

Better at Being Human

by Allysa Raymond

When Evie runs into a room, it's like the air makes space for her joy. She's four, all spark and sincerity, with blonde curls that bounce and questions that don't stop. "Auntie," she says, tugging on my sleeve, "why don't clouds fall down?" I don't know, I say, and she nods like that's a fine answer. With Evie, not knowing things isn't embarrassing. It's just an invitation to wonder.

I'm seventeen, so according to most people, I am at an age meant for maintaining distance from everyone, a time most associate with eye rolls, impatience, and obsession with fashion or makeup over anything else. But I defy such societal expectations. On weekends I choose to spend my time with the four-year-old who lives next door, the one who calls me "Auntie." We color, play Barbies, and sing songs. She talks about flowers, fish, and band-aids with equal fascination. Sometimes she comes over to my house while I'm studying and sees me sitting in a particular chair. The other day, she walked in and sweetly asked, "Can I sit in the study chair?" Now she sits with me while I study, and honestly, it melts my heart. The way we're so drawn to each other, it's like we're quietly obsessed, in the best way. And in those simple moments, I feel more like myself than I do anywhere else.

Once, riding in the backseat together, I watched her take in the world. She notices everything including strangers, dogs, passing cars, as if it all deserves her full attention. As we pulled into a parking spot, she announced proudly, "I have room on my side." It was such a small observation, but it felt important to her. Everything does.

She gives compliments to other people. She tells others they are pretty and smart. When she was two, I held my hand out to her to help her up the stairs, and she told me she liked my nails. She already knew how to make someone's day. She genuinely wants to make other people happy. One afternoon, we were walking in the backyard when she stopped, crouched, and picked up a dandelion crushed flat into the patio. She brushed it off carefully and held it up to me like treasure. "We can fix this flower and give it to Grammy," she said, placing it in my palm. "Let's find one for you too." She is always thinking about others. She says "sorry" even when someone else bumps into *her*. And I think: this little person is better at being human than most adults.

Evie doesn't edit herself to look smarter or tougher or cooler. She just feels things and says them. She reminds me of the famous line from Henry David Thoreau "I came to the woods to live deliberately." She acts deliberately on her instincts without the other kind of deliberating we do where we battle the "should I? how will others see this?" inner debate that often keeps us from acting at all. She has a strange kind of wisdom, the kind that isn't clouded by pride or cynicism. When someone cries, she doesn't ask questions, she just climbs into their lap and tries to make things better. When someone yells, you can see the concern on her face (although, she is four; she can yell with the best of them if pushed to that point). I don't think she knowingly is trying to be good; her kindness comes without calculation.

Evie is always learning and listening. She still believes the world is soft if you are. She says things like “I love you to the moon and back.” She sees things I miss like ants building homes in the cracks of sidewalks, clouds shaped like rabbits, how tired I look even when I say I’m fine.

I wonder what age we lose that. What moment flicks the switch?

I think a lot about what we teach children. Say please. Say thank you. Share. Don’t hit. Be kind. You do not always have to be the first to go. Hold the door for others. It is not important if you win but how you play the game. We teach children to say sorry, to wait their turn, to be gentle. We raise them with stories about kindness and sharing and using soft voices. We teach them that if you do something wrong, you say you are sorry and make it right. But somewhere along the line, adults stop being held to the same standard. We grow up and scream at strangers from behind windshields. We interrupt. We roll our eyes. We behave as if we are the most important people in the world. We argue that being right matters more than being kind. We forget how to mean it when we say, “I understand.”

The humility Evie displays reminds us of the openness we should maintain as adults. For Evie, she is not weighted down by pride. She is not afraid to be wrong, and she approaches others with a genuine desire to connect.

Some days, I wish everyone could borrow Evie’s eyes for just five minutes. Maybe then we’d remember that people are fragile. That we’re all, in some way, four years old wanting to be held, hoping someone will notice when we fall. Evie tells me, “Auntie, when I’m big, I’m gonna be like you.” But the truth is, I’m still trying to be like her.

Allysa Raymond is a high school junior from Westchester County, New York, preparing to apply to college. She has a strong interest in math and science and plans to pursue a

career in medicine. She is particularly interested in global healthcare and has volunteered in a dental outreach program, where she developed a deeper commitment to serving others. In her free time, she enjoys traveling, reading, and spending time with family and friends, as well as reflecting on ways society can be improved.