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Pismo

Fritz Bogott

Illustrations by Mozhi

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The bus hisses to a stop. The few other passengers all seem to be asleep at six o'clock in the evening, and their heads are lolling. Alt shoulders his backpack and walks down the steps.

He's standing behind a suburban strip-mall. Freshly-trimmed topiary frame a cracked-glass entry door underneath a rusted exit sign, inexplicably mounted outside the building. Next to the topiary is a grease-caked dumpster with a dozen flies glued in place. He tries the door. It's locked.

He tries to think when he last saw Uncle Har. Alt must have been around five years old, learning to fish for bluegill under a busy overpass. Uncle Har was wearing the same gray suit as always, dressed down with a pair of green rubber boots.

Peeking cautiously around the corner, Alt thinks he can just make out the giant clam-shaped restaurant sign across acres of parking lot and four lanes of traffic.

Aunt Mar cleaned and gutted those bluegill like a master machinist. She laid out her tools in precise alignment, adjusted the overhead lights, and kept her movements precise and economical. The tiny fish rendered into an impoverished pile of thumbnail-sized fillets, and she microwaved them unceremoniously and served them without salt. Alt runs his tongue around his mouth to clear the memory of the taste.

Crossing the first lane of the parking lot goes reasonably well. The enormous red pickup that was not there a second ago backs up blind and at great speed, but he presses back against a minivan and avoids injury. The contents of his backpack form lumps

between his shoulder blades. The second lane goes even better—late-afternoon mid-summer light glaring off spattered windshields and dented chrome. He becomes bold, and begins to walk more quickly along the side of a driveway leading out to the road. The Chevrolets and Hyundais, bewildered by the sight of a pedestrian, brush him with their mirrors and shove him with their fenders. He begins to whistle, low and in a minor key.

Just as he remembered from occasional childhood contacts, Uncle Har's message had arrived in two halves, jaggedly ripped and wadded into the corners of separate envelopes mailed on separate days. The taped-together message was simple: "Meet me at Pismo's before 6:25 PM on Thursday." No salutation, no signature. He hopes this is the right Thursday. It is probably pointless to wonder what Uncle Har wanted—sending notes out of the blue after almost 20 years. Anyway, the answer is only a highway and a parking lot away.

Traffic is bumper-to-bumper and steady in both directions. He shifts his whistling tempo to adjust for the patter of dust and gravel against his shins. One step forward, one step back. The drivers don't seem annoyed by this feinting; their attentions are elsewhere. He continues rocking on the balls of his feet, then suddenly steps between two sedans and turns sideways between the lanes, splaying his fingers and, he hopes, his toes. The absence of holes means nobody will be changing lanes, and this is a good thing. He whirls and vaults to the median, grinning and spitting a gnat from between his teeth.

Sweat cools on the back of his neck. He steps into the gap between two well-synchronized SUV's, hi-fives each rear bumper as he passes, and lands in shin-deep spiky weeds on the far side.

The giant clam yawns above. He checks his watch: 6:14. An ancient station wagon with no doors or windows pulls up beside him. He turns to look inside. No Uncle Har; just a headphone-wearing teenager who looks at Alt, opens his mouth, closes it again, and bounces forward out of the parking lot.

He walks up to the restaurant's front door, stands with his shoulder to the hinge and twists his head to peer through the glass rectangle. A few heads are visible above the row of booths, bobbing and weaving as they eat and speak. A hostess in Bermuda shorts and a Hawaiian shirt walks through, stopping to neaten the corners on a stack of plastic-coated menus. She looks up and meets his eyes, sideways behind the glass. He jerks himself back, out of sight.

He looks the doors over carefully and edges away along the bright pink brick wall. A family of four on their way from the parking lot eyes him with concern. He smiles nervously and walks toward the back.

The back door is sandwiched between a set of caged garbage bins and a padlocked grease-trap. He tries the knob above a push button keypad. It is locked, and it doesn't turn.

Heat is rising in waves over the blacktop. He wrinkles his forehead, then relaxes, then wrinkles, then relaxes. His glasses creep lower and lower, until they are resting on the tip of his nose. He resets them with a finger, then starts working them down again. The knob rattles. A short man in chef's Zubaz pushes past Alt without looking up, and Alt catches the door with his foot and walks in.

The indoor air is so sharply cold it makes him grunt, and he clips his shoulder on the time clock. There is a mechanical hiss and a steady stream of Spanish coming from the kitchen to the left. Alt hitches up his backpack and takes a step forward, just as a balding

man in shorts and a parka rounds the corner, lowers his clipboard, and looks blankly at Alt.

“May I help you?”

Alt shrugs and darts his eyes around the small space. “Table for two,” he says.

The manager scowls. “How did you get in here?”

Alt looks at him. “Sorry?”

“Look,” the man says. “Go back out that door, go around to the front, and go in that door. This is the kitchen.”

Alt sighs. “Can't I just go through *that* way?” and points down the short hall.

A pale blue woman in Bermuda shorts, a Hawaiian shirt and a stocking cap appears. “Brian?” she says. “We're out of floor-cleaner.”

“Back out that door,” Brian repeats. “Around to the front.”

Alt nods hello to the woman, and she looks from him to Brian, confused.

“I'll just...” Alt says, taking a step forward. Brian shifts slightly, trying to block him.

Another blue woman appears. “Tina called in sick. I can work a double, if that's okay.”

Alt twists to shoulder past Brian. “Thanks, I...”

Brian shifts again, bumping shoulders with him. “Look. Just go out the...”

A third woman appears, teeth chattering. “Trace?” she says, “Table six wants their check.”

Alt nods at the new woman and points over Brian's shoulder. “If you'll just...”

Brian moves chest-to-chest with Alt. “Sir, please. I don't even know how you got in...”

An astounding rumble shakes the restaurant. The pages on Brian's clipboard flutter violently. It makes Alt's teeth hurt. He shuts his eyes and walks through Brian, who gives way, trying to get his hands over his ears. The three women, jaws agape, look warmer somehow.

Alt emerges from the back of the shaking restaurant, walks briskly to the entrance, and looks out through the glass in the front door. A cloud of black smoke obscures the parking lot, and then the noise dies.

There is a long silence while the customers crane their necks and the cloud dissipates. In the center of the parking lot, walking cautiously toward the entrance, are an ancient-looking man in a gray suit and railroad boots and an equally-ancient woman with dyed-black hair, a flowered turtleneck, a leather flight helmet and goggles. Alt sticks his head out the door. "Uncle Har? Aunt Mar?"

Aunt Mar smiles and pulls the goggles up onto her forehead. "Alter dear, so nice to see you!"

Uncle Har slaps him on the shoulder. Alt steps out and holds the door open. "I didn't realize you'd be coming too, Aunt Mar," he says.

"Oh yes," she says, and walks into the waiting area.

Uncle Har ducks to get through the door, and Alt follows them inside. "Long trip?" he asks.

"Oh, no, not bad," his aunt answers. She picks up a menu and starts to glance it over.

Alt looks at his uncle. "I'm sorry," he says, "but I'm not even sure where you live these days."

Uncle Har's eyes are slowly working their way along the edge of the ceiling. Alt follows his gaze but can't see anything of interest. "It's quite a trip for you, though, isn't it?" Aunt Mar asks.

Alt looks at her, at his uncle, and back at the ceiling. "I had to take the afternoon off," he says, "but the bus stops right across the road. There's a bus back in a couple of hours."

Uncle Har's eyes have drifted down the corner of the room and are now carefully scanning the carpet. One of the waitresses appears. She has removed her scarf but is bouncing vigorously on the balls of her feet. "Table for three?" she asks. She locks eyes with Alt and raises her eyebrows. He shrugs. "Yes, thank you," Aunt Mar answers.

"Right this... way," the hostess says. Uncle Har is now zigzagging his head, making a comprehensive survey of the floor. Aunt Mar and Alt follow the hostess into the dining room, and Uncle Har trails behind.

"Can I bring you anything to drink?" the hostess asks, setting three menus down on a booth table.

"No, thank you," Aunt Mar says, remaining standing.

The hostess looks expectantly at Uncle Har, but he simply touches the edge of the table with two fingers, then quickly moves to the next table and repeats the gesture. Aunt Mar looks at him fondly.

The hostess takes a couple of steps backward. "Your server will be with you in just a moment," she says, then turns and walks briskly toward the kitchen, hugging herself.

Alt opens his menu and waits for Aunt Mar to sit down. Uncle Har has finished touching about a quarter of the tables, and he has picked up a two-year-old admirer, who is following along behind him, reaching up and touching each table as he passes.

“I was surprised,” Alt says, “when I got Uncle Har’s notes. It’s been a long time.”

Brian’s head pokes around the doorway into the dining room and follows Uncle Har and the toddler for a few moments, then briefly turns toward Alt, then disappears.

“We don’t eat out much,” Aunt Mar says.

The child’s mother has left her seat and is trying to collect her daughter. The little girl is delighted to be chased. She darts around Uncle Har and begins touching tables ahead of him. Alt runs his fingers through his hair.

The hostess appears and sets a glass of ice water down in front of Alt. Aunt Mar, still standing, smiles at her. The hostess opens her mouth, closes it again, and withdraws.

Alt takes a sip of water. “Cold in here,” he says. “I’m ready for a cup of tea.”

“Oh yes,” Aunt Mar says, smiling and watching her husband.

The little girl is back seated at her table, but she is still watching Uncle Har closely. She kicks her table leg, hard, whenever he touches a table.

Thunk.

Thunk.

Brian’s head appears again. Uncle Har only has four more tables to go. Alt takes a deep breath and rearranges the menus on the table. The rest of Brian comes around the corner.

Thunk.

Alt shifts his weight on the slippery booth seat.

Thunk.

“Honey, please,” the girl’s mom says.

Thunk.

“Is everything okay here?” Brian asks, arriving and looking from the standing Aunt Mar to Alt.

Thunk.

Aunt Mar looks questioningly at Uncle Har. He nods, and she smiles and sits down. “Yes, thanks,” she says. “We’re just deciding what to order.”

Brian looks at Uncle Har, who slides in beside his wife and picks up a menu.

“Your server will be right with you,” Brian says, and walks away.

Uncle Har’s finger points at the first item on the menu. “Soup of the day,” he says. He looks around the walls until he spots the specials board. “Vegetable Beef,” he says. “Beef stock, onions, carrots, celery, tomatoes. Barley. Corn, lima beans, green beans, peas. Ten.”

“And beef,” Aunt Mar adds.

“Eleven,” Uncle Har agrees. “A prime number.” Then he continues. “Beef stock, twenty calories. Onions, seven calories. Carrots, twelve calories. Celery, three calories.”

“Two,” Aunt Mar says.

“Two,” Uncle Har concedes. “Tomatoes, thirteen calories. Barley, eighteen calories. Corn, twelve calories. Lima beans, twenty calories. Green beans, nine calories. Peas, seven calories. Beef, thirty calories. One hundred fifty calories. Five times five times three times two.”

Aunt Mar looks at him proudly. His finger moves to the second item on the menu. “Giant Clam Chowder,” he says. “Bacon, potatoes, carrots, milk. Giant clam juice, giant clams. Flour. Seven.”

“Oyster crackers?” asks Aunt Mar.

“No,” says Uncle Har. “Bacon, fifty calories. Flour, twenty calories. Potatoes, thirty calories. Carrots, fifteen calories. Milk, seventy calories. Giant clam juice, ten calories. Giant clams, eighteen calories. Two hundred thirteen calories. Three times seventy-one.”

Alt starts checking how many items there are on the menu. One, two, three...

“Surfing salad,” Uncle Har says. “Lettuce, tomatoes, carrots, onions. Hard-boiled eggs, cheddar cheese. Hang-ten Ham. Blue Sea Dressing. Eight. Two times two times two.”

Nineteen, twenty, twenty-one...

“Lettuce, seven calories. Tomatoes, twenty calories. Carrots, seven calories. Onions, three calories. Hard-boiled eggs, fifty calories. Cheddar cheese, seventy calories. Hang-ten Ham, sixty-five calories. Blue Sea Dressing, one hundred thirty-seven calories. Three hundred fifty-nine calories, prime.”

Forty-three menu items including drinks.

Aunt Mar’s menu is lying on the table in front of her, unopened. She gazes raptly at Uncle Har.

“Boardwalk salad,” Uncle Har says. “Tuna fish, mayonnaise, celery. Salt, pepper, lettuce leaf. Six. Two times three.”

Alt starts cracking his knuckles finger by finger, joint by joint.

“Tuna fish, ninety-three calories. Mayonnaise, eighty calories. Celery, three calories. Salt, zero calories. Pepper, zero calories. Lettuce leaf, two calories. One hundred seventy-eight calories. Two times eighty-nine.”

Alt excuses himself and stands up.

“Putt-putt salad,” Uncle Har says. “Cucumbers, yogurt, mint. Croutons.”

Alt starts walking toward the kitchen. Brian sees him coming and quickly walks the other way.

The line chefs are wearing heavy ski gloves with the fingers cut off. A waitress turns from the order station and takes a step toward Alt. “May I help you?”

“What’s the worst thing you’ve got?” he asks.

“Sorry?” she says.

“The worst,” Alt says. “What’s the absolute worst thing on the menu; the worst thing this restaurant has ever served?”

“I’m kinda busy?” she says.

“Sea-foam Salad,” says another waitress, passing through. “Smells like piss-thinner.”

“I hate the coffee?” says the first waitress.

“Shark Sandwich,” suggests the second waitress. “What’s in those things?”

“I never eat here?” says the first waitress. “We eat for free, but I bring my lunch?”

A third waitress walks up. “Neon Pie,” she says. “You ever eat that? Gave me hives and I missed a week of work. Couldn’t make the rent, so I asked my boyfriend for a loan, but then he left.”

There is a pause.

“This,” says one of the line chefs, holding up a plate with a crimson blob in the center. “This is the one.”

“We used to serve breakfast?” the first waitress says. “We don’t anymore?”

“Otter Roast,” suggests the hostess, appearing from the front. “That’s cost me a lot in tips.”

“The Woody,” says a second line chef. “Jesus.”

“The Planks,” suggests the second waitress.

“Shack Fries,” says the second line chef.

“Motor Loaf,” says the first line chef.

“I’m with you there,” agrees the second line chef.

“What’s going on here?” asks Brian, showing up and working his neck.

“What’s the worst thing we’ve got?” explains the second line chef.

Brian slowly stares at each person in the group, an angry scowl gathering on his face. Everyone holds their breath. Seconds tick by.

“The chowder,” he says.

There is a collective gasp. The fist line cook slowly puts up his hands in surrender and turns back to his station. The second line cook nods thoughtfully. “The chowder,” he says, awe in his voice.

Alt finds his waitress and meets her eyes. “Three chowders,” he says.

The first waitress pulls a sweater down from a hook on the wall and bunches it up in her fist. “I’m out of here?” she says, and bangs out the back door. Brian turns on his heel and walks briskly back toward the dining room, with Alt following along.

* * *

“Shortening, eighty calories,” Uncle Har is saying. “Sausage, a hundred twenty-nine calories. Seven hundred fifty-one calories. A prime.”

“I’ve got it!” shouts Alt, interrupting.

“How to stop the killer?” asks Uncle Har.

“What?” asks Alt.

Uncle Har reaches into the inside pocket of his gray suit jacket and hands Alt a yellowed three-by-five card. In the upper-left-hand corner is a handwritten date: August 11, 1957. The message says, “I am going to kill you forty-nine years from today, give or take a day, at exactly 6:25 PM.” No salutation, no signature.

Alt moves the card to his left hand and checks his watch: August 10, 2006, 6:24 PM.

A shot rings out.

“Early!” he yells, and dives under the table.

To judge by his aunt and uncle’s knees, they are still sitting calmly. Alt grabs each of them by the waistband and jerks, hard. “Get down!” he yells. The jerk pulls Alt forward, and his forehead hits the table support with a metallic thump. Aunt Mar folds onto the floor as though hinged, but Uncle Har’s head has jammed up above the table somewhere.

