven to get the seven-twenty train and my daughter wakes up at six fifteen, which means I spend forty-five minutes with her, including the time I'm making toast, rushing her out of her diaper, coaxing her to the bathroom so I can brush my teeth and fix my hair.

Last Monday the babysitter's late, and when Thea crawls up in my lap and yanks my earring, I snap at her. Then I feel bad and try to explain in terms a kid can understand.

"Mommy's anxious because she's got to catch the train," I say and her eyes light up like she's forgiven me—the thing about kids, they really can live in the present—so I tell her about the train and the conductor who goes *punch punch punch* on everybody's tickets.

"Why?" Thea says.

"Because there's no such thing as a free ride."

"Why?"

"Because everybody who rides the train has to buy a ticket, that's what helps the train go."

Then the babysitter shows up, all bedraggled and heavy with sleep. I kiss Thea goodbye, and on the train, a funny thing happens: the conductor walks right past me, going *punch, punch, punch* on everybody else's card.

So it's a small thing, but I like that free train ride—three bucks it saves me— and maybe it's living with a two-year-old who asks *why* about every little thing, but I wonder why it happens. The conductor walks by both like he sees me and he doesn't care.

Next morning, Thea's eating toast, I'm rushing around making baked macaroni, and Thea asks me why I'm cooking—a good question since I don't often make dinner at six A.M.

"Mommy's got a potluck after work."

"Why?" Thea says.

"This woman I work with is leaving. We're having a party, and everybody brings a dish so nobody has to do all the cooking. It's nice," I say, despite the fact that I've been cursing since I started, "it's nice to share the cooking!"

And the babysitter, for once in her laid-back life, comes on time, and I get on the train, and the conductor goes *punch punch punch* on everybody's ticket but mine, and I'm thinking great, three bucks, I can get a cappuccino. Except for the free ride, it's a normal, which is to say exhausting, day, until I go to the potluck, put my macaroni on the table, and at eight P.M. Marilyn says, "Here, we had too much food, your macaroni's gone, but don't take an empty dish. Take the casserole, Thea can eat it," so I take the train home with a week's worth of Greek casserole—lamb, feta, artichokes, and avocado—something I'd never make. Which is delicious.

So the next day, I don't understand what's happening, but I think, why not test my luck. I scoop Thea into my lap.

“Every night I get home from work at seven P.M. and do you know what? You’re already in bed! Fast asleep!”

She sucks on her teddy bear’s ear. “I *know* that.”

“Don’t you want to ask me why?”

“No.”

“Ask me why, Thea.”

“Why did you say ask me why, Mommy?”

“Because—” I say, riding over the second question, “my job goes seven to six, that’s what a grown-up job is, you work the hours your boss tells you. And it’s very important you work as hard as everybody else if you want to earn the same money.”

I could tell she’d lost the thread, there’s only so much you can tell her before she rips the clothes off her bear, but I figure I’m compelled to say the whole thing, especially the part about equal pay for equal work. Then the babysitter comes, and I kiss Thea goodbye, get on the train, the conductor goes *punch punch punch* on everybody’s ticket but mine, and at work, Mr. Cheshire, my boss, goes, “Why don’t you cut out at four today?”

“Sure?”

“Sure.”

“Sure sure?”

“Sure.”

So I send the babysitter home early, eat tuna casserole with Thea, run a lavender vanilla crème brûlée bubble bath, pack her into her snuggly pajamas, and fall asleep in the bed beside her, her artichoke and feta breath moist on my cheek. Which is great.

And not that it’s the main thing, this saves me twenty dollars in babysitting money.

Every day it keeps happening: the train ride downtown is free, the boss keeps finding reasons for me to cut out early, and I keep testing it. I’m not going to change the world; I wish I could change it for other people, but if I have a chance to change it for myself, well, why not?

So every day I rush to tell Thea more and more things. I start small and modest—like, do unto others as you would have them do unto you—but every thing I mention, I get immediate results. It’s like God is rewarding me for trying to set my kid straight, giving her the moral goods early. The day I explain health insurance, it occurs to me we’re a long long way from the toddler-appropriate *punch punch punch* story. Thea squirms in my lap and shouts, “I want to get down! I want to get down!” but I know if I just keep talking, I can get us flu shots for nothing, and the next time she has an ear infection, it will truly be no big deal. So I swing my leg over her knees and pin back her arms just long enough to explain the HMO’s and co-payments and the five-hundred-dollar deductible. And what do you know, that night when I get home, there’s a refund check from Blue Cross Blue Shield for the whole year’s expenses, which the next day I deposit, sweating lightly.

Soon I’ve worked it so I’m pulling in a paycheck for a sixty-hour week, but only working till noon. I start a savings fund for Thea, and I’m still paying for the train ride only one way—irks me a little, the mystery of having to pay on the way back—and the health insurance is free, and the neighbor lady’s stopped asking me for favors, and all my favorite charities are writing me letters—thank you for helping Ronald McDonald, Buddy Dog Humane Society, Safe Haven, Camp Sunshine—even though I haven’t given a thing.

One day the babysitter says to me, “I love Thea so much, you don’t have to pay me,” and that’s when I really wake up to the possibilities.

“This is a charmed life we live, isn’t it?” I tell Thea. “Mommy really enjoys our special talks.” But Thea won’t sit on my lap, even when I get her in a headlock, and when the babysitter comes, Thea grabs her hand and they hustle off to her room before we’ve even finished breakfast. They close the door.

I love my life more than ever, and that's why I open the door and say, admittedly out of the blue, "Hey Thea, you and I are going to die."

She looks up from her jigsaw puzzle, her eyes large and tremulous, and I remind her about this ladybug she used to love in the kitchen. "Remember how the ladybug flew into the spider web and the spider kept jumping on top of it?" Thea hides her face in the babysitter's lap and I tell her about my dog Burly who got hit by a car and my mother's stomach cancer and leaky esophagus and my father's diabetes and heart failure, and then, the blood draining from my head, I explain the recent disappearance from the playground of the Markovic boy who fell out of an apartment window and died of skull fractures and brain contusions. Thea is sobbing, but I press on. "And if they don't get murdered or sick or have an accident, people get so old and miserable they can't eat an orange, or sing a song, or ride a bike, or watch the moon, or even remember who they are. And then, Thea, they just give up and stop breathing. Nobody can escape it, sugar plum, that's why both of us are going to die one day, it's like a promise."

"Why?" screams Thea, her face streaked with tears.

| And even though she is shrieking and throwing her puzzle pieces against the wall, I walk off to the train and I know everything is going to be fine.

Sara Levine's recent writing has appeared in *Nerve*, *The Sonora Review*, *Alice*, *Blue Review*, *Brain*, *Child*, and other magazines. She won a Special Mention for Nonfiction in *The Pushcart Anthology* and three mentions in *The Best American Essays*. She teaches writing at The School of the Art Institute of Chicago.

"We have a swing on our front porch where we sit on summer nights and watch a raucous group of neighborhood kids jump rope. They spend more time turning the rope and yapping about who is going to jump than they do jumping."