

# Defund the Marriage

By Aaron Morell

**WHY WE LIKE IT:** *A low key domestic drama of the sort that plays out behind closed doors in every town and city from Heres-ville to Theres-ville. We get lots of submissions grappling with this theme which might prove the truth, sadly enough, that writers write what they know about. What we like about this one is the way escalating tension leads us deeper and deeper into the characters. From just a few lines we can infer what the couple's life together is like and the consequences of what each see as the other's alienation. Marcia's desperate attempt to save something that she knows is already lost strikes a poignant chord and draws us into the struggle. The action is up front and in the moment through the device of in media res and dialogue impresses. To our surprise, we learned from the author that this will be his first published story. Huh? Writing likes this should be snapped up the minute it comes in. Which is what we did. (Font size is author's own.)*

Marcia descends the bare-wood basement steps. Frank is exactly where she last saw him, leaning on the water furnace, hunched over his phone. She takes a breath and reminds herself that she's strong, just as her friends have reminded her.

“Frank,” she says with rehearsed patience.

He drops his head, crestfallen, and then slowly stands straight as if he were bracing for another beating. He looks up at the ceiling and holds this pose for some time. When he finally turns to face Marcia his eyes are filled with rage that extends deep into his soul, back into his childhood, and disappears somewhere within his deceased father. Although its tempered for the moment, Marcia knows to keep her distance because when the source of the rage turns its blind suffering eye outward, things get broken. Sometimes it's her.

“Are you going to get the canning pot down for me?” she asks, careful not to sound impatient, nervous, afraid, submissive, angry, hostile, or confrontational.

“Didn’t we just have this conversation?” he asks irritably.

“An hour ago.”

“So why are you asking again?”

“Because it’s been an hour.”

“And I’m still busy trying to fix this goddamn furnace.”

“You’ve been down here since nine this morning.” Marcia catches herself before her frustration spills over. “It’s not the pilot light?”

“If it was the pilot I would’ve lit it five hours ago,” Franks snaps as his face turns red. This is always the first sign his temper’s flaring up. Next his neck veins will protrude as his body rushes enough blood up to supply the oncoming tirade.

Marcia maintains her equanimity. “Can you please just get the canning pot down for me?”

“You asked me to fix the furnace and that’s what I’m doing. If you want me to come up and get your fucking pot then you deal with this shit.”

Even though it’s not in her nature to back down in a disagreement, Marcia knows better than to argue against nonsense that he will defend like his existence depends upon his words standing as irrefutable fact. So without another word, she turns and walks back upstairs. But by the time she reaches the kitchen, anger and insult have given way to the familiar feeling of being decimated of any self-worth or dignity. This domination and oppression is exactly what she’s protested against, exactly what her friends have insisted she doesn’t deserve. No one deserves to be treated this way. So she walks back to the basement door and *politely* walks down the stairs.

Frank has returned to whatever he was looking at on his phone. Standing at the bottom of the steps, Marcia takes a deep breath and sighs audibly. Don't be timid, be strong.

"Ever since we talked..." She hesitates when Frank throws his head back in exasperation. She starts again. "Ever since we talked—"

"Five seconds ago?" he pointedly asks, without turning around.

"You know what I mean."

Frank turns suddenly. "Ohh..." Blood is pumping through veins that are like fire hoses used in wildfires. "You mean when you said you don't want me around you no more."

"I never said that."

"You said if we can't show respect for each other then we can't be together. Obviously you don't want to be together."

Marcia shakes her head in confusion.

"You don't treat me with a lick of respect," Frank shouts. "Frank go fix the furnace. Frank get the giant pot down. Frank fix the socket I blew out."

"I plugged my hair dryer in and the socket blew up! I'm lucky I wasn't electrocuted."

"Lucky," Frank mumbles.

"It's kinda strange how that happened."

Frank turns away from her and sits down in front of the furnace. With a screwdriver he pries open the pilot assembly door.