“Hermf!” says Uncle Har.

Alt tugs sideways, and Uncle Har thuds to the floor.

The restaurant is completely silent.

Alt looks at the few motionless legs he can see and imagines the diners' faces staring at the gunman, frozen in fear. His aunt and uncle are looking at him. "I know a back way," he says.

In single file, they speed-crawl diagonally across the aisle to an empty booth, and from there to a booth at the end of the row. The sounds of knees on carpet ring out in the stillness.

They're going to have to cross an exposed section of floor on the way to the back door. There's a family at a big table on the far side, and they're all staring wide-eyed, mute with terror. Alt shifts to a crouch. His aunt and uncle follow his example.

"Go! Go! Go!" he yells, springing to his feet and running broken-field toward the family's big table. The woman nearest Alt makes a sudden lurch, and her chair catches Alt in the hip. He stumbles and bowls the woman backward into the table. Aunt Mar and Uncle Har land on top of them, crashing down and overturning the table in a storm of ketchup, lettuce, lunchmeat and decaf.

Alt is briefly lost in a tangle of extended family and bent aluminum furniture, when he suddenly catches sight of a waitress striding out of the kitchen, unaware of the danger. "Get down!" he shouts, wrestling free of the dog pile and wrenching down on her forearm. The waitress and her loaded tray spill out in a violent sleet of creamed soup.

A colossal sack of potatoes slams into Alt's back and shoulders, pounding his knee agonizingly to the floor. It is Brian, hammering away at the back of Alt's head with his fists. "You!" shouts Alt, and he tries to twist his body around to engage his attacker.

"Somebody call the police!" shouts Brian.

"What?" screams Alt, and Brian suddenly slumps to the floor.

Alt whips his head around and sees his uncle at the fin end of a longboard he has pulled down from the wall. Alt looks down at Brian, unconscious under the board's nose.

He grabs his aunt by the wrist and pulls her after him, and Uncle Har charges along behind with the surfboard held over his head with both arms.

Bang! goes another shot, and they all dive to the floor, just outside the kitchen door.

The surfboard thumps noisily down, and a workman on a stepladder looks over in surprise just as he is pounding in another nail. Bang!

The nail goes in and the workman yells in pain, snapping his head back to look at his pounded thumb.

Alt looks back at the fallen family climbing out of the wreckage over the still-unconscious Brian and decides that flight is still the best option. They scramble through the back door and dash out into the parking lot.

“This way!” Uncle Har shouts, pointing and taking the lead. Aunt Mar pulls her goggles down over her eyes.

They run panting between the rows of parked cars until they reached an enormous, hulking chopper with a sidecar. “Wow!” Alt says, trying to see all the way to the top. Aunt Mar jumps into a high half-twist and lands gracefully in the sidecar. Uncle Har scissor-kicks a leg over the seat, holds onto one handlebar, and turns the key. Alt has to use both hands and both feet to scale the sheer wall of the chopper, and he finally manages to straddle the seat behind Uncle Har. Uncle Har turns the key again. Nothing happens.

“What’s wrong?” Alt shouts.

“Won’t start,” Uncle Har says.

“Let’s see if they have any tools,” Aunt Mar says. She climbs from the sidecar and begins to amble back toward the restaurant. Uncle Har jumps down and follows. “Hey!” Alt screams. “We really need to go!”

He looks at the restaurant and sees a forest of faces pressed against the glass. A siren is sounding in the distance. He scrambles down and bounds toward his aunt and uncle. “We can’t go back in there!” he shouts. “We have to...”

A thunderous explosion turns him into a clumsy human cannonball, arms wide and knees bent. The air is full of asphalt and gravel.

He lands, deafened, elbows seemingly displacing his shoulder blades. Aunt Mar and Uncle Har are peeling themselves off the front of the restaurant. He flops over. His arms are still there. His aunt and uncle, faces scraped, are looking down at him. Aunt Mar’s lips move. It makes an awful, pinging sound.

He rolls to a painful crouch, points at his ear, and shakes his head. Aunt Mar is pointing at something too. He looks. Where the chopper had been, there is now a murk of greasy smoke and twisted metal. The surrounding cars and trucks are crushed against each other, missing windows, mirrors and paint. The tinny siren is closer now.

Alt looks all around them, scanning cars and rooftops. The killer could be anywhere.

Uncle Har is already off and running, toward the ditch at the edge of the parking lot. Aunt Mar is watching Alt, looking for a decision. He heaves himself up and sprints after Uncle Har. “Go!” he yells.

They follow Uncle Har into the grass, headed for a tile store. Alt wonders what they’re going to do with tile, but then sees a car dealership beyond a fence. Uncle Har has

his fingers locked into the chain link, and he's kicking the wide toes of his boots, trying to get a purchase. Aunt Mar, in her Velcro walking shoes, is already over. Alt makes a stirrup with his hands and boosts Uncle Har, then spiders his own way up. In the edges of his glasses, he can see the reflection of the red police flashers back at Pismo's.

Aunt Mar is standing beside Uncle Har, who has two fingers on the hood of a car and is droning, "1965 Rambler Marlin. Manufacturer's Suggested Retail Price three thousand one hundred dollars. Two times two times five times five times thirty-one. Dollars. 1972 Toyota Corolla 1200. Manufacturer's Suggested Retail Price one thousand nine hundred fifty-six dollars. Two times two times three times one hundred sixty-three. Dollars. 1981 Dodge Aries. Manufacturer's Suggested Retail Price..."

Alt brushes past them and walks directly past the wide-open front door of the dealership, around to the coffee can full of cigarette butts by the dented steel back door, and begins to hammer on the door with both fists. Eventually the door opens a crack and an eyeball peers out. "What?" it asks.

"What's the worst thing you've got?" asks Alt.

* * *

They gather around a shiny red 2007 Toyota Avalon. The salesman points a finger. "This is it," he says. Alt has never seen anyone with bags under his eyes like that. What was this guy, a werewolf?

Aunt Mar has her goggles pulled up and she's looking around at the rows of ancient cars with pitted paint. She looks back at the Avalon.

"How much?" Alt demands. He's listening for sirens and not disposed to argue.

“Give it to you for thirty-two hundred, unless you need financing,” the werewolf says.

Aunt Mar and Uncle Har look at each other, then at the gleaming new car, then back at each other. “What gives?” asks Uncle Har.

“Pay him,” Alt orders. “The card, remember?”

Aunt Mar is down on one knee, hitching up one leg of her slacks. The salesman bags down at her, impassive. She rolls her knee-highs into a fat donut around her ankle and comes up with a rubber-banded wad of bills, which she places into Uncle Har’s palm. “All I’ve got,” she says.

Uncle Har is flicking through the stack of bills, his lips moving rapidly. He finishes and says, “Not enough, but it’s exactly two times nine hundred forty-one. Very nice, Mar.” He hands the bills back to his wife. “Just a second,” he says.

He pushes back his lapels and begins unbuttoning his white dress shirt, revealing an astonishing mat of silver chest-hair. Alt rolls his eyes. More werewolves. A wide band of silver duct tape stretches across from nipple to nipple. Alt squeezes his eyes shut. There is a ripping sound.

Alt counts to seventeen before he opens his eyes. Uncle Har is buttoning the last of his buttons and Aunt Mar is counting bills. She finishes and shakes her head sternly. They both turn to look at Alt.

Alt shrugs. He rolls up a sleeve to the shoulder and displays, in cigarette-pack position, a folded envelope held down by two stripes of surgical tape. Uncle Har claps him on the shoulder. “You learned that from your dad,” he says.

Alt peels off the tape, adds the bills to the pile, and counts the final stack. “Three thousand even,” he says. Looking at the salesman is like looking at the craters of the moon. “Take it?” he asks.

The salesman shakes his head. “Sorry,” he says. “No-negotiation policy.”

“Oh, come on!” says Alt. He can feel a ring of sweat all the way around his scalp. There is no reason the cops aren’t here already.

“No can do,” says the salesman. “Can I show you something else?”

“Turn around,” Aunt Mar says. Everyone turns to look at her.

“The other way around,” she says, scooping air with both hands.

The three men turn around. Alt starts counting again.

“Okay,” she says.

They turn around.

In her palm lie two perfectly-flat, mint-condition, brand-new hundred-dollar bills.

“Let’s get going,” she says.

They climb into the car, and the doors bang shut with solid satisfying thumps. Alt shifts into reverse and backs slowly past the salesman, who is blinking down at his double-fistful of cash.

At the end of the row of cars, Alt starts to turn the wheel to the right.

“Go left,” says Uncle Har. He is holding his left palm up to his face, fingers spread wide, and he’s performing a numerical (or possibly positional) calculation by moving his right forefinger over his joints.

Alt starts to turn left.

“No, right,” says Uncle Har. He is moving his forefinger faster now; perhaps repeating the calculation?

Alt tugs the wheel to the right.

“Mm mm mm mm mmm!” says the salesman, who has walked up to Alt’s window and is jabbing his finger to the right.

Alt rolls the window down. “You say we should go right?” he asks.

“Yes, right! Go right!” says the salesman, still jabbing.

“So then, we should not go left?” Alt asks.

Impossibly, the salesman’s bags deepen. From somewhere in there, he is glaring, or staring, or something, and trying to decide whether Alt is a funny-man. “Just...go...right,” he says. “Take you right out to the road.”

Alt puts his left forearm up on the window and leans back. “There are only two choices, correct?” he says.

The salesman has already turned his back and he’s shuffling away in disgust.

“Left and right,” Alt continues. “You say we should go right. So it stands to reason that left is the wrong choice. That is the way we should not go.”

The salesman is walking faster now, and he has almost reached the dealership door.

“We should not go left, right?” Alt shouts. “Am I right?”

“Go to hell!” the salesman shouts.

“But not left, right?” Alt calls back. He opens the door and starts to come out of the car. “Say it for me!”

“Jesus, okay, don’t go left!” the salesman squeaks, pulling the glass doors shut behind him with both hands.

Alt goes left.

Uncle Har is still calculating. He stops. “Left,” he says.

They reach the end of the driveway.

In the back seat, Aunt Mar is smiling benignly. “Look!” she says, pointing.

Over at Pismo’s, the air above the parking lot has thickened with flashing red light.

How many cop cars must be *up* there by now?

Alt starts to turn left, away from all that flashing, but Uncle Har puts his hand over Alt’s on the steering wheel. “Right,” he says. “We already went left.”

Alt tries to turn the wheel to the left anyway, but Uncle Har is surprisingly strong. “The card, remember?” Alt says. “Your chopper. We’ve got to go... now...”

Uncle Har shakes his head. “Symmetry, Alt,” he says. He’s nodding.

Alt tries harder to turn the wheel to the left, working the muscles in both arms. He guns the engine, but Uncle Har seems to have shifted the transmission into neutral, and he is holding his bony fist over the shift lever.

“You look ridiculous,” Alt says.

There is a loud honk just behind them. Alt jumps.

The salesman has locked up the dealership, and he and his Mercury are trapped behind the Toyota, unable to leave the lot.

“Just turn right, Alt,” Uncle Har says, gently.

Alt capitulates and cranks the wheel hard to the right. Uncle Har takes his hand off the shift lever. Alt shifts into drive, and the car drifts straight ahead into the road. Alt cranks the wheel further to the right, then shovels it right with both hands until it’s pegged.

But the car continues to roll straight ahead until it's blocking both lanes and Alt has to brake.

"Damn!" Uncle Har says.

Alt turns the car through a soggy left over the shoulder and up onto the far lane of the frontage road. The salesman, who had been signaling left, turns to the right, and screeches off in a din of transmission noise.

"Nice evening," Aunt Mar says.

* * *

Alt is extremely anxious to put distance between them and Pismo's, so he tailgates violently and barely slows for stop signs. When they reach a red light leading to the freeway on-ramp, he clicks his blinker on, signaling right.

Uncle Har reaches into his jacket pocket and withdraws a small abacus. Beads begin to click.

Alt squints at the red light, willing it to change before Uncle Har finishes whatever he's doing.

"Left," says Uncle Har, with one final decisive click.

"We already went left," Alt reminds him.

Uncle Har holds up the abacus for Alt to see. The beads all clatter to the bottom.

"Symmetry, Uncle Har," Alt says, trying to prod the stoplight to green with his forehead.

Uncle Har shakes his head with an expression of regret. "Numbers don't lie, Alt," he says.

Finally the light changes, and Alt steps hard on the gas and bears down on the wheel with his right hand. The car once again rockets straight ahead, and Alt has to slam on the brakes to avoid crashing into the concrete barrier on the far side of the intersection. Cars going both directions squeal to a stop bumper-to-fender on either side of the Toyota.

“Can I say something?” Aunt Mar asks.

Alt and Uncle Har swivel their heads to look at her. Horns begin to honk.

“‘Right’ alliterates with ‘rescue’ and assonates with ‘alive,’ she says.

Uncle Har already has the beads clicking. This time, he holds them in place with the flat of his hand when he holds them up to show them to his wife. “Left,” he says.

“I hesitate to contradict you, dear,” she says, “But ‘right’ rhymes with ‘flight’ and is an anagram for ‘ghirt.’”

Alt and Uncle Har look at each other blankly.

“‘Left’ alliterates with ‘lost’ and assonates with ‘bereft,’” she reasons.

Someone is banging on Uncle Har’s window. He rolls it down.

“You stuck?” the man asks, looking past Uncle Har to Alt.

Alt shrugs.

“I’m going to try to get these cars to back up,” the man says. “Think you can pull off to the side?”

Alt shrugs again.

“Okay then,” the man says. He moves off a few paces and starts signaling with his arms for the traffic in both directions to reverse. There is a minor shifting in the jam.

“‘Right’ assonates with ‘fine,’” Aunt Mar says.

Alt starts to jockey in the tiny space that has opened up.

“Let’s say we assign a value of minus-one to clockwise,” Uncle Har says. “And one to counter-clockwise.”

The continuous honking of car horns is making Alt tense. He doesn’t have enough space yet.

“Then you’ll see that left correlates to a positive outcome and right to a negative outcome,” Uncle Har says.

“I question your axioms,” Aunt Mar says. “They seem arbitrary.”

Alt has now crept backwards to the point where he can just about end up in the right-hand lane, and this leads to a net left turn out of the intersection and points the car directly away from the freeway. Damn!

“What else have you got?” Uncle Har asks scornfully. “I haven’t heard anything yet that convinces me.”

“‘Links’ assonates with ‘schtinks,’” Aunt Mar says. “‘Links’ is ‘gauche.’ ‘Gauche’ is ‘sinister.’ Do you perceive a pattern?”

They are now creeping forward, to the left, out of the thinning snarl.

“Right-hand Rule,” Uncle Har says, holding up his right thumb and waving his fingers to the left. “Positive direction.”

Alt sees the on-ramp receding in the rear-view mirror. Aunt Mar and Uncle Har still think there’s a decision to be made.

“‘Wept,’” Aunt Mar says. “‘Death.’ ‘Bad breath.’”

“Left has four letters,” Uncle Har retorts. “Right has five.” Left is lighter; right is heavier. Left represents the potential of escape. Right represents encumbrance.”

The on-ramp is now just about at the vanishing point. Alt makes a decision.

“*All* the way left,” he says, and guns the engine while cranking the wheel all the way to the left. The car executes an abrupt U-turn, forcing an oncoming truck to swerve in violent evasive action. There is a tremendous popping sound, and the whole car shudders and veers uncontrollably onto the shoulder. Alt brakes, and the car rumbles to a stop. He looks through the windshield at the distant on-ramp, and lowers his head to the steering wheel.

Aunt Mar has lowered her goggles and hopped out, and she’s making a full survey of the outside of the car. “Blowout,” she says, as she’s passing Alt’s window.

Alt keeps his forehead down on the wheel.

“Could you please open the trunk?” she asks.

