



Illustrated by Joel Iskowitz

The Last Biker Gang

Wil McCarthy

Eleven

Alan Szcytlz—aged eighty-four years, zero months, zero days—rolled on the ancient Harley's throttle and gunned it to one mile per hour for every miserable year he'd been alive on this miserable planet. Eighty-four mph fast! It wasn't easy to do; I-25 was clogged with colorful trains of robot cars and trucks, "platooning" ten to a group almost bumper-to-bumper at 65.00 miles per hour. Navigating through them was a matter of spotting the gaps well before he got to them, of plotting his moves in advance, of weaving sharply in and out and back, ignoring the astonished faces of passive "motorists" in their mobile living rooms.

The Harley's engine roared. The highway's wind roared back. His own heart roared with the thrill (yes, thrill, despite how bad he was feeling) of moving so fast when he damn well wasn't

supposed to. Take that, society.

He'd been in one of those driverless monstrosities this very morning. Bought it for himself as a birthday present, to replace the "real" car Rebecca had filled with her possessions and driven away, after fifty-three years of wedded bliss. Was it so bad, being married to him? She'd seemed to think so, once the hormones and senility reversal treatments had really started kicking in. Back from the dead, from the very brink of death, and in a matter of weeks he'd gone from changing her Depends to defending his right to stand or sit or drink a beer. Everything he did, or tried to do, not only wrong but also somehow inflammatory.

"I spent one lifetime putting up with you, Alan. I won't spend another." Yeah.

The Harley's tires squealed alarmingly as he dodged a pair of buses and squealed again as he nearly lost it on the on-ramp to I-70—a long loping curve that suddenly tightened near the end, just before it squashed down from three lanes to two. They used to call this the Mousetrap, and despite almost a century of engineering and reengineering, it still basically sucked, and would have been one of the deadliest chokepoints in the city if people still died in traffic accidents.

He let out a roar, a scream, just because. Just because it was easier than *not* screaming. It was fear and rage and humiliation and all the frustrated ambitions of a lifetime, all compressed into a single, simple emotion—perhaps the only one he needed anymore.

He thought he'd lived his life pretty honorably, hyah? Done what he was supposed to, what he was able to. Let her spend most of the money, let her mostly tell him what to do, mostly didn't get angry and shout about things, mostly just smiled and nodded and sometimes bought her flowers. Right? And for what?

Approaching an ominous wall of trucks, he had to back off the throttle a bit, and finally even downshift into fourth gear, before he could actually drop behind and merge with the eastbound traffic on 70. More platoons, although a few actual motorists were puttering along as well, weaving like drunks among the razor-precise robots.

It was a hot day at the tail end of May—eighty-nine degrees by the *real* thermometer, but with his knees and elbows in the breeze, he was actually almost chilly, because he couldn't find his old leather jacket and finally wondered why he was even bothering to look for it. What did he have left to protect? Why not roll out in just a T-shirt and, yes, a pair of sturdy old blue jeans? Now, situated on the highway proper, he let his speed creep back up again, wishing he could kick out the tail lights of every damn robot he passed.

Oh, he'd bought one of these beasts all right. Infiniti Q200, not cheap but worth it, hyah? But the moment he drove it off the lot, the first thing it did was lock the doors and start driving him in the wrong direction.

"Warning. The driver of this vehicle has an outstanding arrest warrant. Per state and federal law, this vehicle is required to report directly to the nearest police station. Please remain in your seat."

It wouldn't even tell him the charge, although he imagined it must be unpaid parking tickets. What else had he ever done wrong? So as it rolled to a halt at one of the city's dwindling number of traffic lights, he'd blown the escape bolts on the driver's side window, and then crawled out and walked away while the car's alarm system blared and whooped. If the cops were too lazy to come arrest him themselves, if they needed a *talking car* to do their dirty work for them, then it was their loss. He was damned if he'd play that game, or any game. Or maybe he was just *damned*, period.

So he'd walked home twenty miles, pulled the canvas cover off his old Softail Deuce, slam charged its lithium (yes, lithium) battery, poured in a gallon of Stabilized Benzoethanol Blend, and fired her up. Who gave a shit if he was too old for motorcycles? He was also too old for work, too poor and dull for his oh-so-grown-up kids, too young to die of natural causes, and too chickenshit to put a bullet in his brain.

And apparently, too ornery for marriage. Rebecca's final words still stung in his ears. It seemed like they might just echo there for the rest of his stupid life: "I'm leaving, and you're not going to pester me out of it, Alan. Stop talking. Stop trying. You've got the jerk gene, and that's never going to change. *You're never going to change.*"

Never going to? Well, well. He'd just have to see what the fine people of I-70 had to say about that. Taking his left hand off the clutch, he felt for his chinstrap, slowly undid it and, shrugging off this last tangible piece of the give-a-shit world, flung his helmet as hard as he could at the windshield of a passing Fiat.

The glass didn't break, and the Fiat didn't waver in its course, and that might have been the end of it except the helmet bounced off and hit the pavement and rolled and flipped and then a highway full of autonomous vehicles didn't know what it was or what to do about it, and all started swerving and braking and even knocking into each other a little, and even though nobody was probably going to get hurt, Alan realized he had caused what might well be Denver's greatest traffic disaster of the calendar year.

But he was way out in front of it, probably caught on a hundred cameras but with no license plates on the bike—smart or dumb—to identify him, and no kill switch to stop him remotely, and no navigation electronics to take him for an unsolicited ride. So he gunned the throttle harder and sped away, leaving it behind, moving on, moving *forward*, all giddy with innocence and rage.

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Ten

"I'm Skulls," Alan said to the man two barstools down from him. It was his name, sort of. Alan Szcyltz was a difficult name to pronounce, and if you did it right it came out somewhere between "Shultz" and "Scalds", but he was four bourbons to the wind at this point, and his mouth wasn't forming words correctly. "Alan Skulls, retired."

He was holding out his hand, which the man considered carefully. By some coincidence, he was a geezer in a battered old motorcycle jacket, presumably wearing it indoors because it was freezing as fuck in here with the A.C. cranked up to maximum.

"Okay," the man said in a careful voice.

He was into that "ageless elderly" phase where he could have been anywhere from his late fifties to his early eighties—white hair, yellowing eyes, and grizzled puffy skin that stopped short of wrinkly, but not by much. He'd probably been good-looking once, but age hadn't been kind. Which wasn't all that surprising, because he smelled strongly of thic-nic vape, which (despite being mostly steam) had turned out to be nearly as bad for your skin as smoking used to be. Who knew?

"You ride here?" Alan tried, and when the man didn't reply right away he added, "I rode here. Turn-of-the-century Harley."

"Okay," the man said again, apparently not wanting to be too friendly. Which was unfortunate, because it was three P.M. on a Tuesday, and they were just about the only people in this bar, except a much younger bartender who was talking to another man his own age, and a haggard woman who was also ageless and basically curled up by herself in a corner booth, staring at nothing. Alan had been cooped up at home for too long, and wanted someone to talk to, but apparently this was not his moment.

Disappointed, grumbling a little under his breath, he went back to nursing his drink.

The bar was called Dive Bar and looked like it had been around as long as Alan had. Not in a good, retro-'90s kind of way but in a sort of bad, *actual* '90s way. It was all decked out in fishing nets and scuba gear, which was a joke because this was fucking Colorado, but the stuff was so old—cracked and yellowed and dusty and whatever else—it just looked like somebody's basement that had never been cleaned. And it didn't have projected ideoglyphs crawling all over everything, calling out the "mood of the nation," the "daily consensus flavor" and whatnot; instead there was a single 3D monitor at one end of the room, farthest from the windows, showing a feed of actual, curated video news. All of this suited Alan's mood, not least because the video had no sound attached, and in fact the sound system was playing a steady stream of late-twentieth-century ballads.

* * *

*Nobody, nobody, nobody, nobody comes here, anymore ...
She drives me crazy, ooh, ooh ...*

Janie's got a gun ...

* * *

Anywhere nicer, the music choices would have been unbearable. The latest ultravirals were a sort of nonsense ditty called *Shoopidy Doopidy* that really ought to nauseate anyone older than six, and a tone poem by the President of the United States called *Age Don't Make You Wise*. And given that the president was a thirty-seven-year-old pre-op dysgendered with a spiral-shaved head, who openly took bribes and who talked like some stonehead Mr. Rogers, Alan was very definitely not in the mood.

"My bike is shit," the man beside him said.

"Yeah?" Alan prompted, surprised.

"2020 Suzuki V-Strom. I got it free when a buddy died. Long time ago."

"Ah. I'm sorry."

"For what? The buddy or the bike? Either way, don't be. I saw your Harley on the way in. It's not bad. That's actually why I stopped here."

"Hmm. Okay. Not many people out riding on a Tuesday?"

"Not anymore." The man paused after that, looking like he didn't know what else to say. He finally settled for, "My name is Paul."

That seemed to run out the conversation for a while, so they nursed their drinks and yes, listened to the music.

The bartender and his friend barely glanced their way, ever. To obtain each of his four drinks, Alan had had to get up from his stool and physically walk over to the two of them, clear his throat, interrupt, and ask for what he needed. Now it was nearly time to do that again, and it was getting on Alan's nerves. And then all of a sudden Green Day came on the sound system singing about "shitty old men" who'd failed at everything, lost their youth, and just turned bitter. Alan knew the song—it had been popular back in the day—but here and now it struck him all kinds of wrong, because when you got right down to it, Green Day had been a bunch of spoiled suburban children, writing music in an idyll space between global wars, with no idea what they were talking about and no sense of harmony anyway.

Alan really wasn't an impulsive or destructive person, even when he was drunk, but today he was still high on adrenaline, still low on divorce, still raging at the robotic betrayal of "his" new car, and so he took his whiskey glass and pushed it off the bar. It was made out of actual glass, and shattered on the old tile floor.

"Whoops."

"Hey!" the bartender said, looking up.

"Clumsy. Sorry. Could I get another?"

The barkeep considered him for a moment before saying, "Yeah, but I'm charging you for the glass."

"Fair enough."

Alan didn't see any retina scanners or other biometrics in the doorway, just a cash register and chip reader behind the bar. He'd already decided that if he was so damned invisible, he was going to walk out of here without paying. Or try to, anyway, because why the hell not?

"So what did you used to be?" he asked Paul while the bartender did his thing.

"Hmm? What? Oh, I was a surgeon."

"Yeah? Humans?"

"Yeah."

"Tubes replace you?"

A standard autodoc was tube-shaped, like a CAT scanner, and "going the tubes" was what people said these days when they needed cosmetic adjustments or internal part swaps or even just diagnostic scanning. There were human doctors in attendance, of course, but nobody wanted one holding a scalpel. This wasn't the Civil War.

"Me? No, I was out of it before then." He paused for a few seconds before adding, "Surgeons were like football players—high pay, short career, loooong retirement. I guess the tubes make more sense."

He didn't sound like he believed it.

"I was an electrical engineer," Alan said, when it became clear Paul wasn't going to ask. Another obsoleted job; today's tech people were more like psychiatrists or kindergarten teachers, or maybe contract lawyers. No math, just a patient willingness to explain to the Cloud exactly what you wanted it to design for you. "Executive creativity" hadn't been crushed out of the process yet, but designing circuits by hand seemed a bit silly even to Alan.

He said, "I guess we're just taking up space, you and me."

Paul grunted at that, back to not wanting to talk.

Something caught Alan's eye at the other end of the room—the video monitor. It showed a blocky, bandwidth-starved 3PEG of a motorcyclist throwing his helmet at a car.

"Holy shit. That's me!"

Paul looked up, saw the images.

"What?"

"That was me, just now, on I-70."

Paul looked confused. "What were you doing?"

"I don't know. What I felt like."

The scene looped a few times, zoomed and sharpened and reoriented by various imperfect algorithms, and Paul studied it.

"Hmm."

On the feed, Alan's helmet toss didn't look spontaneous at all. It seemed weirdly calm and premeditated, like he'd set out this afternoon with exactly that in mind. Like he'd been paid to do it, or dared. Maybe he had.

"Hmm." Paul said, watching the screen. "Weird. Could have hurt someone. But okay."

"That's me," Alan said, trying in vain to catch the bartender's attention again. Then: "I wonder what they're saying about me on that feed."

"Senile man loses his shit," Paul suggested, and they both shared a dry chuckle at that.

And then the afternoon seemed to run empty on them again, nothing more to talk about and nothing more to do. Not here. So after a few minutes of unspoken restlessness they did indeed walk right out of the bar, as casual as you please. Really, what would the consequences be if they got caught?

The bar was in a little strip mall that Alan had passed a thousand times—maybe more than a thousand, maybe ten thousand—and never pulled into. Two of its shops were vacant, but a third one promised "Clothing Alteration Low Cost"—a rare thing in this day and age—and still another said "Tattoo 4 You."

"It's the Land the Time Forgot," Alan said appreciatively, then wondered if Paul was of the proper age to catch the reference. Then wondered if it mattered and decided it didn't.

"It's hot out here," Paul said. "And you're too drunk to ride."

