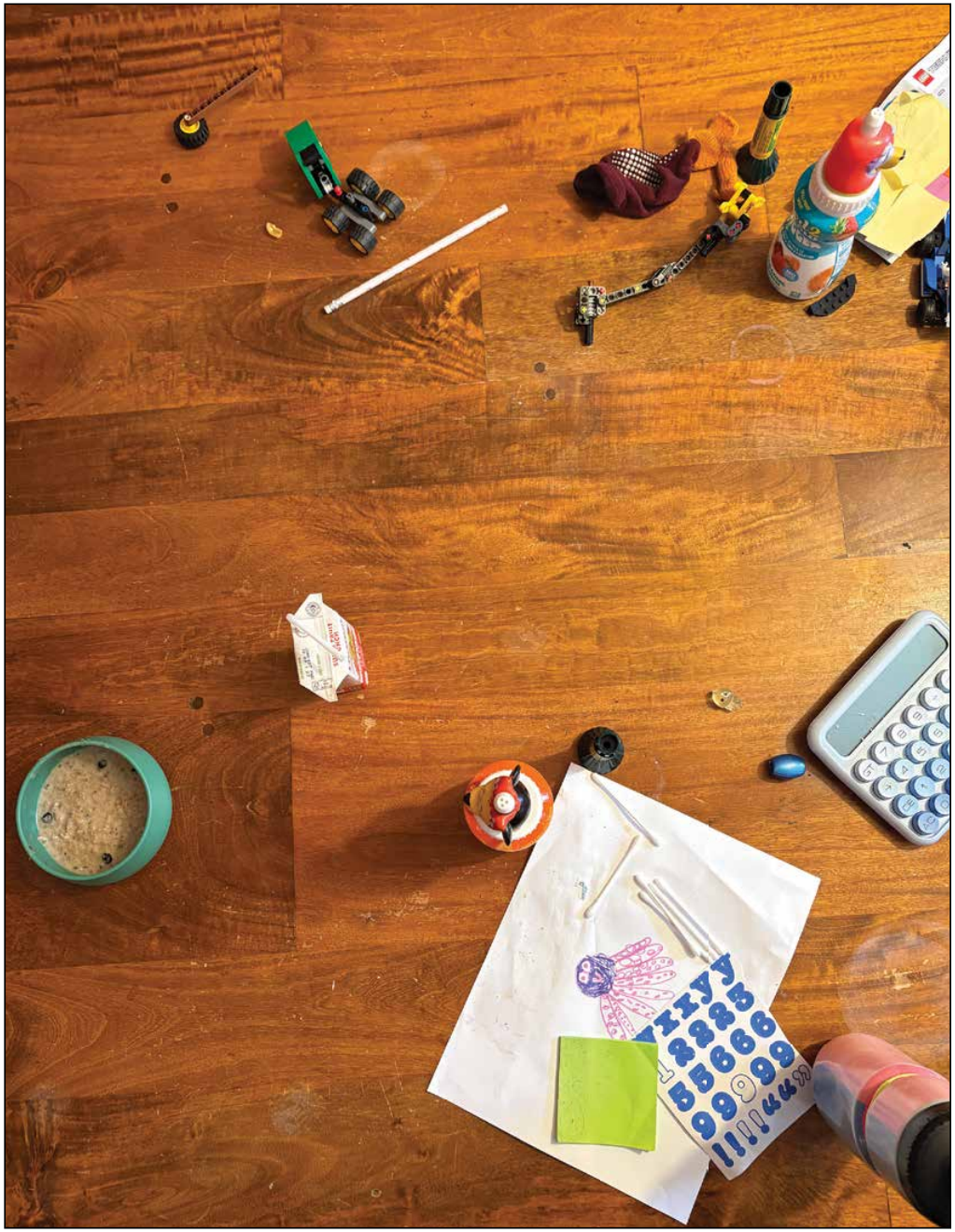


CHILD LABOR

Parenthood is important and impossible. Even if one does it well it is difficult.

No matter what else caregiving is, it is work.

This is an exploration and celebration of this job, and what the current moment requires of those who perform it.

ALIYA BONAR & ROBERT NORMAN, 2026

One Thing Is All There Is

SUSAN HODARA

Interrupted

September 2024

I am in the kitchen, expecting to hear from my daughter Sofie. She is nine weeks pregnant, and this afternoon will be her first ultrasound. She says she will try to call when they see the heartbeat. I am excited.

It is nearly four o'clock. I thought she said the appointment was at three. I text once; "still waiting," she replies.

I decide to bake cookies to pass the time. I rarely bake. But I've been thinking about cookies, craving them. Craving sweetness, something chewy and sugary.

Sofie lives in Boston. She is 38. Her partner, who is a year younger, is completing his Ph.D. and applying for jobs all over the place. Despite his uncertain future, they agree to go ahead and try to conceive. It doesn't take long. My husband and I quell her concerns about her unsettled situation: We, in New York, a three-hour drive away, will be there to help.