Alt feels blindly around and starts pulling levers.

“Thank you,” she says, as the trunk pops open.

Alt hears Uncle Har’s door opening and the sound of boots hitting asphalt. There are some rummaging noises, then some murmured discussion, then more rummaging.

“We have a spare,” Aunt Mar’s voice says next to Alt’s head, “but no jack.”

“You folks need a hand?” says a strange voice out Uncle Har’s window.

Alt looks up to see a nest of yellowed gray hair and beard surrounding a pair of glittering eyes and a patch of sun burnt, furrowed skin. “You got a phone?” Alt asks.

The man just laughs. He shrugs out of his heavy frame backpack and leans it against the car.

Alt climbs out. “Either of *you* have a phone?” he asks his aunt and uncle.

Aunt Mar and Uncle Har have the spare out, and they’re looking from it to the blown-up tire and back again.

“Got a shovel?” Uncle Har asks.

Alt sticks his head into traffic and makes a phone with his thumb and little finger, holding it up to his ears and mouth.

“Nice boots,” says the hitchhiker, nodding down at Uncle Har’s feet. “I’m Mike,” he says, extending a hand.

“Har,” says Uncle Har, shaking it. “This is Mar. That’s Alt.”

“Pleased to meet you,” Mike says.

Alt is up in front of the car, working through an exaggerated pantomime of a blown-out tire followed by a dramatic shrug. Nobody seems to be slowing. He leans an arm through the window and honks out the Morse code for S-O-S.

“I don’t think that will work,” says Uncle Har. “Try the radio.”

Alt turns the radio on. “It’s George Jones,” he says.

“All right!” Mike says.

They all nod.

“Look!” says Aunt Mar. It’s a tow truck.

A horn toots from behind them. Alt turns to look. Another tow truck.

“Hey,” says Aunt Mar. From both directions, every third car now appears to be a tow truck.

“I guess somebody phoned,” Alt says.

“Let’s take *that* one,” Aunt Mar says.

Uncle Har shakes his head sadly. “First is worst, Mar.”

“Next is vexed,” she replies. “Hey, are you being verbal?”

“I’m being ordinal,” he says.

Mike is slowly revolving, a wide grin splitting his face, surveying the tow-truck panorama.

“Find me the twenty-ninth one,” Uncle Har says. “I can accept that.”

“Z: Twenty-six. A: Twenty-seven. B: Twenty-eight. C: Twenty-nine. C is for ‘crap.’ Choose again!” Aunt Mar says.

Alt is up on the first truck’s running-board with his head in the window. “Can you give me an iron-clad reason why I shouldn’t let you help us?” he demands.

“What the hell?” the driver asks.

Alt disappears, and bounds over to the next truck. “Is there a garage around here who you absolutely would not let give you a tow?” he asks the second driver.

The driver can’t hear him over the din of angry horns and rumbling diesels. “What?” he yells.

“The worst!” Alt yells. “Who’s the worst?”

From nearby comes a loud “Crack!”

Mike has swung his backpack full-force into the Toyota’s rear window. Sill wearing his crazy grin, he’s crouching with his giant sandaled feet up on the trunk lid, running his fingers over the cracks in the safety glass. He finds a crack he likes and follows it with a finger, clear off the window and down, galloping, in a straight line to one of the nearby trucks.

“Okay then,” Aunt Mar says, watching him.

Uncle Har is counting cuff-stitches and looking up and nodding, comparing his count with the count of tow trucks. “Yep,” he says, “That’s the one.” He drops his hands to his sides.

Alt and Mike come striding over with Mike's driver and a jack.

"Congratulations," Aunt Mar says.

The driver touches the brim of his cap. The other trucks begin to mope away to the sounds of punitive honking.

The driver nods and begins to jack. Everyone gathers around.

"Where you headed," Uncle Har asks Mike.

"Where *you* headed?" Mike asks in reply.

Uncle Har pulls the card from his pocket and hands it over. Mike studies it. "We better get going then," he says.

Alt rolls the spare tire over to the tow-truck driver. The driver mounts it, and starts tightening nuts. "That'll do it," he says, and dusts himself off. "Cash or charge?"

Alt, Aunt Mar and Uncle Har look at each other. "How much?" Alt asks.

"Twenty-five," the driver says.

Alt sticks his fists into his pockets and hunches his shoulders. Aunt Mar and Uncle Har look uncomfortably at the ground.

"Ho," Mike says, and starts clawing at his matted hair as though stung.

The driver stares at him.

"Yep," Mike says. He pulls a tightly-rolled joint out of his hair with a pinched thumb and forefinger and holds it out to the driver.

The driver, nonplussed, takes the joint, stares at it for a few seconds, then unrolls it into a worn but recognizable twenty.

"You can't roll a joint with a twenty," Uncle Har says, shaking his head. "Paper's too thick."

Mike is now scratching maniacally at his beard. He comes up with another joint. “Keep it,” he says, handing it over.

The driver peels the second joint and then walks off carrying the two bills by one corner, holding them out away from his body.

“Thanks,” Uncle Har says.

“Don’t mention it,” Mike says, giving himself a few extra scratches. “Let’s get going.”

* * *

The on-ramp is finally in sight.

“Best if you take it,” Mike says from the passenger seat.

Alt steps on the accelerator and roars past it.

“What?” asks Mike.

“That’s just it,” says Alt.

There is an intersection coming up. “Everyone?” Alt says.

“Left!” Aunt Mar says.

“Turn around!” Mike says.

“Three!” yells Uncle Har.

Alt goes straight.

“What would you have done if we had agreed?” Mike asks.

“Find out,” Alt says.

“Upon this road we find ourselves.” Aunt Mar says. “I don’t have time to compose enough iambs before we get to the next intersection.”

“Give me something to work with,” Mike says.

“Dead bugs,” Alt says.

“Ahh,” Mike says, studying the windshield.

“Turn right at the next one,” Uncle Har says firmly. “I’ve run the numbers three ways.”

“Are you using reverse-psychology at this point?” Alt asks.

“You’ll never know,” Uncle Har says.

“Hold on,” Alt says. He lets go of the steering wheel, and the car swerves left and climbs the curb on the cross-street.

“I wasn’t finished,” Mike says.

“Finish now,” Alt says.

“Left! No, Right!” Mike says, and the car speeds through a red light and is almost T-boned by an Aztek.

“Can I say something?” Aunt Mar asks. Alt slows a bit. “Maybe if we took turns...”

“That’s it!” Alt says, pulling over and rolling to a stop. “*You* drive!”

“Don’t be hurt, honey,” Aunt Mar says, but she climbs out and switches places with Alt. “But it might be best.”

* * *

It has grown dark.

“My turn,” Aunt Mar calls out, and she swerves left onto a narrow road through a tunnel of tall corn.

“It’s an art,” Mike tells Uncle Har. He has his shirt pulled up to his chin, and he’s using a finger to trace a web of imaginary lines among the many stains on his nearly-translucent white T-shirt. “Right!” he calls out.

Aunt Mar spins the wheel hard to the right, and the car continues forward on its straight path.

“They say Ramanujan knew all the numbers personally,” Uncle Har says. “You could name off an arbitrary seventeen-digit number and he would tip his hat and say, ‘So pleased to see you again! How is life as the square of a cube? How’s the wife and factors? I’m pleased to see they haven’t grown.’ *Straight!*” he yells.

Aunt Mar goes straight.

Alt is still sulking, his arms folded and his chin down.

“Lovely night,” Aunt Mar says. “Lanes narrow. Lake Nigig. Leaving Newton. Less nervous. Your turn, Alt.”

“Turn around,” Alt mumbles.

She slows, checks the starred-out window in her rear-view mirror, and U-turns.

“I’m glad to hear you’re less nervous,” Mike says. “Been running long?”

“Yes,” she answers. “Since 6:25. We never managed to eat our dinner. Order dinner. One decision. Other direction,” she says, U-turning again. “Oh dear.”

“What is it?” Mike asks.

“The gas light is on,” she says. “I just noticed it.”

“Don’t worry,” Mike says. “Can I see your helmet?”

Aunt Mar takes off her flight helmet and passes it back, exposing her flattened gray curls.

“Follicles,” Mike says, holding the leather close to his nose and squinting hard. “Innumerable. Irregular pattern.” He begins to trace in the air, tracking the minute movements of his pupils.

“Innumerable my ass,” breaks in Uncle Har. He snatches the helmet and tries to see. “One,” he counts, then props his glasses on his forehead. “Two...”

“It’s my turn,” Mike says, mildly. “I wasn’t finished.” He tugs the helmet away from Uncle Har. “Give me a moment.” He resumes his absorbed tracing.

Alt’s stomach rumbles loudly. He hugs himself tighter.

“Right, I think,” Mike says. “I’m not sure.” He repeats his last few movements. “Yes, right, I’m sure.”

Aunt Mar turns the wheel right and the car goes straight, and then goes silent. They roll to a stop.

“Better get this thing out of the road,” Mike says.

He and Uncle Har climb out, and their doors clunk shut.

“Now, Alt, don’t be like this,” says Aunt Mar. She shifts the car into neutral. Alt’s stomach rumbles again.

The car’s tires grind quietly on the pavement as Mike and Uncle Har roll it forward. Aunt Mar steers it gently left, across the oncoming lane and off onto the far shoulder. “Thank you for coming with us,” she says.

Silently, Alt picks up his backpack from the floor beneath his feet and steps out of the car. The pack is covered with indistinct dusty footprints he recognizes as his own.

“Mar, could you please pop the trunk?” Mike asks.

The trunk pops open. Mike hauls out his heavy pack and puts it on. Aunt Mar climbs out, tugging on her helmet.

“Well?” Mike asks.

They all look at Uncle Har.

“How about you, Alt?” Uncle Har asks. “Pick a number between one and ten. Square it. Add three. Divide by two.”

“Twenty-six,” Alt says, slowly working it out.

“Straight ahead!” cheers Uncle Har and boldly leads the way. They march together single file, off between the dim gray rows of corn.

* * *

Mud cakes their shoes.

“Yike!” yells Uncle Har, flailing his arms and ducking out of the path of a noisily-flapping pheasant-shaped shadow.

Up ahead, there’s a thinning of the darkness and a tiny point of light. “There we are,” Uncle Har says with satisfaction.

They clumsily thread their way between a couple of strands of barbed wire and out onto a patch of lawn. A goat-silhouette grinds its teeth at them and falls back asleep.

“Think they’ll have some gas to spare?” Mike asks, as they approach the farmhouse.

“Don’t know,” says Uncle Har, and then, “Wow!”

The farmhouse is two stories tall, and appears to be built out of unpeeled logs.

“Where’d they get the trees?” wonders Mike, looking around at the flat, corn-height horizon.

A whirring sound approaches, and a dim cone of light. It's a boy, maybe ten years old, holding a flashlight in one hand and cranking it steadily with the other, eggbeater-style. "May I help you?" he asks.

"We ran out of gas," Aunt Mar says. "I don't suppose you have some in a can?"

"Why don't you come inside?" the boy asks, his beam flickering. "You can talk to my mom and dad."

The front door is rough and looks homemade. It lacks a knob, but the boy tugs on a loop of twine that pokes out through a hole, and the door swings inward.

Aunt Mar and Uncle Har follow the boy into the house. Alt breaks into a sprint and tears around to the far side. He drops to his knees and searches for a dirt clod.

"Alt?" he hears his aunt's voice say.

He looks up and sees a hand protruding from a tiny window, backlit by the flickering flashlight. "Come on up," she says.

Alt takes his aunt's hand and allows her to drag him up the log wall and, wriggling, through the opening. He finds that they are standing in a room with three bicycles, two of them occupied, their riders pedaling briskly.

"I found these people in the yard," the boy says. "They say they ran out of gas."

The man who is presumably the boy's father stops pedaling, and the light over the book rack in front of him goes out. He reaches down and unsnaps his shoes from the toe-clips. "You'll have to excuse my wife if she doesn't stop pedaling," he says. "She's on deadline and her battery is old and won't charge."

The woman glances up from her laptop, smiles, and continues pedaling and typing.

"What can I do for you?" the man asks, extending a hand.

“We ran out of gas,” Aunt Mar says, shaking it. “You wouldn’t happen to have any to spare, would you?”

Alt’s stomach rumbles like a tin sheet. “Excuse me,” he says.

The man is grinning. “No,” he says. “No gasoline. Come take a look!”

He leads the way back out the plank door, followed by his son. His wife glances up but doesn’t break cadence.

The boy has turned the flashlight over to Mike, who is cranking it hard and staring at it admiringly.

They cross an expanse of gravel and reach a large round canvas tent. The man lifts the flap and they step inside.

The flashlight beam plays around the tent’s interior, glinting off poles and bits of machinery. The man pumps a lantern and lights it with a stainless-steel Zippo.

In the center of the space is a rusted pickup truck with a bed full of pipes and scrap metal. The man is grinning again. “Ever seen one of these?” he asks.

They look at him blankly.

The boy can’t control himself. “It runs on corncobs!” he shouts.

Mike is nodding as though this rings a bell.

“Yep,” the man says. “Cobs, stalks, woodchips, you name it.” He sticks his head down into the heap of scrap metal and flicks his lighter again. Somewhere in the heap, a flame ignites. “You don’t see these much anymore,” he says.

“Can I, Dad?” the boy asks.

“Sure, go ahead,” his father answers.

The boy climbs up into the cab and starts the engine. The truck rumbles to life, shuddering on its axles.

“Good enough,” the man says, and the boy shuts the engine back off. The man twists a slab of junk and the flame dies. “Like it?” he asks.

“How much?” Uncle Har asks.

“Not for sale, I’m afraid,” the man says. “Only one I’ve got.” He shuts off the lantern, and Mike resumes cranking the flashlight.

“Let’s go back to the house,” the man says. “We’ve got pie, and we can put you up overnight and find you a tow in the morning.”

“No phone?” Mike asks.

“Not unless you want to take a tin can and start walking,” the man answers. The boy laughs.

“How does your wife submit her stories?” Mike asks. “If you’ve got Internet, that’s as good as a phone.”

“Avian carriers,” the man says. He’s not laughing.

“We’re kind of in a hurry,” Aunt Mar says.

“But we’d love some pie,” Alt adds.

* * *

Alt spears the last cherry on his plate and glowers at the empty pie tin in frustration.

“What’s the hurry?” the man asks Aunt Mar.

Uncle Har hands him the card. The man studies it and hands it to his wife, who raises her eyebrows but says nothing.

“6:25 PM?” the man says. “That doesn’t sound like a hurry to me. Get a good night’s sleep. We’ll feed you breakfast, then we’ll find you some gasoline, and you’ll be three counties away by noon.”

Uncle Har, Aunt Mar and Mike are all looking at Alt. “What’s the worst that could happen?” he asks.

“There, you see?” says the man. “Spend the night. We’ll get you out of here in the morning.”

“No,” Alt says. “Seriously: What’s the worst thing we could do?”

“The worst thing you could do,” the man says, “would be to try to solve all your problems tonight, before you’ve had a full night’s sleep.”

Mike, Aunt Mar and Uncle Har all look at Alt.

“Okay then,” Alt says.

* * *

There is a loud creak from a loose floorboard. Alt freezes and wills himself lighter. Two shadows are already standing by the front door, shifting slightly. Mike’s, dimly, rises from the couch and moves to join the others.

Alt looks at all the eyes for confirmation, then gingerly lifts the door latch and pulls gently on the door’s crossbeam. The door swings inward, letting in a cool breeze and an amplified song of crickets. Everyone pauses and listens for movement from upstairs.

There is none.

They tiptoe single-file down the dirt path.

“That thing’s not quiet,” Mike whispers.

“You got any other ideas?” Uncle Har asks.

Mike shrugs and looks away.

Even with moonlight, it's still too dark to see the tent's flap. They fan out and all feel along the seams with their fingertips. After a few moments, Aunt Mar exhales, "Hah," and they all gather around her as she raises the flap. The inside of the tent was gloomy before, but now it's absolutely black.

