

Erin Williamson

Pots and Pans

A 10 minute play

Content note: talk of fainting from the start, heart thumping, unpleasant body sensations,
discussion of foods and restricted diets, one sentence of doctor dismissing symptoms, abandonment of a partner is referenced, anaphylaxis.

Characters: Mina

Chair, old classic literature book, Mina is lying on the floor. Her head is on a cloth shopping bag that has a pillow in it. She will alternate between sitting cross legged, sitting on the chair, standing, standing leaning on the chair, lying, and lying with the legs up on the chair throughout

Mina is lying a little to her side, she straightens up and turns her head to face the audience

Mina: There's no need to be alarmed. I'm often like this. I have (*enunciates carefully*) POTS.

Like pots and pans. (*shrugs questioningly*) I started explaining it like that and now I've said it so much I've no sense of whether it helps. Whether it makes it any clearer. (*spells it out*) P-O-T-S.

(*moving into a seated cross-legged position*) Sometimes I say 'like pots and pans' and people look more confused. It means dizzy, nauseous, shaky, faint. Although I never actually fainted. Properly. I saw lights then no lights, inky-ness over my vision and all the different beeps in your ears- distant, loud, high, low- and heard the sound of my heart, the feel of my heart, the thump of it (*pauses*) And then ended up on the floor. But I always had a sense of consciousness. So when I was diagnosed and they said that I faint I felt like I was lying.

(*fiddles with book*) This book has lots of fainting ladies in it. When I first felt ill I started reading Victorian fiction, the books on my shelves I hadn't got round to. The

ones that I could prop on my boobs or my belly and read reclined (*demonstrates odd reading positions and the flexible spine of the book*) I think they had POTS. Although they always faint so quickly. And thoroughly.

(*stands up*) They are fine (*snaps fingers*) and then gone (*sinks down dramatically into the chair*)

(*looks at audience, as if reciting from book*) And she fainted clean away. I think the authors just misrepresented them. It's always the most dramatic moment- it changes the energy, changes the plot, everyone in the room flocks around them.

(*looks around*) That has not been my experience.

The day I got my diagnosis letter, my partner came in with shopping bags.

(*holding the shopping bag speaking as Partner*) **-The food shop is either easier or harder now, depending how you look at it.** He looked in the bag and talked me through the contents. **-Chicken, bamboo shoots, garlic chives... whatever they are... eggs but you may just be eating the whites. I can't remember, I'll look it up. There was debate about whether they are even histamine releasing. Or inhibiting. Or whatever it was. The yolks that is. Or the whites.**

-It's the yolk that's the problem, I replied -but I decided to keep eating eggs for now. I need energy from somewhere.

(*to audience*) Another symptom of POTS is food intolerance, in case you're wondering what he's talking about. At this point in time, we don't really know either but (*trying to explain*) you know how you take an antihistamine for an allergy? Apparently our immune systems have histamine buckets and mine is always overflowing. So the answer, until you know what you're reacting to, is low histamine foods.

(*sitting on chair and swinging legs*) There really aren't a lot of them so I don't know how he's taking so long to unpack.

(*As him from the kitchen*) **-Rice. We're going to be eating rice!** He said. **-A lot!**

-Egg fried rice! I shouted back to him, he'd disappeared behind a cupboard door.

(*calling to him*) -I got my diagnosis letter today.

-Oh let's have a look!

He read 'postural orthostatic tachycardia syndrome'. When the doctor diagnosed me in person he stumbled on 'orthostatic'. I have practised.

-What's up with this letter? 'Mainly affects women between the ages of 15 and 50, so these symptoms may ease with time'. He is a man very quick to sniff out patriarchy and injustice. So we sat with the consultant's sentence wondering which bit to go for first (*smiling*)

-He thinks it will be ok because in 25 years time it might not be bothering you anymore?

-Imagine if it was you. It would probably say you'd been struck down in your prime. They would have measured your heart rate increase by what it did when you held a spear.

-Oh, speaking of stone age things...

He proceeded to tell me we could no longer use the microwave. It degrades histamine apparently.

(*she shakes her head as him*) When he's got something in his head he fixes at a point in space and shakes like he's looking straight at the thing. I had been lying down and was slightly disorientated. So for a second I looked over at our actual microwave to make sure it hadn't moved.

(*points, words as though to him*) -It's over there!

-I know.

(*gets up and turns back to look intently at the same point*) So I stared at his invisible microwave foe too.

-What am I supposed to heat food up with since I can't have processed snacks anymore? and he pulled out a tiny saucepan.

-You can heat things up on that. He looked really pleased with himself (*she smiles and half laughs at him*)

(*stands up and wobbles, explaining to audience*) "Postural orthostatic": related to standing upright. I'm now very bad at it. It's especially hard to stand still. The "t" is for tachycardia which tells you the heart is involved. Racing, thumping, fluttering, making strangers of my extremities, sending me hot and cold and pale and wan and faint and fainting. But not 'clean away'. The world gets far away though.

