

The Stockpile and the Letdown

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It's March 16, week one of shelter-in-place, and our freezer shelves—and my breasts—are bursting.

In fall 2019, I am eight months' pregnant with a normal appetite, but an insatiable impulse to stockpile. Between teaching and scrambling to bring home materials for my research, I keep a running list of things to stash in the freezer: chicken soup, lentils in puff pastry, baked pasta, and enchiladas, anything to nuke and eat in under ten minutes. I quiet the hum of pre-parenthood anxiety with dreams of spicy peanut stew, eggplant parmesan, and spanakopita, of homemade-ish food to get us through the fourth trimester.

Soon after our daughter is born, we make room in the freezer for her: bags and bags of pumped breast milk, anticipating her future months at daycare. The prospect of her future feedings overtakes me—I sip woody cups of fenugreek tea, stash almonds and dark chocolate in my backpack, and fill and refill my water glass, all while bingeing stories of women who stashed hundreds of ounces, pumping so much they could give it away. I tell myself I can switch to formula any time, that I'm doing my best. Yet on nights when my husband offers to give her a bottle, I more often than not demur—better for me to wake for her, and to let the stockpile grow.

By late April, with daycare closed and all of us at home, the breast milk competes with frozen steak, broccoli, chunks of ginger and lemongrass, containers of bacon and duck fat. Our landscape is bounded by apartment walls, our clocks run by Zoom calls with family, diaper changes, and the screeching siren of our daughter's voice demanding to be fed. Her hunger structures my day, and the only thing that silences her is me.

If there is ever a Hollywood blockbuster about the pandemic, the constant, inescapable sound of a baby screaming would make an excellent soundtrack.

I was lucky while pregnant: I had zero nausea, zero cravings, and my diet remained relatively unchanged. I was unbothered by the didactic messaging in the pregnancy blogosphere, telling expectant mothers to load up on flax and fish

oil and kale and whole grains. If self-sacrifice in the name of self-care was part of motherhood, I was well prepared. Yet by April 1, the cravings have hit me full force. I hunger for the synthetic: salt-and-vinegar potato chips, peanut butter M&Ms, sugary cereal. Having nowhere to go makes me want to eat like a stoner, to pair a bowl of ice cream with a giant tumbler of bourbon, the dream of eating only for myself—as someone who has not herself become a food source.

Soon, sooner than expected, the pandemic hits close to home. My mother calls to tell me that my sister's father-in-law has died from a heart attack, accompanied by a fever of unknown origin, and so my sister, her husband, and mother-in-law must self-quarantine together. I pack them a bag of supplies: a giant bottle of acetaminophen, coloring books, good reading, and bad movies. The bag is a gesture of magical thinking—as though they'll be stuck in bed on a school day, nothing more than a bad flu, I tell myself. I extract a brick of frozen cookie dough, a forethought during the maternity stockpiling, when I made an offhand remark requesting freshly baked cookies, and my husband turned out a loaf of dough as big as a watermelon. I never imagined our inventory would be depleted this way.

I plot future grocery deliveries like I'm putting a message in a bottle—each one feels like a long-anticipated reunion with normalcy via ratatouille, saag paneer, and burgers and fries. I diligently nurture my sourdough starter, and it ends up bubbling and oozing out of the container and up into the window-sill. I take it as a sign of progress. We order milkshakes from a local ice cream place, an old-fashioned parlor that recently celebrated its fiftieth anniversary but now looks likely to shutter for good. We pick up our shakes curbside and walk home, masks on, delaying the first sip until we can wipe down the cups and wash our hands.

And I feed, and I pump, and I feed, and I pump. And the stockpile grows.

In late March our daughter spikes a fever—first 99, then 100, then 101.7°F. Nothing unusual, her pediatrician says over the phone, quite common for post-vaccination infants.

“It’s not Covid,” she tells us. “Get off the internet, because it’s going to make you think that everything you see is Covid. Think horses, not zebras.” (Everywhere I hear zebras.)

We slip a syringe of cherry-flavored baby Tylenol into her cheek, and before she can burble the syrup out from her lips, I slip her onto my breast. She slowly swallows the milk with the medicine, and both of us are sticky for hours afterwards. We are told to keep an eye on her appetite, because if the appetite remains, the fever will soon fade. And so her hunger becomes a beacon of hope: her normally bright, smiling face turns red with frustration and builds to a wail of total conviction. Yet as soon as she latches on, her breathing slows, her fists unclench, and I soon hear a steady gulping that tells me she’s settled in, relaxed in a way I haven’t been in weeks.

The thing no one tells you about parenthood is not how human it makes you feel, but how mammalian, how primal and uncomplicated the needs you fulfill, the need to be held, rocked, comforted, and fed. You become hyper-conscious of your body: the crackle of skin dried out by handwashing, the

depth of the breath in your healthy lungs, the coolness of your fingers on a baby’s burning forehead. Your pulse rises when she screams, and falls when she’s quiet, and rises again when she’s too quiet.

She eats. The fever breaks.

I think about the novel *Room* by Emma Donoghue, the story of a mother and child held captive in a 11-by-11 foot room for years on end. I wonder if we’ll look back on this time, if we can look back on it at all, as the boy and his mother did, as “a crater, a hole where something happened.” (Donoghue, 2012: 361). Or if, as parents often do, I’ll forget about the constant anxiety, the constant hoarding, and just remember this—clinging close, the click and the swallow, and the momentary silence.

This is something I can do. ©

REFERENCE

Donoghue, Emma. *Room*. Mass market edition. New York: Little Brown, 2012.