Alt sticks his arms out zombie-fashion and wades in. He vanishes completely, and then there's a clank, and an "Ouch!" He walks back out the tent-flap carrying the lantern. "Got a light?" he asks.

They all pat their pockets fruitlessly. Alt points at Mike's hair. "Surely there's *something* in there," he says.

Mike looks skeptical but rakes his fingers in and digs vigorously. He comes out with a toothpick, a machine-screw and a ball-bearing but no source of fire. He tries his beard, but only comes up with a breath-mint.

"Hey, give me that!" Uncle Har says.

Mike shakes his head. "That's triboluminescence, not fire," he says.

Uncle Har keeps his hand out. "Got any whiskey?" he asks.

Mike digs in his back pocket and pulls out a flask. "Rum," he says. "Old Vatted Demerara. Fellow I won it off says it's part diesel."

"Mar, hold the lantern," says Uncle Har.

Aunt Mar slowly and deliberately tucks all her stray curls under the flaps of her helmet, then buckles the flaps under her chin. She takes the lantern and holds it out at arm's length.

“Don’t be an ass,” Mike says, but Uncle Har has already taken a swig from the flask and he is swishing it vigorously around his mouth and through his teeth.

Alt takes a step back.

With the thumb of his left hand, Uncle Har flicks the mint in a high arc into the air and toward his mouth. The mint descends end-over-end and then, in a lizard-like motion, Uncle Har jerks his head forward and snaps his teeth shut on the mint. There is a roar, and Uncle Har spits a jet of flame toward the dangling lantern, which lights and pulses to life.

“Charlatan,” Mike says, shaking his head.

Aunt Mar is already carrying the lantern into the tent, where she hangs it on its hook.

Alt has the truck’s tailgate down, and he’s inspecting a rusted steel cylinder.

“Looks simple enough,” he says.

Aunt Mar is up with her head in the other end of the cylinder. “Needs cobs,” she says.

Mike and Uncle Har are already on their way over with sacks of cobs. Uncle Har hefts his sack up next to Aunt Mar, then shakes the dry cobs down into the tank. Mike tosses his sack into the mess in the bed of the truck, then goes back for another.

Alt still has his neck craned with his head nearly upside-down, inspecting the underside of the tank. “Think you can get fire back out of that lantern?” he asks.

Uncle Har frowns, and rummages around the floor until he finds a splinter of wood. He begins poking the splinter into the lantern.

Mike finishes loading the second sack of cobs and climbs up onto the pile next to his backpack. “It ain’t comfortable,” he says.

Aunt Mar joins in the splinter-poking. Alt searches the shelves around the walls of the tent.

“Ah ha!” Uncle Har says, and he pulls a tiny ember out of the lantern.

Mike lobs Aunt Mar a wad of paper, and she tucks it under the tank ahead of Uncle Har’s glowing splinter.

They all hold their breath.

Uncle Har has his face pressed to the bottom of the tank, blowing hopeful gusts at the paper wad.

“Ha!” he says, and steps back. “Everybody in!”

Aunt Mar climbs into the driver’s seat. Alt holds the door for Uncle Har, who climbs in next to his wife and straddles the gear-shift. Alt slides in beside him and bangs the door shut.

“Okay,” says Aunt Mar, thinking hard. She starts flicking switches. “Okay.”

She turns the key.

Alt had forgotten how *loud* this thing was. The whole truck vibrates, and the tent canvas puffs in and out. Alt wonders whether the truck actually has springs.

Aunt Mar throws the truck into reverse.

“Ouch!” Uncle Har says.

The truck’s owner, in a nightshirt and high-top basketball shoes, walks into the lantern light. “Wish you wouldn’t take my truck,” he says.

“Sorry,” says Alt. “But you told us not to.”

The truck jounces backwards out the tent-flap past the man, who has his arms folded, disapproval on his face. “Bring it back when you’re done,” he says.

* * *

A dirty pink light is just beginning to dawn.

“Left?” asks Uncle Har.

“Ahead,” Aunt Mar says sternly. “Ahead of lettuce, ahead of cabbage, ahead of cattle.”

“A *herd* of cattle,” says Uncle Har.

“Of course I’ve heard of cattle,” says Aunt Mar.

Alt beats his head against the window.

“What if they’ve got satellites,” asks Mike, his lips squeezed through the narrow glass window in back of the cab.

“They don’t have satellites,” says Uncle Har.

“Ha!” says Mike. “So you admit you know who they are!”

“I know they don’t have satellites,” says Uncle Har.

“Forty-nine years is a long time,” Mike says. “What did you do to piss them off forty-nine years’ worth?”

“Do you remember what *you* were doing forty-nine years ago?” Uncle Har retorts.

Mike falls silent.

“But you think,” Alt says, “that if we can keep you alive past the third day, that they’ll leave you alone?”

“Technically speaking,” says Uncle Har.

“Because this is, what? Murder Tag?” Alt demands.

“Left,” says Uncle Har.

“Ahead,” says Aunt Mar, driving straight ahead.

* * *

The engine sputters out and the truck rolls to a stop on the wide gravel shoulder of a crossroads beside a pond. The constant roar has made Alt slightly deaf, and his side aches from where he has been sleeping on the door handle.

Aunt Mar has her head cranked around, and she's looking through the back window. "Out of cobs," she guesses. "I can see Mike back there asleep."

Alt turns and looks. Mike is lying across the scrap heap like a rag doll tossed there, his mouth wide open, his backpack half under his knees.

"Mike!" Alt calls out.

Mike startles and flails his arms and legs, but he only sinks further into the junk. "Help," he says finally.

Alt falls out the truck door and staggers around to offer him a hand. A heavy, bent slab of cast aluminum has rolled onto Mike's leg, and from his spread-eagled position he can't get leverage to lift it off. Alt pries it up, and together they drop it over the side, where it falls to the gravel and bounces once with a dull ring.

"One!" shouts Uncle Har.

Uncle Har has wandered bow-legged to the edge of the pond, and he's hucking sticks at cranes.

"Six!" he calls out. "One!"

Alt and Mike walk over near him and take in the intermittently placid scene.

"Eight!" yells Uncle Har.

"Why are you counting like that?" Mike asks.

"I can't find any rocks to throw," says Uncle Har. "Just sticks. Zero!" he chucks.

“You don’t have much of an arm,” Mike says. “Look, they’re not even flying away anymore.”

“Three!”

“They’re just sitting there like rubber ducks. What have you got against cranes?”

“Three!”

Alt wanders off behind an oak to piss.

* * *

Aunt Mar has wandered up. “Fire’s out,” she says.

Uncle Har glares at Mike. “Nice work.”

“Let’s see *you* stay up all night stoking cobs,” Mike says. “When’s breakfast? Go catch me a crane.”

Uncle Har takes a step toward Mike, but Aunt Mar plants a shoe between them.

“I’ll check my backpack again, see if I have a light,” Alt says, coming back around the oak and weaving toward the truck.

“You gonna do the same?” Uncle Har asks Mike, still glaring.

“What’s the hurry?” asks Mike. “You got a destination in mind?”

“Get some breakfast, for starters,” Uncle Har says. “Smartass.”

Alt has returned with an oil pan full of fist-sized steel hunks. He drops them to the ground between the men. “Nothing so far,” he says. “See what you can do with these.”

“I agree that I would enjoy some breakfast,” says Aunt Mar.

* * *

Alt looks up from rummaging in the bed of the truck. Over by the pond, Aunt Mar is standing, hands on hips, looking down at Mike and Uncle Har, who are lying head-to-head on their bellies, pounding steel hunks together over the oil pan.

“Can’t make a spark, can you?” Mike taunts, knocking steel and watching rum fumes rise. “Bet you never could.”

“Don’t see you doing any better,” Uncle Har says. “You’re a lousy chunk-thunker.” He kicks the toe of his boot for emphasis.

“Weren’t you ever a boy scout?” asks Mike. “Or was that too long ago to remember?”

“I remember fine,” says Uncle Har. “How’s *your* memory these days?”

“I never forget a thing,” Mike says. “Certainly not how to knock blocks.”

The two men knock in accidental unison, and the oil pan erupts into a pool of blue alcohol flame. Aunt Mar picks up a waiting leafy branch and jabs it into the flame, toasting it, trying to make a torch.

“Ha!” Mike shouts. “Told you!”

“You?” growls Uncle Har. “That was me!”

Aunt Mar is doing a hat dance around the edge of the oil pan, trying to keep from getting jostled. The men are on their feet, squared off on either side of her, driving her around and around. “That was *my* spark,” Uncle Har insists. “It sparked from *my* side.”

“Oh, your vision is going, is it?” says Mike. “Bet that wasn’t the first thing to go!”

Uncle Har lashes out an arm, forcing Mike to duck. Mike starts to laugh. Uncle Har grabs the branch away from Aunt Mar and flails it at Mike, who hoots and leers, but

then realizes that his beard is on fire. With three long bounds, he races to the pond and dives in, landing in a steaming belly-flop.

From the edge of the road, there is a disorganized clap of thunder, and Alt is suddenly chasing alongside the rolling, smoking, clanking driverless truck, trying to reach the driver's side door handle.

The door, when he finally manages to unlatch it with his grasping fingers, swings open and takes out Aunt Mar, laying her flat on her back and passing over her by inches. From the ground, Aunt Mar sees the soles of Alt's soaring shoes as Alt lands in the driver's seat and tries to brake, but the truck, which has caught Uncle Har dead center and has him pinned there like a roadkill butterfly, continues to barrel forward toward Mike, who is dog-paddling frantically toward the center of the pond.

All of this has finally caught the interest of the cranes, and they have taken to the air and formed a giant flying ellipse of honking spectators, as the truck buries its front end in muck and spins its rear tires fruitlessly, generating a gentle spray of water and algae.

Alt is staring bug-eyed out the windshield at Mike and Uncle Har, who are incompetently trying to drown each other in foot-deep water. Aunt Mar has stripped to her helmet, bra and girdle, and she wades out into the water toward the flailing, sputtering, gurgling old men. One of the four flopping hands accidentally catches her across a cheekbone, and she loses patience, reaches in, grabs fistfuls of hair, and brings the two heads together with an aggressive croquet noise.

The flailing stops.

Alt has finally remembered to put the truck into reverse, and he's turning the steering wheel back and forth, digging the truck's front end deeper and deeper into the

mud. Aunt Mar, in her bathing attire, is staring balefully through the side window at him.
“Found some matches in the truck,” he shrugs.

* * *

Two hours later, they’re all sitting around the remains of the campfire, picking their teeth.

“Good crane,” Mike tells Uncle Har.

“Nice beard,” Uncle Har answers, clearly not in a mood to accept compliments.

“We should have stayed on the farm,” Aunt Mar says. “We could have had some coffee.”

Alt is holding up the last charred drumstick and staring at Mike’s backpack, which Mike is using as a stool. “I don’t suppose you’ve got some pepper in that backpack,” he says.

Mike shakes his head.

“Tabasco?” Alt persists. “Dixie Sauce? Frank’s Red Hot?”

Mike keeps shaking, and worries at his half-beard stubble.

Alt takes a last look at the drumstick and drops it into the coals.

“Getting late,” Uncle Har says. “Better get us a ride.”

* * *

The astounding flock of starlings provides momentary shade from the greasy, humid noonday sun. A starling turd falls an inch from Alt’s foot. “It’s been hours,” he says. “We should just walk.”

“In this heat?” Mike asks. “Besides, we don’t know where we’re going.”

“We’d be on our way there now,” Alt says, “if Uncle Har hadn’t insisted on waiting for the third car.”

“My calculations said three,” Uncle Har says. “Not one. Not four. Not my fault only two cars have come by.”

“On our way where?” Mike asks.

“I don’t know,” Alt says.

“Hope they’ve got coffee,” Aunt Mar says.

A low shape begins to rise out of the road haze.

“Turtle should have enough sense to stay off the road this time of day,” Mike says.

“Why? We know it’s all alone out there,” Alt says.

The turtle grows taller, and resolves itself into a slow-moving schoolbus.

“School,” Alt says. “We’re going to school!”

The bus rolls to a halt and the doors hiss open. Mike, Alt, Aunt Mar and Uncle Har troop on board, damp and wrinkled. The driver nods and smiles, but doesn’t speak.

Alt eyes the interior of the silent bus. Most of the seats are taken up by middle-aged and older men, smiling or staring in benign curiosity. They all seem to share the same weird baldness pattern. One of them motions for Alt to sit beside him.

Alt lifts his backpack into the rack and sits. “Hi,” he says, extending a hand. The man nods, smiles, and shakes. It’s then that Alt notices the rosary in the man’s left hand.

“Monks,” Alt says. “You’re monks, aren’t you? Vow of silence?”

The monk nods.

“Thanks for picking us up,” Alt says. “Where are we going?”

The monk’s eyes twinkle, and he points straight ahead down the road.

“Perfect,” Alt says.

* * *

Aunt Mar is standing next to an empty seat, transfixed by a lumpy shape in the overhead bin. “Is that what I think it is?” she asks.

The monk seated under the lump grins and stands to lift down the nylon sack. Aunt Mar sits down beside him, and they start unpacking the sack’s contents into their laps.

Aunt Mar opens a plastic container and buries her nose in it. She sighs deeply.

The monk is holding out a pocket-sized butane torch and an igniter. Aunt Mar shakes green coffee beans into a tin cup, and the monk makes a spark and holds the torch to the cup. Smoke and roasting smells fill the bus.

“As soon as I get a pen and paper,” Aunt Mar says, “I’m filing a petition.” She shakes the cup and the beans start to crack. “I think this qualifies as heroic virtue, and there are folks in Rome who ought to know.”

* * *

Uncle Har has found a seat halfway back, and he’s half-sitting, head out in the aisle, counting monks. “Twenty-one, twenty-two, twenty-three,” he concludes.

The monk beside him raises his eyebrows.

“Plus the driver,” Uncle Har adds, “but twenty-four is banal.”

The monk points to the front row.

“One seat, one monk,” Uncle Har shrugs.

The monk points to the second row.

“One more monk,” says Uncle Har. “Total of two.”

The monk makes a rolling-wheel motion with his right hand.

Uncle Har adds the monk in the third row. “That makes three,” he says, “not counting Alt. Fourth row has two monks: Four, five. Fifth makes six, seven, not counting Mar. Sixth-last has four monks: eight, nine, ten, eleven.”

He turns to the monk, impressed, then counts the seventh-last row. “Twelve, thirteen, not counting me. Fourteen, fifteen, sixteen, seventeen. Eighteen, nineteen, not counting Mike. Twenty, twenty-one, twenty-two, twenty-three.”

The monk nods, smiling.

“It’s a good thing there isn’t another row,” Uncle Har says. “Unless you put six monks across, you couldn’t come out prime.”

The monk, grinning broadly now, jabs his finger at the rear of the bus. Behind the tenth row of seats is a pile of luggage, and visible on the floor between suitcases is a cluster of bolts where the eleventh row has been removed.

“Well I’ll be damned,” says Uncle Har.

* * *

Mike has been staring at the closed Bible in his sleeping neighbor’s lap for a *long* time. Its ancient leather cover is a broad delta of zigzagged cracks, wrinkles and bubbles. Mike’s fingers itch to touch it—to follow all those *lines*. And the marble rosary beads looped around one corner of the Bible... The green, brown and gold minerals are swirled together so perfectly... so... turbulently... His pupils begin to dilate.

The bus drives roughly over a bump, causing his gaze to drop inadvertently to the floor for a moment. Hey... the linoleum down there is really... *old!* He drops to his hands and knees and begins following the rips in the linoleum with his fingers. Who *knows*

where they could lead! Panting slightly, he gets all his fingers going like twitching spider legs, and begins to travel slowly up the aisle. The monks kindly pretend not to notice.

