

Change of Life

Enough Rope collection

by Lawrence Block, 1938–

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In a sense, what happened to Royce Arnstetter wasn't the most unusual thing in the world. What happened to him was that he got to be thirty-eight years old. That's something that happens to most people and it isn't usually much, just a little way station on the road of life, a milepost precisely halfway between thirty-two and forty-four, say.

Not the most significant milestone in the world for most of us either. Since the good Lord saw fit to equip the vast majority of us with ten fingers, we're apt to attach more significance to those birthdays that end with a nought. Oh, there are

a few other biggies—eighteen, twenty-one, sixty-five—but usually it's hitting thirty or forty or fifty that makes a man stop and take stock of his life.

For Royce Arnstetter it was old number thirty-eight. The night before he'd gone to bed around ten o'clock—he just about always went to bed around ten o'clock—and his wife Essie said, „Well, when you wake up you'll be thirty-eight, Royce.“

„Sure will,“ he said.

Whereupon she turned out the light and went back to the living room to watch a rerun of *Hee Haw* and Royce rolled over and went to sleep. Fell right off to sleep too. He never did have any trouble doing that.

Then just about exactly eight hours later he opened his eyes and he was thirty-eight years old. He got out of bed quietly, careful not to wake Essie, and he went into the bathroom and studied his face as a prelude to shaving it.

„Be double damned,“ he said. „Thirty-eight years old and my life's half over and I never yet did a single thing.“

While it is given to relatively few men to know in advance the precise dates of their death, a perhaps surprising number of them think they know. Some work it out actuarially with slide rules. Some dream their obituaries and note the date on the newspaper. Others draw their conclusions by means of palmistry or phrenology or astrology or numerology or some such. (Royce's birthday, that we've been talking about, fell on the fourth of March that year, same as it did every year. That made him a Pisces, and he had Taurus rising, Moon in Leo, Venus in Capricorn, Mars in Taurus, and just a shade over three hundred dollars in the First National Bank of Schuyler County. He knew about the bank account but not about the astrology business. I'm just putting it in in case you care. He had lines on the palms of his hands and bumps on the top of his head, but he'd never taken any particular note of them, so I don't see why you and I have to.)

It's hard to say why Royce had decided he'd live to be seventy-six years old. The ages of his four grandparents at death added up to two hundred and ninety-seven, and if you divide that by four (which I just took the trouble to do for you) you come up with seventy-four and a quarter change. Royce's pa was still hale and hearty at sixty-three, and his ma had died some years back at fifty-one during an electric storm when a lightning-struck old silver maple fell on her car while she was in it.

Royce was an only child.

Point is, you can juggle numbers until you're blue in the face and get about everything but seventy-six in connection with Royce Arnstetter. Maybe he dreamed the number, or maybe he saw *The Music Man* and counted trombones, or maybe he was hung up on the Declaration of Independence.

Point is, it hardly matters why Royce had this idea in his head. But he had it, and he'd had it for as many years as he could remember. If you could divide seventy-six by three he might have had a bad morning some years earlier, and if he'd picked seventy-five or seventy-seven he might have skipped right on by the problem entirely, but he picked seventy-six and even Royce knew that half of seventy-six was thirty-eight, which was what he was.

He had what the French, who have a way with words, call an *idée fixe*. If you went and called it a fixed idea you wouldn't go far wrong. And you know what they say about the power of a fixed idea whose time has come.

Or maybe you don't, but it doesn't matter much. Let's get on back to Royce, still staring at himself in the mirror. What he did was fairly usual. He lathered up and started shaving.

But this time, when he had shaved precisely half of his face, one side of his neck and one cheek and one half of his chin and one half of his mustache, he plumb stopped and washed off the rest of the lather.

„Half done,“ he said, „and half to go.“

He looked pretty silly, if you want to know.

Now I almost said earlier that the only thing noteworthy about the number thirty-eight, unless you happen to be Royce Arnstetter, is that it's the caliber of a gun. That would have had a nice ironical sound to it, at least the first time I ran it on by you, but the thing is it would be a fairly pointless observation. Only time Royce ever handled a pistol in his whole life was when he put in his six months in the National Guard so as not to go into the army, and what they had there was a forty-five automatic, and he never did fire it.

