

# Burning Woman

Sandra Tsing Loh's memoir of her roller-coaster ride through 'the change.'

By JUDITH NEWMAN

IF MENOPAUSE JUST made you want to kill someone, it wouldn't be so bad. The problem is, it makes you want to kill someone you love. And then it makes you want to love someone who's a complete and utter moron. And there you have it: the story of half the divorces in America.

This is the story of Sandra Tsing Loh's "change," or, as I think of it, the Year of Bleeding Dangerously. "The Madwoman in the Volvo" is not the first book on the subject. In fact, one of the little-known

## THE MADWOMAN IN THE VOLVO

My Year of Raging Hormones

By Sandra Tsing Loh

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side effects of menopause appears to be writing books, if the number of titles is any measure (5,115 listed on Amazon, but that was last month). Certainly, though, Loh's ranks among the most horrifyingly amusing. The title evokes "The Madwoman in the Attic," Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar's classic look at "monstrous" women in 19th-century literature, and well it should: After reading this brave and witty memoir and realizing the extent to which we are at the mercy of estrogen, one can't help wondering if Bertha Mason could have gotten out of that attic if she'd had a little hormone therapy.

Perimenopause, the phase when a woman's period becomes increasingly unpredictable before it ceases altogether, can be like the extended-play version of PMS: Estrogen is in retreat, testosterone is in its ascendancy (which is like the moon being permanently in Scorpio, for all you astrology fans), and you are therefore a short-tempered, bloated, forgetful, anxious, intermittently despondent cow. Loh is such an engaging writer she manages to make this extremely difficult time hilarious. Make no mistake, however: For women, this is some serious stuff.

This phase of Loh's life begins as it does for so many of us, with the niggling suspicion we're losing our minds. At 47, this performer, radio commentator and author-essayist-memoirist ("Mother on Fire" et al.) thought her midlife crisis was behind her. She had already blown up her life by having an affair and leaving her husband. (And perhaps in a further sign of her unbalance, writing about it in *The Atlantic*.) Here she is, two years later, in a seemingly all's-well-that-ends-well relationship with her *bashert*. Only all is not right, not at all. Now she's doing things like pulling off the road and sobbing uncontrollably about the death of her kids'

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ANTHONY HUCHETTE

hamster. Hammy did not even live with her. Oh, Life's cruelty.

This was the tip-off that something was amiss, and the hamster incident catapults Loh into a frenzy of self-improvement familiar to all of us who've heard the siren song of Eckhart Tolle. Loh is determined to get her groove back. Joining her similarly estrogen-deprived friends, she attempts "happiness projects" and extreme couponing and cruising the aisles of Crate & Barrel and playing computer solitaire "like some addicted lab rat." Then there is the fanatical dieting and working out to lose the midlife spare tire. She finds a trainer so overzealous she fantasizes about paying Equinox a second fee to make her go away. She joins Loseit.com, and when she and her friend admit that they, like every other woman on the planet, are failing to note their liquor consumption accurately, they consider forming an online support group for cheaters, drunkfatfriends.com. "It's all we can do to watch HGTV until noon and not overdose on antidepressants, and that itself is sad. Because are we not still women? Do we not still roar? Do we perhaps need our own female version of a Fight Club?"

Soon Loh's irritation at her own emotional incontinence turns into something more frightening. She begins to resent Mr. Y, her new love, finding fault with him when he dares to have a life that does not entirely revolve around her. How long, she wonders, before she votes him off the island? She eventually concludes that no one husband can ever really suffice: "Your first husband is the provider; your second husband is the one who talks to you; my

**All is not right: Loh pulls off the road and sobs about the death of her kids' hamster.**

third husband will be a cat. If I am lucky."

Worse still, she sees echoes of her mother's behavior in her own behavior toward her children. At first she wildly overreacts to any perceived slight: When one tween daughter is teased online, she stations herself outside the culprit's class, preparing to pounce, an avenging angel in a fanny pack. Eventually, over the course of the year, she finds it hard to listen to her two daughters, just as her loving and dutiful mother, during menopause, could not bear to hear young Loh prattle on. Loh becomes convinced she no longer loves her children, even as they begin to protect and make excuses for their increasingly fragile mother. She is miserable.

And then, she is saved. Not by God or psychotherapy or even the love of her very good man, but by a dab of topical estrogen cream on her wrists. Better living through chemistry.

Throughout the haze of loss and anxiety, Loh sees two larger truths. First, there's the issue of timing: Women turning 50 right now are doing something a little different, and arguably nuts. Our mothers lost their parents earlier, and had children earlier too. We are living longer, and having children later. This means that at 50, many of us have parents who are still alive and need our care. (Loh is appalled to discover her 89-year-old diapered father is now demanding Viagra, and ap-

parently availing himself of an at-home service that offers "healing hands." Not the Church of Christ ministry; something else. I know. Ew.) At the same time we waited to have children, and while they're going through their own bodily upheaval, drowning in a tsunami of hormones, we're chasing the fumes. So we are living through what is one of the most physically and emotionally trying times just at the moment when everyone around us seems to need us most. No wonder there's a lot of crying and throwing Thanksgiving dinner down the garbage chute.

And then there's the issue of what menopause does. Common wisdom says it makes us crazy, and historically treatment for "hysterical" women going through the change ranged from opium to ovary removal. Far from being seen as a natural event, it's seen as a disease of deficiency. And in some ways of course it is. But just as Oliver Sacks perceived the ability in disability, so Loh describes the gains we make when we are no longer floating on a cotton candy cloud of estrogen, the body chemical that makes women "want to help people and serve people and cut up their sandwiches into ever-tinier squares." Seeing the world more clearly is not always a good thing; we are, for a time, rawer than we once were, less able to skate on the surface. On the other side of it all, though, is wisdom; we can and do have more freedom, see more clearly, think more clearly, get things done. Hillary Clinton may have had the brains to be president at 35, but somehow I feel more comfortable, indeed delighted, with nuclear capability in the hands of a 70-year-old woman.

The book ends with Loh's 50th-birthday party, "the one last event in your life, after your wedding... where friends, family and acquaintances can be guilted into showing up, and they can be guilted into bringing a gift, even if it's a joke gift." Predictably she pingpongs between sheer joy as she concocts her dance-mix playlists (it's all about "Brick House") and dread that there will be only a few awkward guests, and crickets. The party is rocking, and one friend toasts Loh with words that deeply move her, if only because she prays they are true: "Instead of running from fear, she moves toward pleasure."

Wouldn't we all like that written on our tombstones? The ending may seem a little forced — one can hear an editor pleading with the sardonic Loh, *For the love of God, leave 'em with a little hope* — but I'm buying it anyway. "The only event like a 50th birthday — the only event that celebrates and commemorates you as a grown-up, with a full, adult life, will be your funeral. So let this celebration of your fully golden self happen when you are alive. And have some cake, for God's sake."

Thanks. Make mine chocolate. And while you're at it, splash on the rum and light it on fire. □