As Mike passes Uncle Har, Uncle Har kicks him in the ribs, just to see whether he'll notice. Absorbed by the chaotic linoleum under the pads of his fingers, Mike doesn't even pause.

Uncle Har creaks to his feet and takes several soft steps back to the rack over Mike's seat. His bony hands stretch out for the buckle holding shut Mike's backpack. The moment he makes contact with the leather of the strap, a heavy weight suddenly strikes the back of his head. It's Mike, squared off, pulling his right fist back to prepare for another strike.

"What's in the bag, Mike?" Uncle Har asks, squaring his shoulders and rising on the balls of his feet.

"What's in *your* sack, Har?" Mike snarls, throwing a punch and missing by a hair. "Not a hell of a lot, I'm guessing."

Aunt Mar, who had been luxuriating in Arabica afterglow, reluctantly rises and moves to the back of the bus. "Har?" she says, warningly.

"Maybe we should take this outside," Uncle Har says.

"Maybe we should," Mike spits.

Alt is out of his seat and is speaking to the driver. The bus blubbers to a halt, and Aunt Mar, Uncle Har and Mike almost tumble to the floor. The twenty-three monks are all staring straight ahead, their faces benign and neutral.

Uncle Har pushes past his wife and goes striding up the aisle toward the door that Alt has just folded open. Mike is close on his heels, but as soon as Uncle Har's feet hit the

gravel, Alt grabs Mike forcefully by the shirt, and the bus begins slowly to pull away. On the side of the road, Uncle Har looks up in confusion.

“Go get your bag,” Alt says.

Mike’s eyes are wide. “Didn’t think you had it in you,” he says, and he backs up and turns away down the aisle.

He comes back in a moment with his heavy pack on his shoulders. He rests one hand on a seat while the bus again rolls to a stop.

Alt pushes the door open.

With a nod at Aunt Mar, Mike walks down the steps and drops onto the road, then begins walking away without looking back.

“Maybe three miles,” Alt tells the driver.

“Three, I agree,” Aunt Mar says.

* * *

It’s late in the afternoon by the time first Mike, then Uncle Har, join Aunt Mar and Alt in the shade of a cottonwood tree by the side of the road. Uncle Har’s clothes are lank and heavy with sweat, and he is leaving weary footprints on the gravel shoulder.

Alt holds out a gallon jug of water. “From the monks,” he says.

Uncle Har takes a few grateful gulps.

“It must be around five o’clock,” Alt says, nodding up at the light glinting through the leaves, and then confirming it with his watch. “We’ve got a little less than ninety minutes. What’s the worst thing we could do?”

“Walk another three-point-one-four miles,” says Uncle Har, laying back and shuddering. “One five nine two six five three five.”

“The worst thing we could do,” Mike says, “is sit right here. I feel like a steamed quahog.”

“To run from danger,” Aunt Mar says, “the one worst thing we could do is ride a wagon.”

“Was that a haiku?” Alt asks.

Aunt Mar points at the horizon, where Alt can just make out a Clydesdale shape pulling a wagon shape.

“Good eyes,” Alt says.

* * *

The wagon crawls through the heat-waves, barely making progress. Aunt Mar has removed her helmet, and she’s fanning her greasy curls with it, occasionally taking a buckle to the temple or forehead but stubbornly persisting. Alt is lying in the ditch, sweating violently and taking frequent looks at his watch.

Mike and Uncle Har have scratched out a chessboard in the dirt and they’re playing some version of speed-chess with chunks of gravel.

“What the hell!” says Uncle Har. “You play like a psychotic!”

“You’re playing to win,” says Mike. “I’m trying to make the board look good. You mess it up, I clean it up. You mess it up, I clean it up.”

“But you don’t have a strategy!” says Uncle Har. “At least not that I can see.”

“You haven’t won yet,” says Mike. “At least not that I can see.”

“Ow!” says Aunt Mar.

“Jesus, Mar, you want me to bring you a tree branch, something without a buckle?” Uncle Har asks.

“Check,” says Mike.

“What is it with you?” Uncle Har demands.

“Half an hour left until 6:25,” Alt says. “Suppose that’s a taxidermy Clydesdale?”

“Go kill it myself,” Mike says, rising and shouldering his backpack and leaving Uncle Har glaring at the board.

“I’m in,” Alt says. The two of them start walking toward the wagon-mirage.

“Why’d he pick *you*?” Mike asks. “You don’t seem like you’d be a lot of help in the lifesaving department.”

“No idea,” Alt says. “We weren’t close. How about you? You and whatever is in that pack don’t seem like you’re getting wherever you’re going.”

“Oh, we’ll get there,” Mike says. “We’ll get there.”

* * *

As they near the wagon, they can see that the Clydesdale is graying and swaybacked, its ribs poking out and with one good eye. The driver is a wizened threadbare suit under a tattered fedora over a frayed collar. “Let’s keep right on walking,” Mike says.

“That would be best,” Alt agrees. He stops walking and holds up a hand.

Horse, wagon and driver make a noise like a dirty rag, and go from a near-stop to a full-stop. “Give us a lift?” Alt asks.

There is no visible movement, so Alt plants his hands on the side-rail of the wagon and hauls himself up. Mike heaves his pack over the side and follows it. “Hot one,” he says to the suit.

The wagon creaks softly.

“Humid,” Alt says.

They may now be in motion.

“Pick up our friends when you get to that cottonwood?” Mike says. “Fella thinks he’s winning a chess game? And his wife, looks like she’s taken a meteor shower?”

No response except the sound of pores clogging.

“Know a good swimming hole?” Mike asks. “Water park? Shave-ice concession?”

“Maybe he doesn’t speak English,” Alt suggests.

“What are you running from?” rattles the suit.

The reins slacken as the horse turns around to stare in surprise.

“Chess loser,” Mike says. “Gonna be killed tonight, or tomorrow night.”

“Chopper got blown up at Pismo’s,” Alt says. “We’re running with him.”

“Nice day for it,” creaks the suit. The jacket flaps weakly, possibly from laughter.

Alt has become distracted by something on the floor of the wagon.

“Nice scythe,” he says.

* * *

The cottonwood, slow-moving as it is, eventually pulls even with the wagon. The sky has grown dark and the still air has turned to aspic. Uncle Har’s body is propped up in front of the chessboard, rigid. “You’re too late!” cackles the suit.

“I don’t think he’s dead,” Alt says. “He’s just not used to losing.”

“Bastard, bastard, bastard,” says Uncle Har.

“Uncle Har?” Alt says. “Where’s Aunt Mar?”

A branch clatters down out of the cottonwood and lands in the wagon beside Alt. He looks up. Aunt Mar is perched on a branch, fifteen feet above.

“Cooler up here,” she says. “There’s a breeze in the trees. The leaves relieve.”

“Come on down and get in the wagon,” Alt says.

“I’m not the only thing that’s going to be coming down,” she says, holding on one-handed and pointing a finger at the sky.

Uncle Har is kicking at the chessboard, erasing the game. “Rematch!” he says.

Mike, staring up at the leaves, ignores him. “I don’t like the look of those leaves,” he says.

Aunt Mar swings down from a low limb and lands in the wagon just as the first fat drop of rain lands in Alt’s eye. “Cool things off, maybe,” she says.

Alt blinks. “Uncle Har, you coming?” he calls.

Uncle Har is trying to attract grouse, leaping and flapping and kicking at the gravel.

The suit maybe moves, and the wagon perhaps resumes its viscous flow. More drops fall.

“Uncle Har?” Alt repeats.

Uncle Har stalks toward the wagon. “Best seven of thirteen?” he asks.

Mike, now grimly tracing the raindrop pattern on his backpack, does not respond.

“Got anyplace we can go?” Alt asks the suit. “Barn? A house someplace?”

The suit shudders—laughing again?—and waves a sleeve at the horizon. “As you see,” he grates.

The storm arrives all at once, crashing down like a safe, crushing the suit’s fedora, soaking Alt’s clothes and filling his shoes. Aunt Mar grunts as though gaffed. Uncle Har, eyes wide, vaults into the air and splashes into the wagon. Mike, despairing, raises both hands from the obliterated pattern on his pack. “Better a storm than so beastly warm,” Aunt Mar shouts.

“It’s 6:25 and there are six of us,” Uncle Har shouts back. “Including the horse! Six is half of twelve and it’s the middle day of three! If we die tonight it will be symmetrical!”

Mike is frenziedly straining his outstretched arms toward the sky. “Give me something to work with!” he screams. There is a bonesplitting crack of thunder and a magnesium flash of lightning. He howls with ecstasy, his fingers retracing the thousand forks.

Alt thuds to his knees and presses his lips to the fedora’s reeking brim. “Can I ask you something?” he shouts. “What’s the worst thing you’ve got?”

A fist of wind hammers the wagon, flipping it over and twisting the Clydesdale deep into the mud. Alt lands crunching on one shoulder and feels Mike’s bulk thud heavily against his kidneys, and the rest of his body is assaulted by a furious mob of elbows, ankles knees and skulls. His fingers are clawed to the shredded fabric of the suit’s jacket, and he’s pulling, pulling at it, trying to free himself from the writhing bodies and the overturned wagon. The jacket, in turn, is pulling away, a high voice screaming something over the roar of the wind, when suddenly something wet and slick hits Alt in the face, causing one of his hands to startle loose and try to swat it away, but there’s another, and another, and the voice is still screaming its unintelligible refrain, and Alt is still clawing hand over hand at the jacket, which peels away loose now, and Alt windmills and catches a fistful of shirttail, sliding on the wet things pouring and tumbling underfoot, and in a sudden blaze of lightning Alt can see a rushing river of toads, spraying in a geyser out of the ditches and onto the road, and he can finally make out the scream from the running, shrunken, shirtless

old man sprinting pell-mell away from Alt, the wagon, the bodies, the toads, his terrified voice shrieking and keening, “What *is* it with you people?”

There is another crash and a sheet of light, followed by the sound of a woman screaming. Alt wheels and lets the shreds of old-man shirt vanish off into the storm. The shadows of the wrecked wagon and struggling horse are back-lit behind the seething torrent of toads. A figure—Aunt Mar?—is off to the side, dipping and jackknifing like an oil drill—vomiting?—and Alt fights the wind, taking clumsy giant steps through amphibious whorls and eddies. The sky is a vivid acid green. Low silhouettes bend and flail on the horizon. The wind is growling, threatening, snarling. The woman’s voice calls out again. No one is visible. Alt reaches out and grabs the overturned wagon, prying himself around its carcass and into the wind. Plastered against the side of the wagon, Aunt Mar is bending over a crumpled heap of clothes and hair. “He’s dead!” she shouts, and Alt finally struggles close enough to see that it’s Mike, a gout of blood over one eye, his mouth stuffed full of still-wriggling toads.

“Where’s Uncle Har?” Alt bellows, his voice burning in his chest but almost inaudible over the wind.

“I don’t know,” calls Aunt Mar, turning away and craning her neck. Mike’s backpack is beside him, its fabric burst, spilling crushed aluminum cans out onto the road, where the wind tosses them, bouncing and tumbling, out among the toads.

“Cans!” shouts Alt.

There is a horrible squealing, and Alt and Aunt Mar look up just in time to see a late-model Buick toadplaning out of control, whirling two hundred seventy degrees on the frictionless surface, headlights flashing by like a lighthouse beacon. Its passenger-side

door slams into the upraised bed of the wagon and the driver's-side door immediately bursts open. Out into the blistering rain strides a towering giantess with rivers of rain coursing from her bare breasts. Stabs of lightning crackle in her leering eyes, and she shakes a black banner with an upraised fist.

Alt shuts his eyes and relaxes, waiting for the hallucination to fade. Aunt Mar's soles slap uselessly against the gore-greased road, trying to pull herself free and away. Wait—Can Aunt Mar see her too? Then she must be...

The rough burlap burns across his arms as he opens his eyes into the darkness of the croker sack, and the drawstring pulls tight around his ankles. He can feel Aunt Mar struggling beside him as they are dragged across the road, lifted into the air and dropped down onto something hard. There is a hollow thud, and suddenly everything is quiet.

* * *

His head is full of dusty rags. He is lying naked on a twin bed, arms atop a white crocheted cotton coverlet. It is dark outside, and the clouds have gone.

He pushes the coverlet aside and swings his legs off the bed. His feet land on a braided rug, its pastels glowing brightly in the festival of electric light. His clothes, which are clean and hot to the touch—from the dryer?—are stacked on a dressing table and topped by a conical, polka-dotted party hat. This is not how he imagined the afterlife.

He gets dressed and cautiously opens the bedroom door. He finds that he is blinking into the startled eyes of Aunt Mar, and they both recoil for a second. Aunt Mar's hair seems to have been washed, and she's holding up her leather helmet by its straps, with a look of wonder on her face. "Freshly blocked!" she says.

"Where are we?" Alt asks.

“I don’t know; I just woke up,” she answers. “Did you get a party hat?”

“Let’s get out of here!” Alt says.

There’s a faint whiff of barbecue coming from somewhere, and a low hubbub. They’re standing in a short hall with a mirrored door at one end and a glass door at the other. The glass door appears to open out into a larger, brighter area, so they walk that way. Aunt Mar pulls the door open slowly, and Alt sticks his head out.

“Living room,” he says, “with a sliding-glass door. There’s some kind of a party going on outside.”

“Let’s try the other door,” Aunt Mar says. She softly closes the door, and they tiptoe to the other end of the hall. She grips the knob. “Locked,” she whispers.

Alt tries the knob for himself. It rattles but does not turn.

“Did you see any other way out of the living room?” Aunt Mar asks.

“There is probably some kind of door off to the right,” Alt says. “I couldn’t see around the corner.”

“Let’s try it,” she says.

They steal back to the living-room door and peer through the glass. No one is visible, so Alt slips through the door and sidesteps to the right, Aunt Mar following closely behind. They reach an entryway with a large door and a window looking out onto a street. Alt tries the knob. Locked. A few inches above the knob there is a deadbolt with a keyhole. Alt reaches up and feels around the top of the doorframe, searching for a key.

“Well, welcome!” rings out a cheery voice. “You must be the new guests of honor!”

A pleasant-looking woman with ash-colored curly hair is smiling at them from the kitchen. Thankfully, she appears to be fully dressed—in white slacks, a pink polo shirt and the same white orthopedic shoes Aunt Mar is wearing.

“No, no, we were just leaving,” says Alt.

“Don’t be silly,” says the woman, and gestures toward the sliding glass door.

“Come on out and have a bratwurst! You wouldn’t skip out on your own party, would you?”

“Come on, Alt,” says Aunt Mar. While Alt wasn’t looking, she has pulled on her helmet and fastened the flaps. She tugs at his arm, and shoulders past the woman in pink. Alt falls in behind her.

Aunt Mar throws the sliding-glass door open and marches straight across the lawn through the party lights and a crowd of politely-smiling faces. She jumps and grabs the top of the wooden fence and prepares to throw a leg over. Alt is right beside her with one leg kicked high above his head when half a dozen hands gently grab him and lift him down. He kicks and struggles, but this is met with widespread laughter. Somebody slips a cold beer into his hand.

Aunt Mar is standing in a similar throno a few feet away, holding a frosty gin and tonic, and she is visibly seething with rage.

“Surprise!” everyone shouts.

The naked amazon is striding toward them with a sweating glass of chardonnay. “So glad you could join us!” she rumbles. Alt can’t tear his eyes away from her nipples, which hit him at about eye-level.

“How’s your car?” Aunt Mar asks, rocked back on her heels and staring up.
“You’re a lousy driver.”

Everyone laughs, and the man nearest the giantess slaps her on the ribs—what would be the shoulders for anyone else at the party—and chuckles, “She’s got you there, Adele.”

Adele grins good-naturedly and says, “The car is in the shop, but then—it’s always in the shop!”

Everyone laughs. Another man calls out, “Good thing they make Buicks big!”

“And strong!” choruses the crowd.