She is so eager, so happy. She worried about her age, that she might never have children. She watched her friends have them; her own sister, two years younger, has a two-year-old and a newborn and has started a list of everything Sofie will need. They laugh that their babies will be less than a year apart.

I am having a lovely summer. I am on a break from teaching. My husband and I spent a month in Denver helping out with our grandchildren. And then Sofie told us she was pregnant. She knew right away, she said. A buoyancy entered me, boosted me, and at the same time I felt more rooted to the earth. These sensations were quiet but strong, constant.

I turn on the oven to preheat. I crack an egg into a bowl, beat it and add a heaping cup of brown sugar, stirring with a wooden spoon until the mixture glistens. Next, I dump in flour and oats, more oats than flour. I plan to add raisins and chocolate chips. That's when the phone rings.

"They can't find a heartbeat." Sofie's voice is a broken whisper. She starts to explain, but then, abruptly: "The doctor is here. I have to go."

Everything else is blasted from my mind. Energy surges through my limbs, but simultaneously my body slows. Nothing can enter me; one thing is all there is. I make myself walk heavily up the stairs. My throat is shackled, like Sofie's had probably been, as I ask my husband to turn off the television.

"What?" he says.

"Can you turn it off?" I say, and when he does, I tell him. He winces, lying there on his back on the bed. He has questions, and I have no answers, but within seconds, the phone rings again.

More information. Then the wailing, my daughter shattered in a way I can't fix. "We are coming," I say.

The house feels foreign as I move through it. I try to focus on what to pack, placing clothes and cosmetics and chargers in a suitcase, throwing apples and nectarines and individual yogurts into a bag. I remember plastic spoons. I remember to turn off the oven. I remember extra water bottles because my mouth is parched.

I briefly wipe the kitchen counters and load the few dirty dishes in the sink into the dishwasher. I look at the bowl of unfinished batter on the butcher block. It is blue glass. I use the wooden spoon to scrape its sides and slide the gleaming ooze into the garbage, where it will sit in a soggy pile until we return.

Prayer

January 2025

It emanates from the core of me, inching upward, slowing my breath, filling me. Pure sensation, it draws everything in me toward it. It is the deepest yearning. It is prayer.

I am not in any temple or church; I don't pray like that. This is different. This is inside me, the embodiment of fears and needs and pleas that words can't contain.

It begins with words, though. Conception. Implantation. Viability. Heartbeat. Words for Sofie, five weeks newly pregnant, five months post miscarriage. "I can't go through it again," she keens, head down so all I can see on my screen is her rose-colored beanie.

Later that day I will remember her cries, relive her agony, think the words. And the feeling will rise again. The yearning. The prayer.

Second Batch

It's four weeks later, and Sofie is nine weeks pregnant again. She has turned 39. This time she has seen the baby's heartbeat. She has already had two ultrasounds, and on the night before the third ultrasound, I make the cookies.

I don't remember deciding to make them, and I work in an uneasy silence, as if I'm trespassing or betraying a trust. I can barely think the words that acknowledge what I am doing, let alone speak them, even to myself. But here I am, standing in the kitchen and mixing the batter in the same blue bowl I used the last time.

I preheat the oven. I spill oatmeal and flour into the bowl with honey and beaten egg and melted butter. I add brown sugar and, this time, vanilla extract, and I sprinkle in a fat handful of raisins. The tablespoon-sized balls I drop onto the buttered baking tray are sticky, coating my fingers with tawny dough that I lick off, despite the uncooked egg.

The cookies take longer to bake than I anticipate; I keep resetting the timer for five more minutes. When their round bottoms begin to brown, I lift the tray out of the oven and place it on top to cool. I eat one right away, tossing each bite around with my tongue and opening my mouth to let out the heat.

Third Batch

Two Weeks Later

With the next batch, I surprise myself. The worry, the unspoken superstitions, seem to have lifted. I just bake.

I bake because I want more of the cookies. I have developed what feels like a need for them: I like their flavor and texture, and they satisfy me, make me feel full.

Preheat. Honey, sugar, egg. Butter, flour, oats. Vanilla, maybe some cinnamon. Definitely the raisins. I line a baking sheet with gummy blobs,

and into the oven they go.

It is then that I am struck by my lack of fraught. Today Sofie gets her blood drawn for genetic testing of the fetus. Nothing is any more certain than it was two weeks ago except that time has passed.

Fifteen minutes later, the cookies are golden brown.

Fourth Batch

End of First Trimester

Sofie is doing well. Her genetic tests indicate a healthy baby boy. He is really on the way.

Paul and I are on our way, too – to London, for a short vacation. The impending trip has made me nervous. Travel under Trump seems dangerous, even for citizens like us. So does flying. Nothing bad can happen now. I am jittery. I feel scared. I wish we weren't going. I want the trip to be over before it has even begun. Funny how anxiety shifts its focus.

