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Aldo's Diary
By Frank Morgan

"Mom, Penny beat me at chess." Penny's mother, Elizabeth Murrow, stopped loading the clothes washer and stopped thinking about triangles in the hyperbolic plane.

"Penny?"

"Yes, I did – I beat Aldo at chess. And he's two years older than me."

"But I thought you said you weren't any good at games."

"I didn't think I was."

"Aldo, did you let her win?"

"She forked my king and my rook."

"Penny, you forked his king and his rook?"

"Yes, I planned it, like Dad did to me last night. I attacked his king and his rook at the same time with my knight, and since he had to move his king, I got his rook."

"OK then sweetheart—sounds to me like you deserved to win."

Penny took over loading the washer.

"Thanks, darling. Do you think it will all fit?"

"No, I think we better do two loads. Aunt Sally said the clothes don't get clean if it's too full."

"But Aunt Sally and Uncle Devin don't even have a washer."

"It was on TV. She said they always overfill the washer and do other ridiculous things."

"Like what?"

"Like leaving the lights on or having cookies for breakfast."

"You like it at the farm, don't you."

"Yes, can we go visit this weekend?"

"Not this weekend, but soon. Dad and I want to do our anniversary hike out that way, and maybe you and Aldo can spend the weekend with Aunt Sally and Uncle Devin."

"Why do you always do an anniversary hike?"

"You know, 'cause Dad proposed to me on a hike when we were at Williams College, and we've celebrated our anniversary like that every year since then."

"Every year?"

"Well, except the year Grandmum died. Even then, we went on a hike a month later."

"Why did Grandmum have to die?"

"I don't know, sweetheart. She loved you and you loved her a lot, didn't you?"

"She always told me a story."

"Yes, that's what Dad liked when he was a little boy. She used to tell him a story every night before he went to sleep."

"Did Grandmum play chess with Dad when he was little?"

"I don't think Grandmum ever played chess, sweetheart, just rummy."

"Why won't Grandpop play rummy?"

"He doesn't like games. He's always had a lot of work to do taking care of the farm and Aunt Carol."

"Why does Aunt Carol still live with Grandpop? Why isn't she married? Is it because she's disabled?"

"Lots of disabled people get married. Maybe she just hasn't met the right person."

"How would she meet anyone out on the farm?"

"That's a good question."

Aldo chimed in. "Mom, maybe we should have a party for Aunt Carol."

"That's a nice idea Aldo, but I don't know whether Grandpop would go for it."

Aldo's brown eyes showed a hint of excitement. "Let's make it a surprise party. Then we don't have to tell him."

"A surprise party for Aunt Carol—well that's some idea. We'll have to tell that one to Dad after he gets home from school, maybe while he's making dinner."

"Don't you think she'd like it?"

"You know, she might, but I don't think Grandpop would."

Penny was getting bored. "Aldo, let's play another game."

"OK, but not right now. I want to do something." He left for his room.

"Penny, what's Aldo doing in his room?"

Aldo's room was very organized. He always made his bed and liked it when Mom put on fresh sheets. He didn't mind bugs and spiders, but he would never have wanted a hamster like Penny. In the locked drawers of his chest bed, he kept his notebooks and showed them to nobody, not even Penny.

One of his current projects was an Outing Club hat for the school janitor with her name Esmeralda on it. She kept their supplies, mainly T-shirts and hats, in some closet for them and often had lunch in the cafeteria instead of in the teachers' lounge. The trouble was that the visor was some kind of plastic, so a magic marker wouldn't write on it. Penny was only in kindergarten, but she was helping with the hat. So, when Aldo went to his room alone, she figured he wasn't working on the visor, but probably something with his secret notebooks. Still, she didn't tell Mom.

When Penny and Aldo's dad, Jeff Murrow, got home from school, he was all excited about his algebra class. "Today, I told them about the square root of -1 ."

"What's so special about that?" Dad loved the way Aldo always took interest.

