

How to Live in the Midwest

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1. Don't flip off the old lady in the Buick Regal. Even as she trundles around the one traffic circle in town, drifting from the inside lane into yours, blocking your only hope of exiting this rotary. Better to resign yourself to perpetual orbit. Because the old lady in the Buick Regal is Mrs. Florence Bettendorf, en route from swimnastics class to Jo-Ann Fabric and Craft, and somehow she knows your name or at least your tenure status, and she will get rattled: your indelicacy will force her to make an unscheduled stop at Don Braga's Body Shop, and Don will perch Mrs. Bettendorf on the tall metal stool he uses when he reviews his orders and invoices; he will dutifully inspect the Regal for scratches and let the lady vent, and when he meets Bill Schroyer, the tree surgeon, for lunch at Arby's, he will sympathetically recount her tale, and, of course, Bill Schroyer has pruned the hackberry in your yard, as well as your next-door-neighbor's sycamore, and that evening as you are watching a *Seinfeld* rerun, your blind neighbor will telephone to ask if it's true, if you gave Mrs. Bettendorf the finger.

2. Don't pick up a copy of *People* in the check-out line at Kroger's. Even though it promises to update you on the contestants of past seasons of *Project Runway* ("Where are

they NOW?"). Don't even pretend to flick through the pages, exasperated and bored, as you wait for the customer in front of you to pay for her purchases. For one thing, there is no customer in front of you. This is the Midwest. For another, in the next check-out line the retired Miltonist, still in his tweedy *deshabile*, is buying his half-gallon of Turkey Hill mint chip, his nostrils flaring, and in a few hours, he will be drinking gin with the Conrad man, declaiming that he ceded his right to weigh in on new hires when he turned in his key; but be that as it may, while he can tolerate the erasure of high culture and low culture, he cannot endorse the *absence* of culture. There will be a clinking of cocktails and babbling laughter.

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