Alan snorted at that. "I could ride. Break my neck it's my own damn business. But all right, Doctor, shall we alter our clothes or our skin?"

Some questions sort of answer themselves.

Tattoo 4 You was as decrepit inside as Dive Bar and appeared to have nothing but freestyle manual equipment. The walls were covered in freestyle drawings that made Alan a bit nostalgic for the start of the twenty-first century, when it seemed like everyone was strutting handmade ink. Who knew the dot matrix implant would replace all that, and then just as quickly die off? Suddenly it seemed unthinkable that Alan had never inked his own skin. To have lived through that era, untouched by it, was rather odd in retrospect.

"I need some artwork," he said to the proprietor, an ageless, wild-haired woman covered in faded freestyle of her own. Alan's words slurred more than he wanted them to. He wanted to be the sort of man who could hold his liquor.

"You're drunk," the woman said. "You can't sign a consent form."

"I most certainly can," Alan told her. "This here's my doctor, Paul, uh . . ."

"Witcher."

"Right. Witcher."

The tattoo artist looked them over, bored and tired. "I actually can't. Sorry."

"You actually *can*," Alan insisted. "How old are you? How long have you been sitting there, filling out forms? I'm done with that. I want a skull *here*, and another skull *here*"—he pointed to the backs of his hands—"and I'm not accepting any negativity about it. Not today."

"And I want scalpels," Paul said, then added, "We have Bitcash."

The artist raised an eyebrow at that, suddenly a little less bored.

"I don't take that," she said.

"Yeah you do," Paul said, fishing a wallet out of a back pocket. That by itself marked him as a creature of days gone by; few people under the age of thirty carried ID or credit cards anymore. Why bother, when a simple retinal scan could identify you beyond doubt or forgery, linking transactions directly to your bank accounts?

Bitcash was something different, though. Something ancient and terrible—an untraceable, untaxable whisper across the digisphere, illegal in virtually every country, and accepted in more places than anyone cared to admit. Sketchy places, where things got done that made very little economic sense, or too much sense, and it was best not to ask questions. Places like this one, *hyah?*

Paul the Surgeon pulled out his chip—a flat, circular wafer of gray ceramic, and slid it across the counter to her.

"I can't", she repeated, sounding a little nervous now.

"No? Ma'am, I still hold a medical license. I could report you to the health inspector."

That made her angry. "For what? You just walked in here."

"For whatever I goddamn say, that's what." Then he looked embarrassed. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean that. Look, we're old men. What say you whip up some ink for my boy, here, and then some ink for me, and we'll buy you a nice dinner? Just between friends, not a transaction at all."

Her glare was equal parts outrage, amusement, and sheer confusion. The bubble of her tedium had burst; she was really seeing the two of them now, really considering them. "Seriously? You've got nothing better to do on a Tuesday than give me a hard time?"

"Nope. Not even a little."

She thought some more. "What kind of dinner would this be, hypothetically?"

"Depends what you like," Paul said. "We're on the Deal, so it can't be anything too expensive, and we're disreputable people, so it can't be too, you know, reputable. Other than that, imagination is the only limit. What's your name?"

"Does it matter?"

"I think so," Paul mused. "Yeah, I think it does. It matters what kind of food you like, and whether the wind in your hair sets it free, or just messes it up."

Well, Alan thought, look who's a poet as well as a surgeon. He could see the artist thawing at these words and wondered how long it had been since anyone said anything that nice to her.

"I'm Carol," she offered, reaching handshakes out to both of them.

* * *

Nine

Four motorcycles grunted their way up the canyon. Not much traffic here on a Thursday morning, and while the stone ramparts would occasionally widen out to reveal meadows and houses and little farms, the road mostly twisted so much that Alan barely had time to look up. Left, then right, an inside curve and then an outside one. On the barrier lane to the right, they passed the occasional brightly clothed bicyclist, and in the opposing traffic lane, there were very occasional automobiles heading downhill.

But mostly it was open road, and that was demanding enough, thank you. The inside curves were the ones where he could see what was coming for a little ways; the *outside* curves were where the cliff face stood between his eyeballs and whatever lay ahead. It could be anything; fallen rocks, slow traffic, deer, mountain goats, or what have you. One false move would smash his old-man body against the cliffs or the road or the bicycle barrier, or fling it off into the trees and the river, and that would be that, except there were three other bikes behind him. He was leading the charge.

With the morning light on his back and the wind whipping in around the edges of his sunglasses, Alan began to remember why he'd owned a motorcycle in the first place; this hypnotic, dangerous, all-consuming task that focused the entire organism. Fight or flight or steer or brake, shifting up and shifting down, never a moment to think about anything else, or to notice that he, himself, existed.

His troubles blew off him like they were written on Post-It Notes, and he felt . . . purified? Sanctified? Still very angry—the anger shone through even on the sharpest outside turns, when he wasn't specifically self-aware—but it was a cleaner sort of anger than before. And a *sharred* anger, too.

As it turned out, Carol knew a couple of other old men who owned motorcycles. Or knew of them, anyway. In retrospect this wasn't surprising, given what she did for a living, so she'd sent some messages and lined up the introductions, and thirty-six hours later they'd all met up at a fueling depot at the mouth of Bear Creek Canyon. Conversation was brief and terse (enough so that Alan seriously wondered whether men his age were capable of any other sort of communication), and now here they were tearing up the canyon together.

Their little biker pack passed through a series of mountain towns—Idledale, Kittredge, Evergreen—that had changed very little over the course of Alan's life. Really just wide spots in the canyon, they afforded no room for expansion, and no real basis for an economy beyond a handful of restaurants, bed-and-breakfasts, and underequipped fueling depots. After Evergreen, though, the canyon widened out into a real mountain valley, and the highway snaked, by turns, through its bottom and along the crests of the ridges that lined it. Here there were houses, little shopping malls, and a lot of mirrored-glass office buildings breaking up what might otherwise have been an idyllic view.

So the Evergreen Parkway took them across I-70 to the Central City Parkway, and up an even steeper climb, which Alan, and the bikes behind him, dug into with gusto. This was an old-fashioned group ride, and these new men—identified only as Dickel and Kamarov—had been content to let Alan lead it with minimal discussion as to the routes they might follow. So they climbed up and up the Central City Expressway, and the smell of pine trees was overwhelming, and hairpin turns were the norm, and the posted speed limit varied from seventy and even seventy-five kph, all the way down to twenty as the road crawled along the shoulders of one mountain after another. The view was occasionally spectacular, but mostly Alan was focused on the road itself, on cutting a perfect line through every curve so he wouldn't fly off the pavement. So he wouldn't come anywhere close to touching the painted lines.

He actually had a few minorly hair-raising moments, where he entered a curve a little too slow or too fast, and the bike threatened to tip over on its low side or flip over on its high one, and Alan began to realize that this was something altogether different than zipping through interstate traffic, and that as the minutes stretched into hours, his eighty-four years made it a challenging ride indeed. Or maybe it had always been difficult and he'd just forgotten about it. Either way, he began to look for somewhere he could pull off and rest his brain for a while. A few rustic restaurants passed by, but their driveways were steep and gravelly, and he frankly didn't trust himself to navigate them until finally the road opened out again into the town of Nederland. He pulled into the first plausible-looking restaurant, a little place called Peak Bistro Technica, found a parking space, and killed the engine.

The sudden lack of wind and vibration was disorienting, but in a moment of bravado he hopped off his bike, stood there while the other men pulled up and killed their own engines. Silence enveloped him.

"Who's hungry?" he asked.

It was actually a pretty reasonable question; from the angle of the sun it had to be close to noon by now.

"I could eat," said Kamarov, taking off his riding glasses. He was a man younger than either Alan or Paul—possibly as young as sixty-five, and certainly no older than seventy-five—with a hard look about him. Or the remnants of a hard look, anyway. His shaved head and beard looked like they'd been neglected for a few days. His hair was steely gray, but his eyes were a

cold, copper-brown squint that seemed to take in everything and to be impressed by none of it. He wore a leather jacket—quite necessary in this cool mountain air—so it was hard to gauge just how much muscle he'd managed to hang onto, but he certainly carried himself like a physically strong person. And in these days of magical medicines, it wasn't like hanging onto muscle mass was all that difficult an achievement. As Kamarov took off his gloves, Alan could see the words PURE HATE tattooed across his knuckles. Well, well. The ink was faded, so it appeared that sentiment had been around for quite a while, and Alan felt that some part of him should probably be repulsed. Unstable. Antisocial. But instead he felt nothing, not even really any surprise. It seemed appropriate to the occasion, was all.

"Yes, food," said Doctor Paul, and Dickel nodded beside him. Dickel was more of an enigma; Alan couldn't tell how old he was, or whether he and Kamarov knew each other, or really much of anything. Nobody got their face muscles immobilized with botox anymore, but it seemed as though something analogous had happened to Dickel. His face was way too smooth, way too fixed, and even his white hair had a sort of frozen look to it—coiffed neatly despite the wind of the ride. He shrugged his shoulders and spread his arms as if to say, *who am I to disagree?*, and the gesture reminded Alan of some Japanese puppets he'd seen back in the '90s. Expressive and expressionless all at once, carved blocks of wood somehow brought to life by the puppeteer standing behind them in a weird ninja outfit. There was no animating ninja standing behind Dickel, but there *was* something eerie about him; his appearance said something unsettling about the world that Alan had not quite pieced together. *Old men are reptiles!*

The four of them walked into the restaurant together like a bad smell.

"Good morning," said a waist-high robot shaped like a black-and-white bowling pin with triangular tank-tread feet and outsized headlight eyes. A sign beside it said PLEASE WAIT FOR SEATING, but Kamarov brushed right past it, knocking into both the robot and the sign in a way that made several human customers look up.

"Excuse me, sir, how many in your party?" The robot tried.

"Fuck off," Kamarov said to it, in a tightly coiled voice that suggested violence if not heeded. "Kick your fucking guts out."

"Very excellent, sir," the robot said, retreating as politely as a bowling pin could do. "Please feel free to seat yourselves."

So they found a booth by the window, facing west toward houses and tree-covered mountain-tops.

"Such a lifelike voice," Paul marveled. "I wonder how much awareness they really have?"

These little robots were new, or rather, they were newly cheap enough to be popping up in restaurants all over the place.

"Who give a shit?" Kamarov asked, picking up the napkin holder and turning it over in his hands, as if looking for some hidden mechanism there.

Paul shrugged. "They act sensibly, to preserve themselves. I'm impressed."

"So do people."

"Hmm."

"Is it more satisfying to intimidate a real person?" Dickel asked.

Kamarov considered that for a long moment before answering, "You're a little old to be asking that question."

Alan was still trying to figure out how to interpret that when an older model waiterbot came around. This one was all white plastic and necessarily humanoid in shape, although it was only four feet tall, and had a second pair of arms tucked discreetly against its torso, and a second pair of spindly "emergency legs" tucked against its pelvis.

"Good morning, gentlemen," it said, passing out four flimsy paper menus. "Can I offer you anything to drink?"

"You're not able to 'offer' me anything," Kamarov told it, "and if you got a human being on premises I suggest you send her out here immediately, before I start ripping pieces off you."

The white light on the waiterbot's head turned red, but otherwise it didn't seem to know how to respond.

“Please go away,” Alan said to it quickly, before things had a chance to get ugly. And within seconds a door was opening and a man was coming out toward them, looking upset. The restaurant’s owner?

“Can I help you gentlemen?” He was looking the four of them up and down, trying to figure out just what was going on here. Alan felt a stab of satisfaction at his expression; not so invisible now, were they?

“Against my religion to talk to machines,” Kamarov said. “What’s to drink around here?”

And from the tone of his voice, Alan deduced that yes, it was more satisfying to intimidate a human being.

“I’ll have a Coke,” Paul said, filling the silence in an attempt to defuse things.

“Coffee,” said Dickel.

“Just water for me,” Alan said.

Kamarov allowed a significant pause before saying, “Beer if you have it. I don’t care which brand. Otherwise just water. And a cheeseburger with fries, if you know what the fuck that is. Look it up if you don’t, because my blood sugar is dropping and I get a little short-tempered.”

The restaurant owner apparently had no idea what to say to any of that, so the rest of them took advantage of the confusion to place their own orders, before he retreated back into his office again.

Alan, feeling no sense of caution whatsoever, said to Kamarov, “You’ve got that finely honed, don’t you? Threatening people without actually threatening them. Threatening machines without actually damaging them. Nothing actionable.”

Kamarov looked at him for a moment before saying, “It’s all in the intonation.”

Alan didn’t bother asking what Kamarov used to do for a living, because he figured it didn’t matter much, but he did say, “It’s a useful talent. Hard sometimes for senior citizens to get the attention we deserve.”

“Okay,” Kamarov said, noncommittally. Alan considered this a victory of sorts, because he could just as easily have been met with that same withering tone.

And once again the conversation dried up, as all of Alan’s conversations seemed destined to. So they waited in silence—not really uncomfortable silence, but just a sort of weary patience—until the waiterbot returned with their orders.

“Mmm,” Kamarov said, grabbing an ugly-looking cheeseburger off the tray and biting into it.