"Well, I've been telling them for two years that -1 doesn't have a square root, and now I'm telling them that it does."

"Well does it or doesn't it?"

"Well it didn't use to, so mathematicians invented an imaginary one."

"You can do that?"

"Yes, in math you can invent new things, as long as they are compatible with the old things. And it turns out that imaginary numbers are compatible with the numbers we had before, which we now call the real numbers."

"So -1 doesn't really have a square root."

"Yes it does, though I have to admit that 'imaginary' is a bad name for it."

Aldo scrunched up his brow. "Then why is it called imaginary?"

"Well, when it was invented, people didn't think it was real at first."

Penny, who'd been trying hard not to interrupt, was growing impatient. "Let's ask Dad about the party."

"Yes," Aldo answered. "But maybe we should let him change his clothes and start dinner first."

Penny liked that idea. "OK, I want to help with dinner tonight."

"Thanks Penny, I need someone to wash the spinach." Jeff had somehow talked everyone into liking spinach. Penny went over to the sink.

Jeff turned to Elizabeth. "How are you doing, honey?"

Elizabeth looked tired but content: "I actually got an idea for proving those aperiodic hyperbolic tilings this morning. It looks like it might work. By the way, the plumber can't come until tomorrow, so the kids will be using our bathroom another day."

Penny interrupted, "Mommy, can I use your comb tonight?"

"No sweetheart, it's too easy to break."

"Dad let Aldo use his comb last night."

Dad explained, "My comb doesn't break so easily."

"Mommy, when will I be able to use your comb?"

"Maybe when you're a teenager."

"Promise?"

"OK, I promise."

Since Mom and Aldo were busy in their rooms while Dad and Penny prepared dinner, Penny had to wait to ask Dad about the party for Aunt Carol. Then Penny was so excited about the dinner they'd prepared that she forgot all about Aunt Carol until they'd finished eating. Aldo seemed to have forgotten too, but as soon as Penny finished her rice pudding with raisins, Aldo said, "Penny, didn't you have a question for Dad?"

"Oh yes! Dad, can we have a surprise party for Aunt Carol so she can get married?"

"Who would you invite?"

"Aunt Sally and Uncle Devin, Aunt Clara and Uncle William and Susie and Amanda, and of course Grandpop."

"And who would Aunt Carol marry?"

"Oh. How about Mr. Read?"

"I think we should invite the whole church," suggested Aldo.

Dad smiled. "You guys have big plans, don't you? And who will send out the invitations and prepare the food?"

"Daddy, you and I could prepare the food and Mom and Aldo could send out the invitations."

Mom tried to be a good sport. "OK, Penny, why don't you ask Grandpop about it next time you see him."

"No, it's a surprise party. We're not telling Grandpop."

Dad almost laughed. "Not telling Grandpop! You really do have this all planned out. Who will pay for the party?"

"You and Mommy."

"OK, well, we've got to think about this one."

"You get a point to be the first one to spot any kind of animal from the car," announced Penny, as Dad turned down Main Street.

"I see you, you're a kind of animal, Penny." Aldo smiled.

"Aldo!...other than a person," squealed Penny.

"I see a sparrow," said Mom, peering up through the windshield.

"Where, Mommy?"

"Over in that white birch tree, just in front of the library."

"OK, Mommy, you get a point for the first bird," said Penny. "Oh, there's a dog, just coming out of that house."

"And he has a flea on him."

"Aldo, we have to be able to see the animal. That doesn't count."

"And the flea has a microbe on it," said Aldo, with a grin.

"Daddy, make him stop."

"OK, sorry, this is a good game. I'm going to find the biggest animal. Oh look, there's an elephant."

"Aldo, stop it, you're spoiling the game."

"OK, sorry, sorry, I'll be serious. And I will find a big animal."

Liz suddenly raised a hand to her brow. Oh Jeff, I forgot the compass. Aldo was using it yesterday and I never put it back."

"Don't worry, Liz, Sal and Devin will have one, and the trails on our hike are well marked anyway."