One night a few weeks in I woke up at 3am really hungry and dizzy. There were chips in the fridge and I needed them warm but the tiny pan was dirty. I dropped it on the floor. Then I ended up on the floor too. He made a noise like (*garbled*) **-okay?** from the bed and I said (*very quietly*) -yeah. It came out like a whisper. I meant

(strongly but shrugging) yeah. I sat there wondering when I'd got so weak and overwhelmed. And then I put them in the microwave. It had barely finished the 'beep-beep beep beeeep' before he was through in the kitchen, standing over me, crunchy faced and half yelling: what I was doing, why was there noise, why was I using it, why wasn't I saying anything? And I couldn't, I was just looking at him, feeling the vibrations of his sleepy anger through my chest, my shoulders, my pelvis. Leaning back against the wall and sinking down in my unwellness.

(she sits cross legged) The "s" is "syndrome" which always means we don't know what to do about it. Or we didn't when we named it.

After that we were separating. At first only in the small ways, like how I would separate the yolks from the whites because as it turned out I did indeed react to one and not the other. I would make him very orange breakfasts with my yolky rejects, throwing all kinds of things into the mixture trying to make up for the missing whites I'd eaten myself.

(she stands) -You don't need to do this too. He'd nod tensely, fix at another point in space, and I'd look down at the ground. We'd had this conversation before. We were so enthusiastic when it was hypothetical.

-I thought it would get better, we'd make it better. He meant we'd make me better.

-We only need to wait until I'm fifty *(smiles)*

Instead of going out for dinner he kept going to meetings. *(pauses)* Not suspect meetings- like green initiatives, marches, talks, get involved with the community stuff. He cared about all the causes now. He'd tell me about them, finding his point in space to stare at and tell off for the dire state it was in. It's hard to stand still.

(she sits) A few weeks after we separated properly, after I'd spent two days away so he could leave fully- noisily, uninterruptedly, taking a prearranged half of our possessions, leaving me the tiny saucepan, and, randomly, the microwave *(raises hands and looks annoyed)*- we met in a cafe. To touch base, to be in a neutral space. To see how we felt.

(sits up and tucks legs up and under her, more directly to audience) How I felt was dizzy. My heart rate was high. My legs were tucked under me. I got a text saying he was running late: he'd been at the beachfront doing an organised litter pick up.

(looks annoyed) I checked my emails while I waited. There was one from change.org. From him. I started shaking, I'm not kidding you, physically shaking from my ribcage to the fingers still holding my phone. He'll go on the marches and sign the petitions but when the other entered his house he had left it.

I needed to do something about the shaking, I needed to look more together than this. These are the moments I admit that sometimes some symptoms are stress triggered. My body doesn't know what to do with a dose of adrenaline now. Or anger. I thought about the Victorian ladies in their tight corsets, stuck being silent over tea and struggling to breathe.

I'd ordered black tea to be alert enough for the chat but the caffeine was going to overload me now. *(looking at her shaking hands)* So when he finally arrived and ordered coffee, I asked for oat milk.

You know those conversations you've already had in your head? You know what you need the other person to say: 'I'm not equal to it. I'm sorry. I'm weak and overwhelmed'. I would have told him that was ok. The waiter came over **-one flat white and your milk**. I spent a long time stirring it into my tea. *(looking over at the novel)* The book would say I could read meaning in his face, that the words hung between us, heavy and unspoken. But really we both looked elsewhere. I don't know what he thought.

My chest hurt physically going home. It was ragged, I was breathing badly. This was new and a kind of pathetic fallacy I wished to ignore. By the time I sat down I was hearing beeps from far away. No sounds were close now, even my thoughts came from elsewhere. **And your milk**, the waiter had said. Not oat milk, just milk. My oesophagus was tightening up.

(starting to stand) I got up to do something- an antihistamine, a phone call, something. When you're having an anaphylactic event your brain narrates the basics for you. I hadn't known that and I find it quite interesting. Mine went: I am not going to make it- I'm falling now- like, clean away.

(she lies back down as she describes collapsing, closes her eyes briefly, pause)

(opens her eyes and turns her head to the audience)

So I think that brings us up to the present *(moving round to side lying, stretches arms out to survey the space, coming to)* This is where we are. I'm alright... my shoulder's banged up. The ringing *(pauses to consider the word)* ringings have been slowly switching off. I don't know how long it's been. The floor is starting to feel cold. I'll get up in a bit- gently- when it's safe. Work out what to do.

(moves gingerly into a seated position, speaking like coming to, slightly puzzled) I

guess there was some reason to be alarmed. Fainted clean away.

END