

*All The Difference*

The moment of decision lay just a few miles ahead.

It was not a big decision. In fact, the driver had made this decision every day for the past seven years.

To turn left or go straight was all that was necessary. To the left lay the shorter route; one that wound through the county's farmland. The route promised plenty of curves and turns, stop signs and intersections. Straight ahead lay the longer route; four lanes of highway as straight as a Euclidean line. At this hour, it held little traffic, and the extra miles would be quick to cover. Though the distances of each varied, the time traveled was really about the same.

In seven years, the driver had rarely paused more than a few moments over the choice of which route to take. He had gathered all the relevant data years ago. Truth be told, and it rarely is, the decision was arrived at without a thought most days. Unless the radio warned of an accident or traffic, the driver relied on mere whimsy to decide. A choice selected somewhere in the depths of the unconscious. Or maybe among the shallows of his subconscious.

Per the usual, as he slowed to a stop at the intersection, he was not thinking about which direction he would take. His mind swarmed with the worries of the day to come: the numbers in the Aidan account, his bosses sweat beaded brow, the comments he may or may not receive on his new tie. Anxieties stung his consciousness, injecting his thoughts with their terrible venom. Often, when he arrived at work, he could not remember which route he had chosen, if chosen it he had, for his conscious mind had been at work on other things.

But today, as the driver moved his head with automatic compulsion right to left, his consciousness emerged from the plague of concerns. He found himself suddenly aware that he had a choice; aware of a decision to be made.

Again, with purpose, the driver looked right to left. He looked down each as far as he could, the pavement yellowing for twenty feet or so under the fall of his headlights, but at five in the morning,

darkness swallowed the distance. So early, the roads lay abandoned to the driver alone. No headlights but his own penetrated the black expanse.

And for the first time since his early days at his job, the driver thought about which direction he should turn. He thought about how to his left waited the way with fewer miles. His hands turned the wheel slightly to the left. Then he remembered the path directly before him provided few turns and faster speeds.

Though the time traveled, the driver knew, was really about the same.

He turned up the radio, which he hadn't been listening to, hoping to catch the next traffic report.

While he waited, the driver looked in his rear view mirror. His break lights turned the darkness red, like blood on velvet. The rest was emptiness. He didn't have to worry about holding anyone up. He felt no need to rush. He was always the first to work by at least an hour.

After a story about a war somewhere, for somewhere there is always war, the local announcer assured the driver that all roads remained clear of wreckage and free of traffic. After that, the local news began. He turned the radio off.

Once more he turned his head. The driver let his mind travel each route in its turn. First left, past Snyder's dairy, where the cows stuck their heads through the slats in their pens, straining their necks to reach their feed, past the rows of six and seven foot corn stalks that climb out of the earth with uniform grace, past the megachurch that had it's own grocery store.

Next, the driver sent his thoughts straight, where the road unfurled like a ribbon of silk before him. Past the billboards advertised everything from cars and clothes to cancer treatments and Jesus. Signage with arrows that pointed to gas stations and fast food joints and hospitals and hotels.

He saw all this as for the first time. Or at least as someone who, for awhile now, has not paid attention. The driver realized that the visions in his head reflected paths he had taken years before. The corn was seven years old. As were all those billboards. The fields could be fallow now. Perhaps

the sign that had once hawked Jesus now pushed used cars. Those arrows might point to now vacant lots.

And still, he could not choose.

The honking of a horn shifted his attention from the road before him to the one behind. Framed by his review mirror, splattered with the red glow of his taillights, a man wearing a perplexed face seemed to be shrugging with his eyes. The driver waved the man around. The man hesitated, as this meant pulling into the oncoming lane. But it was still early-the risk slight.

As the man pulled even with him, the driver gave the man a look in which he hoped to communicate his apology. The man simply nodded to him, looking a bit baffled, and refocused himself on the road ahead. He watched the man put on his left turn signal and pull away.

He envied this man.

