

A Single Woman's Guide to Loving Your Thirties

by Michelle Reed

Realize that you have control of your own destiny.

Assume that you will live until you're at least 80. Think about the women in your family. Grandma Thomas is in her seventies. She's doing fine. Try to reduce 29/80 into a smaller fraction. Fail. Decide that you will live until you're 90. Round up and decide that you're only 1/3 of the way there. Tell yourself that you have plenty of time.

Identify public places where you're comfortable eating alone.

Pick up a steak dinner from Roger's Meats and Treats on your way home from work.

Mr. Tubs, your two-year-old tabby, meets you at the front door. Shake your styrofoam box at him and say, "You're hungry, aren't ya big boy?" in a voice usually reserved for infants. Half your steak with him, cutting his portion into bite-size pieces. Even though you know better, let him eat his dinner on top of the kitchen table.

Try to make small talk. Ask him if he had a good day and if he missed you. Tell him it looks like Bill from accounting is finally going to retire and that your boss is still a jackass. Do not be offended when he seems more interested in licking himself than listening to you. Wonder if you should have adopted a female cat.

Recognize that marriage is not the only road to happiness.

Stop by your parents' house Friday afternoon after work. They are lying side-by-side on identical yoga mats watching CMT and doing abdominal exercises. Your mom is wear-

ing a t-shirt and striped panties pulled high above her belly button. Your dad is wearing gym shorts and a sweat band. Hop over him onto the loveseat and cross your legs on the cushion. Notice a fitness magazine on the floor between them.

"Do you want to do abs with us?" your mom asks.

Shake your head as you watch your father try to pull his torso up by his neck.

Say: "You're doing it wrong, Dad. Stop pulling on your neck."

"Remember Katie's baby shower is Sunday," your mom says. Katie was your best friend in high school. She has been married twice and is pregnant with her third child.

"You're still planning on going, aren't you?"

Nod. Say: "Dad, you're really going to hurt yourself. Use your abs."

"Rosie Guillory sure is lucky, isn't she Walt?" your mom says. "She's already got a boy and a girl from Katie. This one is just a bonus. Plus she's got Harry's stepchildren. I don't really know that situation, but I'm sure they're good kids."

Your parents have been married for thirty-four years. They have survived the metamorphosis and now look and act more like brother and sister than husband and wife. They've melded into each other. They seem to be content.

"It won't be long before Harry gives her another baby, I'm sure," your mom says. "Just think of all those grandbabies. It must be nice." She stops and watches your father for a minute. "Lord, Walt, what are you doing? You're going to break your neck pulling on it

that-a-way.”

Say: “I told you, Dad, you’ve got to use your abs.”

“If I could use my abs I wouldn’t be pulling on my neck, now would I?” he says.

Participate in community activities.

Wear lipstick to Katie’s shower even though you know you’ll be surrounded by menopausal women and young mothers. Stand in the back by the food table and eat meatballs from frilly toothpicks. Wonder about the consequences of spiking the punch at a baby shower. Remember that Katie was responsible for spiking the punch at your high school prom. You went with David Johnson. He got drunk and cried, then threw up in one of the pots from the cafeteria. Later, he dumped you for the boys’ basketball coach. That was the rumor, anyway.

Your mother is here with a gift signed from both of you. It is a breast pump that she picked out, adding that pregnancy has become so easy these days that she can’t imagine any woman not wanting to have a baby.

Your mother’s friends will ask, “So, are you seeing anyone special?”

Smile and say: “No, not lately.”

Say: “Come on. You know me better than that.”

Say: “Well, I’ve been seeing someone.”

Work your way to Katie when she’s finished opening all of her gifts. Laugh when she rubs her belly and says, “Can’t seem to figure out what causes this.” Slip out the back door.

Identify your abandoned childhood hobbies and rekindle an interest in them.

On Friday night, drink a bottle of wine and look through poems you wrote in college. They’re mostly sappy. Sometimes angry. All written in end rhyme. Read them aloud to Mr. Tubs. Do not think that because he is concentrating on licking himself that he does not recognize your poetic talent. Tell him that you

wish to work out a system of communication that would not require interrupting his grooming. Licking of left paw = Yes, you’re absolutely right. Licking of right paw = Dinner was amazing, thank you.

