

Crossroads

Chuck Middleton sat inside the idling car thinking about how they might write the obituary. *Charles Middleton, 38, high school English teacher, beloved husband of Veronica and loving father of Anna and Kim...*

The red lights winked on the striped gate. The bells dinged like at the end of a prizefight. He considered how the final report on him might read in the newspaper and just how easy it would be to pull around the dropped gates onto the tracks, throw the gear shift into Park and just wait.

Today was the day after all. He'd calculated that he was exactly at one half way through his life. He would be 38.6 years old at four o'clock today. The current actuary tables said he should make it naturally to 77.2. Up until this morning he'd been heading away from oblivion and now, in just a few minutes according to his watch, he would be heading toward it. But, if the 3:25 from downtown was on time and he did what he'd been planning then this was not halftime. It was the end of the game. Halftime would have been 19.3 years ago, but he wasn't even keeping track back then.

Middleton loved to play with the numbers. A few years back he'd thrown a party for Veronica to celebrate her ten-thousandth day on earth. The party didn't go all that well because people didn't know what sort of card to give or what presents to bring. They just stood around and looked at Middleton in a strange way. Veronica was embarrassed and that only added to her overall anger.

In a few minutes he was scheduled to enter the second half of his existence, of what he thought might be his only existence – right here in Wilmette Illinois. It should be Paris. He should be somewhere on a cruise ship working it's way across the equator. They have

little ceremonies when ships cross the equator. First-timers are given necklaces or held upside down or something like that. There's always something pagan and ignominious about initiation. As you move from one place to another, from one state of being to another, there are always those on the other side waiting to welcome you. They offer a firm hand and pull you aboard. They do it as if where *they are* is somehow better than where *you have been*.

Middleton knew that Veronica was on her way to making a decision about him. He had reason to believe it was not going to go his way. He had weighed her options for her. Stay with him for the sake of the kids, overlook his addictions, accept his infidelities. He'd heard all her grievances. He was right there with the counselor. He sat in on all those sessions. But, he stayed silent. He was like Melville's Bartleby. He was silent because it was at the time of those sessions that Middleton had decided that he was tired of explaining himself – to everyone. He thought it would be great if he never had to explain anything to anybody again. He decided to test it for one year. It was just unfortunate timing that Veronica's little problems with him and her discoveries about him came up while he was conducting this experiment.

There was no one around. It was a small two-lane railroad crossing on a late weekday afternoon. He dropped the gearshift and slowly pulled the Volvo around the gate and stopped it precisely in the middle of the track.

"What's that poem," he thought. The one by Yeats about the Irish pilot going into battle.

*I know that I shall find my fate
Somewhere among the clouds above*

Was it Yeats? Yes, it was Yeats.

*...those that I fight I do not hate
those that I guard I do not love.*

Middleton tried to remember it and his lips moved silently across the poet's rhythms.

*My country is Kiltarten Cross,
My countrymen Kiltarten poor,
No likely end could bring them loss
Or leave them better than before.*

He sat in his new car and breathed in the fresh leather. He still hadn't removed the price sticker. The state plates had been transferred from the old car, vanity plates that Veronica bought for him last year that spelled the single word, MONDAY.

Just the other day he counted up all his cars. It was his habit of taking inventory. Seven cars, including two that his old man owned that he had to whine and wheedle in high school when he had a date. His dad's old Pontiac Chieftain was his favorite. An amber colored plastic Indian head on the hood. Bench seats so you could tell how things were going with your date. But the old cars were dangerous. They had no seat belts, no air bags, just that hard steel steering wheel on a column that would drive through to your backbone in an accident. Now day's there's protection -- unless of course you get hit from the side, at an intersection. He saw one of those T-Bone accidents once in Evanston. An old man and an old lady on Green Bay Road, they have the light, look both ways and creep out across Central Street in an Oldsmobile Ciera and here comes a young mom in a huge Navigator, late for picking up the kids from Karate, yapping on the cell phone. Wham! They used the "jaws" to extract the two old bodies. The mom in the Navigator was pretty upset, sure, but she was still able to talk on the cell, hastily adjusting her plans. Police were looking for witnesses. Middleton told them he'd seen nothing. "Would you make a statement," the cop said. "I prefer not to," Middleton said.

*Those that I fight I do not hate,
Those that I guard I do not love;*

Veronica's nickname for him was "Monday." It was because he struggled with the Monday crossword puzzle in the New York Times. The easiest one of the week, it took him hours to complete it if he could finish it at all. To tease him Veronica would save the difficult Friday puzzle from the week before and sit down beside him and say, "Go." Middleton believed it was evidence of his love for her that he would give her the joy of his humiliation. When people asked her why she called him "Monday" she would roll her eyes and tell them, "Why, because he presents so many possibilities." When she was really unhappy she'd tell them straight out, "Because he's someone you dread waking up to."

So, what happens when you wake up on a Monday like this one and you're 38.6 years old and have to make a decision whether or not to go the rest of the way. Whether you will step into the second half. Middleton had been teaching Hemingway for the last few weeks and had been telling his students that Hemingway's stories were really about decisions. Do you leave the girl? Do you cut the line on the huge fish? Do you go into the bush after the wounded animal? And that great story about the writer dying beneath Kilimanjaro, waiting for the buzzards -- it's really a final confession. To the woman he doesn't love, the truth. To the man he never was, his regret. To the things he never created, his apology. Hemingway wrote, "The marvelous thing is that it's painless." Painless-- was he talking about death or confession?

