

## **SECOND-PRIZE WINNER**

KEVIN HARTFORD

### **AN OBSESSIVE-COMPULSIVE'S GUIDE TO SIDEWALKS**

I OFTEN WONDER if it's the same with children as it is for birds. How they just know certain things. Evolution. The hive mind. The way knowledge works itself into your DNA the same way physical characteristics do. Likelihoods. Dependencies. All that good stuff.

When we were kids, my brother and sister and I used to play this game where we'd pretend the floor was lava, the same game played by every kid in every living room in the world. But nobody ever asked where it came from. Was it handed down from one generation to the next? Did it spread amongst children like chicken pox? Like lice? Or did everyone just come up with the idea simultaneously, independently?

The rules were, you couldn't touch the floor. If you touched the floor, you'd die. You had use furniture to move through the room. You had to climb and jump from piece to piece.

Nobody ever questioned why furniture was exempt from these rules. Nobody ever wondered how a wooden chair was able to both float on lava *and* resist bursting into flame. You had to leave science and logic out of the equation, the way a religious person would approach the Bible. You just had to believe.

I read somewhere that crows can remember your face. They'll dive-bomb you on the street if they consider you a threat, and then all the other crows, even if they've never seen you before, will somehow know that *they* should be dive-bombing you, too. And then you'll never be able to leave the house.

In first grade, someone told me that if you step on a crack, you break your mother's back. That one really did me in. I kept thinking, *What if...*

My mother already had back problems, so I knew I couldn't give her something she already had, but I certainly didn't want to make things any worse for her.

Eventually, she got a breast reduction and I realized there was no direct correlation between the placement of my footsteps and the deterioration of her back muscles, but I kept avoiding cracks anyway. I got it into my head that it was good luck to avoid them.

I read somewhere about a scientist who put two crows into separate rooms. Crow A and Crow B. Each crow had a bottle, empty except for a bit of food at the bottom and, next to the bottle, a length of wire about half a foot long. Crow A's wire was curved at the end like a hook, and Crow A almost immediately used the bent end of the wire to retrieve the food at the bottom of the bottle. Crow B's wire was straight, and, without knowing what was going on in the other room, Crow B almost immediately used its beak to bend one end of the wire and use it as a hook to retrieve the food at the bottom of the bottle.

I should explain that first-grade me fundamentally misunderstood the concept of a crack in the sidewalk. Grown-up me knows that it's a fissure in the concrete, a lightning-shaped break in the surface, but first-grade me thought a crack was the gap between the flat grey squares, the spot where you'd put the mortar between two bricks. A horizontal dividing line. Pronounced. Authoritative.

That's what I've avoided stepping on for the past thirty years.

And not just avoided stepping on—I've actively incorporated these gaps into my everyday life, using them to play a never-ending game of chance with passing vehicles.

I don't necessarily *want* to play this game, I just *do*. Constantly.

How it works is, whatever sidewalk square you happen to be on at the time, you have to get to the next one before a car passes you. If you make it, it's good luck. If you make it two sidewalk squares from the one you're on now, it's even better luck. Three squares, amazing luck, and so on, your luck increasing as the number of squares goes up.

Inevitably, a car will pass. As soon as a car passes, you tally up your score. Then you start the game over again, because the game never ends.

The car has to be going in the same direction as you. It doesn't count if it's coming from the opposite direction. Unless you want it to count. I usually don't.

If a car goes by before you've gotten past that first square, start over without penalty. Technically, this means you can never lose.

I read somewhere that a crow will find something to eat, pick a spot under a nearby tree or bush, and then bury its food for safekeeping. Other crows will see this happening, wait for the first crow to leave, and then steal its food right out of the ground. Realizing it's been robbed, the first crow will then find something to eat, *pretend* to bury it, and then fly off and bury it for real someplace else. Of course, the other crows, realizing they've been duped, will wait for the first crow to pretend to bury its food, and then follow the crow to whatever hiding spot it picks next.

Sometimes there's a crystal-ball element to the game. Instead of counting sidewalk squares, I'll think to myself, *If I make it to that lamp post before a car passes, I'll get home and find something good in the mail*, or I'll think, *If I make it to that stop sign before a car passes, today will be the day I get a call from the temp agency*.

These are the instances in which I'll hustle to beat a passing car, to force fate to bend to my will. Often I'll run. I'm sure it looks ridiculous.

I once saw a crow dive-bomb a guy on a mountain bike and I thought, *That guy is doomed*.

Occasionally I'll see a guy staring at the ground as he walks, or runs, down the street. I'll think, *Is he like me?* And if I decide yes, he is, I'll think, *Was it something I did?*