Scroll through the list of names on your cell phone. Get ready for bed. Masturbate. Listen to the quick tick of the clock.

Welcome new experiences.

Gina walks into your office, lifts both arms into the air, hallelujah style, and says, “I found someone for you.”

Nod. This is not the first time she has made this declaration

“His name is Richard,” she says. “He’s perfect for you. Trust me.”

Gina is your friend. You do not trust her. You remember the last guy she set you up with. He was a goat roper from Little Rock. At dinner, he removed his front two teeth and set them on the table beside you. For two weeks, you dreamed of finding teeth sprinkled like croutons in your salads. Remind Gina of this.

“I apologized for that,” Gina says. “Plus, Richard’s a really good guy. And I think he even has all of his teeth.”

Pull your daily planner from your desk drawer. Scrunch your lips to the left as you scan the pages. Scratch your head and say: “I don’t know, Gina, I’m pretty busy.” Decide to take classes on becoming an expert liar.

When Gina walks behind your desk, cover the empty weekend squares with your forearm. “Write this down,” she says. “Saturday night. Dinner with Richard. 7:30. Mark and I will be there, too. For support.”

Build bridges.

On the night of your date, apply deodorant at 5:30. Do lunges through your house for three minutes with your arms raised over your head. Call Gina and demand that she pick up the phone. It’s an emergency. When she does not answer, hang up. Change clothes seven

times. Drink two glasses of wine. Decide on black.

Find Gina, Mark, and Richard sitting at a table at 7:37 exactly. They all stand when you approach. Gina introduces you to Richard. Smile like a princess. Shake his hand firmly. You do not know his type.

His hands are clean, and thick. He looks tall, even sitting down. His front tooth is chipped and a little crooked. He is moley--but not in a gross way. Decide that he is attractive. Order grilled chicken and a salad. Drink two more glasses of wine. Listen to Mark and Richard talk about the guys who play in their basketball league. Richard's team is a bunch of guys he knows through work. Mark's team usually wins the league.

Ask: "So, do you know much about goats?"

Let Gina take over the conversation. Flirt with Mark while Richard tells Gina about his job as an accountant. Eavesdrop on their conversation and steal glances at Richard while Mark fidgets with his wedding ring. Richard closes his eyes and tilts his head to the right when he laughs. He is still on his first glass of wine.

Tie strands of your hair into knots until Mark takes both of your hands into his. He is drunk and makes a big show out of kissing your hand.

"A girl like this," he says to Richard. "A girl like this."

Rub your tongue along the front of your teeth, checking for pieces of bread and pepper.

Give yourself some slack--nothing is ever as bad as you imagine it to be.

Do not expect to hear from him again. Realize that you are a lush and a moron. Replay the night in your head.

On Wednesday, wonder why he hasn't called you. Call Gina.

Say: "No, I haven't heard from him."

Say: "Yeah, he was nice and all. I just--"

Say: "No, don't ask Mark to do that. That's embarrassing."

Consider dropping in on Richard's basketball game that night. You could say you were there to see Mark. You could ask Gina to go with you. Create a self-improvement list for your life instead. Post it on the dry erase board in your kitchen:

1. Quit drinking.

2. Black is not your color. Life is not a funeral, you know.

3. Enroll in a class: Quilting? Poetry? Latin dance?

4. Forgive your mother.

5. Buy new shoes.

You've been reading self-help books again. Say: "Living alone deserves our praise."

Mr. Tubs licks his left paw.

Socialize regularly with people who share your interests.

When he calls you at work, remind yourself to act casual, busy.

Say: "Oh, Richard. Hi." Sink into your chair and avoid eye contact with your nosy co-worker. Cover the end of the receiver with your hand.

Say: "Yeah, I've been fine. Staying busy, with work and everything, you know. How are you?" Draw circles on the While You Were Out pad on your desk. Do not write his name.

Say: "Tomorrow?"

You know the answer to this. You've read it in *Cosmo*. You've already made plans. Or you're going out of town.

Say: "Yes, tomorrow's fine."