And Alan had to agree, biting into a club sandwich of his own and thinking that yeah, okay, vat-cloned meat had never tasted so good.

* * *

Eight

They ended up back at Alan’s house, where the four of them quickly burned through his meager supply of beer and vodka, and then through Paul’s supply of THC-nicotine vapor capsules. Alan had never cared much for thic-nic himself, but alcohol was fine, of course, and it seemed intolerable right now that he couldn’t get any drunker than he already was.

“You take the same hormones your doctor prescribes,” Dickel was saying around a reeking cloud of vapor, “but it’s triple the geriatric dose. I’m here to tell you, it puts the hair back on your balls.”

“Bad for your liver,” Paul said, though not sounding terribly committed to it.

“You know what’s bad for your liver?” Dickel shot back. “Sitting around waiting to die. Anyway, this guy Feng says to me, ‘How many times you gonna pay for this stuff with paper bills? You know how hard it is to deposit this stuff in an actual bank?’ I guess they run a gas chromatograph over it every time. Too many dubious substances attached and they put an asterisk next to your name.”

“That’s not all they do,” Kamarov growled. His cool anger from earlier in the day had fanned up into something more proactive; it seemed he might jump up and start punching things at any moment. “Fingerprints, DNA, isotopes, you name. If any bill you touch ever lands in a bank, the pattern recognizers are like signed confession of whatever you done. Fuck, man. Fuck! This used to be America.”

“So he only takes Bitcash now?” Paul asked.

“Not only that, but you have to double-encrypt it for him. Which is, you know, not reversible. Feds catch you with a chip, it’s fine, they can’t prove anything for like three hundred days of straight cracking, and they ain’t got the time. Not for chumps like you and me. Put your medical records on the top layer, tell them that’s what the chip is for, and they can’t even confiscate it without a federal warrant. But yeah, it’s a goddamn pain in the balls is what it is. That money is *just* for Feng; you can’t buy fireworks or cigars or anything.”

“They can still see your account draining into blank space,” Kamarov said.

“Yeah, well, that’s not illegal. They’d have to arrest half the country.”

That seemed like a stretch to Alan. He’d listened to this conversation with interest and envy, because he’d never engaged in any sort of shady transaction in his life. Hell, he’d never even tried marijuana until after they’d made it legal.

“Can you show me how to put funds on a chip?” he asked Dickel. “Hidden under some photographs or whatever?”

“Sure,” Dickel said. “Take about ten minutes if you’re sober enough to work a keyboard.”

“Unfortunately, I am. You should call this Feng character right now, tell him to bring six bottles of bourbon and six boxes of thic-nic.”

Dickel snorted at that. “Feng won’t deal in that stuff, Alan. VAT taxes on the markup! It’s way easier to move merch that was never legal to begin with.”

Paul, ugly as a Halloween zombie in the colored lights of Alan’s living room, was stroking his chin thoughtfully. “I bet Carol would bring us that stuff. I should call her.”

“What *can* Feng bring us?” Alan asked. “Steroids, okay, I could use some hair on my groin area. What about endorphins? Or amphetamines? Some kind of feel-good shit?”

Dickel snorted again. “Sure, but why stop there? Four blots of QSD would get these colors dancin’.”

An hour later, they had a full-on party on their hands, with Feng and Carol, and Feng’s friend Shrieky, and Carol’s friends Wanda and Maria, and a bunch of elderly black men and women speaking rapid-fire Spanish over plastic cups filled with ice and booze and green flashing parkle-dots.

Or maybe they weren’t parkledots; maybe Alan’s brain was just buzzing with staccato colors, and maybe there was no such fucking thing as parkledots anyway. Alan had just spent his entire Social Security check on narcotics, and he had never felt better in his motherbluthering life, and he was just going to have to eat rice and beans for the rest of the month, and that was just fine, just fine with him.

“Is time passing?” Kamarov asked him, or asked everyone. “Is everything happen at once? We ride, we sit, we get up again. Is time passing at all?”

Alan considered him through the pulsing haze of the drug. “Do you feel that time is passing?”

“I feel strange,” Kamarov admitted. “If that question has answer, I feel that I should know it. What year is this?”

Alan thought about it and realized he didn’t know and didn’t care. He wasn’t up to the task of caring.

“You! You have broken your own heart,” Kamarov said to him, his eyes bright, his tone suddenly accusing. “You think someone else break it, but this is not possible. This is why you ride? It happens to people, yes. You still think you can outrun your own heart. Oh, Alan. Oh, my friend. What if we live forever? What will we *do* if we live forever?”

He sounded panicky now, and Alan felt that he should talk him down somehow.

“It’ll be okay,” he said. And he wanted to say more, but the words wouldn’t come. Thoughts were avalanching through him, too big for words.

He thought of Kamarov, of what he must have been like as a younger man. His face seemed to flicker, becoming younger and older, and both. Alan stole a glance at the clock on his bookcase, trying to puzzle out the time. Trying to determine if it was indeed passing, and if so, in which direction.

In Italian neighborhoods, in the twentieth century when the Cosa Nostra were still a thing,

there used to be tough guys who swaggered around, trying to act the part. Guys with nothing, guys too decent to make viable gangsters, who needed something to hold onto. It felt so recent. Was it that way in Russian neighborhoods in the twenty-first? For all his glower and glare, Karmarov didn't strike Alan as a genuinely lethal person. Violent, perhaps. Or perhaps not even that. Perhaps he was nothing but an empty jacket, a pair of studded gloves. A set of boots walking through time, leaving temporary ripples and then gone.

"What about *your* heart?" Alan finally asked.

"Mine? It's meat." He thumped his chest. "Nobody break this thing. Nobody ever, I don't know why. I get lonely, wishing for someone who is capable of breaking me, but I think it's maybe too late."

Paul stood up, then, and announced, "I held a woman's heart in my hand one time, a beating heart. Inside of her. Beating heart. It was crazy. This thing had been transplanted from a donor, it was a hundred years old. The heart was older than she was. Beating for a hundred years. How crazy was that? She was dying on the table and still this thing would not stop beating. How many things had it seen? That's the human heart, boys. That's what a heart can do."

And that seemed a sad thought to Alan. Every part of it sad, though Paul didn't mean it that way.

But Carol—still sober as far as Alan could tell—seemed to find it romantic. "You used to be so cool," she said.

And somehow that was funny, and the room exploded in laughter and froze that way, because time didn't need to pass. Nothing needed to do anything anymore.

* * *

The party ended up lasting three whole days, with Paul and Carol cooking meals until Alan's kitchen and pantry were stripped of food, at which point two of the Spanish guys, Reyes and Hurtado, started making fast food runs in a battered old pickup truck, clearing people's cash reserves out of purses and wallets and returning with bags full of burritos and hamburgers, or stacks of pizza, until the cash ran out and then (they said) their own Social Security and pension checks were dangerously depleted.

(Actually there was no such thing as Social Security anymore. It was Universal Basic Income, or Youbee, or simply The Deal. But Alan's generation seemed to have a hard time remembering that.)

As things started to wind down, Alan realized there were actually *five* motorcycles parked in his driveway, the fifth one being another old Harley—a lightweight Sportster—belonging to Feng's friend Shrieky.

"I had a good time," Shrieky was mumbling as he loaded his shit into a set of cracked saddlebags. "We should do it again."

"We should *ride*," Alan said back to him, then immediately wondered if that was a good idea. Shrieky was a wreck—covered in wrinkles and liver spots, and missing most of the teeth on his right side—the uppers and the lowers. He was probably Asian or half-Asian or something, and looked like he might even have been a hellraiser at some point in the distant past, but today he was just gray and saggy all over, and thin as a rail, and it was amazing he was still alive at all, much less able to pilot a mo-mo. And yet, Shrieky hopped right on the saddle with surprising dexterity, pulled the clutch and popped the bike into neutral, then rolled it back to line up his departure.

"Sure, man," Shrieky slurred. "Just let Feng know. I had a good time, yeah."

Then he flipped the ignition, gunned the throttle a couple of times, kicked the bike into gear, and rode off.

Despite the stoop in his shoulders and the half-dead pallor of his face (Shrieky had to be in his nineties if he was a day), he moved like a much younger man, maybe sixty or sixty-five, which prompted Alan to wonder just what he himself looked like to the rest of the world.

He figured he'd aged pretty well, all things considered. He'd been one of the youngest-looking people at his high school's thirtieth reunion, right before he'd started gerontology treatments. He'd been sort of shocked at how *old* some of his classmates looked—how unfair it was that

some of the women were still smoking hot, still more or less ageless at fifty, while others were already held together with support garments and moisturizer. The apparent ages of the men were, if anything, even more diverse, because of course at that time it was not normal for men to use cosmetics or weight loss drugs or, in most cases, even hair dye.

And in the thirty-six years since then, things had only gotten worse. Not every gerontology treatment worked for every person, and even the ones that did work, worked better for some people than others. Some men Alan's age looked about how men in their mid-eighties always had. Some, like Shrieky, looked worse. Some looked fake, the storied grooves of their faces filled in with synthetic collagen or slathered over with a porous silicone-polysaccharide mask that they peeled off and threw away every night. The hairs on their heads all one color, like a doll's hair, and their cheeks warmed up with too-obvious permablush. Stuff like that.

But some (most of the movie stars, for example) looked really quite good—better than the sixty-year-olds of the twentieth century. Little telltale signs gave them away—their fingernails cracked and curled, the whites of their eyes gone all pink and lemon chiffon—but mostly they looked all right.

Alan figured he was somewhere in between. He'd long ago let his hair go gray and shoulder-length and stopped battling the wrinkles and the belly bulge, but he kept his beard well trimmed, and he liked to think there was still some rugged handsomeness left in his features. For what? For whom? He didn't know, but in this age of vanity, he was not able to surrender the concept entirely.

And anyway, even the worst-aged men seemed different somehow. Different than what he thought of, when he thought of old men. They seemed fitter, more awake, less shuffly and confused. There were so many centenarians running marathons these days that nobody even remarked on it anymore.

A hand clapped onto Alan's shoulder, and he turned to see Hurtado there: a black-skinned Cubano who seemed to be ageing better than most.

He spoke with an accent: "Alan, I gotta go, brother. Thanks for the hospitality. My grandkids, they don't let me party no more. One beer and I'm done. 'No, *Abuelo*, it'll make you dizzy.' Where do they get that from?"

Reyes came up beside him, saying "I'w's a good party, man. Very enjoyable. I'd invite you over to mine, but I don't think my son would approve."

"Naw, we'll do it here," Alan said. God knew he had enough space, up here on his hilltop. The house had seven bedrooms, which had seemed like too many even when he and Rebecca had lived here with two kids and two home offices. It also sported, according to the county tax assessor, 0.62 hectares of land as seen from space, 0.72 of comformal surface area, and enough pavement to park eight full-sized vehicles. And three sides of it bordered on golf course, undeveloped parkland, and a federal reforestation site, so even here in the middle of the city there weren't any neighbors close enough to complain about noise. And yes, the view from up here was as spectacular now as it had been when he bought the place, so many, many years ago. God, how he still loved the view! But it *was* a lot of space for one person.

And it had been such a long time since he'd had anyone over. He and Rebecca had just sort of aged out of all their friendships; people had died or moved away or gone on to different phases in their lives, and it was so hard to meet new people once Rebecca's mind had started to go. He couldn't take her out among polite company, and he couldn't leave her home alone, and finally he could hardly leave her side at all for fear of what she might do. She had once torn down every venetian blind and curtain in the house, saying they "bothered her," and then complained incessantly about the glare, for weeks, until Alan had finally hung the last of them back up. Another time, a darker time right before the brain meds had finally started to kick in, she had smeared excrement on Alan's side of the bed, offering no explanation whatsoever.

He'd withstood these slings and arrows, one small outrage after another, because he loved the young woman she once had been, and because he loved her still; because Alan's love was a stubborn thing that did not desert him easily, even when he wished it could. And because he'd also made a promise: *in sickness and in health, for as long as you both shall live.*

And what if that turned out to be longer than expected? Was there anyone left in the world who took promises that seriously? He didn't know. He'd tried to question Rebecca about it, once she'd woken back up and started talking about leaving him. Leaving *him*, whom she had once called the love of ten lifetimes. And when questioning her didn't work, he'd tried lecturing, and finally stopped just short of pleading. He knew he couldn't plead that feeling back into place, couldn't lecture her back to his side. And so it seemed he'd outlived his marriage. And so he lived alone.

"We'll do it here," he said again to Reyes and Hurtado. "Soon. Next weekend, maybe. I'm going nuts up here by myself."

Hurtado smiled at that. "Why you live all alone here anyway, crazy fucker? You think that's how people supposed to live? You got kids, I seen the pictures. You got grandkids. Where are they? Why you think you're here on this planet, eh? They don't need their grandpapa for nothing?"

Alan shrugged because he wasn't at all sure they did. For as long as his grandchildren had been alive, he'd been right here, waiting. Unemployed in every possible sense of the word.

"Drive safe," he told Reyes and Hurtado, meaning it, because that old pickup truck looked worse than Shrieky's face.

