A husband. A graduate student. A father…and in that order.

Ismar Biberovic

I got married when I was 19. One would think that being married while finishing my bachelor’s degree would teach me how to balance my personal and academic life, and one would be absolutely wrong. Then, graduate school came along, and, it was astonishing how little I knew about the challenges of trying to finish my graduate degree while being married. Studying, more often than not, meant doing work after my wife goes to sleep. Due to low graduate student compensation, I worked weeknights and weekend mornings in a local restaurant, so sleeping in was out of the question. Once fit and active, my mental and physical health was slowly deteriorating – life seemed completely out of balance, and then, we had a baby…

There is this sense of relief when your thesis defense is within arm’s reach. In fact, I just applied for a ‘real’ job in my field, and these last six years of school seem to be leading me in the right direction. My data analysis has been finished for quite some time now and the time I have free I spend writing. Seeing the results of your work get a grander context feels oddly satisfying and one feels very much extricated. I am finally able to spend hours trying to install not one, but two bidets for our toilet – one in a form of a sprayer, for our daughter’s cloth diapers, and the other one, a real bidet, for you know what. But, it wasn’t always this easy.

I had met my wife when we were 15. Four years after, I moved to the United States so we can start a life together. My first couple of years here, I was living the culture-shock to its fullest extent. Turns out, pancakes were not the same as crepes!? Bosnian humor translates very poorly to English, in fact, it’s weird. Everything here came in packaging - even vegetables! When you order coffee, it is not espresso - it’s this cup of hot water with a hint of coffee flavor. And, as a Balkan person, I am constantly asked, to this day, if I am Russian. My wife and I have been married for seven years now – crazy kids.

Our daughter was born after a long night of celebration, on the morning of January 1st, 2022, and she was born to the best mom in the world. Unlike me who is only organized when it comes to washing dishes and vacuuming, my wife has it together 24/7. She was only three months pregnant when we reserved a spot in our local daycare. All our nights away with our friends, that’s all her. I sometimes feel like if she didn’t arrange our friend get-togethers, I would never see anyone but her. She plans our meals. She created our baby registry. She took our daughter overseas to see my parents – twice. Our daughter is only 8 months old. Three days before the daycare was supposed to start, we got a notice that the infant room will be closed for the year. We were stunned.

The child-care crisis seems to be on steroids where we live. We called just about every daycare within a 30-minute radius, and, no luck – every single spot is taken. Our best (and only) decision – I stay with our daughter during the day, and I do work at night. I’ve done that for years; how hard can it be? Well, I don’t think there is a person in the world who likes extension cords as much as my daughter. She is also quite uninterested in every toy meant for infants, and very interested in everything else. If I do not vacuum the tiniest piece of an object that ended up on the floor, she will find it, and she will eat it – or at least try to. I know this, and she knows that I know, which is why she does it inconspicuously, and why I cannot get much work done when she’s awake. She is very independent, but, if she wants you to play with her, you better do that, or else she will whine until it happens – it’s a zero-sum game. I changed my ways; instead of trying to do work, when she’s playing, I tie knots for hours at a time. I do dishes. I fold laundry. I read the news. And, most importantly, I enjoy spending every second with her, building memories to last forever.

While I am waiting to hear back from the hiring committee, oddly enough, I am deeply enjoying these moments of freedom that I get to share with our baby. I do not work on weekends anymore, and I only do research on weeknights. If this job does not work out, I know that something else will, eventually. I will not give up these times with her, but, if anyone hears of an infant opening, you know what to do!