For a moment, the driver thought the man may have been a sign, an omen of sorts. That, perhaps, he should follow this man, that this man was showing him the way. Had providence winked at him in the blinking flashes of yellow light? And so the driver put on his left turn signal as the man had done. He leaned way over the steering wheel and look right. He began to release the pressure of his foot on the break. He felt the car stir beneath him and realized he had almost forgotten he was sitting inside of it. He crept forward a fraction of an inch.

It didn't feel right.

Perhaps the sign had meant for the driver to go straight instead. The man had been a warning rather than an invitation. He began to feel frustrated. How was he to know what the man turning left meant? He was no prophet, no soothsayer. He did not know how to read tea leaves or palms or turn signals.

The driver leaned back, reapplied firm pressure on his breaks. He began to reevaluate his choices.

If time passed, the driver did not notice. He felt frozen in amber. He supposed that there were still seconds and minutes and hours and that each second gave way to another which, in its turn, gave way to the next, as did each minute and each hour. But, in his crisis, they escaped the driver's notice.

If he measured time at all, it was in the sounds of horns. More cars came. The motorists became progressively less patient with him. Some horns played a staccato rhythm, a type of morse code; others delivered long, monotonous serenades. Some refused to look at him as they pulled around his car. Others refused to look away, daring confrontation. There were also a plethora of gestures, most involving a single finger.

The driver knew he should not stay here, that is was dangerous. He thought about turning around, going home. But he was already half way to work. It seemed silly to abandon this mundane adventure when all he had to do was go left or go straight, like he had countless times before.

He then thought about pulling to the side of the road, just getting out of everyone's way. But he felt like he was so close to making his decision. Something in his gut or heart or brain or soul ached with a kind of potential that told him soon-soon he would know which way to go. It's that feeling of knowing that the thing you are waiting for will come the second you've abandoned the waiting. Pulling to the side would pull him from this precarious perch on the edge of decision.

So, instead, he put on his fourways. A gesture of the driver's intractable position.

The driver put his head down on the steering wheel so he could concentrate. When he heard honking, he gave a helpless wave his arm.

He spent the time trying to convince himself it didn't matter which direction he chose. That either way, he'd get to work. He'd arrive, pull into his designated parking spot, number 298, and follow the stone pathway into the building, where he'd head straight for his office, his name displayed on the door. Nothing to it. All he had to do was get there. It didn't matter how.

Then the driver thought of a story his wife's friend had posted on his Facebook newsfeed. She said her husband always took the same way home from work every night. For years. Then, one night, she asked him to stop and pick up Chinese food. This required her husband to go far out of his way. He

grumbled and complained, but because he was a good husband, he did as she asked. The next day she discovered that on his regular route, at the normal time he would have been traveling it, there had been a fatal accident. Someone had fallen asleep, drifted into oncoming traffic. She sincerely believed that she had saved her husband's life. More to the point, that God had worked through her to save her husband's life.

The driver thought about the man who died. Was his wife not as in touch with God? Was he not as good of a husband? Had he chosen the wrong path? This is why the choice was so important. Why it made all the difference. Why it could not be made lightly.

A knocking on his window startled him into lifting his head. Sunlight surprised his pupils into sudden contraction. As the driver waited for the figure outside his car to resolve itself from silhouette into something more tangible, he wondered how long ago he had rested his head on his steering wheel, how many cars had passed him. How many turned left, how many went straight.

He wondered if he was late for work.

The driver could tell the figure was gesturing for him to do something. The shadow wanted him to roll down his window. He did so, frantically blinking away the blurriness.

"Sir, are you ok," the shadow asked.

"Fine, sir, and you?" he asked, baffled and somewhat touched by the concern.

"Is there something wrong with your car?"

Stupidly, the driver looked around the inside of his Civic, saw nothing out of place.

"I don't think so."

As the colors distinguished themselves from one another, patterns appeared and the driver soon realized he was talking to a police officer.

“Sir, you’ve been sitting here for almost three hours.”

He nodded. He was definitely late for work.