"Maybe we should take our cell phones this time."

"No, this is the one time all year we can really be alone together." Liz nodded in agreement.

Penny interrupted, "There's a horse! Now I've got two points and the biggest animal."

"I still say I'll find a bigger one," said Aldo.

"Bigger than a horse?"

"Maybe."

"I bet Aunt Carol would like a horse. Could we get her one for her party?"

No one answered.

"Could we, could we?"

"Horses are very expensive, Penny," said Mom.

"How expensive?"

"I don't know, thousands of dollars."

"Is that a lot?"

Dad answered, "You could buy hundreds of meals for that much money." Penny was determined. "OK, I'll skip two hundred meals."

"And they are a lot of work to take care of," explained Mom.

"Hmm," mused Aldo, "wouldn't that be good for Aunt Carol?"

"Actually it might," admitted Dad, "but Grandpop would never agree."

Penny was persistent: "It could be part of the surprise."

"No," noted Aldo, "that's not fair to give Grandpop a lot of responsibility he doesn't want. And we could hardly have a horse ready for the party today."

Penny bounced up and down in her seat. "I can't wait to see Aunt Carol's reaction."

"Yes, she thinks they're coming to Aunt Sally's and Uncle Devon's just to say hello before you leave on the hike."

"I can't wait to see Grandpop's expression," said Dad.

"You don't think he'll be mad, do you?" asked Aldo.

"He might be."

Aldo looked lost in thought.

By the time they got to Aunt Sally's and Uncle Devin's, half the church was already there. "Elizabeth! Jeff! Aldo! Penny sweetie!"

Sally pulled Jeff aside. "Pop called, said he didn't think they'd make it."

"Do you think he suspects something?"

"No, just being Pop. I told him that the kids were counting on seeing him."

"So, are they coming?"

"Yes, they're coming, but maybe a little late."

"Auntie, Auntie, can I feed the chickens?" Penny was pulling on her aunt's hand.

"I have the cup of feed all ready for you. It's in the usual place by the back door."

Aldo was off talking quietly to his cousin Susie, who lived on another corner of the farm. She looked a bit embarrassed, or maybe just pleased.

When they finally heard Grandpop's old truck coming down the road, everyone except Sally, Devin, Elizabeth, and Jeff hid in back. Aunt Carol came rushing in first, eagerly kissing and hugging one after another several times each.

Jeff tickled her in the stomach and she squealed with delight. Her brother Jeff had always been her favorite. She waited patiently for his visits when he was away at college, but when he got married and moved out for good she cried for three days, until Sally told her he'd be back to visit with children soon enough. Aldo was her first nephew.

Grandpop took his time coming in. "The second step to the front porch is loose. I'll come fix it tomorrow."

"OK, but today is just for fun Pop."

"Where are the kids?"

At that moment, as if responding to his question, the entire church congregation burst through the back door crying, "Happy birthday Carol." It wasn't really her birthday, but she loved her birthday and surprises and she didn't keep track. She just screamed with delight and ran to hug and kiss everybody. She started telling everybody that she had had a dream last night, a dream that her mum had come back, and that this was just as good. Everyone she told listened with intent interest, even Aunt Clara and Uncle Will, which made her want to keep telling the story. Aldo had one of his notebooks and was working on something.

Grandpop, much to almost everyone's surprise, joined in with gusto and helped Devin bring in the birthday cake and ice cream. He didn't even seem to mind that Carol got it all over her dress.

When Aldo and Penny came down in the morning, their parents were already gone.

"They left about 5 am," said Aunt Sally, "because of the bad weather. They wanted to make sure they'd get to the camp before dusk."

"But Mommy said if I came down by 6 I could say goodbye."

"She remembered that and said to tell you she said goodbye to you specially."

"Did she say goodbye to Aldo too?"

"Not specially, just you."

"I said goodbye before we left home." Aldo's matter-of-fact manner made Penny feel better. "Can I feed the chickens now, Auntie?"

