

A Long and Hectic Day

By Mindy Levine

9:30 pm on Sunday night: I leave my house to catch the overnight Amtrak train to Washington. I am going to meet with my program officer at the NSF to talk about my proposal for a CAREER grant. I thought about staying at a hotel overnight or flying the next morning, but I am a second-year assistant professor. Money is tight.

I have lined up 7 bottles filled with 42 ounces of pumped breast milk in the fridge so that my 3 month old child can eat while I'm gone. These are labeled in permanent marker with phrases like "Defrosted! Use first!" I wonder about the use of permanent marker a little, but not enough to try to find peel-off labels instead.

My toddler's lunch box is packed as well. His clothing is laid out, together with several spare changes of big boy underwear with various cartoon characters that I can't identify. We are in the middle of potty-training. We are potty training, and I am leaving.

10 pm Sunday night: I board the train and find a seat. I try to go to sleep right away, but my fellow passengers continue to talk on their cell phones. They may not be quite as sleep-deprived as I am. Besides which, I can't seem to relax.

1 am Monday morning: I am freezing, freezing, freezing as I try to sleep on the train. We are somewhere between New Haven and New York City. My baby is waking up right about now, and I am 150 miles away.

5 am Monday morning: Somewhere between Philadelphia and Baltimore, I attempt my first 'pumping in public' session. As I cover myself with a nursing shield and try to maneuver all pump parts discreetly, I feel lucky that my seatmate is still sleeping.

7 am Monday morning: I am in Union Station on the phone with my husband. He informs me that my 2 1/2 year old is planning to "wait at the window until Mommy comes home." He was less than thrilled to realize that Mommy is not coming home so fast. I promise I will try to make it home for bedtime.

9 am Monday morning: I am pumping in the public bathroom at Union Station. I have my laptop case, pump bag, and cooler bag all lined up on the baby changing table. My large Starbucks coffee is balanced precariously on the edge of the table. I imagine this is not the strangest thing that people have witnessed in this bathroom. Most of them ignore me.

10 am: I am at the NSF trying to discuss science with my program officers. I lug my pump bag, computer, papers to grade, and food for the day from meeting to meeting. When I am asked whether I am interested in meeting with just one more person, I smile brightly. Of course I am.

12:30 pm: My meetings are over. I rush rush rush back to Union Station so that I can board the 1 pm Acela to Boston. I make it. Assuming there are no train delays, I will be home for bedtime.

4:30 pm: Yet another pumping session. I have a seatmate, a polite European (male) teenager who seems to pay no attention. I studiously ignore him and look out the window.

7:30 pm: I am home. I have spent 16 of the past 22 hours on the train. I have traveled 870 miles, met with 4 NSF program officers, pumped 45 ounces of breast milk, and graded 6 problem sets. I am home in time for bedtime with my toddler, who gleefully tells me, "Mommy always comes back."

At that moment I can't tell him the truth: In less than a month, I am going back for a 3 day panel. I am taking his baby brother with me so that I can nurse him at nights. I am sure he will be heartbroken when this happens.

I already am.