As far as owning guns, Royce had a pretty nice rimfire .22 rifle. It was a pretty fair piece of steel in its day and Royce's pa used to keep it around as a varmint gun. That was before Royce married Essie Handridge and took a place on the edge of town, and Royce used to sit up in his bedroom with the rifle and plink away at woodchucks and rabbits when they made a pass at his ma's snap beans and lettuce and such. He didn't often hit anything. It was his pa's gun, really, and it was only in Royce's keeping because his pa had taken to drinking some after Royce's ma got crushed by the silver maple. „Shot out a whole raft of windows last Friday and don't even recall it,“ Royce's pa said. „Now why don't you just hold onto this here for me? I got enough to worry about as it is.“

Royce kept the gun in the closet. He didn't even keep any bullets for it, because what did he need with them?

The other gun was a Worthington twelve gauge, which is a shotgun of a more or less all-purpose nature. Royce's was double-barrel, side by side, and there was nothing automatic about it. After you fired off both shells you had to stop and open the gun and take out the old shells and slap in a couple of fresh ones. Once or twice a year Royce would go out the first day of small-game season and try to get himself a rabbit or a couple pheasant. Sometimes he did and sometimes not. And every now and then he'd try for a deer, but he never did get one of them. Deer have been thin in this part of the state since a few years after the war.

So basically Royce wasn't much for guns. What he really preferred was fishing, which was something he was tolerably good at. His pa was always a good fisherman and it was about the only thing the two of them enjoyed doing together. Royce wasn't enough of a nut to tie his own flies, which his pa had done now and then, but he could cast and he knew what bait to use for what fish and all the usual garbage fishermen have to know if they expect to do themselves any good. He knew all that stuff, Royce did, and he took double-good care of his fishing tackle and owned nothing but quality gear. Some of it was bought second-hand but it was all quality merchandise and he kept it in the best kind of shape.

But good as he was with a fishing rod and poor as he might be with a gun, it didn't make no nevermind, because how in blue hell are you going to walk into a bank and hold it up with a fly rod?

Be serious, will you now?

Well, Royce was there at twenty minutes past nine, which was eleven minutes after the bank opened, which in turn was nine minutes after it was supposed to open. It's not only the First National Bank of Schuyler County, it's the only bank, national or otherwise, in the county. So if Buford Washburn's a handful of minutes late opening up, nobody's about to take his business across the street, because across the street's nothing but Eddie Joe Tyler's sporting goods store. (Royce bought most of his fishing tackle from Eddie Joe, except for the Greenbriar reel he bought when they auctioned off George McEwan's leavings. His pa bought the Worthington shotgun years ago in Clay County off a man who advertised it in the *Clay County Weekly Republican*. I don't know what-all that has to do with anything, but the shotgun's important because Royce had it on his shoulder when he walked on into the bank.)

There was only the one teller behind the counter, but then there was only Royce to give her any business. Buford Washburn was at his desk along the side, and he got to his feet when he saw Royce. „Well, say there, Royce,“ he said.

„Say, Mr. Washburn,“ said Royce.

Buford sat back down again. He didn't stand more than he had to. He was maybe six, seven years older than Royce, but if he lived to be seventy-six it would be a miracle, being as his blood pressure was high as July corn and his belt measured fifty-two inches even if you soaked it in brine. Plus he drank. Never before dinner, but that leaves you a whole lot of hours if you're a night person.

The teller was Ruth Van Dine. Her ma wanted her to get braces when she was twelve, thirteen, but Ruth said she didn't care to. I'd have to call that a big mistake on her part. „Say there, Royce,“ she said. „What can I do for you?“

Now Royce shoved his savings passbook across the top of the counter. Don't ask me why he brought the blame thing. I couldn't tell you.