"OK, and tell Uncle Devin that it's time for breakfast."

"At 6 o'clock?"

"He's been up since 4."

"Can we have a second breakfast later like the hobbits?" Penny had been

enjoying Dad's latest read-aloud book, *The Lord of the Ring*, at bedtime.

"That's a good time for our morning snack."

"Aldo, you be Frodo; I'll be Sam."

"OK, and Uncle and Auntie can be Meri and Peregrin."

"And Mom and Dad can be Arwen and Aragorn."

Aldo wrote something in his notebook.

After breakfast, Aldo had an announcement. "I'm going to see Cousin Susie."

Penny looked at him and knew that for some reason she wasn't invited.

Uncle Devin said, "OK, you kids can walk over, but stay off the road." Penny looked uncomfortable.

Aunt Sally quickly interrupted, "Penny, couldn't you stay and help me bake cookies?" Aldo was already out the door.

"Yes, peanut butter, those are Aldo's favorites."

That night, after the lights were out, Aldo started talking in a voice so low that Penny knew no one else could hear. "Penny, do you like Aunt Clara and Uncle Will?"

"I guess so, but they're so quiet."

"Yes, they're like Josh and Laurie at recess last week."

"That was fun when we got to stay for recess. Why didn't Josh and Laurie want to play freeze tag with everybody?"

"I think that they did want to."

"Then why didn't they play?"

"Susie said they all sometimes read together after dinner."

"And then do they play games?"

"I don't think so. Susie and Amanda don't seem to have any games."

"Let's go take them one of ours tomorrow."

"How would you get Josh and Laurie to play freeze tag?"

"I'd just tag them and then all they'd have to do is stand there frozen."

"That's it. That's what we have to do."

The next morning Penny came running down the stairs. "Today Mommy and Daddy come home."

Aunt Sally was busy in the kitchen. "We'll have chicken and corn on the cob for dinner. Your job is to pick the corn."

"I'll go do it now."

"No, it's fresher if you pick it right before dinner. But now you can go feed the chickens."

"What time is dinner?"

"Six o'clock as usual."

"When do they get home?"

"They always arrive at exactly five o'clock."

Sally suddenly noticed that Aldo was there too. "What do we do if they're late?" he said.

That was a question Sally didn't expect, certainly not from Aldo. "I guess we'll just wait for them."

"If they don't come by seven, will we eat without them?"

"I guess so, but they'll be here at five as usual."

"Can we go meet them?" asked Penny.

"We don't even know exactly where they are. We'll just have to wait for them here."

"I think I'll start walking down the road to meet them."

"Penny, go feed the chickens."

"OK, but can I have some hot chocolate for breakfast?"

"Hot chocolate in this weather?"

"Yes, I'm hot outside, but I'm cold inside."

"OK, missy, hot chocolate it is. Aldo, do you want some too?"

"No thank you, I don't want anything special. I just want today to be a normal day."

"Auntie, you said they'd be here by five o'clock, and it's already five thirty."

Penny looked worried.

"Well, I guess they just got delayed this year."

"How could they get delayed?"

"Well, maybe they stopped to help someone."

"I would stop to help anybody."

"Yes, I think you would, sweetheart. And now you can help Auntie by setting the table."

"I can set the table; Penny picked the corn," said Aldo.

"No, I want to set the table. I want to give Mommy and Daddy the special forks. The ones with the three teeth."

Uncle Devin had been sitting quietly. "And what about Auntie and me?"

"You live here. You can have the special forks every other night."

"And what about Aldo and you?"

"We had them last night."

"Well then, that's fair I reckon."

Sally spoke quietly to Devin. "I'm getting worried, they're always on time."

"As you told Penny, there're all kinds of reasons they could be delayed."

"Well I guess we have to eat; I'll keep their chicken warm in the oven."

"I'll go get Penny," said Aldo. They were surprised he could hear them. Penny was outside waiting for her mom and dad.

