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The Container

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My baptism into Balint coincided with my return from maternity leave and the looming threat of global pandemic on the horizon. The first wave would hit one month later, tumultuous and turbulent, with the things we had always been so sure of dissolving like sea foam. Small islands of solace in cherry blossom and kitchen discos – eerie calms while the storm clouds gathered in preparation for another torrent. We were cast adrift from each other, some drowning in ICU, others battered and shipwrecked by grief. Someone writes this in a poem, or something like it: *'same storm, different boats'*.

We do everything we can to keep things normal for the kids. We read them stories, pick flowers on walks, we try yoga. Somehow, we do this and manage to work a bit in between too (I don't remember how). One day, we build a cardboard pirate ship from all those delivery packages, now arriving with embarrassing frequency (a chess set, weights, a disco ball). It is flimsy, but we all fit inside. We sing shanties, because – like banana bread – shanties have gone viral. Indulge me here for a brief diversion on shanties. Some say their origin is almost that of a marching song, to synchronise sailor's efforts for periods of hard manual labour on an already long and brutal slog of a journey ('Heave! Ho!'). But they're more than that. Mourning and melancholy, nostalgia and hope, stories and magic pour from them by the bucketload. They change on the wind as they are blown back towards land, travelling on the tongues of those they encounter, back towards the mothers they miss: a communication across the waves, the sea, as the distance but also as the medium. Some of the songs are deep as the sea and exquisitely painful as a jellyfish sting.

We have sung a version of the shanty 'Spanish Ladies' to our children at night since they were born, and a line springs to mind now: *'Let us be jolly and*

drown melancholy'. But, of course, this is not what the sailors were doing: they were using the time-old tradition of processing something painful through song. '*This is faux jolly to process our melancholy*', perhaps? Ahem. Back, for now, to our living room floor, to the cardboard pirate ship: our son is painting it green. We have found various hats and made flags; we are googling semaphore. We all fit inside. There's something here too about shanties and the pandemic: it is something you sing together, and for those two minutes and fifteen seconds of 'The Wellerman' we are all in the same boat, weathering the same storm. Nonetheless, I think of holes in the hull, using a bucket to stop us sinking. Maintaining this not-quite-normal is utterly exhausting. I read a tweet: '*ever spill a bit of your coffee and realise the thread you are hanging on by is actually quite thin?*'

And so. Back to our beginning. I go back to work. I have a baby and a toddler at home. There is a pandemic. Am I sinking? Am I one coffee spill away from annihilation? In any case, I feel lucky compared to many. Ready or not, here we go anyway. Patients. Laundry. MMSEs. Shanties. Amazon packages. The on-call rota. P.E. with Joe Wicks. Zoom lectures. More Amazon packages. Zoom pub quizzes. Mental State Examinations. Zoom memorials. A&E in PPE. The Maudsley Prescribing Guidelines. Banana bread. Balint (also on Zoom).

Balint. I have no idea what to expect but I dive in. We are invited to swim in the unconscious of our patients, those close to them, and the presenting doctor. I am reminded of Gabor Maté (2007): '*Children swim in their parents' unconscious like fish swim in the sea*'. (He goes on to say, '*It is good to make sure the water stays clear*', but at this period in time the best I can muster is a paddling pool). I am invited to bathe in the minds of old women with dementia, racist inpatients, self-harming teenagers and their mothers who scream 'Do more'. Sometimes we 'lose' the patient, or the doctor, or both, caught in our own fantasy; we are guided gently back to them. Sometimes I submerge myself, and sometimes it's painful to dip a

toe in. Sometimes it is just too close and sometimes too far removed. I try to remember that *'every separation is a link'* (Weil, 1947), but it is easy to forget.

One session, our facilitator tells us about Bion's 'container'. We are holding something for someone that they are unable to hold themselves. 'My hull is leaking. My bucket is full. I'm leaky right now and I need a bigger bucket. SOS.' In acting as container for the infant, the mother carries the infant's rage and sadness, the big, messy things that can't help but spill over. The mother scoops it up, repackages it and hands it back in a child-friendly form: 'Here, I've put a handle on your bucket. It's still heavy, but you can hold it with one hand now.'

This is a moment of realisation for me. I am newly a container for not just one but two small humans, and I'm feeling the surface tension at my edges. I realise this is what I have been doing through the meltdowns, fevers, broken bones: holding them, murmuring to them, making up bedtime shanties – 'Baby, please give me some of this. You don't know what to do with it yet.' I remember the feeling of my skin stretching to its limit toward the end of pregnancy, the ache of a body barely able to contain. And then, suddenly, at the moment of birth, the sensation of a wet fish sliding out of a carrier bag, a sudden emptiness and distance.