„Deposit?“

„Withdrawal.“

„How much?“

Every dang old cent you got in this here bank was what he was going to say. But what came out of his mouth was, „Every dang old cent.“

„Three hundred twelve dollars and forty-five cents? Plus I guess you got some extra interest coming which I'll figure out for you.“

„Well—“

„Better make out a slip, Royce. Just on behind you?“

He turned to look for the withdrawal slips and there was Buford Washburn, also standing. „They off at the sawmill today, Royce? I didn't hear anything.“

„No, I guess they're workin', Mr. Washburn. I guess I took the day.“

„Can't blame you, beautiful day like this. What'd you do, go and get a little hunting in?“

„Not in March, Mr. Washburn.“

„I don't guess nothing's in season this time of year.“

„Not a thing. I was just gone take this here across to Eddie Joe. Needs a little gunsmithin‘.“

„Well, they say Eddie Joe knows his stuff.“

„I guess he does, Mr. Washburn.“

„Now this about drawing out all your money,“ Buford said. He fancied himself smoother than a bald tire at getting from small talk to business, Buford did. „I guess you got what they call an emergency.“

„Somethin‘ like.“

„Well now, maybe you want to do what most folks do, and that‘ leave a few dollars in to keep the account open. Just for convenience. Say ten dollars? Or just draw a round amount, say you draw your three hundred dollars. Or—“ And he went through a whole routine about how Royce could take his old self a passbook loan and keep the account together and keep earning interest and all the rest of it, which I‘m not going to spell out here for you.

Upshot of it was Royce wound up drawing three hundred dollars. Ruth Van Dine gave it to him in tens and twenties because he just stood there stiffer than new rope when she asked him how did he want it. Three times she asked him, and she‘ s a girl no one ever had to tell to speak up, and each time it was like talking to a wall, so she counted out ten tens and ten twenties and gave it to him, along with his passbook. He thanked her and walked out with the passbook and money in one hand and the other holding the twelve gauge Worthington, which was still propped up on his shoulder.

Before he got back in his panel truck he said, „Half my life, Lord, half my dang life.“

Then he got in the truck.

When he got back to his house he found Essie in the kitchen soaking the labels off some empty jam jars. She turned and saw him, then shut off the faucet and turned to look at him again. She said, „Why, Royce honey, what are you doing back here? Did you forget somethin‘?“

„I didn‘ t forget nothin‘,“ he said. What he forgot was to hold up the bank like he‘ d set out to do, but he didn‘ t mention that.

„You didn‘ t get laid off,“ she said mournfully. (I didn‘ t put in a question mark there because her voice didn‘ t turn up at the end. She said it sort of like it would be O.K. if Royce did get laid off from the sawmill, being that the both of them could always go out in the backyard and eat dirt. She was always a comfort, Essie was.)

„Didn‘ t go to work,“ Royce said. „Today‘ s my dang birthday,“ Royce said.

„‘Course it is! Now I never wished you a happy birthday but you left ‘fore I was out of bed. Well, happy birthday and many more. Thirty-nine years, land sakes.“

„Thirty-eight!“

„What did I say? Why, I said thirty-nine. Would you believe that. I know it‘ s thirty-eight, ‘course I know that. Why are you carrying that gun, I guess there‘ s rats in the garbage again.“

„Half my life,“ Royce said.

„Is there?“

„Is there what?“

„Rats in the garbage again?“

„Now how in blue hell would I know is there rats in the garbage?“

„But you have that gun, Royce.“

He discovered the gun, took it off his shoulder, and held it out in both hands, looking at it like it was the prettiest thing since a new calf.

„That’s your shotgun,“ Essie said.

„Well, I guess I know that. Half my dang life.“

„What about half your life?“

„My life’s half gone,“ he said, „and what did I ever do with it, would you tell me that? Far as I ever been from home is Franklin County and I never stayed there overnight, just went and come back. Half my life and I never left the dang old state.“

„I was thinkin’ we might run out to Silver Dollar City this summer,“ Essie said. „It’s like an old frontier city come to life or so they say. That’s across the state line, come to think on it.“

„Never been anyplace, never done any dang thing. Never had no woman but you.“

„Well now.“

„I’m gone to Paris,“ Royce said.