"I love it here on the farm," said Aldo, watching Penny eating her dinner quietly.

"When are Mommy and Daddy coming Uncle Devin?" asked Penny.

"Probably pretty soon, but maybe not until tomorrow, depending on what they're up to."

"What could they be up to?"

"Maybe they're having trouble with the car."

"But they checked out the car before the trip. And why wouldn't they call us?"

"They never take their phones on the hike."

"But if they're having car trouble, someone would help them, and then they could call us."

"Maybe they'll call soon."

"I'm glad we're here with you, Aunt Sally and Uncle Devin," said Aldo.

It was well after midnight when Aldo crept downstairs to write in his notebook:

At almost exactly eight o'clock, we heard the car coming up the road. Penny jumped up and ran to the door, but Uncle Devin quietly told her to go to her room. It wasn't Mom and Dad, but two policemen. I just sat quietly on the sofa, but the police saw me and hesitated. Uncle Devin asked me to go to my room. Penny asked me what was going on. She's always asking me for chess lessons, but she didn't even want to do that. So for the first time I showed her one of my notebooks. It was a little story about Uncle William and Aunt Clara and how Penny got them to play her "Make a face" game with all of us. The part she liked best was when Uncle William had to make a face like a chicken at feeding time and he made this clicking noise and bobbed his head and Susie and Amanda were so happy and laughing. After a half

hour Penny fell asleep. I could hear the grown-ups still talking, but they spoke so quietly I couldn't hear what they were saying. About ten minutes later I heard the police leave. Uncle Devin and Aunt Sally were still talking very quietly. Finally I ventured downstairs, and Aunt Sally ran up to me and hugged me and said, "Dear Aldo, I'm so sorry, your grandpa is gone. Mr. Riley stopped by with a pie Mrs. Riley made and found him dead in his chair, still holding that book on "The Life of the Pond" you gave him.

"What about Carol?"

"Aunt Carol didn't even realize it. I don't think she knows yet. Mr. Riley took her for a drive; they should be here soon."

"We shouldn't be too sad when we tell Carol about it. Maybe she can come live with us."

"No, she'll stay on the farm here with us."

Another car pulled in, and Carol came running up to the house. "Where's Pop? Is he OK?"

When Penny woke up in the morning, she saw that Aldo was already up, which gave her a start, which turned into slicing fear when she remembered that Mom and Dad had not returned the previous night. She started downstairs in her pajamas and heard Aunt Sally and Uncle Devin talking in hushed voices. She paused in fear on the landing. She didn't see Aldo anywhere, and that worried her too. She had seen him slip out in the middle of the night with his notebook, which meant that he was concerned about something. She knew he liked to write when he was worried, though he usually wrote about something else. He once told her, "It's better to be scared about something you know isn't real." Then she heard him coming down from the bathroom, and he took her hand.

"Aldie, where are Mom and Dad? What are Auntie and Uncle talking about?"

"I'm not sure. What do you think?"

"I'm afraid, Aldie. I'm afraid something bad has happened."

"Do you think that Auntie and Uncle are afraid?"

"No, they're grown-ups."

"Grown-ups get afraid."

"I'm sorry: I saw you slip out last night."

"Sorry, I tried to be quiet."

"You were very quiet; I don't know why I woke up."

"I had to do something."

"I know."

"Let's go downstairs."

"Aldo, Penny, come here sweethearts, we're going to go find your mom and dad."

"Where are they?"

"We don't know, Penny, probably somewhere on their way here. Maybe they had trouble with the car."

"But then why wouldn't they call?"

"I don't know, sweetheart, but we'll find them. Aunt Clara and Uncle William are going to look too. You and Susie and Amanda will stay with Grandpop and Carol. They're on their way to get you now, so get dressed."

Now Penny knew what Aldo was worried about, what made him get up in the middle of the night and make up something else to write about.

