A Mother’s Gold

“Your mother is still holding on.” I was searching for the right words. “She is comfortable.”

“Thank you for the update,” he said briefly, before hanging up. He was a doctor himself, familiar with the process of dying. I took a slow breath; there was a knot in my throat when I swallowed.

Under my scrubs, my breasts were heavy and aching, like a stomachache only higher up. It had been 3 hours since I had pumped. There was no putting aside the tragedy of a mother dying without her son—that would stay with me forever. But for these moments I was not only an intern navigating the tragedies of COVID-19, I was also the mother of a baby who depended on me.

When my daughter, Della, was less than an hour old, a labor and delivery nurse helped us breastfeed for the first time. Fingers cupping Della’s head and neck, she guided the little mouth to my breast like a puppeteer. I flinched at the speed—almost roughness—of the motion, instantly aware of all the new ways that the world could hurt me.

I was a fourth-year medical student when I gave birth. The milestones of pregnancy and medical training are still hard for me to disentangle. She was the size of a blueberry on my surgery rotation, when more than once I had to pull my car over to the side of the road, retching into a garbage bag in the predawn darkness. My 20-week anatomy scan happened during a rotation in the pediatric intensive care unit; I lay awake the night before thinking of the parents I had seen lose children, the little nameless creature in my belly turning somersaults. And during residency interviews, I lagged behind the group on hospital tours, red-faced and panting, like a stomachache only higher up. It had been 3 hours since I had pumped. There was no putting aside the tragedy of a mother dying without her son—that would stay with me forever. But for these moments I was not only an intern navigating the tragedies of COVID-19, I was also the mother of a baby who depended on me.

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As I watch her nurse, my mind drifts to my own death. Will Della be with me? It occurs to me then that the sound of her breathing is the last sound that I would want to hear.

Unexpectedly, pumping milk for Della became a sort of sustenance for me, linking me to her even when we were physically separate. During challenging inpatient months, I settled into an unwieldy routine. Wake up, pump in a daze at kitchen table, drive to work, pre-round, pump, rounds, pump, work, fit in one afternoon pump or live to regret it, drive home, strip off scrubs, shower, nurse, dinner, Della’s bedtime, pump, sleep. Della’s day unfolded elsewhere, mainly, but her physical needs mirrored my own. As for me, the pages, the glut of hospital tasks—none of it paused for me to step away. So I bulldozed ahead, pumping in, around, and on top of other things. During rounds if they went too long. With a set of portable inserts while running in and out of patient’s rooms. On the phone with consultants. My days resembled how my head felt sometimes, crowded with thoughts of medicine and thoughts of her.

At the same time, as I found my way as both “doctor” and “mother,” it was comforting to have others also see me—literally in my scrubs and gray pumping drape—as both. My colleagues found ways to show that they understood, that they wanted me to succeed. A fellow resident discreetly refilled my water bottle when I was tethered to my desk. A pregnant senior resident took my pager, so I could have a quiet moment outside with my family on a weekend day. An attending, the father of a toddler, asked me at the beginning of an obstetrics shift when I would need protected time, transforming my burden into one of the shared goals of the team.

And so Michael, Della, and I plodded along, bound together by rituals both tedious and repetitive but also loving and intimate. I can picture Michael now in the kitchen, submerged to the elbows in soapy water. He scrubs each duck bill valve then examines it to make sure the seal is still strong. I sit cross-legged on a kitchen chair,
eating dinner leftovers that he has heated up for me in the microwave. He hums the tune of "Wheels on the Bus," which he’s learning to pluck on the guitar for Della. The next day, hours after I have left for the hospital, he carries her to daycare in the blue snowsuit that she can barely move in. He swings the lunchbox of stacked milk bags as he points out the sights they see. “Dog!” “Car!” “Dada!”

On that afternoon after my phone call with the doctor, I assembled pump parts before the white glare of the computer screen. I thought of his mother, 2 floors below, dying of COVID-19. Her breathing was shallow, her vitals slowly dwindling. I thought of the life they had shared, the millions of threads that connected them through the years. All of it parsed and filtered so inadequately now through a brief phone update from a virtual stranger. An attending physician at our hospital showed me a poem she wrote after watching me work. "A mother’s gold," it read, "hums in the background while residents hold—space—for the next patient who will die of COVID."

In December, not quite 2 months before Della’s first birthday, COVID-19 case counts again surged in Rhode Island. Colleagues fell ill. The hospital asked that we not eat or drink in front of others, so I was constantly thirsty. To avoid others, I huddled in empty offices to pump and eat, and a couple of times in my car. Whether from stress or dehydration, my milk supply plummeted.

More and more frequently, Della refused my breast entirely. Sometimes it felt like she had simply forgotten how. “Please, baby,” I whispered as I coaxed her one night. The outline of the N95 that I now wore all day was still etched onto my face. I cradled her, one hand gripping my breast and the other cupped like a C around her neck. I tried to remember when it had started to feel awkward. She screamed like I was hurting her. Michael appeared at the door, silhouetted by the kitchen lights.

“I think she just wants the bottle tonight, Margot,” he said gently. “It’s OK, it’s just because it’s late.” We looked up at him, both of our faces wet with tears. She, the daughter who was no longer comforted by her mother’s breast. And I, the mother who feared what else would be lost if I let this go.

For a few final weeks before we stopped entirely, Della would only take my breast in the middle of the night. Alone together in the darkness, we remember the motions. The noisemaker whirring, we rock in the blue recliner where we had spent most of the first few months of her life. She watches me with interest as she nurses, her gray eyes with rust at the center. Eventually, her eyelids flutter shut, eyebrows raised under closed lids. Even in sleep, she looks like she is concentrating. She makes a soft noise—half coo, half hum—as she swallows.

As I watch her nurse, my mind drifts to my own death. Will Della be with me? It occurs to me then that the sound of her breathing is the last sound that I would want to hear. I hold her tightly and listen to it, long after she has fallen asleep.