

How to Feed a Child

by Christine Overall

Beside my bed the ticking of the alarm clock is as steady as a metronome. In time with the ticks, the little metal horse attached to the clock face clicks hopelessly back and forth. In my world, time doesn't fly; it gallops, though it gets nowhere.

I've been lying awake for long, empty hours. It's now 1:20 a.m. My parents and my younger brothers are asleep. In the darkness of my room, I push back the covers, reach for the floor with my bare feet, then open the door. We children are not supposed to get up in the night. I must be very quiet. Our parents need their rest.

The house isn't silent. The steady warm wind from the basement furnace rushes through the grate in the wall. As our home breathes in its sleep, mysterious pops, creaks, and snaps arise from the floors.

I creep across the hall and into the bathroom. After closing the door, I don't turn on the light. The sole illumination is from the streetlamp outside the window.

A fat bar of soap rests beside the hot water tap. Five toothbrushes stand like soldiers beside the drinking cup. Dotted in the sink are spots where my family spat out their toothpaste. In the bathroom mirror my face looks back at me—round, babyish, and alert.

I take the bar of soap and wet it under the cold-water tap. Then I smear it on the open palm of my left hand. Round and round I draw the soap, making a thicker and thicker scum on the smooth skin of my palm. Next, I pick up the toothpaste. With only my own right hand, I can't squeeze the tube from the bottom as we've been taught. I'm hoping my pinch in the middle won't be noticed. Half an inch of toothpaste oozes onto my left palm, on top of the soap layer. Then I put the toothpaste down and use my right pointer finger to spread the toothpaste and smear it around. I even doodle a couple of designs, finger painting in the muck.

Finally, I'm finished. My entire left palm is shiny, slippery, and greyish white in the light from the window. For a long moment I look at it.

And then I begin to lick my hand. I lick and I lick until all the soapy toothpaste is gone, until my hand is bare, and I can no longer taste anything. Then I wipe my damp palm on the seat of my blue pyjamas and creep back to bed.

Many times that year I made my late-night forays to the bathroom. I was never caught or stopped.

But why? Why did I eat soap and toothpaste?

Not for the taste, that's for sure. I still remember how my tongue sought out the grainy bittersweetness of the toothpaste, but recoiled from the greasy soap, which stung my throat when I swallowed it.

I ate it because I was hungry.

My mother fed us well, by the standards of the time. Meat at almost every supper; only poor people—and my parents didn't consider themselves poor—could not afford meat. Occasionally breaded fish sticks appeared on our plates, though not on Fridays. The Catholics in the neighbourhood might give up meat for fish on Friday night, but they were not to be emulated.

Along with the meat there were potatoes—mashed, boiled, fried, or roasted. When my mum was a girl, she told me that her mother calculated the number of potatoes for supper by counting “two each and two over.” For our family of five that would have meant twelve potatoes every night. But we never had close to that many. Perhaps Mum couldn't face peeling twelve. Or perhaps we just couldn't afford it.

In addition to the meat and potatoes there were cooked carrots, canned corn, or canned peas, all of them mushy. Sometimes cauliflower or mashed turnip, rarely broccoli. More often the much-despised brussels sprouts. Never salad.

Yet I was hungry all the time that year. During the day, when my mother wasn't looking, I would wet a finger down to the knuckle, plunge it into the canister of sugar, then suck all the sweetness off. I would have taken other food too, but I was afraid of being caught. My mother knew exactly how many apples and crackers were in the cupboard. Or so I believed.

I'm not sure why I was hungry late at night. What I do know is the mixture of soap and toothpaste was so repugnant, it stopped me from thinking about food and let me get to sleep.

I also know our neighbours called my younger brother "Skinny Dugan." His stomach was concave, and his ribs lay like fingers right under his skin. He was always asking for more Kool-Aid or Velveeta slices.

We were the children of people who had survived the Great Depression and the Second World War. Our parents lived on the edge of their budget. Our father was sometimes unemployed. Our mother was always counting coins and trickling them into small brown envelopes, each one, she said, for a different expense.

So they limited our portions; oranges and bananas doled out; biscuits restricted; snacks forbidden. Despite the meat and potatoes, we were not well nourished.

Our kitchen has black linoleum on the floor, with a pattern like small, thin, yellow worms. The table and chairs are made of wood and painted pale green. My mother says she hates the table and wishes she could have one made of Formica and metal, more up to date. The kitchen smells of the crumbled hamburger and diced potatoes my mother fried for supper. She doesn't like cooking.