And as they drove away he found himself standing in the harsh sunlight, deep in thought. Reviewing his life, reviewing the lives of his children and grandchildren, wondering where it had gone wrong and how it had all come to this. What if Rebecca was right, hyah? If he had the jerk gene, and that wasn't going to change, then maybe this was the best he could hope for. That was an insult she dragged out when all others failed—a way of shutting down the conversation, of declaring him beyond hope or reason. It was *mean*, but what if she was right? Maybe these old land and this empty hill had been his fate all along, the only thing he'd ever really deserved.

And that thought made him very angry, but also sad for all the things he couldn't undo. This wrong, that wrong, all of it wrong? Now you tell me?

Now you tell me?

* * *

Seven

There never was another party like that one. Nobody had the money, for one thing, but also there really wasn't much of a need. They had crossed that item off their To Do list. Instead, they started hanging out during the days, sipping beer and trying to cobble together a working motorcycle from bits and pieces of dead ones. It started with discoveries in the basements and garages of their children's friends and progressed to some sort of online ad Feng posted somewhere on their behalf. Soon, Hurtado was making trips around town every day, picking up junked bikes, or pieces of them.

Alan had never been much of a mechanic—he left that part to Dickel and Kamarov, who understood the basics, and to Paul, who brought more enthusiasm than skill to the task. But Alan was fine with electrical systems, and thus he was sitting on the driveway with an old Suzuki wiring harness laid out in front of him when his car—his *old* car, his wife's car—pulled up and parked right in front of him, partially blocking his light.

His wife got out of it. Ex-wife.

"So this is how you're spending your time now?" she wanted to know.

He looked up. The sun was behind her head, casting a halo through doll-brown hair. Her expression was hard to make out, but there was certainly no happiness in it.

"Hello, Rebecca. What can I do for you?"

She paused, looking around before saying, "I was worried. Robbie said you'd made a strange phone call, about junked motorcycles and other things. I wanted to see if you were all right."

And what could he say to that? Yes, sure, perfectly fine. Why wouldn't I be? Just because you moved away and left me with an empty house?

He said: "I'm fine. Thank you."

But there must have been something in his tone, because she immediately answered with, "What's that supposed to mean?"

“What? Nothing.”

“Uh huh.”

And there they were, right back in the loop they'd inhabited for years. Until she got sick. Until she started losing her mind. She didn't stop fighting with him then, but it was milder somehow. She stopped laying traps, and holding onto grudges for days at a time. Truthfully he'd liked her better in the early stages of the illness. Their sex life had returned, after a fashion, and she'd seemed to enjoy watching videos with him, always asking what was going on in the show but never really seeming to care. Her ability to sustain a focused anger seemed to be one of the first things to go. But other things had followed, her essence leaking away piece by piece, until there was nothing left to love. Nothing but a sense of obligation.

“What's that you're doing there?” she asked, not quite so coldly.

He looked at the harness in his hands, and the two others spread out at his sides. “Tracing an electrical short. Something is forming a loop to the chassis ground, and it's probably one of these wires. If I can fix it, we just might get the bike running again.”

“Huh. Why would you do that?”

He shrugged. “We're a motorcycle club.”

Her frown deepened, as though a suspicion had been confirmed. “Alan, you're eighty-four years old.”

“Yes. And?”

“Are you trying to get yourself killed?”

Here he paused for a moment, giving the question some thought before answering, “Not that it's any of your business, Brex, but no. If anything, I'm trying to get myself alive. How are *you* doing?”

She didn't answer that, at least not right away, so he followed up with, “That's what I thought. Thanks for stopping by.”

Sighing, she turned and took a step toward her car—their car—and now he could see her face. How long had it been since he'd seen her in full daylight? She was younger than he was, still in her seventies and showing it well. With her sunglasses on, she looked so much like the girl he'd fallen in love with, the one who said she'd never leave him, that she couldn't imagine a scenario where she'd ever want to. Well, time had figured that one out for her. How exactly had it done that? And why? Had the years or the senility treatments altered her in some fundamental way?

Those were the thoughts that kept Alan up at night, that made him question the human condition. Not that she hadn't tried to explain herself, but her answers seemed to leave out something crucial, something so obscure or so obvious that she couldn't wrap words around it.

As he studied her, he noticed that the glasses had little embedded cameras, and she was wearing some sort of earpiece. Both had their legally mandated RECORD lights glowing green, the color washed out in the sunlight but still clearly visible. She was either archiving this encounter for evidentiary purposes, or else live-streaming it to a friend somewhere. Or a relative. One of the kids? The idea bothered him, and he looked away angrily.

Sensing this, she turned back toward him and said, more gently, “Alan, things don't always work out.”

“Clearly, yes.”

“It sounds like such a cliché, but I sincerely never wanted to hurt you.”

“Really? I remember it differently.”

And then she was angry again: “You think you were such a saint, Alan? Is that what you think? Saints don't throw bottles.”

He shrugged again. “That happened *once*. I took care of you when you were sick, Brex, and *that* happened for almost a decade. Before that I kept a roof over your head while you went through all your careers, all your hobbies. While you played at parenting and grandparenting. I held my end up, so yeah, as long as you're here, I'm curious: What exactly did I promise you that you never got?”

“Oh, Alan. So many things. I'm not going to run through the list again, okay? I'm not. I was

planning to leave you before I got sick. If I had, you wouldn't have been saddled with taking care of me like that. I'm sorry it happened that way, and I'm very grateful you didn't just deposit me in a residence. I'd still be there! You think I don't know that? But it doesn't mean two people can be together."

He studied the wiring harness in his hands, wondering whether he could make it work and whether it was indeed worth the effort. It came from a wrecked vehicle after all, and the best it could hope for was to be transplanted into another one. He thought about standing up, looking down on Rebecca instead of letting her look down on him. But that didn't seem to matter either. Having failed somehow in his life's most important task, he was left with nothing but wreckage and transplants.

"You know, Rebecca, I thought that's exactly what it meant. Two people taking care of each other, keeping promises. Who does that, right? Too busy shaving symbols in their heads. Go on and break your vows, sweetheart, but don't tell me it's the moral thing to do."

"Oh, please," she said, her lips curling up into the ghost of a sneer he had seen so many times before. "I didn't have to come here. I didn't have to worry about you. Hell, I didn't even have to let you keep this place."

And that much was true; she'd taken the cash and the car and the jewelry and the clothes, and maybe a third of the furnishings. She had left behind everything that might possibly remind her of the life they'd lived together. Not just the printed photographs, not just the souvenirs of every trip they'd ever taken, but also her thread and glowcloth, her sequin printer, her 3D sewing machine. Those she had left behind for him to deal with, as if he knew where in the world they ought to end up. And she had left him the house, yes, an asset worth more than all she'd taken. But he'd always figured that was because selling it would be such a hassle—not only for him, but for both of them. And because she wanted to be able to look herself in the mirror without flinching. If she'd cost him his home, on top of everything else, how could *he* be the jerk?

Paul had been lurking in the shadows of the garage with Kamarov and Dickel, but at these words from her, he stepped out into the sunlight.

"Hi there, ma'am," he said. "My name is Paul Witcher. I'm a friend of your husband's."

"Ex," she said, unnecessarily.

"I'm a doctor, ma'am. I want you to know your husband is in good company here. Things are hard for him right now; when you stopped needing a caretaker, I'm sure he lost a major piece of his self-image. And when you stopped needing a marriage, I think it's fair to say he lost the rest of it. Our whole generation sees its roles winking out."

"Spare me that, okay?" she said to him. "This is a private conversation."

"My point is, he's not doing anything unsafe."

And that was an interesting thing for Paul to say, because it was manifestly untrue. Did he believe it, or was he simply trying to reassure her? And either way, why? And for that matter, when exactly had Alan divulged all these private details to Paul? The liquor and drugs, machines and wires had apparently created what thirty years of waiting could not: a plain-old friendship.

And then Kamarov called out from inside the garage, "Lady, you come here to make yourself feel better, but I think you don't deserve this. Pat yourself and go, okay? Your husband needs something more real."

"Ex!" Rebecca said again, now directing it into the darkness of the garage. Then, to Alan, "I can see you've got me outnumbered. I don't know what I thought I could accomplish here. I'd ask where you found these guys, but I'm realizing I don't actually care. I hope they make you very happy."

"They have the jerk gene," Alan said to her. "That's good enough for me."

* * *

Six

Sometime in late June, on a date Alan would later be unable to recall, there were seven of them downtown: Alan and Paul, Dickel, Kamarov, and Shrieky, plus Hurtado, who was limping along on a Continuous Variable Transmission salvage bike, and Feng, who had managed to acquire an old Honda junker from somewhere or other. They were toodling down Lawrence Street,

hogging both southbound lanes plus the bicycle lane, and listening to their engines echo off the faces of brick and glass buildings. It was hot as the center of hell, and none of them were wearing jackets or helmets. A few had fingerless gloves (easier to work the controls than with full gauntlets), and all of them wore sturdy boots of varying age and disrepair, but basically they were out there in denim jeans, T-shirts, and sunglasses, like something out of an era that had vanished before Alan was even old enough to ride.

From the astonished looks being shot their way by pedestrians and other motorists, they might as well have been cowboys on horseback, or Neanderthals on mastodons. Probably most of these people had never in their lives seen two motorcycles in the same place, any more than they'd seen covered wagons. Hell, even *hang gliders* were more common these days—still leaping off the cliffs of Golden to soar out over I-70 where it breached its way into the Rocky Mountains.

Riding fast wasn't really an option here amid the regimented robot traffic. Still, one nice thing about autonomous vehicles was that they didn't dawdle at goddamn intersections. When the light turned green, they all started moving at once, like they were connected by invisible tow chains fore-aft and left-right. It reminded Alan of a chessboard somehow. The traffic lights were nearly as intelligent, and if enough cars came through at once you were unlikely to be stopped with an unnecessary red light, so things moved along reasonably well.

Still, the robots were capable of reacting to obstacles in their path, and even though a motorcycle could accelerate faster than an automobile, it couldn't squeeze around these ranks upon ranks of them. So the bikes were caught behind these grids of too-predictable traffic, and the robots behind them were keeping a safe distance from their unpredictable human piloting. And so, more than anything, it felt like Alan and the others were riding at the tail end of a parade.

It was something new. They'd done a few mountain rides and a few times tearing through the suburbs, until Alan began to fear they would run over somebody's dog or, worse, somebody's kid. So here they were, trying out the downtown scene. It wasn't so bad.

Alan wanted to call out to his friends, to tell them he wanted to stop. But even without helmets, even at the slow pace of forty kph, the bikes and the wind were still too loud to hear anything. It was just as well; another good thing about robot cars was that they didn't need to park in crowded areas like the central business district. Bots didn't really need to park anywhere; they could just keep circling on solar-assist, or head back home, or to their fleet headquarters, or to pick up their next fare. In fact, the number of people owning their own cars was shrinking year by year, and the number riding mass transit or hailing robot cabs was skyrocketing. Not so good for the parking lot business, which once had thrived here, charging only slightly less per hour than a slave-wage employee could earn. But parking prices hadn't gone up in over a decade, and the lots themselves were starting to fall into disrepair as it became easier and easier to find free parking on the street.

Which is what Alan did; he dropped back behind the other bikes (further alarming the robots behind them), stopped, and walked his back tire up to the curb. It didn't take long for the others to figure out what he was doing, and in another sixty seconds they were all parked up and down the block, angling their rear tires up against the curb and killing their engines. It was hardly the show of precision Alan had rehearsed in his imagination, but it would do.

The last to park was Feng, who seemed rather wobbly on his mo-mo, uncertain how to back it up and unable for a while to find the kickstand with his foot. The ride he'd found was a piece-of-shit dirt bike without turn signals or mirrors, a good four inches too tall for him, and he certainly didn't ride it with any sort of confidence or grace, but that was okay. Finally, he found his ignition switch and shut off his engine.

"Sorry," he said in response to Alan's look. "I've been concentrating on shifting. Haven't put much time into anything else."

"Okay," Alan said, "if it's that important for you to ride with us. Being a drug dealer isn't exciting enough?"

Feng glared at that. "Man, you watch that. Ears everywhere, you know that. It's not a joke. But yeah, you kidding? I'm not going to let you grandgeezers have all the fun. Shit, Reyes is kicking

himself, trying to figure out how to join the club. Until you boys scrape together another motorbike, that fellow's out of luck."

"Yeah," Alan allowed, eyeballing Feng's ride. He might not be a mechanic, but it seemed to him that a few things could be done to make this contraption a little more street friendly. Not just paint and a better front tire, and lowering/tightening the suspension, but also some blinker lights to make it legal. Yeah, and license plates. Alan had already gone down to the DMV and reregistered his own bike, accepting one of the "smart plates" they were putting on everything these days. Yes, it would be constantly ratting him out to the authorities in some vague way, but they hadn't yet connected the dots and acted on his arrest warrant, so whatever. If he didn't have plates, he was going to get pulled over on the street, and then they *would* arrest him. Good times.