As doctors, we like to think of ourselves as strong, sturdy, opaque containers. And maybe we are, some of the time. But in these pandemic years, we cannot avoid the image of our colleagues and friends collapsed in corridors, teary eyes just visible above a mask and behind a steamed-up visor. It is too much to contain. And so here in Balint, we could begin to contain each other: just a little, newly, as containers yielding and flexible and forgiving. Yes, a carrier bag comes to mind again.

It is weird now to remember that I once thought being a doctor might make me a better mother (rather grandiose actually, on reflection). But I do think that being a mother has made me a better doctor, and maybe this has something to do

with my experience in Balint, and the timing of all of it. I am not angry at that mother screaming, 'Do more' at the A&E doctor, and I think I might have been before. I am there with her (I am her) the night my son had a high temperature and I argued with the paediatrician about antibiotics. Not my best moment, I'll give you that. But when your child is sick, even your flimsy carrier bag-like containment starts disintegrating and I can almost hear that unconscious communication now: 'SOS BIGGER BUCKET PLEASE'. And for the patients 'acting out' and saying abusive things to the doctor, I hear it too: 'I AM SPILLING OVER AND I DON'T KNOW WHAT TO DO ABOUT IT, I have never been shown how.' And for the doctor in front of us in Balint, overwhelmed with anxiety or even barely concealed hatred for those patients, I hear it: 'I am supposed to be a big, shiny, tough bucket. What is going on, please?' Balint is one of the things that have helped me to see that people have different ways of telling me their boat is leaking and their bucket is not enough to stop them sinking. It might be coded in semaphore – indecipherable to me – but I will see that they are waving their arms frantically and with time I could learn their red flags from their yellow. They might do something totally mind-boggling, like poking more holes in their ship so that I will help them faster. They might have never had another bucket offered and fearing what it is, throw it back at me, handle and all. The doctor might not yet realise he has a bucket to offer in the first place.

Last year a container ship got stuck in the Suez Canal, and the image that sticks in my mind is that of a tiny digger scraping furiously at the side, totally dwarfed by the task at hand. I realised that I had somehow never thought about how this giant and mysterious industry supplies 90% of the things I wear and eat and do, from bananas to disco balls. I learned that even the captains know less than 5% of what their actual cargo is (could be anything from yoga mats to nuclear waste). A rather shocking number of shipping containers just fall off into the sea, unopened, buried and forgotten.³ I suppose Balint and parenthood remind us that,

even when we present ourselves as huge and reliable containers, some parts are still unknowable to us as captains of our vessels. Some compartments will fall into the sea, remaining sealed and unopened. Perhaps, though, by allowing others to scratch the surface, some parts may become more knowable to us. Moreover, we cannot know if or when we may become 'stuck' ourselves, and not only block our own progress, but that of the containers around us, who rely on us to navigate and move smoothly through a difficult passage. Come little baby ships, follow your mother ship to the sea!

The sea, the sea. Perhaps we should think of the container as fluid itself. During the pandemic, I felt myself drawn towards bodies of water for that fleeting serenity peculiar to floating. I wasn't alone here. In the UK, we flocked in droves to wild swimming spots, drinking up greedy gulps of nature and weightlessness, parched and bone-weary from this inescapable and menacing viral cloud hovering over land. But what else was here? A yearning for a return to the fluid containment of the womb? Like shanties, water is a balm for melancholy: *'For whatever we lose (like a you or a me)/ it's always ourselves we find in the sea'*: an E.E Cummings poem I rediscovered at the Turner Gallery in Margate, half-forgotten from my first poetry book given to me by my mother. Margate, also home to the first 'sea bathing hospital' for the treatment of non-pulmonary tuberculosis. A disease then untreatable, uncontainable; how terrifying it must have been, for patients, for their mothers, for their doctors. How much of the benefit derived from this 'treatment' was actually a sort of fluid containment? Is this what the doctors unconsciously offered their patients? No solid container would hold that much mourning, I think. Here in Balint too we can all pour into a collective unconscious and swim together, go fishing and see what bites. Fluid thinking, fluid containment. Maybe we can invite our patients to swim here, too.

Turbulent waters do not reflect. Perhaps we are moving too fast, churning up the waters around us; a wake that would capsize little ships. In Balint, perhaps

we can slow things down, steady our ship enough to give the sea time to still itself
and catch a glimpse of ourselves on the surface.

Maggie and milly and molly and may

*maggie and milly and molly and may
went down to the beach (to play one day)*

*and maggie discovered a shell that sang
so sweetly she couldn't remember her troubles, and*

*milly befriended a stranded star
whose rays five languid fingers were;*

*and molly was chased by a horrible thing
which raced sideways while blowing bubbles: and*

*may came home with a smooth round stone
as small as a world and as large as alone.*

*For whatever we lose (like a you or a me)
it's always ourselves we find in the sea*

(E.E. Cummings, 1956)

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