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The Tender Soul's Guide to Midwestern Middle- class Midlife Dread

COME ON, GIRL. You know what I'm talking about. Never mind your daytime complacency: your house and man, your handful of good friends. You've got fine memories of Bubby and Zaidy to see you through the cold season, and the crazy miasma of lilacs come spring. There's your dog of a lifetime. And your daughter, of course, like all the stars in the sky.

Still it keeps encroaching, the prickly dread, waiting past midnight as sleep comes in stutters, until you quit trying. As branches scratch tree-songs at your windows and shadows scurry like mice across the sills. Because time is ticking down. An inevitable end approaching, the unmarked cars turning onto your street, their low rumble over asphalt. How that sound climbs in volume, the sudden brightness of headlights filling your bedroom—surely they're coming for you!

Better face it, girl: you're already flailing in dread's jittery peripheries. When better to explore its past and current neighborhoods, its dwindling shorelines and sinking cities? So take a breath, grab your *Easy Guide*, and dive right in.

DON'T WAIT ANOTHER MINUTE: SEVEN DREADFUL REASONS TO GET STARTED IMMEDIATELY!

1. **DISTRACTION'S BEEN A BUST.** The endless bunny videos and Bowie tunes looping on repeat through your brain. The bourbon and bonbons. The shopping.

Because you turned away for a second and fire ants ate every bunny. Because Bowie's gone (that wrenching in your soul!). Because you're stoned and fat, your house so full it's tipping toward sea-level.

2. Even as those oceans blue rise past their horizon lines, so all the little boats, little rafts, little ellipses dotting the water capsize in the

smallest of squalls.

3. The skies are tic-tac-toed with exhaust trails as planes zip here, there, and everywhere, all the people seeking chill-thrills before we heat another degree or three.

4. Gangs and guns and burning cities. Dead whales washing ashore by the dozens, their bellies thick with plastic. Because the bees. Because of children made refugees, welcome nowhere. Children disappeared into wastelands and roaring rivers, others snatched from their parents' hands. Children made soldiers. Children in cages.

5. Your daughter's off to college, and your doggie's seen better days. Your man's sagging a tad in the middle, and so are you.

6. Decades fly like aerialists on their invisible lines. Blink and they'll fall. Shut your eyes and miss it all.

7. Because life is suffering. (Or possibly a bowl of cherries.) Unexamined, it's hardly worth the bother.

EASE THE DREAD BY PLANNING AHEAD: WHAT TO PACK FOR YOUR TRIP!

1. MOON CHEESE FOR STAMINA. Chivas Regal for gumption. Chocolate bunnies for consolation.

2. Drugs. Legal are swell. Your out-of-date Xanax or just-in-case Ativan—the last couple rolling around in your underwear drawer beside the bunny-eared vibrator (its batteries long, long dead).

Not-so-legal are swell as well. Downers recommended over uppers. Hallucinogens probably redundant.

3. A comfortable suit of armor, though rust can be problematic. Kevlar is a good alternative and stylish to boot.

4. Sunblock—high SPF, because it could be hot where you're going. Alternately bring mittens, because sometimes it freezes over.

5. Mantras come in handy. Revisit TM for the secret one you've long forgotten. Summon your pink bubble of protection—find it in the 90s, after your surgery gone bad, grad school gone belly-up, that boy up and gone. Don't forget the accompanying chant: I am the light. The light is within me!

6. Curiosity. Far from killing the cat, it'll see you past birds in the bush, troubled waters, and rocks and hard places.

7. Earplugs. And blinders, just in case. Keep handy when entering certain cluttered rooms in your unconscious.

8. Traveler's insurance. Check with therapist for future availability and inevitable rate increases.

Helpful tip! Leave grinding axes at home, along with tastes of your own medicine, fuel to your fires, and chips on your shoulder.

POPULAR SCENES INSPIRING YOUR PERSONAL DREAD!

NOTE: THESE AND OTHER formative milestones make awesome daytrips.

1. *Fairy tales* we tell the kiddies. Don't let plump mattresses fool you. Peek beneath happily ever after to discover legions of dead crows, the stepsisters' bloody feet, the hag charbroiled in her greasy oven. In these villages, fathers habitually go missing, and stepmothers are dense as dead leaves on the ground. You're bound to stumble over some crone patching her peppermint walls, another convicted for child labor or vanity. Watch ravens circle once, twice, thrice, then dive to gobble their eyeballs. Yum!