In front of them was a tea room, one of the new places that had been popping up this past decade that served healthy stuff like chai and boba and yogurt alongside remarkably *unhealthy* stuff like vat-grown lard in which they would deep fry bits of bread or cake or even whole slices of pizza. Apparently, nobody was afraid of getting a heart attack anymore. You could also inhale the chemically loosened vapors of coffee or cocoa or vanilla beans, and you could pick fresh berries growing right out of the ceiling, if you could jump that high. Alan had only been to a place like this once before, and it was expensive, but Feng was offering to buy lunch for everyone while they were here, so okay. They'd given him enough of their money this month.

The seven of them gathered together on the sidewalk, looked at the tearoom with mingled disdain and curiosity, and shrugged at one another. Why not? They walked in.

There was no maître d' or greeter or waiterbot, and an aggressively dysgendered, dys-everythinged sign said "Identify w/ the Liberty to Seat Zeursel(s)." Unfortunately, all of the tables seemed to be taken—a problem which Kamarov solved by marching up to one that had a single patron sitting at it.

"Move," he said.

The kid looked up. He couldn't have been more than twenty-five (although who could tell, these days?), and he was dressed like a total douche, and it took him a moment to process the sight of seven men in their eighties muscling him out of his seat. He opened his mouth to say something, then seemed to think better of it, and silently gathered up the mug and plate and napkin that were in front of him.

"May I join?" he stage-whispered to the patrons at a different table, who softly murmured their assent. "Yeah, yeah, sure." They didn't know what to make of this, either. Without further ado, Alan and the others took their newly liberated seats.

"Nice place," Kamarov said sarcastically. Alan knew what he meant; it did seem like a nice place—friendly, crowded, and surprisingly vibrant for an early Saturday afternoon. There was music playing that managed to seem light and airy and yet just a little bit raucous. But the patrons here were all very young, with that scrubbed, snotty look all of them seemed to carry these days. Like they wouldn't recognize a shovel or a steering wheel or even a computer keyboard if you handed them one.

"I hate the glyphs," Paul said.

Annoyingly, there were a dozen or so holographic symbols on the walls, slowly drifting here and there, changing colors and forms with the laziness of clouds in a summer sky.

"Thank you," Dickel agreed. "I thought it was just me. I mean, what am I supposed to do with these? What do they even mean?"

"That one," said Feng, pointing, "is U.S. Politics. It's trending green at the moment, which means the three parties are at peace. One big happy."

"Aw," sneered Kamarov.

"You gesture it if you want to query the sublets. This one over here is Agriculture, and that one is the Identity Rake, which is a bit more complicated. Its sublets morph to your predicted ethnic primary, so it can only vacate the plurals that validate as meaningful to that particular ethnicity. Personally, I never thought that was a good idea, but nobody talks about melting pots anymore."

"We don't care," said Kamarov.

“Er, okay. You just . . .”

But it was true, none of them gave a crap what any of this stuff was or did. The world had gotten along without it for millions of years, hyah? And even here, nobody seemed to be interacting with the glyphs, the way they might have five or ten years ago. Alan had never understood the first thing about glyphware, and yet apparently it was already passé. Or perhaps he was missing something about all this—something subtle and important, with deep implications for his life. But it hardly mattered, because he *didn't care*.

Which did sort of beg the question: what were they doing here? Just sneering?

“WELCOME,” the table said to them in a smooth voice that didn't bother to hide its machine-generated nature. Its surface flickered briefly with miniature glyphs before opening and expanding a rectangular graphic that contained the tearoom's menu. “PLEASE ORDER AT ANY TIME BY PRESSING YOUR PALM AGAINST THE TABLETOP.”

This proved more complex than it sounded, but within another minute they were ordering boba like they'd done it all their lives. Alan got something flavored with watermelon and green apple, the only two flavors that seemed comprehensible on such a hot day. Paul got vanilla, and Shrieky got something called nut bitter. Kamarov managed to order alcohol, even though it wasn't visible among the menu options.

“That wasn't very nice of you, zhir.”

They looked up. There was a kid standing there, looking tentative. Addressing all of them, like he wasn't quite sure which “zhir” was the one not being nice.

“Eh?” Kamarov asked, slightly incredulous.

“I'm sure zhe would have made room. That's how we do things here.”

Kamarov didn't like that answer one bit. “Fuck are you talking about, boy? Your opinion wasn't asked.”

“Zhir, there's no profanity here. You may be unfamiliar with the conduct code, but—”

The kid's attitude was all wrong. He seemed to think he had some sort of upper hand. Worse, he didn't seem to feel any sense of danger emanating from Kamarov or the geezers around him. At least they weren't invisible—*that* was good—but even Paul could maybe kick this man-child's ass, or at least give him a good run. And Kamarov . . .

“Run along, youth,” Alan said, thinking at first that he was trying to defuse the situation. But his voice came out all wrong for that, all derisive and superior. “You don't want any trouble with us.”

And then the kid made his last mistake, saying, “Excuse me?” in a tone not quite deferential enough. So Kamarov stood up and hit him with a chair, hard across the arm and body. To his credit, the kid didn't fall, but he did reel back against a neighboring table, his eyes wide with surprise. Struck by an old man. *Hurt* by one. What the hell?

Somewhere, a girl let out a stifled scream. Others gasped. Still others stood up like they wanted to involve themselves in the situation somehow. Like they knew what to do in this scenario, when in fact they had no idea what was happening, or just how little of a fuck Alan and the men around him gave about their silly little teahouse, or any of their silly shit. Had these children, or their world, spared a single thought for surplused men? The very idea made Alan angry enough to pick up his own chair and just start swinging.

Now, Alan hadn't been in a fight in sixty years, and never of the hit-with-a-chair variety, so perhaps he didn't connect as well as he might've, or at all. He just swung the thing around. Nevertheless, people shrank back in fear. *Now* they got it.

“Let's go,” Paul said behind him.

“Are your emotions wounded?” Kamarov asked the crowd. “Perhaps you need counseling.”

“Let's go,” Feng echoed, louder than Paul. “Before someone gets hurt.”

Alan felt someone grab him by the back of the shirt. Not someone from the teahouse—one of his own. Okay. He let himself be pulled away, saying only, “You think I'm too old? Do you *think I'm too old?*” Then he dropped the chair, loudly.

Kamarov was not so compliant, elbowing Shrieky in the ribs rather than allowing himself to be towed. Lecturing coarsely: “People used to be harder than this, much harder. Who will fight

with me, ha? Pick up a chair. Even very old men are more than you. One old man is more than all of you.”

But no one took him up on his offer, or said anything, or moved, so in frustration he raised the chair over his head and hurled it into the crowd, snagging a vine of strawberries along the way. And it occurred to Alan that Kamarov wasn't just showing off, wasn't just bullying people because he could. He *wanted* to get hurt.

“Kamarov,” Alan said, sharply. “Cops'll be here soon. It's time to go.”

“The cops will fight me,” Kamarov said, both to Alan and to the crowd. “Somebody will, yes. I'm *physically present in the situation*.” But finally he turned and strode toward the exit.

On the street, people seemed to have already been alerted somehow. Something like a reverse 911 call, or an amber alert, had told them to beware of a scuffle at this location. They were keeping their distance. Which suited Alan and the others just fine as they mounted their ancient motorbikes and fired up the engines.

Kamarov took the lead on their escape, managing to pass all the robot traffic on the right and then bail into an empty alleyway. Alan and the others followed behind as he blew through the next intersection and then made a right, a left, a right, hugging the routes too narrow or cluttered for robot traffic, then roaring across a pedestrian footbridge that spanned Cherry Creek, and soon another across the Platte River. They left the central business district behind, into a realm of brick and brownstone apartment buildings, with cars parked tight along each side of the street and barely room for one car to pass between. Kamarov was trying to throw off any ground pursuit, and doing an excellent job of it. He was going *fast* for the conditions, maybe seventy-five kph, and it wasn't easy for Alan and the others to keep up with him, although they managed it. Even Feng. Because they were a group, hyah, and didn't want to get separated.

And because it was thrilling.

And because, perhaps, getting hurt would not be such a bad thing after all. Not bad enough to be worth fearing. Not bad enough to be worth slowing down.

But somehow their location was still known, still reported. It wasn't long before a police helicopter acquired them, red and blue lights flashing, toy sirens blaring. But even it was having a hard time keeping up. Whether it was autonomous or under the control of some remote human hotshot, it didn't have the friction of tires on pavement, or the thrust of a V-twin engine banging a liter of fuel-air explosive every fiftieth of a second. Instead it retreated to the sky, following along their general course above the trees and rooftops, three or four stories up.

And so Kamarov took them deeper into the residential neighborhoods, overhung with leafy green trees that hid their progress, and threw their acoustic signature in a thousand different directions. The drone fell out of view. They dodged occasional cars and trucks, bicyclists and pedestrians, all frightfully eager to get out of their way. *Now* they existed, yes.

But then there were red and blue cop lights ahead of them, and behind, and to either side. A wall of police vehicles blocking the way, blocking every way. Their little biker gang had been sighted, headed off, boxed in, shut down. There was nowhere to go. For a moment, Alan thought Kamarov was going to mount the sidewalk and try to escape that way, but instead he screeched on his brakes, slid to a halt, put the kickstand down, and killed his engine. The rest of them followed suit.

“Play dumb!” Paul said to all of them, over the ringing in their ears. “Play very, very dumb! Let me do the talking!”

Kamarov looked offended enough that Alan thought their afternoon might come to blows after all, but then he nodded and adopted an expression so idiotic nobody could possibly take it seriously. But then the police were walking up on foot, stunners drawn, looking alert and unmused.

“Officer!” Paul said to the police. He pointed at Kamarov. “There's something wrong with my friend! He's off his medication!”

“Hands up! Everyone!” one of the officers shouted. But already he could see this was something different than he'd been expecting. Something different than he'd been trained to expect. Seven very old men on dilapidated motorcycles, doing . . . what, exactly?

Alan put his hands up. So did everyone else, except Kamarov, who just sat there on his bike like an idiot.

"I'm a doctor!" Paul said, with his own hands pointed straight in the air.

"What?" said one of the cops.

"I'm a doctor. Look it up. Paul Witcher, M.D., still licensed in the state of Colorado. I have an I.D. card in my wallet if you'd like to see. My friend is experiencing some kind of transient episode. Thank you for stopping him! I believe fifty milligrams of trazodone will calm him down."

The cops stood their ground, neither approaching nor retreating nor lowering their weapons. Nor, apparently, having any idea what to say.

"Who are you?" Feng asked them, sounding exactly like some asshole faking senility. He got off his bike.

"Stay where you are!" one of the cops shouted, brandishing his stunner.

Paul lowered his hands. "Oh, for God's sake, officer. I'm escorting a group of senior citizens on a weekly pleasure ride, to exercise their motor skills. All of these men are licensed to operate these vehicles."

That annoyed Alan. Paul might look younger than the rest of them, but no one could mistake him for anything other than a retiree.

"I've got about fifty criminal charges to level against all of you," the cop said. "Aggravated assault. Speeding. Reckless endangerment. Resisting arrest. Failure to comply with lawful orders."

"Aggravated assault?" Paul asked, sounding offended.

"You threw chairs in a teahouse. Tried to start a fight. We have witnesses."

Paul laughed. "Officer, I think you have the wrong idea. There was some confusion about chairs, yes. People started shouting, and we left. They're lucky if I don't press charges. Do you have video of this incident?"

The officer hesitated. "I don't know. A lot of these businesses have privacy fields, so probably not. How old are these men?"

"They're in their eighties. A few of them have very foul mouths, for which I apologize."

The cop didn't know what to say to that either.

"Look," Paul said, "I'm sorry about the speeding. I'll pay any fines these men incurred. One of our group members was very agitated after the encounter, and we were afraid of losing him. I'm not sure he knows his way back home."

And still the cop didn't know what to do. "You didn't ride on the Interstate, did you? That's about to be illegal for nonautonomous vehicles."

"Oh," Paul said. "I wasn't aware of that. We didn't this time, no. But we have."

The officer lowered his weapon. "You can't do that, sir. It's too dangerous. I'm frankly not sure why these contraptions are allowed on the roads at all. How do you even steer that thing?"

And right there Alan realized they were going to get away with all of it. This senility reversal shit was still too new; people really didn't know what a group of discarded old men were capable of. Perhaps they didn't know themselves.

But they would.

* * *

Five

"We got caught," Alan told Paul back at the house, "because of our license plates. The cops couldn't keep up with us on the street. Even if they'd had someone specifically tracking us on the CCTV, they'd've been lagging maybe thirty seconds in their reports. It's not that easy to keep tabs on someone moving so fast and . . . erratically. Cops would have been a couple of blocks behind us, not a couple of blocks ahead."

"Yeah?" Paul had said. "Well how did they do that?"

"The smart plates are constantly reporting their own locations."

"I know that, idiot. I mean how did they know which plates to query?"

Alan thought about that. "Probably just by vehicle type. They told the system they were following a group of motorcycles, and we were the only group, maybe in the whole damn state.

From there it probably took less than a second to start calculating intercept points and tell the cops where to deploy. No human judgment involved.”

“Jesus. This kind of thing used to be easier to get away with. We’re going to have to dial things way down, Alan.”

