

Midlife Pandemic

By Amie Heasley

WHY WE LIKE IT: *The isolation and distancing imposed by Covid-19 takes an introspective turn in this strongly written CNF in which a woman watches the life she has built over 22 years with her husband and daughter slowly unravel. A misguided attempt to rejuvenate into a hipper version of how she sees herself—Doc Martens, nose ring, sex toys—ironically and pathetically only point to the woman she is running away from. We like the way social distancing is paralleled by marital distancing in this ‘confession’ and how Covid-19 and menopause conspire to ratchet up the tension. The effective use of the passive POV creates both a sense of intimacy and separation and the author’s nimble slightly frantic prose is deliciously readable. Quote:*

You’re well acquainted with the concept of social distancing, at least when it comes to your marriage. Your husband has been standing six feet away from you for months, maybe years.

She laughs the kind of laugh that makes you feel pleasure in a way you’ve been robbed of for too long.

(Spacing is author’s own.) Eds.

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You do not buy a little red sports car, but you do buy a pair of Doc Marten boots: black ones with yellow stitching. Unlike the ones you bought years ago in some Hollywood boutique, you buy these sober in an over-lit shoe store in the Midwest with your 8-year-old in tow. You put on your new Docs immediately when you arrive home, and you wear them around the house while you do the dishes, run the vacuum and go over your daughter’s spelling words. You act like you’re as hot shit as you were at twenty.

You get a nose ring, spur of the moment. Your husband and daughter go with you. Your husband asks if you’re nervous and you say no because you want him to believe you’re stronger than the hollow tree of the woman you’ve become. Still, when the sterilized stainless-steel needle pierces your right nostril, you’re grateful he’s holding your hand.

You're surprised he's holding your hand. You hardly ever hold hands. You don't hold hands enough. You wish you held hands more.

You're not sure how much longer you can stay upright. How much longer can you lug around the shards of your heart?

You've never shied away from tears, but you've been weeping too much. Every day you cry, often more than once, for weeks, then months. You avoid watching anything too sentimental. Even insurance commercials with Flo or that Green Bay quarterback can cue the goddamn waterworks. Most of your music could be categorized as Depressive Mode, so though you've loved dissecting lyrics and melodies in songs all your life, you stop listening to anything. (This vignette about the silence in your life that was once filled with song makes you well up.)

Your husband says he feels like his existence doesn't matter to you.

You're irritated by the concept of a mancave. Why do all the troubled and weary men need a cave for escape, hibernation, watching sports and/or jerking off? Can't they just do that in the sunken living room when the kids and the wives are fast asleep in their bedrooms? You don't have a mancave or a sunken living room, but before the quarantine you encourage your husband to go out and have a few drinks, give himself all the space he desires, despite the fact he took a break from wearing his wedding band. Your heart aches from wanting to hold fast and tight to his ringless hand.

You begin seeing a therapist. Your self-esteem is abandoned squares of a quilt you don't have a clue how to stitch together. In the face of what might be The Apocalypse (aka our "New Normal"), could you sew anything? A face mask? A blouse? A wound? You've had these recurring bleak thoughts about the state of the world, your marriage, your soul. There are days when the thoughts won't stop playing on and on, like the jam band music your husband likes but you can't stand. Not that you listen to music anymore.

You call your husband an asshole. He doesn't hear you, but your daughter does. You're well acquainted with the concept of social distancing, at least when it comes to your marriage. Your husband has been standing six feet away from you for months, maybe years.

You buy two vibrators. Your husband reveals he doesn't think you're sexually attracted to him. You have 1) gone through the motions in bed before and 2) haven't been having enough sex for years. You could list out the excuses and the reasons here and now, but they're probably SOP for a couple married for over two decades. Your husband's revelation and his pushing you away make you want him more. You'd bone him every day if he'd indulge you, but your lust reversal turns him off.