"What did you do with my hair dryer, anyway?" Marcia asks.

"I threw it in the garbage. It was fried." He shimmies down so he's lying on his side. With a flashlight he examines the furnace interior.

With her hands on her hips, she glares at the back of his head. "What about the cat?"

“What about the cat?” his voice resounds in the furnace cavity.

“Where’d he go?”

“How should I know?”

“Because someone let him out and it wasn’t me.”

“You don’t know that,” Frank whines.

“Yes I do,” Marcia snaps. “He doesn’t like to go outside. He’s terrified of the outdoors.”

“You haven’t been working on this the whole time, have you?”

Frank slams the flashlight on the concrete floor and sits up. “What do you want from me!”

“Honesty. Respect. How about a little kindness. Do you even know what that word means?”

“Marcia, I swear....” He bites his bottom lip and shakes his head.

“What, you’re gonna hit me? Is that what you’re saying?”

In a wrathful explosion, Frank throws the flashlight against the wall. The lens pops off and rolls across the smooth concrete floor. “Why can’t you just stop tormenting me? Constantly fucking tormenting me! Oh, don’t you dare look at me like I’m sick. You’re the one who’s done this to me.”

“Done what?”

“Driven me into complete fucking depression. You make me hate my life so fucking much.”

“Every single time I try to talk to you about anything, you just get so angry for no good reason.”

“Oh, there’s good reason.”

“Let’s hear it.”

“Let’s start with how you don’t appreciate how goddamn stressful my work is.”

“That’s completely untrue,”

“If you did, you’d understand how I feel.”

“But Frank, we talked about this. I explicitly told you I can see what your work is doing to you. But I said it then and I’ll say it again: taking it out on me is not unacceptable.”

“I don’t take it out on you. I keep it inside.” He jabs himself in the chest with his finger. “It’s in here all the fucking time. Never goes away.”

“You call physically hurting me, not taking it out on me?”

“I said I was sorry! You love to dwell on that. You use it like a knife, stabbing me over and over.” Frank stares down at the invisible dagger in his hand as it penetrates his flesh and guts. Menacingly he twists the blade back and forth.

“Frank.” She changes her tone so she’s practically pleading with him. “Don’t you agree we need to change? Our marriage needs to change. I love you but I’m unhappy and so are you. We need to rethink and re-imagine our marriage by figuring out what happened, what went wrong. Don’t you agree?”

“How about I just blow my fucking brains out? Would you like that?”

“Don’t say that.”

“Then just leave me alone. If you don’t want me going out with my pals and you don’t want me doing anything except work and serve you, then I need space.” He hammers his point home with the screwdriver handle.

Marcia nods as if she’s finally figured him out. “So, if I understand you, what you need—or should I say what you want—is to go out every night with your buddies and get drunk, spend

the weekend at the track, or whatever it is you do, and when you are home you want the right to treat me like stinking garbage. And if I express even a whimper of unhappiness, you can just knock the shit out of me.”

“I swear to God, Marcia! I’ll go upstairs right now and get my gun and blow my fucking brains out all over the walls.”

Marcia abruptly turns and marches away. Her heavy steps are amplified like a drum in the empty space below the stairs.

**AUTHOR’S NOTE:** *From early on in the police violence protests this year I was struck by the negative reactions. Demands for justice were met by indignation. Pleas for dignity were mocked with disdain. Certain police unions characterized protesters as pro-criminal advocates. Department leaders claimed the attacks on law enforcement had destroyed their morale and therefore their ability to function adequately as protectors. I saw these conflicts of interest on a very human, personal level and I wondered how it would look within a relationship. My writing is strongly influenced by cinema aesthetics and philosophical writers like Kundera and Camus.*

**AUTHOR’S BIO:** After studying literature and film at the University of Kansas, I lived an itinerant life exploring the country, making short films, and writing screenplays. Several years back I shifted to fiction and began submitting that body of work in 2020. I now live in Brooklyn, NY with my daughter.