“Or not. If we had license plate spoofers—something to throw the machine off our scent—I’m not sure these baby cops would know what to do at all.”

And so it was that on another gorgeous day—cloudier, less bakingly hot—Alan was out on the driveway again, soldering fine wires onto a printed circuit board. It was a custom board he’d designed himself, and ordered from a 3D print shop. It had to be small to fit properly behind the plate, and that meant the connections were very close together. The workbench in his garage would have been a more comfortable place to do this, but the light was better out here.

The thing was, the spoofer had to be capable of passing basic diagnostics, and of traveling down the road without drawing attention to itself. In other words, it had to *be* a smart license plate, or they’d simply get pulled over for running unlicensed vehicles. But when the panic switch got flipped, the spoofers had to be capable of reporting erroneous speeds and headings, and even false-flagging the VIN number and basic vehicle type. It needed to be subtle, and it needed to be elegant, or Alan figured the Big Computer in the Sky would just start barfing out error messages. Location spoofing was a fairly serious crime, so unless they wanted the whole city cordoned off and searched by block, any discrepancies needed to look like software bugs or sensor glitches. That was harder than it sounded, and the code had taken Alan almost a week to sandbox.

He was about fifteen minutes from actually turning it on for the first time when an immaculate blue pickup truck rolled up the driveway and stopped. Alan’s son got out of it.

“Hi,” Alan said, without much hope. His son’s name was Lawrence, or Larry, or “L.A.,” and he was a fifty-three-year-old man much larger than Alan had ever been. Oh, he had Alan’s eyes and hair and jawline, and his mother’s nose and light pigmentation, not yet running to gray. But he was somehow taller and more heavily muscled than his father, and his years of working in tractor repair shops had only exaggerated the differences. He was harder-edged than either of them, too, as if he’d inherited the worst of Alan’s short temper and Rebecca’s general unwillingness to compromise. The years had exaggerated that, as well.

L.A. could be a good guy; sometimes a great guy. He was a strict but even-handed father to his own children—Alan’s grandkids—and he and his wife still seemed to be going strong. More than Alan himself could say. But if you caught L.A. in one of his moods, he could be explosive and petulant, and from the look of him he was in one of those moods now.

“Dad, what are you doing?”

“Fixing a motorcycle. You?”

“Ha ha. Mom tells me you’re running a gang out of this house.”

“That’s putting it a bit strongly.”

“Yeah?” L.A. paused, looked around, licked his bottom lip. “How many people live here?”

“Hard to say. Is there a reason you need to know?”

“How many people are in the house right now, Dad? I count four motorcycles on the property.”

Alan nodded toward the open garage. “Five, if you count mine. I think everyone’s inside watching a movie right now. And a couple of the guys aren’t here. And the girls.”

L.A. studied him impatiently. “Dad, you’re eighty-four.”

“Uh huh. Your mother already told me.”

But here L.A.’s message diverged from Rebecca’s. He said, “Are you trying to ruin this house? I grew up here, Dad. It looks like a junkyard.”

Indeed, there was motor oil all over the concrete portions of the driveway, and random machinery parts laid out in piles all around the hilltop. There was an orderly system to it, but that probably wasn’t evident.

Alan squinted, wondering why he was always the one looking up. “You worried about your inheritance?”

“Don’t know. Should I be?”

“I don’t see why. Don’t you have a house of your own?”

L. A. snorted. “Yes, finally. I’m out from under *The Monstrosity*.”

“Ah, yes. I bought you the wrong house. I’d nearly forgotten.”

“I got tired of explaining it. But Jesus, Dad, even your good deeds . . . That was the house you wanted, in the neighborhood *you* wanted. I couldn’t even sell it.”

“You didn’t have to accept.”

“Yes, I did. You know I did. And that incident was not isolated. I didn’t turn out like you wanted. You never stopped trying to change that.”

“Wasn’t that my job?”

“What? No. How about supporting me? How about *liking* me?”

“Of course I did,” Alan said, as dismissively as he could. But he had to admit (if only in the privacy of his own mind) that the kid wasn’t entirely wrong. They were somehow not each other’s type. They hadn’t been since L. A. was in grade school and gave up playing driveway hockey with his dad. It sounded stupid now, but that had broken a piece of Alan’s heart, apparently irreparably.

And yeah, perhaps L. A.’s heart had broken, too.

Alan said, “I’m sensing you’re not here to talk about the past. You want *this* house now? Is that it?”

“No, Dad, I don’t want your house. But I don’t want you going crazy in it, either. Or out on the highways. And no, it’s not a matter of ‘acting your age.’ Like we ever agreed about *that*.”

Indeed, L. A. had moved out of this very house at the age of seventeen, emancipating himself in geographic fact, if not quite in law or finance. He’d moved through a series of friends’ parents’ houses, and the apartments of older acquaintances, like someone running away from abuse. Alan supported him in every way he could, but L. A. had stubbornly gotten his own cell phone plan at eighteen, his own car insurance at twenty, his health insurance at twenty-one, without ever being asked to. He was in *such* a hurry to grow up, and yet also reserving the right to behave, at any time, like a ten-year-old. Never wanting to be the teenager he actually was. Alan had never really known what to do about any of that. Rebecca had taken on all the “soft” parenting, the rewards and praise when things were going well, leaving the punishments and threats and daily nagging to Alan. And perhaps that had hardened his own soul, far more than he’d ever realized. Perhaps he had driven his own son away, or perhaps they’d driven each other away. It was such a long time ago, and also it was yesterday, and at times it was like something that had happened to other people, something he’d watched on TV and half forgotten.

Alan looked at his son and sighed, with a funny mix of indignation and despair. “I’m sorry I wasn’t the father you needed. I tried to be. Gave it my best shot, every day, which is frankly more than I can say for your mother. She used to check out for months at a time, whenever things got tough. Do you remember that?”

L. A. looked back at him, annoyed. “Yes, I remember. And that *was* your job, and I get tired of thanking you for it. I’m not here to pick a fight, okay? I’m really not.”

“Okay.”

“People are worried about you.”

“Now they are,” Alan answered. “What about four months ago? Or ten years? I’m not dead, Lawrence. I’m renewed.”

“I don’t need a renewed father.”

“Did you need the old one?”

It was L. A.’s turn to sigh, to look away, to study the clouds. “I would ask you to bury the self-pity, but you know, you’re probably right. I haven’t been around much. Is this . . . is this just boredom? This gang stuff?”

“It’s more than that. I’m not sure I can explain it to you.”

In truth, it really was a kind of reincarnation, a death and rebirth into some totally different way of living. In decades past, old men used to shoot themselves in the head with such regularity that the news channels didn’t bother to report it, even as a statistic. The men who did it were

rarely missed. But Alan's generation had already thinned itself; everyone inclined to self-murder had already done it, twenty years ago or more. The ones that were left were the stubborn, the defiant, the foolishly hopeful. And yes, the playful—men who weren't done with the world yet, even if it seemed to be done with them.

When L.A. didn't say anything, Alan finished his thought: "I don't think we were meant to live this long, son, I really don't. Or at least, not by ourselves, not as exiles. A long time ago, old men were treasures. Maybe there are just too many of us now. But do you ask if I have anything left to teach you? I always did. You don't have to learn everything the hard way."

He thought about that for a moment and added, "I became surplus equipment the day of your last driving lesson. I was going to teach you to ride a motorcycle, did you know that? And how to start one when the battery was dead. And how to solder a connection, to bypass the emissions computer or whatever."

"I know how to solder."

"Yeah, fat bulldozer cables the size of your finger. It's not the same thing."

To Alan's surprise, L.A. came over and sat down next to him, looking at the half-finished spoofer.

"That's fine work," he said, sounding surprised. He looked at Alan's hands, watched how steadily they held the solder zapper and the circuit board and the wires and the solder itself. It was the sort of three-handed task most people couldn't do without a fixture, and the sort of needlepoint precision that frankly most people couldn't manage at all.

"This was easier," Alan said, "back when the solder was made of lead. Wonderful stuff. This is SnAg, not the same thing at all. But it works. I could teach your kids."

"So they can work in a museum?" L.A.'s voice was gentle, but his point wasn't. "Dad, I'm glad you're keeping busy. These hobbies, these projects, I'm sure they're good for you. But you have to stay safe. What exactly is that thing?"

"License plate spoofer," Alan said, figuring there was no point in hiding it.

"*What?*"

"Yeah, we got caught by the cops the other day. Nothing serious—they let us off with a warning—but I figure the world doesn't need to know exactly where we are every moment. It didn't used to. Do you remember? When you were a kid, we didn't even have GPS. Even we didn't know where we were half the time."

"Dad, that's illegal."

"Uh huh. Like bitcash and underage drinking."

"Have you lost your mind?"

"No," Alan said, but then actually stopped for a moment to think about it. He *was* eighty-four, and he *was* taking half a dozen neuroactive substances. It wasn't a possibility he could altogether dismiss. Maybe Rebecca had lost her mind, too. Maybe the whole damn world had lost its mind. And what did it matter, anyway? "I mean, I don't think so. Just bored, like you said. Nobody wants the things I know how to do. It was called a club, by the way."

"Eh?"

"Back when there were actual motorcycle thugs prowling around in packs. It was a motorcycle *club*, not a gang. They had a whole terminology around it, a kind of intellectual property. If you used those words without permission—Motorcycle Club—you were opening yourself up to a serious beating, even murder."

L.A. did not look mollified. Not one bit.

"I'm going to leave now," he said, standing up and brushing off his pants. "I think there's going to need to be a family meeting. I love you, Dad, but this is not okay."

And with that he got back in his pickup truck, closed the door, put his feet up on the dashboard, and let it drive him away.

His condescension rang in Alan's ears, and for the first time in months he felt . . . elderly. And alone.

* * *

Four

The smart thing to do would have been to lay low. Let the heat die down, let people forget anything was going on up here. But Social Security deposits had come in, and they were all tired of drinking Cost Club beer and smoking watered-down thic-nic.

“Let’s find a bar,” Kamarov suggested, to general grumbles of assent. They were all present here in Alan’s family room, lounging around on broken but comfortable furniture.

“Let’s find a *shitty* bar,” Dickel clarified.

To which Carol said, “Anyone rides me to a shitty bar is going to be well thought of. Well thought of indeed.”

“I know a place called Dive Bar,” Alan told them. “Still has pool tables.” That brought more affirmative grunts and grumbles.

Paul Witcher, ever the voice of reason, jumped in with, “How about lunch, someplace mellow? We can order lavishly and drink when we get back.”

That was met with derision.

“Perhaps you’ll bake us cookies,” Kamarov said. “Soon enough we’ll all be dead, Doctor. Low-key is not helpful to us. Alan, have you finished with your gifts to the poor?”

“Yep. Spoofers on every bike, identical except for a few details. I had to rewrite some code, make some parts substitutions. Probably more than you wanted to know. But they should all work approximately the same. I haven’t field tested any of them, though. I was planning on doing that today.”

“Ah!” Kamarov said. “Our very dear friend! I believe in your devices. Why not? Anyway, who says we will get in trouble this time? Who chases senior citizens on their pleasure ride?”

Paul was blanching at all this. “Guys, we need to think. What’s wrong with just planning a ride? It’s July, and the mountains are beautiful.”

Shrieky opined, “A shitty bar is where the drinks are cheapest.”

To which everyone except Paul cheered loudly. And so it was decided.

“You don’t have to come with us,” Alan told him, not unkindly.

Paul’s answer: “Yeah, I do.”

* * *

Dive Bar was quiet enough when they arrived, but today turned out to be a Friday, so after an hour or so people began trickling in, until the place was fairly hopping. Carol, whose tattoo shop had been next door for over thirty years, said it was about as busy as she’d ever seen it, which would later cause Alan to wonder if the fates were conspiring against them somehow.

Blue-collar work had declined over the course of the twenty-first century, but it seemed to have bottomed out in recent years and even perhaps picked up a little. Robots were not good at fixing complicated things or diagnosing subtle intermittent errors, and even at totally mechanical work like digging trenches in the street to lay new pipe or pouring housing compound out of a printer nozzle, they were still—still!—fundamentally stupid in a way that even the thickest human beings were not. They needed minders and supervisors to watch them work, and inspectors to certify the results, and maintenance technicians to fuel and lubricate and adjust them, and dispatchers to get them loaded onto the proper trucks and sent off to the proper job sites. At the loose ends of every job there was still a human being, and so there were still plenty of men like L.A. who left work in the afternoon with oil and grime and concrete dust under their fingernails.

These, for the most part, were the men showing up at Dive Bar. There were women, too, and some of them had dirty nails and smudged faces, or too-clean faces, as if they had just vigorously washed them, taking any trace of cosmetics away with the grime. But most women still preferred higher pay and less noise and yes, less of the element of danger that could never quite be removed from men’s work. And so the blue-collar women of Dive Bar seemed to be coming from long days of cutting hair and chopping vegetables, caring for hospital patients and wiping the asses of other people’s toddlers. These professions seemed to require a human touch that the robotics industry had given up trying to replicate.