My parents are fighting. Not physically, but verbally, shouting at each other. Saying, "I don't care" and "You never ..." and "I don't know why I bother" and "You always ..." and "What's the point?" The anger and tension in my parents make me feel untethered, unattached, and unsafe. Before this year I never noticed my parents fighting. It started when our baby was born.

Now the baby is lying in his carriage nearby. My brother and I sit in silence at the table. My brother is eating, but slowly. His laboured pace annoys our parents. At seven he's barely tall enough for the table, and he's hunched over, sheltering himself from the familiar disaster unfolding in our family.

I've almost finished my dinner. I don't like it much, but I'm always hungry, so I seldom have trouble eating. It's digesting that gives me problems. My stomach feels as if it has stones in it, which roll around and bump each other and press against my insides.

I often need to run to the toilet. This trouble started just after our baby arrived, six months before I started eating soap and toothpaste.

The battle between my parents reaches a crisis. Slamming his knife and fork on the table, as if to bury them in the wood, my father stands up. He shoves his chair back so hard it judders against the linoleum. Grabbing his jacket, he hurls himself out of the house. The front door bangs shut, then the door of our old car, and he backs out of the driveway so fast that gravel flies up and pelts the sides of the car.

My mother hasn't moved. She's crying. So is our baby, but no one goes to comfort him.

Two decades later I became a mother myself. I wanted to raise my children in a better way than I was raised. I wanted to know what their feelings were, what they thought and hoped. And I wanted to give them lots of good food. Red and green peppers, their skins shiny and taut, cut into ribbons. Slices of cucumber or apple. Canned tuna or salmon in casseroles, salads, or sandwiches made from bakery brown bread. Pizza with tomatoes, cheese, mushrooms, and pepperoni. Brown rice, gooey and slightly crunchy at the same time. Spaghetti, macaroni, and when I was especially tired, Kraft Dinner with chunks of hot dog. Apple juice or orange juice to drink, but never Kool-Aid.

At supper one day, quixotically, I asked my small son, "What do you think the meaning of life is?"

He was a thoughtful, serious child. With his eyes closed, he contemplated for a moment. Then he looked up at me and said, "To make sure all the kids are fed."

I have a vision, an embedded primeval fear. It may be imagined, yet it feels like a flashback.

I'm sitting by a fire with a few members of my clan. The flames send arrows into a darkness so thick it's almost solid. We are together for warmth and community, only a few of us, sheltering from the wolves and snakes and spirits that skulk in the forest just beyond our sight.

We're waiting for the clan's gatherers and hunters to return. We hope for berries, blue or green. Walnuts, chestnuts, or hickory nuts, hard to open, tough to chew, but filling.

Leaves, roots, and mushrooms, only those known to be safe. Crunchy insects and succulent grubs. Sometimes a delicacy: honey, fish, or even a little meat and juicy bone marrow.

Will the foragers find the food we need? Will there be enough to eat for even the smallest and least important of us? We lean against each other, we do not talk, we watch the flames conjuring light in the impenetrable dark. Some of us sleep, but I do not. I watch and wonder. They may find food this time. But what about the next time? How long will it be until we can eat again?

All this could be a species memory, a ghostly trace of the past. It's not so very long since people like me and my clan were only one meager hunt, one unsuccessful search, one failed crop away from hunger. And still today, starvation is a common plague.

But the fearful apparition of my clan around the fire may also be a glimpse of years to come. We humans have leveled the forests and grasslands and bombed the fields. We've covered the ground with asphalt and cement, poisoned the soil and water, and multiplied the numbers who must live on it and from it.

Some day there may be nothing to ease the hunger of a small girl in the night.

Now, as an old woman, I share dinners with a man who is gentle and steady. I eat baked salmon topped with olive oil and lemon juice. Edamame sucked one by one from their pods. Sweet potato fries, so much better than white potatoes. Pasta with grass-green basil pesto. Maki, uramaki, and nigiri, small artworks of raw fish, seaweed, rice, and cucumber. Pizza topped with avocado, eggplant, and artichoke hearts. Arugula and kale, bosc pears and pomegranates.

Feasting like this is a privilege. I waste very little. I eat up all the leftovers.

I no longer need to eat toothpaste or soap. Not now.

Not yet.



A recovering academic, **Christine Overall** has published extensively in philosophy. For thirteen years, she also wrote a weekly feminist column for her local paper. Her short story, "Dragon," was published in 2022, and in 2023 her personal essays, "Lost Ring," "Boxes," and "Warts," were accepted for publication. She's written several short monologues for local theatre groups, some of which she performed herself (probably badly). Her latest adventure is in improvisational theatre.