Alt is still stumped where to put his eyes. Aunt Mar has him by the bicep and she’s steering him slowly but forcefully toward the side gate. Alt notices that her goggles are down.

“Rotate!” someone calls out, and like a school of fish changing shape, the whole party recombines into a jovial, drunken quarter-circle in front of the gate. Everyone is all smiles.

Aunt Mar is snarling like a cougar, the sound rolling low in her throat. Alt tries to read her body language so he can stay out of her way.

“Another beer?” Adele asks from somewhere high above her breasts. Alt’s eyeballs twitch.

“Hi-Ya!” shrieks Aunt Mar, and she drops a shoulder and sprints straight into the grill, sending hot links, chicken thighs and burning coals avalanching into the wooden fence. A small pile of dried leaves and party litter immediately catches fire, and a woman joyfully calls out “Fire!”

“Fire!” the crowd sings out. “Fire! Fire! Fire! Fire!” They move in and hoist Alt and Aunt Mar onto their shoulders as they march around the yard chanting “Fire! Fire! Fire! Fire!” and giddily spraying beer and champagne onto the pitiful dying blaze.

* * *

The waning moon is visible through the window, just beyond the flashing lights of the radio tower. Aunt Mar is sitting on Alt’s bed, and Alt is pacing.

“Do you suppose they got Uncle Har too?” Alt asks. “Right after they stuffed Mike full of toads?”

Aunt Mar lifts her shoulders and lets them fall. “I don’t know, Alt. Naked people might be capable of anything.”

“Suppose she’s asleep?” he asks.

“Who knows,” Aunt Mar says.

“Here,” he says. “Pass me that paperweight.”

She picks up the paperweight from the corner of the table and hands it to him. He steps back from the window and flings the paperweight with all his might. It rebounds with a subdued thud, arcs back into the room, and lands firmly on Aunt Mar’s left foot. “Ow,” she says.

“Try the frontal approach again?” he suggests. She rises silently to her feet and stands there, her shoulders hunched.

“Let’s go,” he says.

He leads the way out to the glass-panel door at the end of the hall, expecting it to be locked. It opens easily, and they step out into the broad expanse of champagne-colored shag. The house is silent. Aunt Mar walks over to the sliding-glass door and pulls on the

handle, but it seems to be locked. She steps to the side and delivers an enthusiastic roundhouse punch to the center of the glass. It bongs splendidly, and she drops her closed fist to her side, her face turning red and tears springing to her eyes.

“Once you’re putting in your order for bulletproof glass...” Alt says.

“...Might as well install it everywhere,” Aunt Mar finishes.

Alt, still pussyfooting, walks to the front door and rattles the bolt. If only Uncle Har and his breath-flints were here, they could maybe *burn* a hole in it...

There is a clank from the kitchen.

Alt jumps, trots back into the living room, and presses himself against a wall, hoping this will make him invisible.

“Hello,” calls out Aunt Mar, taking the opposite approach. “Adele, is that you?”

Adele rounds the corner and walks unseeing past Alt, her bare back broad as a billboard. “I know it’s late,” she says, “but here: I baked you some cookies.” She is brandishing a pair of oven mitts and a cookie sheet that, in her hands, looks like a dollhouse accessory.

“Adele,” Aunt Mar says, “why are you keeping us here?”

Adele laughs delightedly. “I’m not keeping you here,” she says. “I’m just showing you a little hospitality! Just to welcome you to town.”

Aunt Mar cocks her head skeptically.

Adele turns back toward the kitchen. “I do hope you’ll decide to stay. Most of my guests do, you know.”

Alt can hear the sound of a spatula sliding across the cookie sheet. He shifts his weight, trying to remain perfectly silent, but Adele’s head pops around the corner.

“Oh, hello there!” she says. “I didn’t realize you were there! May I offer you a cookie?”

Alt squints up at her, frowning.

“Adele,” Aunt Mar tries again, “you’ve been wonderful. We’d love to stay, but we’re having a bit of an emergency. Perhaps we could set a date for another visit later?”

“An emergency?” Adele says, looking shocked. “What kind of emergency?”

Aunt Mar looks uncomfortable and clears her throat. “Well, frankly, Adele,” she tries, “we thought you might know a little bit about it.”

“Me?” Adele asks, incredulous. “Now I’m quite curious! Please tell me all about it!”

“It’s my husband,” Aunt Mar begins, and then pauses, watching Adele’s expression. “It’s just that... He’s missing.”

Adele looks genuinely baffled. “Missing?”

“Well,” Aunt Mar says, “he was worried that he might be... separated from us. And now we’re here, and, well...”

Still no change in Adele’s expression.

“...we’ve been wondering if this was related somehow,” Aunt Mar concludes.

“Well!” Adele says, moving back into the kitchen. “Of all the...”

Alt and Aunt Mar have moved into the kitchen doorway, looking in. Adele, who almost fills the room, takes down a glass from a shelf and fills it from the tap, drains it in one gulp, and stands for a moment, breathing deeply. “I think,” she says, her voice shaking, “I ought to say goodnight.” She pulls open a drawer, scoops out a key, and marches agitatedly to the front door. Alt and Aunt Mar are right behind her. Adele

unlocks the door and pulls it open, firmly stiff-arms Alt and Aunt Mar, and, tears in her eyes, stoops low and ducks outside. She pulls the door shut behind her and locks it from the outside. Her bare shoulders disappear off around the corner of the garage.

“Midnight snack?” Alt asks. “Where do you suppose she sleeps?”

“Maybe she has a beanstalk,” Aunt Mar says.

* * *

Hours later, Alt and Aunt Mar are slumped in the kitchen. Alt has picked up a full-body tremor, and Aunt Mar looks like she has spent too long in the food dehydrator. “I like it here,” Alt says. “Let’s stay. Let’s go to sleep.”

“A,” Aunt Mar says. “Apprehension. B. Bereavement. C. Countdown.”

“Come on,” Alt whines. “What’s the worst that could happen?”

Aunt Mar squeezes her eyes shut, considering this. “Defiance,” she says, speaking slowly and keeping her eyes shut. “Escape. And Failure.”

“All right,” Alt concedes, his teeth beginning to chatter. “Where do we start?”

Aunt Mar opens the refrigerator. “Grapefruit,” she says, and smacks two grapefruit down on the counter.

Alt starts pulling open cabinets and drawers. “Hammer,” he says, and sets it beside the grapefruit.

“Ice cubes,” Aunt Mar says.

“Jackknife,” Alt says.

“Kraut,” says Aunt Mar.

“Cheater,” Alt says. “Shouldn’t that be under ‘S’ for ‘sauer?’”

“Go ahead, smartass,” says Aunt Mar.

“Line,” he says, slapping down a spool of fishing line. “There; now we’re even.”

“Molasses,” Aunt Mar says.

“Nails,” says Alt.

“Oatmeal.”

“Pliers.”

“Quick grits.”

“I’ll let that go,” Alt says. “Radio.”

“Sardines.”

“Twine.”

“Chewing gum,” Aunt Mar says, unwrapping a stick.

“What am I missing?” Alt asks.

Aunt Mar chews silently for a few moments, the strain on her face briefly easing.

“Used chewing gum,” she says, sticking the wad on the top of the pile.

“Vaseline,” Alt says. “Strange thing to keep in the kitchen.”

“Wafers,” Aunt Mar says.

“Good one,” Alt says. “I never would have let you put those under ‘Nilla.’” He stands on his tiptoes and tries to look up onto a high cupboard shelf.

Aunt Mar is tapping her foot. “Come on, Alt,” she says. “You can do better than this.”

“X-ray?” Alt says, feeling around blind on the shelf. “Xylophone? Xantham gum?”

“Time’s up, Alt,” she says. “Time to start putting this stuff together.”

* * *

An engine rumbles outside, revving, in need of a muffler job. A motorcycle?

“Pass me the Vaseline,” Alt says.

“What?” Aunt Mar shouts.

There is a squealing of tires that goes on for longer than seems possible, and then an enormous green Pontiac punches through the kitchen wall, in a spray of wallpaper scraps and sheetrock dust. Alt and Aunt Mar scramble clumsily out toward the patio door. A canyon of cleavage looms through the Pontiac’s open sunroof. “Oops,” Adele says.

Alt and Aunt Mar huddle on the far side of the kitchen wall with their ears up.

The Pontiac’s engine revs, and there is some screeching of bent nails trying to pull loose from pine lumber, then less screeching, then some low thumping as the engine shuts off, then silence.

There is pounding from inside the car, then a long sigh, and then grunting. Alt peeks around the kitchen door and sees Adele trying to lever her hips out the sunroof. He ducks back and shrugs at Aunt Mar. They wait.

There is more scrambling and grunting, then footsteps, then a key rattling in the lock, then the sound of the front door opening and closing, then keys again, then stillness.

Alt and Aunt Mar lock eyes for a few seconds, then Alt nods and they scramble toward the scratched but intact Pontiac, dart up onto the hood, dive through the sunroof, slither over the front seats, bang out the car’s rear door, and stand panting, hearts thumping, inside the darkened garage.

Aunt Mar tugs at Alt’s wrist, and in the dim light, Alt can see her work through a simple four-part sign-language sentence. She wants him to check one side of the garage, and she will check the other.

Silently, they move apart. Alt shuffles to the house-end corner of his side, and cautiously begins to feel along the wall. His fingers move across wooden tool handles, empty plastic bags and dusty spider webs. Exposed nails, scrap lumber and a bow-saw. A crowbar, a coil of rope, and...

“Ouch,” says Aunt Mar.

Alt turns reflexively toward her, and his foot slips in a puddle of motor oil. He loses his balance and sends an elbow hard into an empty garbage can, which topples and crashes to the floor.

Suddenly a light bulb turns on overhead, dazzling his eyes as they fight to adjust. The garage door begins to rumble open, letting in a rush of cool night air and pre-dawn bird sounds.

Aunt Mar, thinking quickly, is down on her hands and knees by the widening door-crack, searching for legs. She motions for Alt to follow her and then rushes out through the opening, straightening from her crouch into a bolt-upright—even laid-back—sprint, helmet straps flapping behind her. Alt is impressed.

“Aww,” Alt hears Adele’s voice say behind him, and he darts a glance back to see her eight-foot fleshy frame heave into motion like a voluptuous fullback.

Aunt Mar has headed straight across the street and she’s careening past shadowy hedges against the side of a house, dashing diagonally across a lawn and vaulting over an ornamental pond. Alt is ten feet behind her, doubting he will be able to keep up. Adele is presumably an arm and an inch away, about to close the inch.

He flinches to one side and tries a veering path, his lungs burning, Aunt Mar breaking out into the next street, her feet scattering sticks and rocks.

Alt thinks of the old joke about hunting buddies trying to outrun a bear—Aunt Mar only has to outrun *him*. But Adele wasn't planning to *eat* them, was she?

Aunt Mar, as if by special effect, hurtles over an eyesore wagon-wheel and a garden gnome, and begins to pull away. Alt zigs around the lawn ornaments and zags into a side yard after her, and she's pounding down a hillside toward a dark ribbon that must be a river or a creek and then she's airborne, launched slow-motion into a graceful, balletic swan-dive, only to come horribly, painfully, sickeningly down into six inches of brown water and snot-rope algae.

Alt is already at apogee, his arms and legs windmilling crazily, and he has barely begun to scream when his feet and ankles crash down and his vertebrae make a noise like a dropped stack of china plates. Another sound, the sound of Adele's helpless laughter, slowly begins to soak through the humiliation and the buzzing pain.

Adele has toppled to the ground, and her howls of mirth are jerking her bare arms and legs through wild orbits in the uneven grass.

Aunt Mar's tug almost dislocates Alt's shoulder. Her face and neck are bloodied and bruised, caked with mud and fish guts and slime, but she's on her feet, all systems go, prepared to drag Alt behind her like a sled if necessary.

He makes a supreme effort, loosens the rubble of his legs, and heaves off behind her, lumbering up the slope on the far side of the creek and listening to the dwindling sound of Adele's full-throated hysteria.

* * *

On the far side of the creek, they run along the top of the hill. Even Aunt Mar sounds winded now, and her strides are less graceful, more desperate. “Water,” she says. “Find some water.”

They reach an intersection, and the dawn sun washes pink over their mud-encrusted faces. Aunt Mar has several long weeds glued across her upper lip, and she looks like a menacing, goggle-eyed rabbit.

“Better wash,” Alt says as a jogger, watching the mud-people, stumbles off the curb and nearly falls into traffic.

“Convenience store,” Aunt Mar says, pointing.

They walk toward it along the edge of the highway, paced by a growing line of slow weaving traffic, drivers’ eyes fixed on them. Alt salutes.

The doors on the front of the convenience store are all marked ‘Exit’ in mirror-image stenciled paint. Alt leads his aunt around to the back, where they find a chipped gray steel door under a satellite dish and beside a surprised-looking brimming brass spittoon. Alt twists the knob. “Locked,” he says, stepping back. Aunt Mar frowns at him disdainfully and attacks the door with a forceful motion of arm, shoulder and hip. There is an odd pong, and the door swings open. Alt hangs his head.

They are standing across from an open stockroom. Alt pokes his head around the corner into the store. In the despair-inducing fluorescent light, a bleach-blond clerk is chewing gum around an unlit cigarette. She looks up, meets Alt’s eyes, then looks away. “Late night?” Alt asks.

She shrugs.

Aunt Mar pushes against the door of the women's restroom. It doesn't budge. She tries her judo trick. It looks great, but the door doesn't move. "Do I need a key for the restroom?" she calls out.

"Key's lost," the clerk answers.

The men's-room door is hanging open by one hinge. Alt pushes it open and sees the porcelain toilet cracked in half and the sink dangling by pipes from the wall. The floor is wet and covered in dust. "What's up with the men's room—kids?" he shouts.

"Damn kids," the clerk agrees.

Mud-Alt looks at Mud-Mar. A woman coming in the front door sees them from across the store and quickly goes back out.

Alt looks around the store. Refrigerators... ATM... magazines... stack of cases of 3.2 beer...

Aunt Mar nods and snags one of the beer cases. The clerk has her head turned the other way. Alt holds the door for Aunt Mar, waits for her to move beyond the glass, then calls out, "Thank you," and follows her around the back of the store.

Aunt Mar already has one of the cans open and she's draining it in a long stream over her head, letting the beer run down in muddy rivulets over her helmet. She uses her free hand to scrub her cheeks. Alt grabs another beer and begins washing his neck.

"Hey," says a voice. It's the clerk, coming around the corner. "What the hell?"

Alt and Aunt Mar drop their beers, and the cans fall, foaming, to the asphalt.

"Sorry," Alt says. "We'll just..." and they're off and running again.

The clerk shakes her head, lowers her jeans, and squats to pee.

* * *

At the side of the highway Alt, inspired, throws his arms wide in a gesture of benediction, grinning to let his white teeth shine out the mud and beer. The lead car screeches to a halt, and the driver stares open-mouthed while Alt and Aunt Mar pick their way across the stalled traffic and down into the ditch on the far side.

Aunt Mar is about to enter the convenience store on *this* side of the highway when Alt holds up a hand for her to wait. He walks to the pumps and starts pulling abandoned receipts, and then dips into the garbage can and comes up with a fistful. Aunt Mar watches him silently, then follows him around to the rear of the store. He's leafing through the receipts as he goes, letting each one fall to the ground.

"Ah ha!" he yells, holding up a receipt and letting all but one of the others flutter down. He closes the distance over to the car-wash door and begins working the keypad. The door rolls open. Aunt Mar begins to walk inside, but Alt holds her back. "Wait," he says. The carwash starts up, and they watch it from outside the big fiberglass door, mud drying to scales on their skin.

The big dryer comes on with a roar. "Punch it in!" Alt yells, handing his last receipt to Aunt Mar and sprinting to the far end of the carwash. He runs through the exit in the last of the drying cycle and waits by the entrance door for his aunt to punch in the code. The entrance door rises, and she steps inside.