And so just as Alan and his gang were finishing up their chicken wings and vat-grown burgers and getting truly lit on bottom-shelf liquor and beer, the bar was packing in with tired, sweaty, hangry people who were impatient to follow their example, and getting louder and louder about

it.

Paul looked tense about all this, which Alan, at the time, found both funny and irritating.

"Relax, Witcher. You and I met in this very spot."

"Hyah, and it was totally empty. And we didn't have these merry men to look after."

"Oh, are you looking after me?" Kamarov mocked. "Will I be grounded? What will you do when I misbehave?"

"Hold open the door, so you can escape," Paul answered. "What did I do at that tea place?"

"Nothing," Kamarov told him. "You did nothing. Alan here, he interrupted the flow. Didn't you?"

He clapped Alan on the back.

Which of course jostled one of the other bar patrons, which of course led to an argument.

"Watch what you're doing, Grampa," said a short, burly man with straight black hair. His voice wasn't particularly unkind. Perhaps it was even tinged with humor.

"You watch it," Alan said. "I'm not your Grampa, and we've been standing right here for hours."

"Well, good for you. Some of us had to work for a living."

"Some of you *get* to. Quit your sniveling."

It was the wrong thing for Alan to say if he wanted to keep the peace. So was looking back at Kamarov with an expression that said, *can you believe this guy?*

And suddenly it was like the last two weeks hadn't happened, like they were back in the tea-house again but with a rougher crowd to face them. Alan pushed the black haired man, and the man (looking surprised and embarrassed) pushed back, more gently, just to make the point. Going through the motions of defending his honor. And then Kamarov used Alan as a weapon, pushing him hard *into* the black-haired man.

But the man stopped and said, "What the hell is your problem, citizen? I don't want to fight you. You're an old man. *Really old.*"

"You should respect your elders," Kamarov said.

And Paul, behind him, called out, "We don't want to fight, either."

"I could break you," the man warned Alan, and moved away.

"Keep walking," Kamarov called after him, to no effect.

They had a couple of other near misses like that—people who seemed more amused than intimidated by this gang of bald, wrinkly creatures. Perhaps they had parents or grandparents like this—grouchy and pointlessly combative. Alan did finally begin to wonder just what they were doing here, what *he* was doing here trying to pick fights with people younger and stronger than he was.

But just then, Kamarov finally found a taker: a fiftyish man (maybe) wearing a reinforced vest in reflective yellow that had seen brighter days. He had a full, ginger-colored beard and a head of curly hair to match it, and he was looking severely pissed off with the world even before Kamarov got in his personal bubble and started shouting at him about some damn thing.

Without much warning, the man threw a punch. Kamarov ducked under it and threw one of his own, hard to the gut. Astonished, the man dropped to his knees, whereupon Kamarov kicked him under the chin, flipping him, gasping, onto his back. The man had three friends in various flavors of the same yellow vest, and they all, looking surprised, converged on Kamarov. But Kamarov had friends as well, and in another moment Dickel and Shrieky were launching themselves into the fray, low, leading with shoulders and elbows, and Alan (now sighing with doubt) waded in after them, flailing his fists in unskilled, unfocused wrath.

The fight probably lasted about fifteen seconds—a long time for such things—and Alan would remember it only as a blur of impacts, the bar lights dancing overhead as something pounded into him several times, knocking him off-balance.

But then the bouncers were there, in the same black T-shirts bouncers had worn since time immemorial, and the combatants were forcibly separated.

Next to the fallen ginger-bearded man, there was blood on the floor, which confused Alan. There was blood on Alan's own arm, which confused him even more. Blood on Shrieky, blood

on the yellow vests of the ginger man's defenders.

"Somebody's got a knife," one bouncer said to the other. Alan felt himself roughly searched, then pushed aside like something irrelevant. The others were searched just as roughly, and a part of Alan's mind was relieved that finally, finally somebody was taking them seriously, treating them like they might actually be dangerous. The yellow-vested workers were searched as well, and the floor around all of them, but no knife was found.

"Hold them for the cops," someone said from behind the bar, but the bouncers weren't paying attention. They were rounding up Alan's gang, pushing them roughly toward the exit. "Get the fuck out of here, old man," one of them said to no one in particular. And soon they were out in the parking lot, being pushed toward their bikes. Alan marveled briefly at the skill of these security professionals, two of them able to herd eight hostiles without any apparent effort or fear for their safety.

"These yours?" one of them asked, pointing at the motorcycles.

"Yes," Paul said. "But we've got two people still inside."

"Don't care," the bouncer told him. "You just ride on out of here."

"This man has been stabbed!" Paul objected, pointing at the wet scarlet stains on Shrieky's clothes. Low, on the side, where Alan imagined his left kidney might be. It was at least a quarter-cup of blood, not gushing out or anything, but definitely more than a scratch.

Alan noticed the blood on his own arm again (about the same amount) and became aware of a sharp pain there. "I think I might have been stabbed, too."

He'd had at least six drinks over the past three hours, but he felt sober. Worse than sober. He felt *ashamed*.

"You guys have been asking for it all evening," one of the bouncers told him, "and you're all banned for life. I'm going to give you a choice: cops and ambulances now, or just get the hell out of here and stop being my problem."

"Ain't goin' in no ambulance," Shrieky mumbled, climbing onto his bike.

"You're not so tough," Kamarov tried, but the words were coughed out weakly. He'd taken a beating in there, and he *was* an old man. Really old.

"It's okay. We're leaving," Alan said, and that was the last thing anyone had to say about it.

* * *

Three

Maybe the spoofers worked, or maybe the police in Lakewood were just less on their game than the ones in Denver. In any case, no flashing lights pursued them back to Alan's house. They were chased, however, by long evening shadows, through gusting air that, despite being a balmy 22 Celsius, felt cold. Was it too early for night to be falling like this?

By the time the ride was over, Alan was starting to feel drunk again, and in rather a lot of pain from rather a lot of different places. Stabbed, beaten, thrown out on the street for a fight that he, himself, had actively sought. There was a time, not long ago, when all of this would have been unthinkable to him. Was it thinkable now? Or had it simply happened, without the burden of thought? He felt like he was dreaming, like what remained of his life had descended into the sort of fitful dreams you had right before waking up.

Rounding the curves of his driveway, climbing upward, he arrived in front of his garage and killed the engine, put the kickstand down, climbed off, and then vomited onto the concrete. And when that was finished, he went over to the curb at the edge of the driveway and sat down, right where he'd sat with his eldest son just a week before. Now, he watched the other bikes pull up one by one.

Shrieky collapsed when he got off his Sportster. It wasn't clear if this was due to drunkenness, exhaustion, injury, or whatever, but Paul rushed to his aid, pulling up his shirt to expose the stab wound.

"It isn't deep," he said. "Shrieky, how much pain are you in?"

"I dunno," Shrieky mumbled. "Think I hurt myself."

"He's disoriented," Paul announced, perhaps to some invisible surgical nurse.

"He's *drunk*," someone answered. "I saw him down at least seven."

“Well, then he had no business riding in this condition. I’m going to clean the wound and then glue it shut. I don’t think he cares about scars, and if we go to a hospital they’ll call the police. I’m guessing he doesn’t want that.”

Then, to Feng and Hurtado he said, “You two, get him into the kitchen and find something to put pressure on this wound. The bleeding is slowing down, but if he moves around he could tear it open again.”

And *then*, fully in charge of the scene, he got up from his kneeling position and came over to Alan. “Roll up your sleeve,” he ordered grimly. Alan found himself annoyed by this. *He* had started the motorcycle club; if anyone should be giving orders, it was him. But then he remembered that a ship’s surgeon was authorized to give orders to a captain. Medical orders only; the captain was in charge of everything else. So maybe Alan’s sputtering ego could survive this.

Alan was wearing a dark gray, long-sleeved T-shirt covered with the names of dead musicians. He didn’t like riding with his arms bare, didn’t like doing much of anything with his arms bare, even when it was hot, so these long-sleeved tees had become a kind of uniform for him. But in the failing light he could see an inch-long perforation in the material above his forearm, surrounded by a red-black crust that was already largely solidified.

“Come on, come on,” Paul urged. “You could have tendon damage, or worse.”

Gingerly, Alan rolled up his sleeve. The wound was the same size as the slice in his shirt, and it *did* look deep.

“This is a puncture,” Paul said unhappily. “Can you make a fist for me? Okay, now spread out your fingers. Now go like this. Now this.”

“Is it bad?” one of the geezers wanted to know.

“It’s not good,” Paul said, “But it seems to have missed everything vital. Did anyone see what they stabbed him with?”

Nobody said anything.

To Alan he said, “I don’t suppose you’ll let me take you to a hospital? There’s muscle damage which, at your age, is never going to heal correctly.”

“No thanks,” Alan said. “I’m done with hospitals.” Painfully, he flexed his arm, bringing a fresh welling of red-black blood through the cut.

“Don’t move it unnecessarily,” Paul said.

“It still works. I mean, it hurts, but I can move everything. Can you just glue it up?”

“No, but I’ve got a full suture kit in my saddlebag.”

“Of course you do. Yeah, of course you do. You knew something like this was going to happen eventually, hyah?”

Paul didn’t answer that.

They went into the kitchen, and even though Shrieky’s case was ultimately less serious, Paul patched him up first, because it only took a couple of minutes. Shrieky was basically passed out, so once Paul was done with him a couple of the guys grabbed him by the armpits and heels and dragged him off into one of the bedrooms.

Alan’s case took longer; there was a thorough and painful irrigation of the gash, followed by an injection and a topical ointment, and finally a heavy-gauge needle and thread, which Paul manipulated deep inside Alan’s arm with a pair of forceps. Both Alan and Paul—and everyone watching the procedure—opted to ignore the fact that Paul’s hands were fighting a visible tremor.

They were just finishing up when a loud knock came at the front door. Through the windows, red and blue lights flashed.

“Shit,” someone said.

“Cops never ring the bell,” someone else said.

Alan got up, shirtless and covered in orange betadine, with fresh stitches glaring like signal lights, and answered the door.

Two uniformed cops—a man and a woman—stood outside, looking professional.

“Yes?” Alan asked them. And he would have liked to be cool about it—really cool, like some oldey timey gangster—but the tremor in his voice was as plain as the one in Paul’s hands. At the

end of the day, he wasn't really cut out for this.

The male cop said, "Sir, are you Alan Schultz?"

"Szcyltz, yes. Is there something I can help you with?"

"Are you the owner of this residence?"

"Yes."

"We had a report of a disturbance at an establishment called Dive Bar, on Colfax and Union. Were you there?"

"I don't know. When?"

"This evening, about an hour ago."

"I don't specifically recall," Alan said, with calculated vagueness. Lying to the cops was a crime these days, but placing himself at the scene of a different crime wasn't any better. Idiocy, however, was a proven strategy.

"Do you own a motorcycle, sir?"

"Yeah, a turn-of-the-millennium Softail Deuce, pretty good condition. Would you like to see it?"

"No, thank you. How many people are here right now, sir?"

"I'm not sure. Seven?"

"We had reports that some of them might be injured. Do you believe that's the case?"

"What? No. Officer, what's this about?"

The female cop said, "We've been getting a lot of reports lately, about a group of elderly motorcyclists. That wouldn't be you, by any chance?"

She didn't sound accusatory. In fact, she sounded amused.

"I don't know," Alan said. "We do ride sometimes."

"Did you ride tonight?" the male officer asked.

And there was no point denying it, because the bikes would still be warm, so Alan just nodded, as casually as he could manage.

Behind him, Alan felt Kamarov lurking. Lurking but not doing anything. Lurking but not menacing. It seemed as if the fight had gone out of him, at least for the moment.

The female officer said, "Mr. Szcyltz, I approve of the fact that you're keeping up hobbies. People are living longer these days, and staying active is very important. But it sounds as if you may be living dangerously."

Again, that tinge of amusement. Derision, even. They were going to get away with it again, because the idea was just too ridiculous, that eight very elderly men would pick a fight with four men in their prime, and kick the ass of at least one of them. Clearly, nobody was pressing charges.

Against his better judgment he asked, "Do you have video of this disturbance?"

"Yes," the male officer said.

The female one added, "It's 2D, four-color, highly compressed. Hard to make out details. But . . ." she nodded toward Kamarov ". . . two of the men in the recording look very much like you two. There was blood on the floor; are you sure no one is hurt?" And here she glanced meaningfully at Alan's arm.

"I'm a doctor," Paul called out from deeper inside the house. "I haven't seen any injuries I'd consider serious."

"Can you come forward, please?" the male cop asked.

Paul did so and then, uncharacteristically, said, "It was a fair fight, sir. These men gave as good as they got."

The cops digested that. It wasn't quite an admission of guilt, but it was something.

Finally, the female officer said, "That doesn't sound like a very good idea, gentlemen. I'd steer clear of that place if I were you."

And the male one said, "I don't want to hear about any more trouble, anywhere. Do we understand each other? It's about to be illegal for those machines of yours to operate on state *or* federal highways. That's most of the Front Range, hyah? And it's *alrea dy* illegal to pick fights in bars." And then, for emphasis, he repeated himself: "Do we understand each other?"