So I bake more of the cookies. I feel brave when I make them. Defiant. They come out crispier than before, I don't know why.

Our flight leaves near midnight the next day. Once on board, I unzip my carry-on and take out the crimson scarf that will serve as my blanket and the sandwich bag I've packed with my cookies. Before I ready myself to sleep, I open the bag and I eat them all: one, two, three, four. I chew slowly. In my mouth, I savor flakes of individual oats and gooey raisins and vanilla like perfume. I think of Sofie and the hint of a protrusion that is emerging around her belly and pray that I make it home safely.

Fifth Batch

Mid-April

"Let's bake them," I say to Sofie. At first it is a fun idea, addressing Sofie's urge for more of my cookies, which she devoured the night before. And then, in an instant, I am overcome by the unlikelihood of the scenario, stunned by its perfection and by how delighted I feel at its possibility – the two of us making the cookies together.

Sofie is visiting Paul and me in New York after attending her friend's mother's funeral in Queens. She is 18 weeks pregnant now, almost halfway through, and, not unexpectedly, ravenous. She inhaled an entire head of roasted cauliflower yesterday afternoon, hardly sitting down as she did. I offered her my cookies with a promise that they were filling. "I didn't follow any recipe," I confessed.

She took a bite. "Oh, these are good," she said. She has always been a fan of my concoctions.

Sofie knows nothing about the cookies I've been baking and my complicated relationship with them. Even when she was eating them, it didn't occur to me that she was actually chewing the very cookies I'd once thought I'd never make again, the cookies I'd imbued with her loss, grief and fear. So I tell her, and she listens with a hush. The rims of her eyes redden when I describe scooping the first batter into the trash. She is silent as I explain my secret emotions about batch two. She smiles as my story unfolds. "That's sweet," she says.

And then we make the cookies. Well, I make them, while Sofie sits waiting, scrolling on her phone at the table nearby. As I begin spooning dollops of the viscous batter onto the baking sheet, she stands and dips her finger into the bowl for a taste. "Don't," I say. "There's raw egg in there."

She has a Zoom meeting upstairs while the cookies are in the oven, and by the time she comes back down, they are cooling on the stove. She bites into one. "Mmmm," she says.

In the morning, she will drive back to Boston. I prepare food to sustain her during her trip: an almond butter-and-jelly sandwich, a banana and a baggie stuffed with the cookies, which will ride beside her all the way home, crumbs accumulating, I am sure, on the driver's seat as she eats.

Sixth Batch

Late August, 37 Weeks

I am working quickly, because what if Sofie calls before the cookies are done?

I have been invited to join her and her partner in the delivery room. When I get the news that labor has begun, I will hop into my car and go. Paul will follow once the baby arrives.

Sofie is tired, she says. Heavy. But on FaceTime she looks fecund and beautiful. Her hair is long and thick, her belly exploding in front of her. There are kicks being felt, gear being acquired, details being worked out. There is a name. Her hospital bag has been packed for weeks.

"Oh," she says one day on the phone. "They told me to pack snacks for the delivery room. That's something you can bring."

I don't remember eating in the delivery room when I gave birth. I don't remember thinking about hunger. But I, too, will soon have a bag packed.

Late September

It is quiet in Sofie's apartment. I am with her while her partner is at work. Sofie is stretched out on the living room couch, a wooden stool set nearby to hold her water bottle. Sunlight streams in through giant windows as my days-old grandson sleeps on her bare chest.

Sofie is, of course, exhausted, and it hurts when she moves too much due to an unplanned C-section. But after a few days in the hospital, she is relieved to be home, and each day she tackles another of the endless ways one becomes a mother, while I am here as hers.

I fetch her phone when she's left it across the room. I turn on the air conditioner when she overheats. I stack the dishwasher and throw in loads of laundry that later I fold and put away as instructed. And I make food. Sofie is just as hungry as she was before she gave birth. When I arrived, I delivered more of the cookies that had followed me throughout the past year, morphing slightly with each new batch. The cookies I brought this time are almost gone. So I gather the ingredients from her cupboards – the eggs and butter, the sugar and vanilla, the flour and oats and raisins – and I bake.

The rest of the time, I gaze at the baby, with his head of dark hair and pale eyelids that flutter on occasion, as if he's dreaming. When I place him over my shoulder and tap on his back so he'll burp, it is muscle memory. I bounce and sway and rock; when he opens his eyes and begins to fuss, I stand and walk and tell him, "Don't worry. Don't worry," and I watch as he slips back into sleep. Nestled in the crook of my arm, he is warm, sturdy, so tiny, his smell of newness, his skin like velvet. In this apartment, I am enveloped by the rare peace of a single and pure focus. One thing is all there is.

For Isidore Lee Hodara, September 15, 2025