It was almost a year since their Mom and Dad disappeared, and Aldo and Penny were planning a special celebration for their anniversary. Uncle Devin and Aunt Sally had been worried that it would be a very sad day, so Aldo and Penny decided to celebrate the happy times instead.

"Auntie, can we have a big cake and ice cream?"

Sally always forced herself to look at Devin, since on her own she could never refuse Penny anything. This time he was nodding happily.

"Of course dear, a BIG cake and three flavors of ice cream, whatever kinds you want."

Penny thought for a few moments. "What do you think Aldo?"

"Chocolate is Uncle Devin's favorite, and peppermint for Aunt Sally, and we like strawberry."

"I like strawberry; you like black raspberry."

"I like everything, and strawberry goes better with the cake."

Uncle Devin felt the new peace and joy that had come with these children. "We'll have all four: chocolate, peppermint, strawberry, and black raspberry." Penny ran up and hugged him. For a moment he thought Aldo was about to follow. Instead, he said, "And Penny, we'll have to play your 'Make a Face' game."

They all sat around in a big circle. At Aldo's request, Uncle Will gave out the pencils and slips of paper and then collected the papers in Grandpop's big straw hat. Aldo spun the bottle and it pointed to Aunt Sally. After a gesture of kind concession, Sally drew a slip and merrily looked out at the others over her glasses. Then a strange expression came over her face and she continually puckered her lips. As everyone laughed, Carol screamed with delight, "Fish, fish, fish."

"Yes you got it, Carol, I'm a fish, that's what it says," waving the slip of paper, "I'm a fish."

Then Penny pretended to pull out a slip of paper for Carol, with "cow" written on it. Carol's face lit up, and she started to moo with abandon. Aunt Clara quietly muttered something about "cow" to Will, but Aldo was standing by and quickly announced her the winner. She seemed distressed, but Sally ran over and hugged her and Aldo brought her the big straw hat and when she hesitated handed her a slip of paper. It said, "chicken." Her squawks, though a bit hesitant at first, were undeniably those of a chicken. Susie and Amanda, at first a bit stunned at their mother's predicament, ran to her squawking like baby chicks, and Will laughed despite himself.

That night they let Penny stay up until Aldo's bedtime. After the lights were out, she had something to tell him.

"Aldo, last night Mom and Dad came to me in my dreams. They said they were looking forward to our party. They were very happy and proud of us, what we've done for Aunt Carol and Grandpop, for Aunt Clara and Uncle Will and Susie and Amanda, and especially Aunt Sally and Uncle Devin. They told me that Auntie and Uncle had always wanted children of their own."

"Then you're ready?"

"Yes, now I know it's time. Did they tell you too?"

"Penny, I have to show you something."

Aldo turned on the light and got out an old, worn notebook and handed it to Penny. He had never showed her any of his notebooks before. She read it very quietly and then looked intently at Aldo.

"Aldo, it's my dream. How can it be in your old notebook?"

"I don't know, Penny. I thought I made it up."

"How could you wait so long for me to have the dream?"

"I didn't know that you'd ever have it, or if these things would actually happen."

"But they did."

"Yes they did."

"And now I've had the dream."

"Yes."

"Yes, I'm ready."

In the morning, Aunt Sally and Uncle Devin were waiting in the kitchen.

"That was a wonderful party, Aldo and Penny, thank you. I've never seen everyone so happy before."

"Auntie, you even got Aunt Clara to play "Make a face."

"Well it was lucky she got "chicken"; she's always loved chicks since she was a little girl. Did I ever tell you that?"

Aldo smiled at Penny. "Yes that was lucky."

"Auntie and Uncle, we still miss Mom and Dad, but we're very happy here. We have one more favor to ask of you."

"Yes, Penny, sweetheart."

"We'd like to call you Mum and Pop."

Aunt Sally sat down and Uncle Will took her hand in his. Aldo and Penny had never seen her cry before, but she started sobbing. Aldo went over and took her other hand and Penny crawled into her lap and gave her a hug.

Aldo smiled at Penny and wrote something in his notebook.