

Birthday Letter

A selection from *Personal Mythologies*

Sean Arthur Joyce

Having reached age 44, I begin to appreciate things I was too blind to understand as a younger man. What it might have been like, for example, to be my grandmother Maree, stewing in a dusty bar in California in 1947. Wrestling desperately with her conscience. Two little kids outside, rubbernecking like scared lambs in the back seat of the car. Somehow managing to pull herself together long enough to drive them a thousand miles to a remote fishing resort called Fisher's Paradise in Queens Bay, Canada. Then drop them off with her ex-husband Roy Fisher and his new wife Ollie, and say goodbye. Her last unselfish act. The last any of them would see her alive. Dead of alcohol poisoning at age 41.

Midlife is both sides of the coin: A shining beacon of new possibilities. A terrifying upheaval of everything you hold dear. And just maybe, our last chance at change. Will we risk staying open, or ossify into caricatures of ourselves? Midlife is a kind of second adolescence, a reckless bravado held up like a fist in the face of mortality. A new plunge into the roller coaster of passion. Yet there are the curious beginnings of grace about it, too. A widening of view from the narrow self-absorption of youth. A new opportunity both to re-embrace values you cherish and explore potential you might never have considered before. A softening of the hard edges of strength with grace. Wisdom begins to peer in like sunlight through a crack in the door.

In some ways, it's a supercharged renewal of energy. But paced now by a body no longer willing to be treated like an immortal machine. Ironically, more dependent now on machines and the ease they bring to newly aching backs and bones. A wake-up call from the Universe: *Hey, stupid! Abuse me and you lose me!* And then—as if to really drive the point home—someone you love dies, and a stinging void yawns open in your heart. Or your health collapses, forcing on you a harsh, *daily* awareness of your mortality. As Allan Chinen writes in *Once Upon a Midlife*, “To youth, death is dramatic, heroic, or romantic... but death is only an abstraction to youth. At midlife... death becomes a sobering reality, stark and inevitable, no longer a matter of glory, but of limitation.”

Maybe the best expression to illustrate this phase of life would be a tired, slightly exasperated sigh. Finished off with a wry grin and a slooow savouring of single malt Scotch. And a prayer of thanks to my buddy Dave Green for the discovery of Jameson's Irish Whiskey on my 40th birthday. And then there's the plunging inebriation of new love—or what passes for it through a fevered middle-aged brain. A sexy young girlfriend who turns out to be a cross between borderline personality disorder and mildly retarded. I used to think my more thoughtful nature would prevent me from thinking with my trouser snake. Are men really so predictable?

I see a lot of people of my generation wandering around, looking naively sweet and a little lost in this so-called 'new world order'. Still young-looking, even with the creeping grey. Yet out of place somehow. The guys might punch you out if you said they were gay and you turned out to be wrong. The women still seem to need a man who's a carbon copy of sexually abusive fathers.

Nice guys just don't last. So we wander through life, sometimes together, but almost always separate. And too often, alone. Spending our precious hours adrift.

In some ways we really did have it too good, being kids in the '60s. All our fathers had good jobs, a house, and a car—one income plenty for the whole family. A whole lot less 'stuff' but what we didn't have we learned to make. And summer vacations. Sweet respite from the Chinese water torture of school, wearing down your originality, making innocence a crime. Stolen kisses and tree forts in the whispery bush behind the house. Bike trips the full six gravelly miles to Six Mile Lake, bumping along in a dust cloud to reach summer's watery azure haven. Then once I got there, wanting to turn back. Watching all the other kids swimming like dolphins while I sank like a stone. And trying not to cry.

I'll never forget the first time I stepped through the portal into a new dimension. I was 13 and it was a high school dance in Mackenzie, BC. The blackness swept by Radio Shack lasers and blacklights. *Smoke on the Water* thudding across the waxy wooden gym floor. It was one of THOSE moments: indelible, invincible, life-altering. Kicking down a door of perception that would stay gloriously open the rest of my days. Lawn tents with Creedence Clearwater Revival in the cassette player. The first Stampede record chiming out *Sweet City Woman*. My first true rock album Ten Years After's *Rock 'n Roll Music to the World*. Blacklight parties in dark basements. Kids guzzling down ugly brown beer stubbies and making out in shadowy corners. Toking and tripping to Deep Purple, Black Sabbath, Pink Floyd, The Stones, Zeppelin. . . . Or truckin' into the pool hall and feeling the chequered floor rumble to the muscular bass of Floyd's *Money*, or the delicious melancholy of Dylan's *Like A Rolling Stone*.

Little did we know we were to be the last generation of the old bountiful Empire. Before we got way, way overextended. Before the polar icecaps started melting. Before the canaries started dropping from the skies and the children's wards. We should have known it couldn't last. But hell, what did we know? We were kids. All we knew was the lies we were taught in school: *'The sun never sets on the British Empire.'* *'Bringing civilization to the savages'* and all that. As Paul Simon so aptly sang: *"When I think back on all the crap I learned in high school / it's a wonder I can think at all."* We should have known better. Should have known no race could live that blissfully ignorant for that long and get away with it.

Now we seem to have entered an era of mass blindness. Alcoholic denial on overdrive. A fixation with reliving the plastic dream of the '50s. Infant urge overkill, the signature icon of the age a giant, gaping mouth that can never be filled. Security merchants jacking up fear and paranoia to a self-sustaining feedback loop. Listen folks, it's simple. We're mortal. Security is an illusion. Get over it. And maybe we can all start to relax, breathe easy. But no, not as long as there's another billion to be made in Apache helicopters and ICBMs. I'm beginning to understand why people bury their heads in virtual reality. Empire always creates its own junkies.

So here we are: Easter Island déjà vu. No summer arctic ice by 2040, exhausted polar bears swimming for days to find food. Half the coral of the Great Barrier Reef dead within a decade. Record-breaking heatwaves across the planet, year after year. About 32% of the world's old growth forests or rainforests left, and logging companies want the rest, down to the last stick. Deserts spreading like a shadow over the land, including up to 30% of the American land base.

And water the new gold, as supplies drop by one-third per person over the next 20 years. And how many species an hour disappearing into extinction? I'd say it's time to pace ourselves, folks, if not pull over and start this whole damn trip over again.

What all this has to do with turning 44 I'm not exactly sure. I've mused on the significance of the two 4s making 8. Turned on its side, 8 could be the symbol for infinity. But I don't really know my numerology, except to know that it's one step short of 9, the symbol of completion, and one after 7, which is spiritual perfection. Just like me, to be just one step either side of the right place at the right time. But then I guess that probably describes most of us, almost any time in our lives.

—Originally written September 16, 2003