Helpful hint: check used bookstores for out-of-print editions where the Little Match Girl and the Little Mermaid die.

2. *Gothic Tales*. Pack your cleavage and billowing gown and spend an afternoon touring bloody castles. Enjoy ghosts groaning from the murder room, sputtering candles and snaking corridors. Don't forget the languishing heroine, whose silhouette you've attempted to starve yourself into since adolescence. Let the hero or creature or undead sweep you—boneless and silky white as a bedsheet—into his arms, bend you at the neck and drink you dry. What a way to go!

3. Try the *Southern variety*, with outsiders and misfits galore. They'll shoot you for sport, or gut you like a silver fish from their swamp. They'll eat your bleeding heart for supper, but they'll hold your pain forever after.

4. *Slasher flicks*. Try the '80s variety with chainsaws and metal claws, axes and knives in every size and style of edge (keen is terrific, but don't forget serrated for a bit of a workout). Where slutty girls poured into Jordache jeans get it first. Where the jocks (clones to boys who snubbed you through high school) with smirks/scowls and feathered/spikey mullets are the next to go, in explosions of skin and viscera.

Listen! The telephone's ringing over and over. The caller's already in the house, waiting for you.

TRIPS DOWN MEMORY LANE!

1. *INFANCY. YOU'RE COLD.* Nerve endings attached to hunger split you through the center. You flail, reach into blurry space. Inscrutable faces rise and fall like the sun; they pat you or shout or turn away. Your wail becomes grunt becomes babble—you know what you want to say, but your mouth betrays you time and again.

Still, you're busy busy busy. Turning over, scooting and crawling. Until neurons fire from deep inside and impel you into open air. Upsy-daisy! Then the tip-over, the hard crash to earth. Repeat again, again, again.

2. *Childhood.* You know Bubby and Zaidy are sad to their bones. You know they'll keep you, if your mother flies loose for a while. You know bus trips with Bubby to Detroit's main library. You know Zaidy's garden—grass like silk, neat rows of roses, the prick of cucumbers when you pick them. You know to avoid the occasional anthill, to press lilacs between finger and thumb, so the scent rises like wings into the sky.

You know your mother is sad when she doesn't have a man. You know children's words burn like acid. You know when to bite your tongue till it bleeds. You know books feel like starlight—what you imagine starlight must feel like—in your hands when you read long past midnight.

3. *Adolescence.* The funhouse of middle school: unreliable adults around every corner, the lunchroom cacophony, the locker-room stink. Girls hiss like water over river rocks, and boys become rabbits jumping at doorframes and dangling banners. Girls and boys huddling in all the hallways. You will yourself invisible and scuttle by.

Moods: your Highs, alarming as bird screech; the Lows dirge-deep, so you slash your journal and go mute for days. So you dream of bloody castles wrapped in thorn and tell no one about the stranger inhabiting your skin—how she whispers stories and truths, and you're clueless which is which. That time you tried to hack her right out. How embarrassed you felt after, as you bandaged the little scratches.

4. *Your 20s.* School, boys, booze, bongos, drudgery, desperation, sick, cheap travel, men, underpaid jobs, grad school. This decade births terrible poems. And the nightmare of first love, how you crave that man with such ferocity that your lungs blister with every breath. And when he leaves you high and dry (low and slow), you ball the shards of that

agony into a fist and press it into your chest. How you point to this spot forever after. Say, *Look, now. See what you've done to me.*

The exhaustion of it all! It's enough to build the dreadful foundations of years to come. But don't fret. Adrenaline will see you through subsequent decades, the time passing like a locomotive clacking down the tracks, picking up steam as it churns—the smell of lilacs all around, rising like the sea—the air a sizzle, scenery a blur as the train roars toward full blown midlife dread.

Give into it, girl. Let it take you where it will.

MUST SEE EXCURSIONS OF THE DREAFUL, MIDLIFE VARIETY!