The chassis-wash sprays up the insides of their legs, leaving them sickly warm and damp. "Okay then," Alt says. "Do we think he's dead?"

Aunt Mar has to raise her voice to be heard as the soaper bar passes slowly overhead. "No way to know," she says. "My eyes were on Mike."

“Let’s say he’s alive,” Alt says, scrubbing his fingers through his now-soapy hair.
“What’s the last place we’d ever want to look for him?”

Aunt Mar is scrubbing the underarms of her blouse. “If alive, the grave,” she shouts. “If dead, my bed.”

“Aren’t you mixing alliteration and rhyme?” Alt asks.

“Shun the undertaker,” she says. “Ignore the morgue.”

The rinsing hoses are now blasting them from both sides. Alt and Aunt Mar spread their arms and legs and spin in place, trying for full coverage. “Anywhere else?” Alt yells.

The exit door rumbles open, and the dryer begins to howl. Aunt Mar clomps slowly forward, her soaking (but clean!) clothes flapping noisily in the gale. “And underwater,” she shouts, “is also unlikely.”

* * *

Alt opens one eye and winces in the bright sunlight. Taking a long nap was the worst thing they could possibly have done. He rises from the pavement and bangs his fist on the mortuary’s garage door. “Bring out your dead!” he yells.

“Alt, dear,” Aunt Mar says. She has evidently been awake for some time.

The door has no exterior handles. He is running his palms all over it. “Let... us... in!” he yells.

“Alt, dear,” Aunt Mar says again.

He kicks the door and glowers at his aunt.

“Come inside, dear,” she says, turning the knob of a door beside the garage door and pushing it open.

He stares at the door, and reddens. “Sorry, Aunt Mar,” he says, and shuffles inside.

They squeeze past a smudged Oldsmobile hearse and shoulder through a side door that turns out to lead into a hallway with spring-blossom-themed wallpaper and low burgundy carpet. They merge into a somber procession of couples and families in dark suits and long dresses.

Alt looks down at his T-shirt, which is shiny with Turtle Wax and has pronounced ridges. "I'm completely confident we are crazily conspicuous," Aunt Mar whispers.

Many of the mourners are trying to look at them out of the corners of their eyes, but nobody goes so far as to actually stare. "So sad," Alt says loudly, "that whoever died." Aunt Mar nods her head solemnly.

They stay with the herd far enough into the room to ascertain that the corpse is that of an elderly woman of roughly Aunt Mar's age. "Pitiful," Aunt Mar says, attracting glares. "But not him."

Alt hustles down a side-aisle toward a door behind the coffin. He rattles the knob but it doesn't turn. One of the ushers is hurrying toward him. "Oops," Alt says in a stage-whisper, and he squeezes through the space between the coffin and the altar, forcing the usher to choose between cutting into the viewing line and squeezing through the narrow space himself. He opts to drop back and avoid a scene.

Alt meets back up with Aunt Mar at the chapel entrance and sees that she has pulled a damp handkerchief from somewhere. She blows her nose exaggeratedly.

"May I help you?" asks a suited funeral director, as they attempt to move on to the next chapel.

"No!" Aunt Mar sobs, and Alt wraps his arm around her consolingly.

The funeral director gives way and allows them to walk into the empty chapel. Alt gestures with his head at the closed casket on the velvet-draped cart. “There’s no way that’s Uncle Har alive in there, right?” he asks.

Aunt Mar shakes her head vigorously. “It beggars belief that he is being buried,” she says.

“Then give me a hand with this lid,” Alt says.

They lock their fingers around the edge of the lid and tug. Nothing happens.

Alt knocks at what he guesses is the head-end and says, “Uncle Har, are you in there? Knock once for no and twice for yes.” He presses his ear to the coffin and waits, then shakes his head.

Aunt Mar moves so her lips are an inch from the wood and calls out, “Open up, old uncle!”

“Old uncle?” Alt asks.

“Do better, dumbbell,” she says.

“Let’s get this thing open,” Alt says, looking around the room.

“We suspect,” Aunt Mar says, “a workshop somewhere.”

Alt nods, and tries one of the side doors. It opens into a closet, and Alt emerges with a brass candle-lighter. “Terrible lever,” Aunt Mar says. “Too light.”

Alt nevertheless tries to insert various ends and bends of the lighter around the edge of the casket lid, leaving large scratches and dents in the varnish.

“Break in,” Aunt Mar suggests, “with a bus impact.”

Alt nods, and drops to his knees to unlock the wheels of the casket cart.

“To facilitate disaster,” she adds, “use the front door.”

It only takes a few loping steps to get the cart and casket rolling fast. The heavy mahogany provides excellent momentum. Same principle as a battering ram, Alt guesses. He hits the chapel door and shoves hard on one corner of the casket, sending it whipping unsteadily around and out toward the crowd of mourners. The quick-thinking funeral director doesn't waste breath on disbelief or shouting, but simply throws himself in the way of the surging corpse-trolley. He is thrown aside like a rag doll. A woman begins to scream.

Aunt Mar catches up with Alt and adds her weight to a corner. Several dozen terrified mourners plaster their backs against the wall and make wide ovals with their mouths.

The cart's wheels bump up and over the front-door threshold, and Alt and Aunt Mar let go and raise their arms high above their heads, watching the casket hurtle into main-street traffic, directly into the path of a red dump-truck. She gives him the thumbs-up.

The truck's air-brakes wheeze as its high bumper hits the casket, sending it off the cart and down onto the road, where the truck's front wheels catch it and push it unbroken along the pavement in a long skid. Sweaty hands claw at them from behind. "Can't be him," he shouts, pulling away from the frightened usher's half-hearted grip.

"Hard nut corpse," Aunt Mar calls over her shoulder as she runs away. "Have a nice cremation!"

* * *

Once again, Alt is struggling to keep pace.

"Jesus, Aunt Mar," he pants, "How can you run so fast?"

“Trying to prevent murder,” she says. “Time is passing mercilessly.”

“That was a stretch,” he says. “You must be tiring.”

They pass under a sign with a blue ‘H’ and an arrow, and they dart to the right. In his sopping shoes, Alt wonders whether the blisters will outpace the trench foot, or vice-versa. “There!” she points. They jog through the sliding doors of the emergency room and immediately lie down on the floor and shut their eyes.

“May I help you?” a woman’s voice asks.

Alt tries to hold his breath.

“Is this some kind of a joke?” the voice asks.

Alt can hold it. He’s *sure* he can.

The voice waits a few seconds, then says, “Look. I’ll give you five minutes. After that, I’m calling security.” Alt hears rubber soles take a couple of short steps. “And *you*,” the voice says, “Aren’t you a little old for this sort of thing?”

Aunt Mar doesn’t answer. Alt wonders whether she’s holding her breath too.

The rubber shoes squeak away. Alt exhales slowly, trying not to let his ribcage sag too much.

The vinyl floor tiles are clammy. Or maybe it’s Alt’s pants that are clammy. He wonders what kind of cleaning product they use on the tiles to make them smell like this.

Minutes tick by.

“What’s with them?” a new voice asks.

“Some kind of sick joke,” the original voice responds. “I’m giving them two more minutes.”

“They’re going to scare hell out of any real patients who walk in,” says the second voice.

“This is an emergency room” says the first voice. “Scary place.”

Alt counts down from seven hundred by sevens, his ass slowly going numb.

“Somebody call security?” a third voice asks.

If there is a response, it’s a silent one.

Suddenly there’s a blast of amplified feedback right in Alt’s face. His legs twitch reflexively, which actually helps a little with the numbness. “All right, you jokers,” the distorted voice barks out. “You! You are not dead! You do not look dead! You are not convincing as dead people!”

Alt’s ears were not made for this. “You have no talent for playing dead!” says the bullhorn. “Go and play somewhere else!”

Alt can’t hear movement from Aunt Mar, and concludes she’s still hanging in there. The bullhorn squelches, and then the voice, unamplified this time, says, “Okay, Maureen. Go ahead.”

A bucket of cold water hits Alt in the face and causes his limbs to flail. He feels his head being prodded by a rag mop—or what he hopes is a rag mop.

The bullhorn again: “We are now mopping you! We intend to mop you right out onto the street!”

This mopping feels sort of nice. It reminds Alt of the car wash.

“Prepare to be mopped!” says the bullhorn-voice.

Alt feels himself washing along the tiles with less friction than seems plausible.

Whee!

The automatic door whooshes open and blasts Alt with muggy afternoon air.

Damn! Jungle rot!

“You have been mopped!” says the bullhorn, and Alt feels a body—presumably Aunt Mar’s—wash up beside him. He opens one eye.

Aunt Mar has one eye open too, and their two combined eyes take in a view of red light flashing against the sun-raked walls of the hospital.

“A, B, C, Go!” shouts Aunt Mar, and they’re up and sprinting toward the ambulance.

A uniformed paramedic sees them coming and tries to head them off, but Aunt Mar, goggles down, is much too quick for him. She jumps in and throws the ambulance into reverse. Alt lands in the seat beside her. There is a groan from the back.

They screech backwards around the circular drive with the paramedic and the bullhorn-wielding security guard chasing after them. Aunt Mar throws the transmission into drive and starts randomly whacking buttons. Suddenly they’re off and peeling, lights flashing, sirens blaring. “Where to?” yells Alt.

“Water ought to spill downhill,” Aunt Mar yells back, and she whirls the steering wheel, sending the ambulance two-wheeled around a corner and over the crest of a hill. The voice in the back is whimpering, reciting some kind of prayer. Alt turns the two-way radio on. “Think this will work?” he shouts.

Aunt Mar ignores him and floors it, sending them fishtailing out onto a bridge. “Aquatimo!” she screams. She spins the wheel and sends them rocketing through the side rail and off the bridge.

The flashing, whooping, and tearing all fall away as the ambulance overcomes gravity and floats gracefully above the river—Alt wonders whether he should climb out and drift along in the warm soft air outside—but then hurtles down and crashes obscenely into the dirty water. They spin once, then flop sideways and wash untidily down the last few yards of river and out into the lake.

* * *

Alt, head bloody, wonders why the water should be making the siren so much louder. He claws his way up the dashboard and sticks his nose over. All along the lakeshore is a parade of white police cruisers, lights flashing, sirens blaring. “They’re playing our song,” he says, then slumps back to the floor.

The passenger in the back is kicking angrily and steadily. “Hello, helo,” Aunt Mar says, weakly.

“Are you okay?” Alt asks. “That noise is not a helicopter.”

“It’s a chopper, whipper-snapper,” she says.

The kicking grows louder.

“How hurt can he be,” Alt asks, “if he can kick like that?” There is a thump at the window. With his head tilted to the side like this, it almost looks to Alt like a rope ladder.

“Time to climb,” Aunt Mar says.

Alt is smiling, enjoying the sound-and-light show. “You go,” he says. “I’m staying here.” He hears her door open, and she disappears somewhere. Funny, he doesn’t hear a splash.

The thing thunks again. Alt tries turning his head the other way. Yup: It still looks a lot like a hallucinatory rope-ladder.

He decides to go with it. He struggles hand-over-hand up the front seat, and pops his head out the driver's-side door. There is indeed a helicopter up there, or else a really ugly grasshopper.

He reaches out and grabs a rung. As soon as his fingers are wrapped around, he can feel his shoulder dislocating as the ambulance is pulled away from his feet.

He looks back and sees that the sideways ambulance is still mostly above water, but it's getting smaller and smaller for some reason, as are the trees... He reaches out with his other arm and hugs the ladder, and presses his face against it.

A head like Uncle Har's is looking down at him. "You coming up?" it asks.

* * *

"You bought a helicopter?" Alt says.

"I never buy helicopters," Uncle Har replies. "There's always one around."

Aunt Mar has her head out the window, earflaps quivering in the wind, a colossal grin on her face.

"Think we're safe, up here in the sky?" Alt asks. "Or do you think they have surface-to-air missiles?"

"They don't have surface-to-air missiles," Uncle Har says.

"They got Mike," Alt says. "We were worried they got you too."

"You too!" Uncle Har says. "V-3! W-4! 9-12-4-8-25-12 22-13 2-21-10-19-12!"

Alt checks his watch. It's 6:24 PM. He surveys the landscape below, wondering from where the attack will come. There doesn't seem to be anything down there but corn, soybeans and cattle. What should he be looking for—silage weapons? A tofu cannon? A bomb in a bull? "We spent the night with an eight-foot naked blonde," he tells Uncle Har.

Uncle Har reaches inside his jacket, pulls out the postcard and hands it over.

Alt glances down at it. “I am going to kill you forty-nine years from today,” he reads, “‘give or take a day, at exactly 6:25 PM.’ Who is the last person we would expect?”

“6:25!” Uncle Har says, and shoves Alt out of the helicopter.

The postcard rips loose from Alt’s fingers and floats gracefully up, twisting and fluttering into a perfect blue sky.

He wishes his clothes weren’t so damp—the wind is making him really cold—but then maybe the wind will help *dry* his clothes—or maybe the impact will *knock* the moisture out. Impact? Impact?

His whole body feels the hard slap of the surface, and his breath is taken from him and left hovering in the air about three feet above...

...the farm pond.

It’s quiet down here, muffled. He feels grateful for the silence. He could just drink it in, breathe it in...

He vomits, and beats at the pond water with his forearms. It’s green, it stinks, and he wants *out*.

He flails over to the side of the pond and hangs, gasping, over a wet cowpat with something stuck to it: the postcard.

“*I’m coming to kill you,*” it reads. No salutation, no signature.

He hears the first gunshot.

“I wasn’t *born* forty-nine years ago, dumbass!” he shouts, heaving himself out of the muck and stumbling forward.

“Numbers don’t lie, Alt,” Uncle Har calls back, getting off another wide shot. “My great great grandfather was born in 1849!”

“So what?” yells Alt. There’s no traction in this pasture.

“He had four children,” Uncle Har yells. “One of my great grand uncles was killed in the Civil war! The other three had three children apiece!”

“Of course!” yells Alt.

“Of those nine,” yells Uncle Har, “five had no children. “One had one, one had three, one had five and one had seven.”

Alt thanks God Uncle Har is wearing those heavy boots. No good for running.

“Thirteen of those were killed as children!” Uncle Har yells. “When a dirigible crashed at a family reunion!”

It’s pointless to keep trying to dodge cow pies. Alt tries a straight-line sprint for variety.

“My mother was one of the three who survived!” Uncle Har yells. “I had four brothers and sisters! Seven first cousins! Thirteen second cousins! My mother’s cousin wanted to make up for the thirteen who died!”

Aim for the cow pies! That should produce a random pattern!

“Your father had eleven cousins, twelve second cousins and twelve third cousins! I loved him for it!”

Trouble is, manure is *sticky*!

“You have ten cousins, twelve second cousins, thirteen third cousins and fourteen fourth cousins!” Uncle Har bellows. “Can you comprehend how disruptive that makes you?”

“Why?” demands Alt. “Eleven, twelve, thirteen, fourteen! Nice series!”

“Innumerate!” shouts Uncle Har. “Without you, there would have been seven generations of progressive squares!”

“I’m square!” Alt pleads. “I’m progressive!”

“I’m going to kill you,” Uncle Har roars.

“But it’s arbitrary!” Alt screams. He’s doing his best to run in zigzags across the pasture, but it’s a challenge with fifteen pounds of dung glued to each foot. “You had sixteen great-great grandparents! Why insist on one in particular?” He trips, and face-plants in the treacherous mud.

Uncle Har’s voice grows closer. “Beauty is truth, Alt,” he says.

Alt rolls onto his side and looks up one-eyed into the enormous barrel of the gun. “Okay,” he says. “But why wait forty-nine years?”

Uncle Har is smiling, maybe. “Your next-oldest cousin was born forty-nine years ago at 6:25 PM” he says. “Anyone born after that I was bound to resent.”

Alt is trying to blink digested grass from his other eyelid. “But why the three-day window,” he asks, his voice cracking. “What sense does that make?”