Grin. Shake your head and bang it against the cushion of your chair. Stand up and walk to the restroom. Try not to scream.

Open your door to others.

When he brings you home after drinks, do not ask him to come in. You don't want to be one of those girls. He kisses you on the cheek

and asks when he can see you again.

Say: "Soon," while you wonder about the shape of his penis. Stand outside and watch him walk to his car. Do not wave when he drives away.

Take more chances.

After twelve days, sleep at his house. Find a toothpaste tube in his medicine cabinet. Its contents are squeezed perfectly toward the open end. Consider using the toothbrush you've packed in your purse. Remind yourself of the message a toothbrush sends and squirt toothpaste onto your finger.

Sleep naked with your make-up on.

Do not get prematurely swept away by romance.

Say Richard several times out loud in different accents. Decide that British sounds the most authentic. Wonder about your ancestors. Say bollocks, bloke, and bugger. Say: "Well, fuck off then." The last sounds more Irish than British. Realize that you don't really know the difference. That probably means your ancestors were a little of both.

Listen to Billie Holiday's "The Man I Love" and dance around the room with Mr. Tubs tucked under your chin. Stay within the vicinity of the fan cord so he is less tempted to jump down. Tell him he's a beautiful dancer.

Say Richard again. Then Richie. Then Dick. Wonder if he has a nickname. Wonder if he'll let you call him Richie. Dick, you think, may be inappropriate. He's a nice guy. Decide to wait a while to ask.

Avoid negative thinkers.

Your mother calls you on Tuesday night to fill in for Rosie Guillory in their Pinochle game.

"Katie's having her baby," your mother says. "We need a fourth player."

When you get there, your dad is sitting on the front porch drinking coffee.

Say: "They run you off?"

"Can't a woman alive run a man out of his house," he says. "Your Aunt Ida is in there."

Your mom, aunt, and neighbor, Mrs. Pat, are eating bean dip out of plastic bowls.

"There's the birthday girl," Aunt Ida says without taking her cigarette from her mouth.

Mrs. Pat asks if today's your birthday.

"Friday," your mom says. "The big 3-0."

Say: "Yeah, don't remind me."

"Maybe you should cut your hair," Ida says.

"A woman your age shouldn't have long hair anymore. It looks haggard." Ida's hair sprouts from her head in the shape of a bowl. It's gray and thinning. She never married.

"Ida's right," your mom says. "But a woman your age should also be settled down by now."

Say: "Don't start, Mom."

"Don't listen to her, sugar," Ida says. "No rush on things like that. And you, you better watch it before you run this one off. You're gonna need someone to take care of you when those knees finally give out on you. Shit, Walt ain't gonna be around forever."

"Lord, Ida, what do you have to get to talking about things like that for? And just who do you think is going to look after you when your lungs finally collapse from all that poison you been puffing on all these years? You're lucky I take care of myself."

"So, are you seeing anyone special?" Mrs. Pat asks.

Try not to smile. Nod and push the deck of cards over to your mother.

"Oh, really?" your mom asks. "Since when?"

Say: "Just a couple weeks. It's nothing serious."

"What's his last name?"

Tell her. Listen as she repeats it, preceded by your first name.

"It's too alliterative," she says and deals a hand of cards.

Don't compare your life to the lives of others.

When Gina calls you on Friday to tell you that Mark is having an affair, agree to meet her at SpeakEasy for drinks. "Some slut from the photo lab," she says over the phone. You find her in a corner booth with a box of tissue and two empty shot glasses. Tell her she looks like a female Humphrey Bogart.

Listen to her say bastard, cunt. Listen to her threaten to leave him. Know that she won't. Watch her red eyes and listen to her try to breathe. Say nothing. She knows that you would not understand. You have never devoted your life to one person. Vowed to honor. You have never loved like that.

Do not mention Andrew. Do not mention the last time that she called you like this. Almost like this. Same walls. Same drinks. The rest are technicalities. Do not mention that she made you promise not to tell Mark. Or her promises to you that it would never happen again, as if you were the one she needed to make that promise to. Remind yourself that infidelity is the exception. Infidelity is the exception. Infidelity is the exception.

Inside the bar, it feels later than it is.▲▼▲

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