1. *THE NEIGHBORHOOD of recurring dreamscapes.* When you do—*finally*—drop to sleep, you enjoy an active nightlife. Choose from the attic of kidnapped children, the haunted graveyard, a glass house where everything is breakable (make sure to step gingerly!), your mother's bed erupting in bugs, the meandering levels of an abandoned mall, rain or snow or hailstorms through which you're perpetually driving blind, your overflowing closet containing nothing (not one goddamn thing!) that fits, the basement crammed with every person you ever disappointed.

Helpful hint: keep a pretty journal beside your bedside for jotting notes upon jolting awake.

2. *Social gatherings.* Revisit middle school lunchrooms, that writers' conference you attend yearly, the work parties and in-laws' reunions. Where you say the wrong thing, or nothing at all. Where you hide in shadows and moan when no one refills your wine glass or bothers to give you the time of day.

And after: the childhood bed/hotel room beside your snoring man, where you lay awake for hours muttering, *Stupid girl. Stupid, stupid woman.*

3. *The republic of second-guessing.* Family secrets spilled after one, two, three too many cocktails. The stove, curlers, iron you maybe left burning, the back door or your daughter's window you possibly left agape. So that little bed might even now be empty as new paper. So you check again and again, just to be safe. Like safety's an option in this wacky state.

Also, visit opportunities never seized: if you'd been the perfect

mother to your girl, if you'd entered the contest, rewritten the memoir, shimmied and shook like a mad woman on the dance floor. Who would you, could you, be if you had?

4. *Regret city*. When you were cruel to a classmate, just to try it. When you drove past that kitten in the snow. When you drove past that girl—surely younger than your daughter—as she posed in shredded clothes behind 8 Mile. How you felt helpless and did nothing. And how, when you drove by the next day, and the next, she'd vanished into the dirty storefronts, so you wondered if you dreamed her. How you rarely gathered lilacs, though they grew crazy in your grandparents' garden, and later, in the fields next door—back when you lived with your man in Mexicantown—where they exploded like all the luster in the world. So you thought they'd last forever.

5. *Cluttered rooms in your unconscious*. Home of the iceberg's underside. Contains worms and poop and genitals. And hunger incarnate, for bonbons and skin-on-skin, for Daddy's love and fluffy bunnies, for lilacs come spring. For all the stuff ever. Make sure to revisit the primal crawl through the birth canal. And save time for Repression Alley, filled with enough rage to shatter the sky. With dungeons brimming with middle school bullies, bad dates, workmates, bosses, thesis advisors and crappy drivers you've really, really wanted to murder over the years. Be prepared for caterwauling, for Nick Cave's *From Her to Eternity* playing on repeat.

6. *Shrines to past and current phobias*. Check out social gatherings (above), enclosed spaces, height and flight and drowning phobias. Fear of being buried alive. Depression phobia. Fear of losing child. Fear of global warming. Fear of serial killers. Of being old and alone. Of death (of course). Of rugs tugged from beneath you. Of bugs—killer wasps to swarm you, fire ants to eat you. Crawling bugs that cling, flying ones that sting. The huge ones with spindly legs that break off when you flail in terror.

DREADFUL SOUVENIRS!

WHEW! WHAT A RIDE, HUH? Now reward yourself with these and other midlife keepsakes.

1. Chewed nails, a tendency to freeze in oncoming traffic, a grip too tight. That extra twenty pounds you gain and lose, gain and lose.

2. Recurring flashbacks: choose your favorites and make a scrap-

book for later perusal. (Undertake with the assistance of your stalwart therapist.)

3. Better living through chemistry: *Paxil*—too sleepy; *Wellbutrin*—too jumpy; *Zoloft*—just right!

4. Finally, like the dregs of Pandora's box, find a single thimbleful of gratitude.

Gratitude for your man. For memories of your grandparents, for your mother still here, your old doggie gone now, her sweet ghost joining you most evenings on the couch. For your sticky-hot planet tilting on its axis, but somehow still spinning. For every missing baby returned. For years flitting away, and the ones still ahead.

For books of every sort. For your daughter, luminous as the night sky—even now she's carving her story against the breaking world. For lilacs in spring, their perfume lush as the light in Bubby and Zaidy's garden, for the fields still wild in your city, for the yard your man cheerfully waters, when he thinks of it. Where bunnies eat all the cucumbers, every damn year.

Now, buck up, girl. Because this will have to suffice.