

FROM

## *The Young Widower's Handbook*

BY TOM McALLISTER



**R**ummaging around the basement looking for nothing specific but feeling like he needs to unearth *something*, Hunter finds, buried beneath layers of Christmas decorations, a wrapped gift with his name on it. Three months in advance of their anniversary. (What else has she hidden here? Are there gifts for his fortieth birthday? A watch for his retirement?) A card, inside of which she has scribbled a note—her handwriting was always shockingly poor, loopy and stout, like a parade of jaunty fat men—that says how excited she is to have spent another year with him, how much she loves Hunter and appreciates his support even on days when she’s not as nice as she wants to be, has come to rely on seeing him every day, wants him to know he is the most important thing in her life. The card says, “You’re a better man than you think, and I can’t wait to see what happens when you finally believe that.” She’d always had greater faith in him than he had in himself, always seemed to believe he was capable of making meaningful contributions to his community and his family. She never specified what those contributions would be or how they would happen, whether they would be career-related or otherwise, but she repeated her vision to him with such conviction that it seemed more prophecy than fantasy. The note ends like this: “I love the man you are, but I can’t wait to see the man you become. Four years is not enough; I want another forty.” The gift, it’s a globe, a nice one, classy, handcrafted in Malaysia. The sort of thing aristocrats keep in their study. She has taped a note to the globe. It says, “Tell me where you want to go, and I’ll follow you.”

IT DOESN’T SEEM RIGHT, at first, to accept his anniversary gift three months early, or at all, given that this upcoming anniversary technically will

be invalid, but Hunter figures why not treat these as her true last words and honor what amounts to her dying wish? He can use her insurance money to pay off the mortgage completely and to fund their first great vacation together. She died before he'd fulfilled many of his promises, but this is a goal he can still achieve.

He spins the globe and jabs his index finger blindly at it. Lands on the United States, East Coast. Spins again, jabs again, U.S. again. Five times this happens, until he thinks perhaps the point is that one needs to explore one's own country before gallivanting around the rest of the world, speaking pidgin French and crowding onto tour buses in order to push past strangers to glimpse the Eiffel Tower. Perhaps what the globe is telling him is that what a mature traveler does is he takes his wife with him on a tour of his own country, learns about his roots before he imposes himself upon other nations.

THE PLAN IS THIS: the plan is to go west. What other direction is necessary? He's seen the Atlantic, frolicked in it briefly with Kait, doesn't necessarily need to see it again. So why not aim west and keep going until they have to stop? Details are best figured out later, Hunter says to Kait's ashes as they pass through a tollbooth. The key isn't the destination so much as the act of moving away from where he is. It's something he's always talked about doing anyway, late nights in college with roommates, passing a makeshift bong around the room, wistfully diagramming their hypothetical cross-country journey. He's listened to Dylan. He's skimmed Kerouac. He knows that if you're a disaffected young American and you're looking to find yourself, then the place to look is somewhere between your current location and the other side of the country.

NORMALLY KAIT WAS the driver, but that's not an option anymore, so now she's strapped into the passenger seat, Hunter cruising in the right lane behind a convoy of freight trucks. He got his license at sixteen like everyone else, but only because he wanted to keep up with his friends, and because Jack made him take the driver's test, said it would be his first step into the world of self-reliance. At the time, the idea of driving, in theory, seemed deeply appealing due to the freedom and the speed and the potential for picking up girls, but the reality of driving is that three-quarters of the cars

on the road are piloted by lunatics and incompetents, a succession of blazing two-ton missiles weaving dumbly toward their targets. When Hunter tells people about his anxiety about driving, they generally assume he's been in a bad accident, a PTSD situation, but the truth is, no, that's not it at all. What happened is he took driver's ed classes, which consisted almost entirely of watching graphic videos of gruesome car wrecks, and by the time he got behind the wheel he knew not to trust anybody or anything, and this skittishness has only intensified over the past decade, since moving into the city and forsaking his car and generally relying on Kait to chauffeur him everywhere.

So, then—he stays in the right lane, moving at exactly the speed limit, a line of trucks a force field between him and screaming sports cars.

HE PULLS INTO A rest stop in central PA, needs a coffee. He started drinking coffee after college, when he was unemployed but also inexplicably drowsy every day, told Kait the drowsiness was probably due to *the ol' ticker*, which despite having been healed when he was an infant would never be quite as strong as one with a properly formed ventricular septum, and although he has never liked the taste of coffee, he likes the way a coffee cup looks in his hand. Passing through the rest stop with disheveled hair and carrying a warm cup o' joe, he feels like a true adult male, almost fatherly, nods at a pair of passing truckers, tugs on the brim of his cap, implying centuries worth of accrued masculine knowledge. Cradled in his other arm is Kait, who sure as hell cannot be left unattended in the car, because one does not just leave one's most valuable asset sitting unattended in the car, no matter how badly one needs a cup of coffee.

He carries her into the bathroom. The men in there are clad in chainmail, feathered Elizabethan caps, cloaks, knee-high boots. The line at the urinal moves slowly, everyone clanking and grunting to maneuver in their complex outfits. In his jeans and T-shirt, he is the only one dressed for life in twenty-first-century America. He looks down at Kait, rolls his eyes. Whispers, "You ought to see these guys," and points her toward the man at the sink, whose striped tights are several sizes too small and clinging to his groin so snugly that his testicles bulge out like a frog's eyes. He mutters to Kait, "This is like that time we went to the ballet," and imagines her smiling at the memory of that night, when they'd agreed to give ballet a try because they wanted to

support the local arts and be more cultured. They had dinner at the trendy Moroccan fusion restaurant downtown, he in his suit and she in her cocktail dress, took a moonlit walk to the theater, sat respectfully through the two-hour performance, and afterward she admitted she'd kind of hated it, which was a relief because as much as he wished he'd enjoyed the show, didn't want to feel like a generic guy being bored by ballet, he had to admit he just did not get it. "That one guy's junk really stole the show," she said, and it was true, the lead was hung like a porn star, and neither of them had been able to look away from the impressive bulge when he was on stage. In their continuing effort to become more sophisticated, they'd also bought a season pass at the city's oldest theater, attended two plays, both of which they'd found intolerably turgid, and then never went again. Kait said they still deserved credit because they'd given it a shot. "It's not our fault if we don't like it," she said. "We don't have to apologize to anyone for liking sitcoms more than plays." The moment she said it, he realized he'd felt this way all along but was either not smart enough to figure it out himself or not courageous enough to own the feeling. Her gift: to see inside him and to understand him better than he ever understood himself.

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