And because Alan's temper was frayed and he couldn't quite stop himself from being a prick,

he said, "Sir, I'm a little slow these days," and closed the door in their faces.

And that was the end of the encounter. The cops got back in their car and let it drive them away.

"Your spoofers didn't work," Kamarov said, sounding tired and annoyed.

"No," Alan said. "They did. But it didn't matter. The authorities know who we are."

And he wondered, then, why he'd ever thought they wouldn't.

* * *

Two

Alan was sleeping it off in his bedroom—formerly his and Rebecca's bedroom—until well into the following morning and woke up only when he realized the doorbell had been ringing for a while now.

Still in his pants and socks from the night before, he got up, moving blearily through the house, and answered the door.

It was Carl, Alan's youngest son, along with Katina, Alan's granddaughter. Katina was *so big*—at least a full inch taller than the last time Alan had seen her, but she was smiling with youthful innocence, clutching some sort of stuffed pony, even though she had to be about eight by now. Carl—some forty years her senior—did not look so innocent. He looked worried as hell, and guilty.

"Hi, Grampa!" Katina said brightly.

"Hi," Alan said without emotion. He didn't know what to feel.

"Dad," Carl said, nodding.

"Are you here to talk sense into me?"

"Kind of."

Alan sighed. "Well, I guess you'd better come in, then."

He stepped aside and let them enter his living room.

Alan's relationship with Carl was better than the one with L.A., but also more complicated. The two of them had been real buddies throughout Carl's tween and teenage years, enjoying the same books and movies and binge shows, for mostly the same reasons. Carl was about the only person who'd ever cared to sit through a black-and-white movie with Alan, for example. But Carl didn't care to learn anything about electronics or sports, and as he got old enough to start dating, he spent more and more time in music clubs and vape bars, and less time talking to his dad. It was a totally normal growth trajectory, but no less tragic for that; the day Carl had announced he was getting an apartment with some friends, rather than coming home from college for the summer, was among the saddest of Alan's life.

"What's the problem?" Rebecca had chided him. "We raise them to leave. That's our job, and we've done it. Now it's our time."

True and true, but that was almost thirty years ago, and the pain of it still ached a bit—dull, where Rebecca's departure was sharp as a stab wound. He hadn't raised *her* to leave. He had fully meant to preside over her death, to hold her hand, only to find it snatched away. *Not* till death do we part.

Too, his hopes of being a good grandparent had never amounted to much. Was that his own fault? Should he have tried harder, called more often, issued more invitations to grill veggies on the patio? Like L.A., Carl had a complex life of his own, in which parents played no great part and were rarely even thought about. Normal, yes, but shitty.

"Nice Santa beard," Katina said, then rushed to the corner to pick up the old bass guitar Rebecca had left behind. It was Katina's favorite thing about this house.

"What happened to your arm?" Carl asked, looking at the iodine-colored stitches.

"Bar fight," Alan told him, because he had a sense Carl already knew.

Carl settled down on the couch, with grunts of middle-aged effort. His hair was half gray now. Carl's! It seemed tragic and impossible, but of course time never hurried, never rested, never stopped, never cared.

"So, what can I do for you?" Alan asked.

"I think you know," Carl said. And unlike his mother and sibling, he sounded genuinely loving

in his concern.

“Tell me anyway.”

Over the jangling of guitar strings, Carl looked around the mess of Alan’s living room and said, “Dad, I’m not sure you understand how all this looks. I mean, I’ll bet it makes sense to you. It always does, right? But from the outside . . .”

“I assure you,” Alan said, “I’m of sound mind. I have a doctor who can vouch.”

That sounded lame, a poor way to address his youngest son, so he leaned forward and asked, “Carl, what would you actually do with your time, if you found yourself alone? Scratch that; what would you do if your kids were grown, and you’d been unemployed for fifteen years, and *then* you found yourself alone? Watch binge shows and news feeds all day and night? Really? I did that when your mother was here; I had to. I couldn’t dare be away from her very long. But I won’t do it now that she’s gone.”

“No one’s asking you to,” Carl said. But he sounded more conflicted than convinced. “Dad, I’m really sorry Mom left you. That was very shitty of her. She says she’s happier alone, and maybe that’s even true. But it’s not the point, is it? I’m not choosing sides, but I do think you deserve better than this.”

Picking up on something in Carl’s voice, Alan asked, “Do I deserve better than whatever you’re about to say?”

That just made Carl’s expression look sadder. “Dad, you have to understand how this looks.”

And suddenly, Alan understood: there *had* been a family meeting.

“You’re having me committed,” he said, speaking the words as soon as they occurred to him.

Carl didn’t reply right away. So, yeah. Despite their alleged concern for his well-being, no one was stepping up to take care of him the way he’d taken care of *her*. Not even Carl. Instead, they were going to lock him away in a nursing home.

“Nice place?” he asked angrily. “Jell-O, shuffleboard, and the sweet smell of piss?”

Carl leaned forward, gazing intently, now looking a little angry himself. “Can you honestly tell me you’re not a danger to yourself and others? Please? Can you tell me that?”

But Alan of course could not.

“I think you should leave now.”

“Dad, I—”

Tightly, Alan said, “I love you, son. You’ll always be my greatest creation, but I think you should *leave*. Thank you for giving me fair warning, but this conversation is over.”

And then, when Carl opened his mouth again, Alan said, more loudly, “OVER.”

So without another word, Carl collected up his daughter and left.

“We just got here,” Katina protested as the door closed behind them.

When he was sure they were gone, Alan went to the garage, picked up one of the clubs from the golf bag he hadn’t used in over a decade, came back inside, and swung it hard at the wall. BAM! It punched right through in a shower of dust and old-fashioned drywall. Not forty-millimeter nozzled cement, but the real deal: quarter-inch textured white gypsum board, like God intended.

And that felt good, so Alan did it another twenty times, bashing and bashing the walls and ceiling before Paul and Kamarov materialized beside him, grabbing the club and trying gently to take it away from him.

“Social! Contract!” he said, pulling away from them and hitting the wall some more. “Social! Fucking! Contract!”

“Hey, easy, hey,” Paul was saying.

Kamarov said, “It’s a nice house, Alan. The house hasn’t done anything to you. Why are you upset?”

They wouldn’t let him hit the wall again. The living room was a total wreck, with wooden studs visible behind the drywall everywhere, and the already-messy floor now covered in big white chunks and fine white grit. But Alan wouldn’t let go of the club, either. He breathed heavily, saying nothing. What could he tell them? That his only choices were fucked and fucked? To rot here alone in this house, or to rot alone somewhere else?

Old men were not allowed to work. They were not allowed to fight, or ride, or drink in bars. It was really that simple. They were really that superfluous.

"I should have been a better grandfather," he said finally. "Left a better class of wreckage behind me."

"Oh, my friend," Kamarov said, with more sympathy than Alan had heard from anyone in a long time.

Alan sat down on his ottoman, feeling the red leather creak under his weight. And although he had never approved of self-pity—had never allowed it from his children or his friends or the people who worked for him—in this moment he felt nothing but sad and old and defeated. Self-defeated, perhaps, but did that really matter? The three laws of thermodynamics said, in essence: You can't win. You can't break even. You can't withdraw from the game.

He thought about telling all this to Paul and Kamarov, but didn't they know it already? Weren't they living it, too?

Instead he said, "This sucks," which better conveyed what he was feeling anyway. And with that, felt himself growing angry again. It was a safer emotion—more empowering, and also (in its own way) more prescriptive.

He stood up, brushed drywall dust off his pants, and (without putting down the golf club) went rummaging for a pair of riding boots. As he laced them up, Paul asked him, "Was that your other son who just left? What happened?"

"Nothing," Alan answered him. Then clarified, "Nothing good."

And without bothering to put on a shirt, or to put down the golf club, he went into the garage, pressed the OPEN button, and climbed aboard his ancient Harley. Actually thirty-six years less ancient than Alan himself, which said a lot about the nature of the problem, yes. He kicked it into neutral and started the ignition.

"Where are you going with that?" Paul shouted over the noise.

But Alan didn't answer. He didn't know. He didn't *care*. Bare-chested, with the nine-iron across his knees, he walked the bike back out into the driveway and kicked it into gear. As he wormed his way down the hill and out onto the street, he spotted an empty car—driverless and passengerless—turning the corner ahead of him. And suddenly all his frustrations came into focus, because it was *these* things, these robots, that had crowded human beings off the roads, and out of the sorts of workplaces that made any sense.

Gunning the throttle, he gave chase and then, when he had caught up, squeezed around it on the right and gunned the throttle harder. The little car swerved and slowed, not sure where to go or how to react, so Alan picked up the golf club in his left hand and started bashing it. The hood, the windshield, the side-view mirror. But the car dropped back further, and Alan couldn't keep with it because his hand was off the clutch, and anyway his left arm wasn't strong enough to do the kind of damage he wanted to do. But just the same, the message had been sent; the car pulled over and stopped, temporarily defeated.

Alan roared out into the city, intent on whatever mayhem he could manage to inflict.

* * *

One

He had locked the throttle in at three thousand RPM and switched the club to his right hand. Despite last night's stab wound, it was a lot stronger than his left, and he'd already taken out five cars by the time he became aware of Paul and Kamarov riding after him.

He thought perhaps Paul was shouting his name, but over the wind and engine noise, it was impossible to be sure, and it didn't matter anyway. Were they, too, trying to talk some sense into him? Even Kamarov? Too bad. He was past all that.

He was focusing his energy on empty vehicles, outraged at the way they prowled his neighborhood, like they owned the place. Not today, they didn't. Another one came into view, and he made for it. With the throttle locked, he couldn't control his speed very precisely, and *certainly* couldn't stop for stop signs and traffic lights, but he did have the clutch and the rear brake at his disposal, so it wasn't hard to get up next to target number six and give it a good, hard bash. The driver's side window shattered into a thousand little jewels, and then another bash took out the

windshield, and then he was past it.

And he really could hear Paul's voice shouting, "Stop! Alan, stop!"

But Alan couldn't stop. His throttle was locked. And he was rounding on target number seven when something swam into view from his left side and then filled the entire left side of his vision, and for a moment, he was eye-to-eye with a human driver before his front wheel touched the front bumper of the car that took him out.

The handlebar spun out of his grip and slammed him in the gut, but he was pivoting over it, and then he was flying through the air, and his life really did flash before his eyes, sort of.

He saw himself as a child, playing hockey with his father.

Himself as an adult, playing hockey with his son.

Himself getting married, boarding an airplane, swimming in a pool. Making love for the very first time, in the back seat of a Chevy Malibu with steam-coated windows.

Arguing with Rebecca. Arguing and arguing again, never able to find the peace they used to inhabit so easily.

And amid the screeching of tires and crunching of metal, as the ground rushed up to meet him, he had time—plenty of time!—to wrap his arms around his head in a kind of makeshift helmet, and to think: it figures. Six robots down, and the thing he collided with was a human being.

And then he hit.

* * *

Zero

The world did not go black; it jumped. One instant he was flying, and the next—confusingly—he was on his back with his legs out straight, and his arms forming a T. Crucified on the warm pavement.

Paul Witcher, M.D., was kneeling over him, holding Alan's left eye open.

"Can you hear me?"

"Yes," Alan said and tried to sit up.

"Don't move," Paul told him. "You've got serious injuries. Maybe back and neck, I don't know, but your abdomen is purple and distended. You've got internal bleeding."

"The handlebar," Alan said.

"Don't try to talk."

Alan grunted in amusement. First of all, he'd had it with people telling him what *not* do to. That was over now. And second of all, that internal bleeding thing sounded about right, because he could *feel* some vital essence leaking out of him. Disoriented as he was, he could still tell that with every passing moment he was weaker than he had been the moment before. With a stab of fear he realized he was, in fact, dying.

Fear, now? Really? He found himself disappointed with his own humanity.

"You were a really good friend," he slurred to Paul, because that was true. In the short time they had known each other, Paul had done nothing but look out for Alan. Alan wished he could say the same.

And Alan's use of the past tense, coupled with whatever he saw happening to Alan's body, brought a sad certainty to Paul's expression that made Alan feel even worse about their relationship. Was this Paul's fate? To watch this pointless death and then persist in the world, wondering if he could have done something different?

"It's not your fault," Alan said, as warmly as his fading voice could manage. Had he led a good life? Had he been a good person? Probably not, but he'd done his best, and maybe that was enough.

"Stay with me," Paul said, snapping his fingers over Alan's face, and it seemed more a personal plea than a bit of medical jargon.

Alan felt like he was going to sleep, like he should curl up on his side and drift away. But he was too tired to move even that much. Whispering now: "Paul, there was never anything you could have done. Really, it's long enough. It's long enough. I had the jerk gene, and that was never going to change."

And the universe simply stopped.

A former aerospace engineer who helped launch three interplanetary space probes, Wil McCarthy is a serial technology entrepreneur who holds patents in seven countries, including 29 in the U.S. He has published ten books, dozens of stories (including ten in Analog), and hundreds of nonfiction articles, and his fictional world of P2 (from the novel Lost in Transmission) was rated one of the ten best science fiction planets of all time by Discover magazine.