„What did you say?“

„I’m gone to Paris is what I said. I’m gone rob Buford Washburn’s bank and I’m not even gone call him Mr. Washburn this time. Gone to Paris France, gone buy a Cadillac big as a train, gone do every dang thing I never did. Half my life, Essie.“

Well, she frowned. You blame her? „Royce,“ she said, „you better lie down.“

„Paris, France.“

„What I’ll do,“ she said, „I’ll just call on over at Dr. LeBeau’s. You lie down and put the fan on and I’ll just finish with these here jars and then call the doctor. You know something? Just two more cases and we’ll run out of your ma’s plum preserves. Two cases of twenty-four jars to the case is forty-eight jars and we’ll be out. Now I never thought we’d be out of them plums she put up but we’ll be plumb out, won’t we. Hear me talk, plumb out of plums, I did that without even thinking.“

Essie wasn’t normally quite this scatterbrained. Almost, but not quite. Thing is, she was concerned about Royce, being as he wasn’t acting himself.

„Problem is getting in a rut,“ Royce said. He was talking to his own self now, not to Essie. „Problem is you leave yourself openings and you back down because it’s the easy thing to do. Like in the bank.“

„Royce, ain’t you goin’ to lay down?“

„Fillin’ out a dang slip,“ Royce said.

„Royce? You know somethin’? You did the funniest thing this mornin’, honey. You know what you did? You went and you only shaved the half of your face. You shaved the one half and you didn’t shave the other half.“

(Now this is something that both Ruth Van Dine and Buford Washburn had already observed, and truth to tell they had both called it to Royce’s attention—in a friendly way, of course. I’d have mentioned it but I figured if I kept sliding in the same little piece of conversation over and over it’d be about as interesting for you as watching paint dry. But I had to mention when Essie said it out of respect, see, because it was the last words that woman ever got to speak, because right after

she said it Royce stuck the shotgun right in her face and fired off one of the barrels. Don't ask me which one.)

„Now the only way to go is forward,“ Royce said. „Fix things so you got no bolt hole and you got to do what you got to do.“ He went to the cupboard, got a shotgun shell, broke open the gun, dug out the empty casing, popped in the new shell, and closed the gun up again.

On the way out of the door he looked at Essie and said, „You weren't so bad, I don't guess.“

Well, Royce drove on back to the bank and parked directly in front of it, even though there's a sign says plainly not to, and he stepped on into that bank with the twelve-gauge clenched in his hand. It wasn't over his shoulder this time. He had his right hand wrapped around the barrel at the center of gravity or close to it. (It's not the worst way to carry a gun, though you'll never see it advocated during a gun safety drive.)

He was asked later if he felt remorse at that time about Essie. It was the sort of dumb question they ask you, and it was especially dumb in light of the fact that Royce probably didn't know what the hell remorse meant, but in plain truth he didn't. What he felt was in motion.

And in that sense he felt pretty fine. Because he'd been standing plumb still for thirty-eight years and never even knew it, and now he was in motion, and it hardly mattered where exactly he was going.

„I want every dang cent in this bank!“ he sang out, and Buford Washburn just about popped a blood vessel in his right eye, and Ruth Van Dine stared, and old Miz Cristendahl who had made a trip to town just to get the interest credited to her account just stood there and closed her eyes so nothing bad would happen to her. (I guess it worked pretty good. That woman's still alive, and she was seventy-six years old when Calvin Coolidge didn't choose to run. All those Cristendahls live pretty close to forever. Good thing they're not much for breeding or the planet would be armpit deep in Cristendahls.)

„Now you give me every bit of that money,“ he said to Ruth. And he kept saying it, and she got rattled.

„I *can't*,“ she said finally, „because anyway it's not mine to give and I got no authority and besides there's another customer ahead of you. What you got to do is you got to speak to Mr. Buford Washburn.“

And what Buford said was, „Now, Royce, say, Royce, you want to put down that gun.“

„I'm gone to Paris, France, Mr. Washburn.“ You notice he forgot and went and called him Mr. Washburn. Old habits die hard.

