

Exes in Suburban Quarantine

She pours me another while she is up, checking the monitor for movement in their cribs and then we sit together again at the table in the kitchen while the house is finally still. I can't remember the last time we sat at a table in a kitchen together. She says here ya go and reminds me that she isn't judging and to be careful. I nod and smile a little and know that 3 bottles emptied in a week is not sustainable.

We cheers, six feet apart.

Three weeks ago, we had the conversation over the phone. She said, I think it's time I pull the babies out of daycare, but I can't do it alone. What do you think? We were both working from home and had been splitting our three children between our two households since the crisis was no longer not at our doorsteps. I told her, of course, this is what is best for the family, instant in my certainty about what we should do.

Suburban quarantine looks like this.

Five children. Three of them ours. Two of them foster children she has been caring for. Two adults that had been married for eight years and now divorced for eight, the union ending with their children loaded into their car and tires squealing towards Missouri and me standing on the front porch in the wreckage the rest of the day after light was shed on everything and there was no more lying to be done. Two dogs that yap constantly at the washing machine and the roar of the local airport and the opening and closing of the cupboard when I refill my mason jar with whiskey.

All of this under one roof and the world burning down around us.

How do you drink it straight like that? I tell her that it's a lifestyle and she reminds me that she always thought I was at least a little funny. She looks the same as our wedding day and I do too with a little wear and tear, but the same. We wonder out loud how long this will last and make sure to say how lucky we are that we still have jobs and that we are all healthy and relatively happy. Our daughter comes in with late night teenage conversational force and we respond by telling her the story of how she was made. It's what we do when there is no more parental energy to spare, serve up sarcasm and embarrassment. We tell her about the phone call and how I had only moved north a week before it and how I knew what she was going to say before she did and how instant our certainty was about what we should do.

"We're pregnant."

“I know, I’ll be there in nine and a half hours, start packing.”

We were twenty, me one day older, and my father disowned me with the news, told me I was breaking my mother’s heart, despite Huntington’s disease keeping her from saying or expressing anything the way she would before. He showed up at her apartment in the city anyway the morning of the move, helped me load the heavy items in silence into a trailer he rented. He drove the nine and a half hours north, helped me unload in silence. Returned south immediately, all in silence.

Sometimes, nothing can hide love, I suppose.

I take another sip and she says can you believe this? Could you have ever imagined this? I tell her no and that’s about all the energy we can conjure on day whatever of week whatever. We don’t know it yet, but the tired feeling is from clinging to old ways, the way our world once was. We began tuning in to the press conferences being held by the president and his virus task force of people much smarter than he. It was our hour of entertainment for the day, our going to the movies. We scoff. We yell. We laugh at what is said, the ridiculous nature of who he is and the family members we know we both have that hang on every word.

“We can’t do another 4 years of this, can we?”

We will continue this habit each day and slowly watch our country descend into chaos.

I take another sip and she just brings the bottle and places it in front of me, says here ya go.

“I really appreciate you being here and how willing you were to be here. I know it’s not your cup of tea, the suburbs and all. You’ll get a kick out of this. The neighbor called earlier, asked if I was okay, said she saw a tattooed man with no shirt wearing overalls walking around the front yard barefoot, digging in the grass.”

“I was planting seeds, okay? And, yes I carry seeds with me in my travel bag and, of course, I was willing. We are a family. Shit, we still have the same last name all these years later. Also, you’ll have squash and radishes and spinach in 3 to 5 weeks.”

She always reminds me that she didn’t want to change her last name after we signed the divorce papers, said I gave it to her and there had to be one thing that I couldn’t take back.

We each sit on our phones and answer emails and texts and mindlessly scroll through pictures that make us laugh to ourselves and then say, look at this one. It has taken eight years to get to this point, sharing the same space and laughing and drinking together. Eight years of apologies that weren’t as loud as the offense. Eight years of saying things like, I was a broken person. Or, I was lost. Or, I made the wrong decision. Eight years to finally arrive at the truth. I was selfish. I was cruel. I used the love of a good person to fill me up when I was empty without any consideration for what was left in her tank. I drank it away for a long time before I decided to sit

with it in the dark, unlock and open the door, invite in the demons and the memories and tell them to pull up a chair, do you want a drink? It has taken eight years to get to this point.

“Ya know, you were always the first to pop up out of bed when the kid’s cried at night, never complained about not sleeping enough or being stressed or how broke we were at first. You just kept on going. I always admired that part of you and I can see that part of you in our kids. It was the emotions that you couldn’t handle, couldn’t talk about, couldn’t deal with and it drove you to find something easy, something that required nothing of you and built you up without request of the same in return, with someone else. I have forgiven you and who that person was.”

She’s a better person than I am.

She says she’ll be up early and we should cook those egg-in-a-hole things the kids say you always make for them in the morning, says I’m really glad you’re here and that we are doing this together and that you are our children’s father.

She says everything will be okay, we’ll get through this.

It’s night whatever of week whatever and isn’t that what we are all feeling, that everything will be okay and that we will all get through this, together and together and together, that the best of us is showing despite some rotten apples, that we will keep and not forget the slowed down

nights of this all, the good mornings and waves from masked strangers and the scared and drunk silly dancing in the kitchen alone or with loved ones, smiling and crying, and distill it down to the essential human parts?

I'm up before anyone else the next morning, hearing the younger of the babies cry in a tone that even an out of practice parent understands. I have been sleeping on the couch for three weeks now, refusing the offer of taking over one of the kid's rooms. I tell them, dad will be fine. I go in quietly. The only thing worse than one crying baby is two crying babies. I pick her up, hold her close, rock a bit and whisper it's okay and it's okay and it's okay. I take her out into the long hallway, close the door behind me, softly. We pace the length of it back and forth and she relaxes into me and the sun is coming up. The first ray is now a stream through the small window at the east end, so defined that it looks solid. I reach out my hand so it is bathed in orange, pull it back, reach out again. The baby does the same. We dart our hands in and out, she giggles, a few tears still drying on her cheeks. I decide to change her diaper, despite saying weeks earlier over the phone, okay, but there is no fucking way I'm changing any diapers. I put her down in the hallway, say hang on, I am getting a diaper, okay? I feel around in the dark. I close the door softly again behind me and see the baby standing in the hallway, at the foot of the stream of sun coming in so defined that it looks solid. Her hands are extended up and out, both bathed in orange, and she giggles and there are still a few tears drying on her face and I think about what we are all facing now, the long dark hallway with the small window on the east end. It's been dark for a while and there is still some darkness left, but the sun is starting

to come up and we have been crying and we have been scared and the first ray of sun is coming through in a stream, so defined it looks solid, and we reach up and out for it with both hands, bathed in orange, and we giggle and we say to our loved ones, up close or from a distance, I'm really glad you're here and that we are doing this together. Everything will be okay, we'll get through this.