

Progress Report

I sit in what we call the Momma Chair, shaped like a baseball mitt, and when my body lowers into its turquoise velour softness, I feel the same relief a catcher might when a strike lands dead-center.

A crescent-moon foam shelf, covered in azure flannel and velcroed around my nightgown's waist, is my cushioned desk for my new job.

Only one button to undo for my left one, engorged glistening alabaster, like a whale floating belly up on all this blue.

My partner gently places our infant son on the nursing pillow that rests on my lap between the velvety arms of this cupping chair.

I tickle my inflamed rosy nipple on his lower lip, and his father and I laugh as this infant's head, dwarfed by my breast, does a shark waggle before latching, as if he must crack a spine first. Once attached, his body like a benzene ring, is part and not, of me.

My arms are guards against his possible rolling away and a shield from our TV.

I cradle the headset between my shoulder and ear, the phone beside the wipes warmer on the coffee table.

"No grandma, it's not like the French water Evian. It's Avian, like birds – chickens, grandma!" I explain. "It spread from chickens to people!"

She makes a clearing-throat noise, but I know her scrap of disgust articulates unspeakable despair, defiance and deference.

“Yeah, grandma, I know about Spanish flu, killed more people than World War One... I know!” I tuck my forearm close as my son instinctively presses his pink fists to massage out every drop.

The news blasting over my handset matches the scenes unfolding on our TV: doctors and officials behind podiums in grave seriousness, health workers clad not in disco silver spacesuits but reflective snow white, gurneys briskly loaded into ambulances, bodies blanketed in a soft teal. People wear masks, gloves, unmistakably wide-eyed with unknown terror.

Yes, we can still eat chicken soup. Yes yes yes, I say to my grandma’s list of what to do. And her list of what not to do.

“They don’t know!” I finally shout. “I love you but I gotta go grandma...”

Before we hang up, her guttural phlegmy words, “Der eibeshter zul shomer umatzil zayn.”

Yes. Yes. Yes.

Doors are opened with sleeves, surfaces carry the whiff of sanitizing wipes. We stock up on supplies.

Everyone washes their hands, and who visits is a closed circle.

Bad news knows where to find you, my mother reminds. We keep the news off.

I ask my son's father, how can we ever keep our baby safe?

He's heard the guttural phlegmy pronouncement enough, but still he mangles it as he recites, pointing his finger in the air as we dissolve into helpless guilty laughter.

The baby is now 22, a senior in college, he will have no graduation ceremony.

He is alone in a small flat in a very large city on the other side of the country.

My grandmother is dead, my mother is dead.

Not from flu or virus.

G-d rest their souls.

I mailed him gloves, masks, zinc lozenges, I begged him to get chicken bone broth.

He maybe is not as careful as I would want, he has used only the lozenges.

I remember this, he tells me with a laugh.

Through the phone, music he creates surrounds.

I know what to do, he assures me.

He watched us opening doors with our sleeves, washing our hands, being... careful.

His father played guitar, we wrote songs.

You wrote your first book during this time, he reminds me.

Yes. Yes. Yes.

While I nursed and the world was contagious, my infant son
fed, nestled by my keyboard, and I wrote a novel.

I slept to keyboard clicks.

Yes yes yes you did.

Maybe that's why typing puts me to sleep.

That's funny. Please be careful...

Momma... I know...

It's crazy...

But I will not be. I'm making some music and got a paper to
write.

Then, You OK? he asks softly. You writing?

My hands are cracked, so dry.

We laugh.

This we know.

I remember he says.

He does not remember the taste of soil. He was the child that did not put his fingers in his mouth after playing in the dirt.

I nursed him up to a month before he was four, for immunity.

My father is 86. He has no mask, no gloves. I hear it in his voice over the phone, as his TV blares non-stop horror.

That gurney could be me, he says with a laugh, then makes the same throat clearing as grandma.

This is a terrible place to be, he says.

He went outside without a mask, without gloves, like his grandson.

Trev, how's he doing? he asks.

He's got a good immune system, like you, I say firmly.

Nobody knows anything, he says.

Dad, maybe turn the TV off?

They don't know anything.

"Der eibeshter zul shomer umatzil zayn," I recite from long ago.

I know his laugh, when something surprises him.

Wow, he says deliberately thoughtfully slowly.

What does it mean?

The One Above should protect.

Hebrew or Yiddish?

Both, he laughs. My father, G-d rest his soul, wow, he used to say that when you were a baby, acch, you were running a terrible fever.

I remember, I tell him, I remember.