You're on eggshells in the home you've lived in for twelve years with the man with whom you've shared your entire adult life. You rarely leave so much as a fragment of a

shell in the eggs you routinely scramble for him, and while the man with whom you've shared your entire adult life likes the domestic ritual of the homemade breakfast, he hates the house you've lived in for twelve years.

You attempt and succeed at the smoky eye. Your husband says he loves you, but is not *in love* with you. This little bombshell wreaks havoc on your smoky eye(s).

Your husband insists he's driving the narrative of whatever's going on with or between you two, but he's the one who put whatever's going on with or between you two in park. (Neutral at best.) You are the one who caught him looking at porn. You are the one who pointed out the porn wasn't the problem. The problem was (and is) the walls he erected. You tell him he isn't present in the home and the life you've built together. He agrees with you. So technically, you're the one who put your foot on the gas of the narrative that's currently driving your relationship. (Plus, you're open to watching porn with him.)

Your husband's existence means everything to you.

You used to have game. (Maybe your game is like asymptomatic coronavirus, cloaked within your cushy perimenopausal body?) You meet a friend at a bar for a "girls' night." There's this guy who sells garbage trucks for a living chatting her up. He doesn't hear well, or like your mother-in-law says, he has *selective hearing*. Your friend tells him she works for a company that does research for pharmaceutical development. She keeps repeating the word *drugs* louder when he says *trucks*. This gentleman has nothing but your friend and trucks on the brain. When the bartender steals his attention, you tease your friend: "See, you've got game." She laughs the kind of laugh that makes you feel pleasure in a way you've been robbed of for too long.

You've gone down on your husband more in the last six months than the last fifteen years. It lacks sensitivity and embraces stereotype, but you can't wrap your head around how blowjobs on the regular could spike any red-blooded male's anxiety.

You suck at asking for help. This simple fact blooms technicolor in your mind during one of your solo jogs in the glorious and free fresh air. You share it with your therapist through the grainy screen of an iPad in your third or fourth teletherapy session. Later, you also text your husband your insight. This is what self-discovery looks like mid-pandemic.

You and your husband decide to put in an offer on a lake house. He resents you for not being open to the idea of living on a lake sooner. The lake house is tiny but the water and the promise of happiness in front of it are vast.

You call your husband a dick, a prick, a self-absorbed, coddled narcissist. Nobody hears you.

You try to have some dignity for God's sake. You deserve more than the pittance your husband doles out. You deserve to be loved for the one and only flawed you. Pull up

your bootstraps. Put on your big-girl panties. Tell your husband to not let the door hit him in the ass. Stay calm and carry on. Bye, Felicia. OK, Boomer. These silly convictions seem convincing when you're out running. Feet pounding the pavement, you pray your strides beat back your uncertainty.

You refuse to give into the Humpty Dumpty narrative.

Your husband asks your daughter who she's taking to the school dance. She answers without hesitation, "Mommy and Daddy." You wonder if your husband realizes the fleeting and monumental nature of this statement.

Your lake house is sunk. The inspection doesn't go swimmingly—the garage is a full scrape, the deck is rotting, one of the rooms doesn't have heat, the staging is too perfect, there's probably a rabid cat next door who'll shit in your flower box. The list of concerns equals too much risk. No matter what he's said, your husband won't allow himself to steer your marriage into uncharted waters. Instead, he yields to the familiar comfort of throwing open the porthole, letting his, his therapist and his father's doubts about buying his dream home wash him overboard. Ahoy, matey! This isn't the first time he's found himself in need of a life preserver.

You take a trip to D.C. for your twenty-second anniversary. Your husband who has avoided flying for three years and counting has decided you both should be wheels up. You consider it a small miracle you've reached twenty-two. You also consider this a sign your husband is trying to work things out. You spend several hours immersed in the replica of a slave ship that is the African American History Museum. You slouch on a barstool and eat the best fish sandwich you've ever tasted. You stumble into a massive Right to Life march by mistake. (Your daughter is adopted, but you remain firmly pro-choice.) You ride the Metro like Midwest tourists. You have sex like newlyweds. You have oral sex like new lovers. You have orgasms (plural)! You both drink too much, in D.C., in Kalamazoo and everywhere in between. The trip is short and sweet and the relief is welcome and temporary.