*Nor law nor duty bade me fight,
Nor public man, nor cheering crowds,
A lonely impulse of delight
Drove to this tumult in the clouds;*

Middleton was fascinated with the magic of memory. When he was a boy his mother taught him his phone number, his birthday and how to tie his shoes, the usual things. But

then he began to add hungrily to his store of facts. He loved learning the pledge of allegiance, the twenty-third psalm, centigrade conversion, the quadratic equation, his social security number, his driver's license, credit cards and pin numbers. He'd memorized the legal description of all of the places he'd ever lived. Asked where he grew up he'd say, lot 62, block 7, in the third parcel in the Alfred Kohn subdivision of Section 33 in the County of Cook in the State of Illinois, east of the third principle meridian... etc. It was these numbers of definition and location that fascinated him most -- the numerical coordinates that could place him, uniquely, at a fixed location, where he was and no one else was, and at a particular time. But then, with each step he took he was somewhere else, and with each passing hour he was at some other time -- and did that not make him different person? It was that realization that finally caused him to lose faith in the numbers that had defined him -- the insufficiency of social security and American Express and the State of Illinois to pin him down, to stick him fast like a collected butterfly.

So, now: it was nearing four o'clock in the afternoon on the eastern most of two railroad tracks at the crossing of Linden Avenue, Village of Wilmette, 42 degrees north latitude, County of Cook, State of Illinois, a part of the old USA in the northern hemisphere of the third planet from the small sun on the outside of a spiral galaxy called the Milky Way. All he needed to do was take the car out of park and glide down the hill to the stoplight and he would be in a different place. The thought made him feel elusive. But, elusive of who? Actually it's *whom*, Middleton corrected himself. Why is it called the Milky Way, he thought. Cause that's what we call it. It's all just an invention. Where he was, what time it was, is all a contrivance -- just like he was, a name, a phone number, a small house in a measured tract, his card numbers and passwords and pins -- all an invention of the human mind. He knew that essentially he was nothing more than an idea. He was a proper noun in the present tense. In a few minutes, after the train leveled him, he would be no more. No, he would still be a thought, only now in the *past* tense -- "live-lived"; "is-was;" "love-loved." Soon he would be only a thought that would fade according to some precise mathematical function of decay. He would be a thought that would grow faint at a rate that would be absolutely unique to him. He would exist in the past tense,

but only in the minds of people who ever knew him. He would last only until the last of them had died away. Then he would, finally, be nothing. Decomposed, his molecules returned to the air and the land. Elusive. His address would be re-occupied, his numbers eventually re-issued.

Middleton turned on the radio to get the score of the ballgame. The White Sox were playing a day game. It was the bottom half of the fifth and the score was tied. He figured he might listen to a pitch or two. He loved baseball for its elegant complexity. There are about a hundred and fifty pitches thrown in a game and after every one of them the situation is different. What happens next is effected mightily by what just did happen. Every pitch and you've got a new set of circumstances calling for a new decision. The conditional probabilities start to spin.

Middleton could now see the train's light down the tracks to the left -- an eye of blinding brightness. Cyclops was stopped, resting -- probably at Davis Street. He lowered the window to get a clearer look at his attacker. He'd once read a story about a cat and a canary. It mentioned the magical moment just before the cat grabbed the bird. That wonderful instant when there were no longer any choices, when there was only that infinitesimal moment between the hunter and prey when all is inevitable, when time stops and they look most deeply into the each other's eyes and sink like lovers into the presence of the other. On the radio the announcer reported that the batter, Frank Thomas, was knocking dirt from his spikes. Middleton heard the train whistle loudly now. The trees were blowing hard, the big oaks waving like pom pons. It was supposed to storm tonight. The oaks seemed to be cheering it on. "Thomas will be looking for a fastball here," the announcer said, laconic, as if there was all the time in the world. Middleton pictured a twirling of the tote board of universal probabilities, outcomes, decisions, spinning and rasping like an old mechanical calculator. He watched the train's light. What had been a pinpoint had grown to a nail head and now it was dime-size, a mad eye, a luminous ball rolling insanely inside of itself. The horn blew with more urgency. He could feel the rocking of the Volvo on the tracks transmitted by the fury of the train.

*A lonely impulse of delight
Drove to this tumult ...*

What were the last lines?

*I balanced all, brought all to mind,
The years ahead seem waste of breath,
A waste of breath the years behind
In balance with this life, this death.*

“Ball *three* to Frank Thomas. “ The announcer was sounding a little more excited now. “Another wide one will load the bases.” Middleton closed the window against the train horn which was blasting hysterically now. He starred straight ahead and squeezed the steering wheel tight and then dropped the Volvo into gear and slipped outside the other gate as the screeching wheels of the train slid behind him. In the days ahead Middleton would not bother to ponder whether it was Yeats or Frank Thomas or just curiosity that made him decide to wait around, to see what Monday evening would be like. Now, sitting at the red light on the other side of the tracks he had to decide whether to turn left or right. His choice was weighed mostly by what might please Veronica and the kids for dinner. Should he go left and get something from Dominick’s to put on the grill, or go right and just pick up some Chinese?

