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Room Temperature
The Father, the Baby and the Bottle
Belinda Blecher

This short novel captures a moment in time where a father gives his six-month-old, 'Bug', her 3.15pm bottle. We get a glimpse of Father getting comfortable with his new role as a protector, provider and comforter:

... I shifted my weight slightly in the rocker, the sweater's mute woolly bulk made me feel particularly fatherly and head-of-householdish ... I was pleased to see how comfortable the Bug looked with her head in the crook of my arm, unaware through the loft of all that yarn of my elbow tendon tautly supporting her.

Father's vivid observations of feeding 'Bug' stir up intense emotions in him, particularly about his own mother and feeding experiences:

Like a screech trumpet player, she held her bottle with one hand; her other hand roved in search of textures: my sweater's, of course, but also a wrinkle and the nippily bump of a snap on her own striped outfit, her hair and ear and especially the raised ounce and cubic-centimeter demarcations that were molded into her Evenflo bottles plastic, like the fractions of a cup that had once been molded into glass peanut butter jars, so useful for practising your fingertip-reading skills.

Father's association with the peanut butter jar seems a significant link. Over the course of the novel peanut butter proves integral to his thinking about breastfeeding:
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My mother told my sister and me that when she was breastfeeding us she ate peanut butter straight from the jar with a tablespoon, and perhaps because of her own maternal craving she didn't mind later when I took a full jar and a silver spoon upstairs with me while building my plastic models. I sometimes preferred rather to work a single spoonful down very slowly.

Father later describes how eighteen years later, when his wife had her period, she asked him to pick up a jar of peanut butter on his way home from work. One can almost taste his anticipation:

I'd stopped eating it myself. I jabbed a tablespoon vertically into the new six-ounce jar I had chosen for her and left the arrangement in the middle of the kitchen table for her to find when she got out of her shower; and then I thought better of this over-preparation and pulled the spoon out and smoothed out its sea-shaped intrusion and tightened the lid again so that she might think that the seal had never been broken, because she might want (as I certainly had wanted years before) the pleasure of being the first to dig into the lunar surface herself. She probably would want to use a knife and make a sandwich anyway, I thought... But half and hour later I found her flipping through an in-flight magazine with the jar open on the arm of the couch and a teaspoon upside down in her mouth. Tears came to my eyes. ‘Straight from the jar, baby!’ I said.

I wondered about the significance of this scenario coming to the forefront of Father’s mind while he was feeding his baby. Babies can evoke profound infantile feelings in fathers. The above extract, I felt, had sexual connotations. Perhaps it is not just the baby who struggles with oedipal feelings, but becoming a father may involve reworking of oedipal issues. This may include his own memory of being in competition with his own father for the breast, but also the competition and sexual rivalry between him and the baby for possession of the ‘breast’. Baker’s sensual description of Father breaking the peanut butter ‘seal’ first, perhaps reflected Father’s thoughts that he had triumphantly got to Mother’s body first. This extract touches on something of a taboo subject, as not only are rivalrous feelings towards the baby evident, but also sexual fantasies aroused for Father through the feeding experience.

The novel continues to explore how Father feels excluded and struggles to find a place for himself in the dyad. From the extract below, it appears that Father felt absolute awe, idealisation and intrigue towards his baby and wife and what happened between them.
She had begun writing in a spiral notebook every night, but I gathered that it was mostly observations about the new-born Bug. I would bring her a glass of water and get in bed while she sat against her pillow with her knees up ... and try to 'read' by ear what Bug-events she had found noteworthy that day. I wanted, as a first step to isolate some simple words like 'sleep' or 'milk' from the complicated sequences. I wasn't successful. Sometimes as I cranked my eyeball to its limit ... and with that visual supplement to the sound, I think I possibly decoded the aural image of the word 'nipple'. Or was it 'happy'? Was this skill even within the range of human ability?

As well as being identified with the infant, Father thankfully gets in touch with his adult part. This seems to make it possible for him to support the feeding relationship. This is the part of him that delights in feeding his wife and mother of their child and supporting her so she can successfully feed the baby. His idealisation and support of Mother and Bug seemed to be a healthy way of managing his more infantile greedy feelings. This significant move seems to involve the reworking of the relationship with the mother of his child, as a shift in their sexual relationship changes to incorporate this new person, who also has a right to Mother's body.

In conclusion, when Father's thoughts rapidly scanned through various past experiences and significant relationships including university and travel, 'the baby and her bottle' tended to get lost. These moments were harder to swallow! I felt enormous relief (an emotion perhaps shared by 'Bug') when Father's thoughts reverted back to Bug drinking her bottle, and

She had a regular rhythm going: she took three pulls on the nipple and then swallowed and every other time she swallowed, she made a lovely voiced sigh or hum of exhalation.

I thought Father's observations of the changes in his language were interesting, as it seemed to reflect the rhythm of the feeding experience: 'Gradually letting the consonants dull into a continuous vowelly whisper, inhaling some phrases and exhaling others.'

Through his experience of becoming a father, nothing would be the same again; as Baker notes 'everything in his life was beginning to route itself through the Bug'.

Reference