“It was a long labor, Alt,” Uncle Har says.

Aunt Mar comes running in at high speed, then baseball-slides in the manure and comes to rest a few feet away. “Hello, Alt,” she says.

Alt looks from the Aunt Mar to the gun to Uncle Har and back to Aunt Mar. “He wants to kill me,” he says. “I was one too many.”

“My husband is obsessed with perfect squares,” she says, as if she’s reciting something. “They lead him down some questionable paths.”

“Don’t just blank verse!” Alt snaps. “*Do something!*”

Aunt Mar is back on her feet, dusting herself off. ““But really after almost fifty years,” she says, ““why not let Harold have his fun at last?””

Alt boggles at this. “You’d rather let him kill me than break meter?” he says.

She shrugs. “Meter is a harsh mistress, Alt.”

Uncle Har cocks the hammer and begins the countdown. “Forty-nine, thirty-six, twenty-five...”

“Wait!” shouts Alt. “What section is this?”

“...sixteen,” Uncle Har says. “Section?”

“Thirty-six sections in a township,” Alt says, his voice cracking. “You wouldn’t shoot me in section fifteen, would you?”

“Jesus, Alt,” Uncle Har says, lowering the gun. “You’re absolutely right. Seven? Forty-nine? I can’t throw away forty-nine years of effort by killing you in a section with no common factors!”

Alt exhales.

“Let’s go get that cleared up,” Uncle Har says.

* * *

They’re crouching in the dark beside a tall spruce tree in front of the county courthouse. Alt realizes something. “You killed Mike,” he says.

Uncle Har is scraping spruce needles together into a tall pile. “He beat me at chess, Alt,” he says. “I ask you.”

“With toads,” Alt says.

Uncle Har carefully lowers a final needle onto the pile, and steps back to check for symmetry. “What would you have done?” he asks.

“Nice pile,” Alt says. “Can I get you two sticks?”

Uncle Har holds up a book of matches. “Found them in the helicopter,” he says.

He lights a match and holds it against the bottom of the needle pile until the needles start to smolder. Then the three of them walk sideways around to the rear of the courthouse.

“Any minute now,” Uncle Har says.

The yellow glow from the security lights suddenly gains an orange tint and the air fills with a crackling sound. “So sad to sacrifice that sturdy spruce,” Aunt Mar says.

They wait. After a couple of long minutes the sirens arrive. At the sound of running boots and shouting voices, Uncle Har lifts a leg and puts a foot through the glass door, then stands to one side as Alt and Aunt Mar climb through the jagged hole. He climbs through after them and they press together, staring up into the darkness at the illegible hall signs.

“Turn on a light?” asks Aunt Mar. “Make something ignite?”

“Always turn right?” Alt suggests.

His aunt and uncle look at him for a second.

“That’s *sure* to fail,” Uncle Har nods. “Let’s go!”

They muddle to the right-hand corner of the lobby, then push through the swinging door and begin to feel their way down the hall (which is surprisingly cluttered with invisible objects: sharp-edged tables, shin-high benches and randomly-placed, echoing garbage cans.) The muted sirens throb on outside.

“Here,” Alt says, reaching the last door on the right. “It’s locked. Let’s all go home.”

“Nonsense,” says Uncle Har. “If I’ve said it once, I’ve said it 1,024 times.”

“Said what?” asks Alt.

“Bring me one of those tables,” says Uncle Har.

Alt and Aunt Mar noisily slide one of the long tables toward the end of the hall, producing a slippery rain of brochures, flyers and Xeroxed handouts. Uncle Har helps them shove the table across the locked door, and then he climbs up and kicks off the last few papers. “00, 01, 10” he counts, then chins himself up to the transom and begins to slither through headfirst.

There is a sickening crunch, and a few seconds later the door pulls open from inside. Uncle Har is rubbing his head. “Records office,” he says. “Nice work, Alt.”

Alt goes inside, walks to the window and watches steam rise from the blackened spruce. Then the lights come on and he finds himself blinking at his own stained and battered reflection.

“Here’s the one,” Uncle Har says.

He and Aunt Mar have opened a series of flat drawers and have extracted an enormous map, which they have laid out on a table in the center of the room.

“What do you think, Alt?” Uncle Har asks. “Section seven, for the root of our problems? Section eleven, for the next-largest prime?”

“Section one,” suggests Aunt Mar, “for a job well done?”

“What’s the worst place you can think of for killing your grand-nephew?” Alt asks.

Aunt Mar has her face pressed against the window, her hand shading her eyes.

“Immediately outside?” she says. “Impossible to hide.”

Uncle Har slides his finger across the map until he locates the courthouse.

“Perfect,” he says.

* * *

Aunt Mar, Alt and Uncle Har move nearer to the rubber-suited firefighters. Uncle Har is carrying the revolver down along his thigh.

“Thirty-one second head start?” Alt asks. “Nineteen? Forty-seven?”

Uncle Har shakes his head and gestures curtly with the revolver.

“Eighty-three?” Alt pleads. “Four hundred forty-nine? Three?”

“Three,” Uncle Har agrees, and Alt takes a giant leap, drops into a roll, and dives to one side.

Uncle Har’s shot is loud and unbelievably wide. Spectators crane their necks and a couple of police officers break away from the pack to check out the ruckus.

Alt is up and sprinting circles around the spectators, the cops, the firefighters, the steaming tree, the fire trucks, the spectators again, the cops again...

“Hey,” a firefighter shouts at Alt, “keep away from the...”

Uncle Har’s second shot is better-aimed, and it hits a fire hose just as Alt is about to leap over it. The sudden jet of water knocks him off his feet and tosses him several yards to the side, where he lands painfully in yet another sodden heap.

The cops have now caught on, and they’re fanning out to cover Uncle Har, who is standing tall in a widening circle of fleeing spectators, pistol raised in a two-handed grip.

“Drop it,” a voice booms out. “Drop your weapon!”

Uncle Har is carefully sighting down the barrel at Alt, who is dancing to get free of the writhing hose and pummeling stream of water.

“Put the gun down!” the voice shouts, and there is a loud CRACK as the sixty-foot ember gives way and crashes down into the semicircle of police.

Uncle Har’s aim falters at the last minute and the shot thuds into the ground a foot from where Alt has his head down trying to push himself up. With the bullet’s impact he makes an extra effort and manages to get to his feet. He skates several strides across the slippery leaves, then gets his footing and barrels straight for Aunt Mar. He catches her full-force with the crook of his arm, and she stumbles for a moment, then rights herself and begins to jog alongside.

Alt’s lungs are heaving. “What do you think, Aunt Mar?” he gasps. “You think he’d risk shooting at you to get at me?”

Aunt Mar’s eyes are bright, her face relaxed. It looks as though she’s about to recite again. Alt unwraps his arm and tries to dash away, but she’s too fit. She easily keeps pace.

“My grand-nephew always hates to decide,” she begins, “He asks each person, ‘What’s the worst you’ve got?’”

Alt swerves and doubles back, but he just can’t shake her.

“So is it then indeed such a surprise?” she asks, “The worst they’ve got ends with him getting shot.”

And, BANG! Uncle Har lets off another wide one, which sizzles in the air above and is followed by a loud POP! and a shower of sparks, and then darkness.

“He gave it a try,” Aunt Mar says, “but he got a transformer.”

Alt is down on his hands and knees, reasoning he makes a smaller target this way, and anyway it's safer to crawl when he can't make anything out in the darkened street.

After a few moments of confusion, the police have located their flashlights and are playing them around the square, trying to make sense of the muddled scene and, if convenient, stop Uncle Har from killing Alt. The fire trucks have their headlights on, making tunnels through sooty spruce smoke, but not providing any real clarity. Alt figures he's basically crawling for distance. The street is closed off and empty of vehicles, and most of the rubberneckerers have scattered, so Alt has a clear track. The remains of his jeans scrape wetly across the asphalt.

Suddenly, his thigh goes up in flames, as though it has been slashed with a dull razor, or hit with a miscalibrated cattle-prod, or... dammit.

Uncle Har's gray-suited leg glimmers into view. "How about that shot?" he asks. "I always did shoot better in the dark."

It's taking all of Alt's strength just to clamp down on his gunshot quadriceps. He stares up glumly.

"It's twenty-one thirty-six," Uncle Har says. "What do you think of twenty-one thirty-seven as a time to die?"

"No, thank you," Alt says.

"Har?" Aunt Mar says. She's winded, so she must have been searching for them for quite a while. "Har?"

Uncle Har thumbs back the hammer, his eyes on his watch's glowing second hand.

"That's a revolver, Har," she says.

Alt tries to think back. One, two, three...

Uncle Har blows air from his lungs and steadies his hands.

“Five shots, Har,” Aunt Mar says. “This is number six.”

Uncle Har’s eyes stay fixed on his watch, his head nodding the seconds. “Oh, please,” he says. “It’s a Magnum. And I’ve fired seven.”

“Eight then, Har.” she says. “Eight.”

Alt shuts his eyes.

“Good point,” says Uncle Har. “I hate even numbers.”

He lowers the gun.

* * *

Uncle Har is teetering unstably along the darkened gravel road, barely able to pedal with his grand-nephew tied up in the bicycle’s rear cargo basket.

Aunt Mar, having found nothing more suitable to steal than a six-year-old’s coaster-brake banana bike, is not doing much better. “You’re a basket case, Alt,” she puffs.

“You’re cruel,” Alt says. “Whose side are you on?”

““Although my husband has my loyalty,”” she says, ““and I will give him every help I can—””

“Have mercy!” says Alt.

““Although my nephew asks the worst from me,”” she concludes, ““have I no duty to my fellow man?””

“There,” Alt says. “I knew you’d come around by the third stanza.”

“Come around?” she says. “The turn doesn’t arrive until the final couplet.”

* * *

The discomfort of being trussed and stuffed into a bouncing bicycle basket turns out to be a welcome distraction from the wound on Alt's thigh. By the time Uncle Har's tires thump down off the asphalt and onto the pea-gravel of the rail yard, Alt's mind is completely clear. He blinks, looking for escape in the wan moonlight.

Uncle Har dismounts, and Alt's weight flips the bicycle down onto the gravel. Alt grits his teeth and tries to remember how a snake crawls. Uncle Har lifts the bicycle off him and drags him by his bad leg toward the tracks.

"You must pay the rent!" shouts a stranger's gruff voice.

Uncle Har and Aunt Mar freeze and swivel their heads in the direction of the sound. The dim outline of a porkpie hat is hovering just above a pile of railroad ties. "Howdy," says the stranger. "Nice night."

"Yep," says Uncle Har.

"What?" says Aunt Mar.

Alt can't see what's going on. He tries to shrug.

Uncle Har resumes wrestling Alt onto the tracks, and the stranger shuffles over and tries to help. "Friend of yours?" he asks.

"Grand-nephew," Uncle Har says. "It's nothing personal."

"Yeah?" asks the stranger.

"Yeah," says Uncle Har. "I've been planning this for forty-nine years."

"Forty-nine?" says the stranger. He drops his end of Alt and dashes back behind the ties.

"Ouch," says Alt.

The stranger emerges with a forked stick and starts hurrying down the tracks.

Uncle Har resumes trying to solo-drag Alt across the tracks. “Mar, can you give me a hand?” he asks.

“No, Har,” she says. “Not helping.”

Alt looks at her. “See?” he says. “You *are* coming around.”

“Wait,” she says.

“Hey!” the stranger calls out. He emerges out of the dim light, dragging the stick. “You don’t want to put him there,” he says. “Come over here!”

Uncle Har sets Alt down and follows the stranger, curious, with Aunt Mar trailing behind. Alt has worked his hands loose from the bungee cord, and he starts to crawl off on the far side of the tracks.

The stranger is running flat out now, his dowsing rod quivering in front of him. Suddenly the tip drops and he almost falls over himself trying to stop. “See?” he demands.

“What are you dowsing for?” asks Aunt Mar.

“Try it for yourself,” he says.

Aunt Mar takes the rod and tentatively paces around the spot. When she passes the stranger, the rod jerks from her hands and clatters to the tracks.

Uncle Har picks it up and tries it, his boots crunching in an irregular march across the gravel. When he reaches the spot, the tip dives and quivers. “Yep,” he says. “This is the spot.”

Alt is making pretty good time, all things considered. He’s weaving around in a patch of tall weeds, among the trunks of willows and box elders. There is water moving somewhere nearby.

“Hey,” he hears from somewhere behind him.

“Alt?” he hears Aunt Mar call.

He finds the edge of the bank and crawls down into the river, hoping he’ll be able to swim with two arms and one leg. He finds himself in a slowly-flowing inch-deep puddle. He looks upstream and can just make out the rough outline of a beaver dam. Damn beavers.

“Alt?” Aunt Mar calls again.

“One two three four five six seven,” Uncle Har says, pacing. “One two three four five six seven.”

A stick breaks next to where Alt is trying to wade through the mud. “Over here,” the stranger calls. His rod is pointing to the spot where Alt waded in.

“Seven,” shouts Uncle Har, and then “Whoops!”

There is a splash.

“Har?” calls Aunt Mar.

Alt can see Uncle Har’s silhouette rise from the water, its back toward Alt.

“Har?” Aunt Mar asks, “Are you all right?”

“Stuck,” Uncle Har says, shifting his weight from side to side.

“Here,” says the stranger, arriving and extending a hand. Uncle Har grabs it and pulls the stranger off balance and into the river with him. “Sorry,” Uncle Har says.

“Hey, my stick!” says the stranger.

The stranger’s floating stick bumps against Alt and he snags it out of the water and works one leg free.

“Uh, Mar?” says Uncle Har.

“Here,” she says, holding out a long branch.

The stranger and Uncle Har grab the branch together and pull Aunt Mar into the water. “Sorry,” they say together.

The stick is twitching in Alt’s hand, pulling him hard toward the scrum. He takes a clumsy step forward, trying not to lose his grip on the stick.

“Can you move?” asks the stranger.

“I’m not sure,” says Aunt Mar.

“No,” says Uncle Har.

“Anybody seen my stick?” asks the stranger.

“What?” says Aunt Mar.

Alt drags forward another step, and involuntarily pokes the stranger in the shoulder with the extended tip of the stick.

The stranger looks back over his shoulder and says, “Oh, thanks.”

Uncle Har turns, spots Alt, and starts. He fumbles in his coat, brings out the gun and tries to bring it to bear. Alt ducks behind Uncle Har’s back. Uncle Har flails back and forth on his immobilized legs, trying to turn around.

“Hello, Alt,” says Aunt Mar.

Alt, with one arm magnetically fastened by the stick to the stranger’s shoulder blade, waves his free arm until he is able to catch Uncle Har’s gun arm as it goes by. Uncle Har’s hand claws spasmodically and drops the gun. Alt, trying to catch it, fumbles the stick. The stranger, sensing an opening, grabs the stick. The gun plops into the murky water and vanishes.

“Well,” says Aunt Mar.

Alt shrugs, turns, and resumes slogging for the bank. Aunt Mar pulls with her leg and manages to take a step.

“Mar?” asks Uncle Har.

“This way,” she says, beckoning toward the stranger.

“Mar, I’m stuck,” says Uncle Har.

““Because your numbers proved thicker than blood,”” she says, ““should not this mud prove thicker than our love?””

She gets a foot up on the bank and reaches a hand back for the stranger.

“Thanks,” he says.

“Hey!” says Uncle Har.

* * *

Aunt Mar motions for the stranger to join her on the handcar. The stranger looks at her sadly for a moment, and touches the brim of his hat. In his other hand, the stick is jumping and pulling aggressively away from the tracks. Aunt Mar nods, shrugs, and begins to pump, slowly rolling away toward the south.

* * *

Alt nestles deeper into the alfalfa as the sprinkler rolls by above him. The water pools on his skin and slowly turns to vapor in the dawn. It’s nice here. It’s going to be a beautiful day.