“Sir, may I ask you why you’re just sitting here?”

“I don’t know which way to go.”

“You’re lost?”

“No.”

The officer didn’t respond right away. The driver could make out the confusion on the officer’s face. He didn’t mean not make sense. It was hard to explain.

“Sir, I’m going to have to ask you to step out of the vehicle.”

Again, he nodded. He put the car in park and opened the door. The sun felt even brighter out here. The officer proceeded to run the driver through several activities involving following a finger, walking a straight line, reciting the alphabet and touching his nose. He rather liked it, for following directions was easy.

The officer asked for the driver’s license and registration. After gathering this documentation, the officer told him to have a seat in his car and wait, then returned to his cruiser.

As he waited, he noticed that once again, there was no traffic. The morning rush had passed. He thought about the ebb and flow of people washing over the roads. He thought about how when he took a sick day, he was always amazed at how much traffic there was on a Wednesday morning or at 1:30 on a Tuesday afternoon. He wondered where everyone was going. Now, he wondered where everyone had gone.

A hand appeared through the window, holding his information. He received it with a smile.

“Which way are you heading, Sir?”

“I’m not sure.”

“I mean, Sir, where are you going?”

The officer’s voice sounded tight. His lips barely moved and he did not smile. The Sir sounded less and less respectful and more like a substitute for what he really wanted to call the driver. Asshole, say.

“To work.”

“Where do you work?”

He told the officer.

“Ok, so what’s the problem?”

“I don’t know which way to go.”

“You don’t know how to get there?”

“No, I do.”

More silence. Not silence really. A silence filled with lots of unheard noises that made the driver uncomfortable. He shifted in his seat. The vinyl made chipmunk sounds.

“Sir, do you or don’t you know where you’re going?”

The driver decided he didn’t want to talk about it any more. It made him sick. Something in his chest stung and burned, a tiny volcano erupting inside.

“Sir, you either need to move this vehicle, or I’m going to have to detain you.”

He ignored the officer. The driver leaned over the steering while, looked at his options again. Left, straight, left, straight, left, straight.

His chest was searing. He felt the waves of heat wash up against his sternum and waited for a tsunami that would break through his bone and flesh and pour out over the steering wheel.

“Sir, I’m going to ask you one more time to move your vehicle.”

Leftstraightleftstraightleftstraightleftstraight

“Sir, step out of the vehicle.”

He didn’t hear the request. The driver only heard his two choices echoing in his head like a scream emanating from the bottom of a well. Though instead of fading with each repetition, succumbing to silence, each reverberation increased in volume, as if feeding off the word that came before, until his entire mental landscape consisted of these two words. The sound became so loud, he had to squint.

His door opened. A hand gripped the driver’s shoulder. With the sonic boom of his consciousness pressing inside-out against his flesh, he barely registered the cold fingers at the base of his neck, but he felt that he should allow the hand to guide him. It would show him which choice to make.

The officer pulled the driver from his car and deposited him into the cruiser. He watched as the officer returned to his car, climbed in and moved it off to the shoulder, out of the way of future traffic. The officer locked the car and returned to the cruiser.

The officer turned and said something to the driver, but he still couldn’t hear. But he nodded to show cooperation.

They sat there for some time while the officer typed into his computer and called someone on the phone. For a moment, the driver thought maybe the officer too could not decide which way to go. He felt the fire in his chest eat through some muscle or bone and drop into his stomach. He winced.



Then the car pulled forward and stopped at the stop sign. Despite his discomfort, the man sat up, alert. The officer looked each way once, twice, then a third time.

The man in the back of the car held his breath.

The officer went straight, crossing the intersection. Soon, he was on the highway.

The man fell back against the seat as if he had just plummeted from a great height. He felt the internal flames consume the last of their fuel and begin to die, first into embers, then to ash. The voices in his head seemed to go hoarse, and fall into dull whispering.

He rested his head against the cool window, exhausted.

Of course, he thought. Straight. Of course.

He closed his eyes and slept.