You ask your therapist, "How do you help someone who won't get the fuck out of their own way?" (This is a rhetorical question aimed at both you and your husband.)

You tell your husband he thinks he's better than you. He doesn't disagree with you. He is socially engaging, charming really. He's the bread winner with the cool job at a nationally renowned brewery. You are a self-employed writer, don't bring home much bread (or beer) and aren't known beyond your innermost circles. Social situations make you anxious. Your husband says your social anxiety is a burden. You don't disagree with him, but note you've never described his fear of flying or his claustrophobia as burdensome. Maybe you should've been more forthright. Maybe you should've taken that elevator to the bowels of Hoover Dam or that flight to Finland without him, just as he's spent so many evenings mingling among coworkers without you.

Your husband sleeps mostly on the couch. Your bedroom is too confining for him. Bullshit. What's confining is you lying next to him, so you, too, take up evening residence on your sagging leather couch. You're desperate to be near him. You can't be certain how long his nearness will last. If and/or when he leaves, you will either donate or burn that couch. (You're heavily leaning toward flames and ashes.)

You think, I didn't sign up for *this*. Is *this* the for worse, the in sickness?

Your social anxiety could be a boon during the COVID-19 crisis. Yet you can't have children, and even if you could, a chronic introvert wouldn't want any part of repopulating the earth. You're closing in on your fifth decade on the planet and can't fathom sleeping with another man besides your husband in RL.

Your daughter finds one of your vibrators. She asks if her teddy bear can please have it.

You kiss and hug more. It makes your husband flinch. His unease stings, but you won't stop. You will keep telling him you love him. You're angry, you're numb, you're terrified, you're resilient, but one thing is crystal: you will always throw him the goddamn life preserver.

You wind up in the ER for a psych eval. Thoughts of suicide, no specified plan, humiliation thick like the wet blanket your husband has labeled you. He informs you he no longer wants to be married. You inform him you no longer want to live. He calls 911 when you try to flee the house. The cops show up. EMS follows. You're loaded into an ambulance, eyes of your betrothed neighbors watching.

You, your husband (still) and your daughter are all inside a pressure cooker, trapped for God knows how long. Michigan's governor has ordered everybody to shelter at home to help flatten the curve. Your family is together, but if you hear the phrase or read the hashtag "in this together" one more time, you and your Instahouse will explode.

You've had a great fall. You'll need something more than all the king's horses and all the king's men to ever be whole again.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *The inspiration for this work came from the precipice of divorce. Trite and first-world as it sounds (most of us are probably familiar with the stats), I never thought the potential dissolution of my marriage was something I'd have to face, let alone during a pandemic. Over the last several months, in what has felt like soul-crushing isolation at times, I've navigated life as a Great Pretender, much to the detriment of my mental health. Nobody outside of a pretty small circle has truly known about my internal struggles. Writing has always been a savior for me, and while it's been more challenging than ever to put pen to paper (or fingertips to keyboard), this particular piece has allowed me to give my pain*

some much-needed air. It's enabled me to give in to the vulnerability and finally breathe. Using second person (along with the short, non-linear vignettes) made my emotional fragility feel more universal. Beyond my own healing process, my hope is that the work strikes a chord and shows others that we really are (ugh, gasp) "in this together."

AUTHOR'S BIO: Amie Heasley earned an MFA in fiction from Western Michigan University. You can find some of her work online or in the pages of Stoneboat Literary Journal, Monkeybicycle, Juked, Change Seven, Belletrist Magazine, The Boiler Journal and Fiction Southeast. She blogs lovingly but not nearly enough at chopperchronicles.blogspot.com.