„Royce, you still didn't finish your morning shave. What's got into you, boy?“

„I killed my wife, Mr. Washburn.“

„Royce, why don't you just have a seat and I'll get you a cold glass of Royal Crown. Take my chair.“

So Royce pointed the gun at him. „You better give me that money,“ he said, „or I could go and blow your dang head off your dumb shoulders.“

„Boy, does your pappy have the slightest idea what you're up to?“

„I don't see what my pa's got to do with this.“

„Because your pappy, he wouldn't take kindly to you carrying on this way, Royce. Now just sit down in my chair, you hear?“

At this point Royce was getting riled, plus he was feeling the frustration of it. Here he went and burned his britches by shooting Essie and where was he? Still trying to hold up a bank that wouldn't take him seriously. So what he did, he swung the gun around and shot out the plate-glass window. You wouldn't think the world would make that much noise in the course of coming to an end.

„Well, now you went and did it,“ Buford told him. „You got the slightest idea what a plate-glass window costs? Royce, boy, you went and bought yourself a peck of trouble.“

So what Royce did, he shot Ruth Van Dine.

Now that doesn't sound like it makes a whole vast amount of sense, but Royce had his reasons, if you want to go and call them by that name. He couldn't kill Buford, according to his thinking, because Buford was the only one who could authorize giving him the money. And he didn't think to shoot Miz Cristendahl because he didn't notice her. (Maybe because she closed her eyes. Maybe those ostriches know what they're about. I'm not going to say they don't.)

On top of which Ruth was screaming a good bit and it was getting on Royce's nerves.

He wasn't any Dead-Eye Dick, as I may have pointed out before, and although he was standing right close to Ruth he didn't get a very good shot at her. A twelve gauge casts a pretty tight pattern as close as he was to her, with most of the charge going right over her head. There was enough left to do the job, but it was close for a while. Didn't kill her right off, left them plenty of time to rush her to Schuyler County Memorial and pop her into the operating room. It was six hours after that before she died, and there's some say better doctors could have saved her. That's a question I'll stay away from myself. It's said she'd of been a vegetable even if she lived, so maybe it's all for the best.

Well, that was about the size of it. Buford fainted, which was plain sensible on his part, and Miz Cristendahl stood around with her eyes shut and her fingers in her ears, and Royce Arnstetter went behind the counter and opened the cash drawer and started pulling out stacks of money. He got all the money on top of the counter. There wasn't a whole hell of a lot of it. He was looking for a bag to put it in when a couple of citizens rushed in to see what was going on.

He picked up the gun and then just threw it down in disgust because it was full of nothing but two spent shells. And he couldn't have reloaded if he'd thought of it because he never did bring along any extra shells when he left the house. Just the two that were loaded into the gun, and one of those took out the window and the other took out poor Ruth. He just threw the gun down and said a couple bad words and thought what a mess he'd made of everything, letting the first half of his life just dribble out and then screwing up the second half on the very first day of it.

He would of pleaded at the trial but he had this young court-appointed lawyer who wanted to do some showboating, and the upshot of it was he wound up drawing ninety-nine-to-life, which sounds backwards to me, as the average life

runs out way in front of the ninety-nine mark, especially when you're thirty-eight to start with.

He's in the state prison now over to Millersport. It's not quite as far from his home as Franklin County where he went once, but he didn't get to stay overnight that time. He sure gets to stay overnight now.

Well, there's people to talk to and he's learning things. His pa's been to visit a few times. They don't have much to say to each other but when did they ever? They'll reminisce about times they went fishing. It's not so bad.

He thinks about Essie now and then. I don't know as you'd call it remorse though.

„Be here until the day I die,“ he said one day. And a fellow inmate sat him down and told him about parole and time off for good behavior and a host of other things, and this fellow worked it out with pencil and paper and told Royce he'd likely be breathing free air in something like thirty-three years.

„Means I'll have five left to myself,“ Royce said.

The fellow gave him this look.

„I'm fixin' to live until I'm seventy-six,“ Royce explained. „Thirty-eight now and thirty-three more in here is what? Seventy-one, isn't it? Seventy-six take away seventy-one and you get five, don't you? Five years left when I'm out of here.“ And he scratched his head and said, „Now what am I gone do with them five years?“

Well, I just guess he'll have to think of something.

