

The Straight Story Film Summary

The Straight Story by David Lynch

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Context

America was astonished when they heard the story of Alvin Straight on the national news. No one could believe that a 73-year-old man could have ridden a lawnmower for six weeks to make peace with his brother, Lyle, but Alvin Straight did it all by himself.

When viewers meet Alvin, he is just enjoying his life, but he realizes after he receives a call that his brother has had a stroke and that he must make peace before it is too late. Since he can't drive a car, he decides that he will drive his lawnmower to Wisconsin to see his brother. Although he experiences a couple of setbacks, his stubbornness and persistence keep him going.

Throughout Alvin's journey, he meets a variety of people and helps each one with his simple, honest advice. Alvin makes a lasting impact on these people while experiencing life on the road. When Alvin finally reaches Lyle, they have a relaxed and friendly reunion after years of estrangement.

David Lynch is known for his unusual style in such films as *Lost Highway* (1997) and *Mulholland Drive* (2001). He creates films that go against the norm. *The Straight Story* is not as unusual as most of Lynch's films, but he challenges the norm by keeping *The Straight Story* moving at a slow, subtle pace rather than speeding it up like most modern films.

Richard Farnsworth started out as a stuntman. He often doubled for stars like Roy Rogers and Gary Cooper. In 1978, Farnsworth was nominated for an Academy Award for his role in *Comes a Horseman* (1978). Some of his other excellent performances include roles in *The Grey Fox* (1982) and *The Natural* (1984). He came out of retirement to perform in *The Straight Story*.

The Straight Story received awards from people around the world. It was nominated for the Golden Palm at the Cannes Film Festival and won the Screen International Award at the European Film Awards. The film was also nominated for three Independent Spirit Awards for Best Director, David Lynch; Best Feature, Mary Sweeney and Neal Edelstein; and Best First Screenplay, John Roach and Mary Sweeney. Richard Farnsworth won the Independent Spirit Award for Best Male Lead.

At the Golden Globes, the film was also nominated for Best Original Score - Motion Picture for Angelo Badalamenti and Best Performance by an Actor in a Motion Picture - Drama for Richard Farnsworth, while the Academy Awards also nominated Richard Farnsworth for Best Actor in a Leading Role.



Summary and Analysis

As *The Straight Story* begins, the audience sees the night sky sprinkled with stars before the scene changes into a large field where a man is driving a tractor. Then, we see a small town and a small house where Rose, Alvin's 40-year-old daughter who is a little slow, and Dorothy, her neighbor, call a greeting to each other. At the back of Rose's house, we hear someone fall while Dorothy returns to her seat in the sun.

In a building, a man named Bud tells friends that he's going to go over to Alvin's house. Bud goes to find Alvin, and when he arrives at the house, Dorothy shouts that Rose went out earlier. He walks to the back of the house and finds Alvin inside on the floor. Bud calls Dorothy inside, who wants to call 911 after she sees Alvin, but Alvin tells her to put the phone down. A moment later, Rose returns and wants to know what's wrong with her dad. He tells her he's fine, but he can't get up by himself.

Outside, Bud goes back to the bar to tell their friends that Alvin's back is out. Alvin tries to get out of going to the doctor, but Rose reminds him of his promise to her that he would go. At the doctor's office, the nurse tries to get him to put on a gown, but he tells her to just bring the doctor. When the doctor arrives, Alvin refuses to use a walker or have tests done to determine what is wrong with his eyes. The doctor tells him to start eating a better diet. If he doesn't make changes quickly, the doctor says there will be some serious consequences. Alvin doesn't want to hear anything about it.

Back at home, Alvin quickly lights up a cigar. Rose comes in to show off her newest birdhouse, and Alvin tells her he's proud. She asks what the doctor said, and he reassures her that he'll live to be a hundred.

Alvin then goes out to mow the lawn but can't get the mower started. While Rose paints her birdhouse, he works on the mower. Storms begin to come in, though, so he will have to wait until later to mow. That night, he and Rose watch the lightning storm until the phone rings. Rose answers it and comes back to tell Alvin that his brother, Lyle, had a stroke. Alvin simply sits still and watches the storm.

The next day, Alvin mows the yard while Rose talks to Bobby, Lyle's son. They discuss how the two brothers came to be estranged, and Rose explains that she doesn't know what Alvin will do. That night, Alvin comes in and talks to Rose. He tells her he's going to go see Lyle, but he's not sure how he'll get there yet.

The next day, Rose explains all the problems with Alvin going to see Lyle. He can't drive a car or afford to travel any other way, and all his joints are hurting. She also points out that he's 73 years old. He tells her that he's not dead yet. Then she asks what he's building out in the yard.

Rose goes to the store and talks to the clerk and a party she is going to give. Rose explains that her dad's going on a trip and needs food for his trip, but she still isn't sure how he's getting there. Meanwhile, at the gas station, the clerk asks Alvin why he's



buying so many gallons of gas, and Alvin asks to buy the clerk's "Grabber" as well. Finally, the clerk agrees to sell it and reluctantly gives it to Alvin.

Back home, Alvin keeps working on his project while Rose watches him work. He finally puts a hitch on his lawnmower and backs it up to a trailer filled with supplies for his trip. Rose just says, "Oh, geez, dad!" That night, Rose and Alvin talk and listen to the grain elevator. She tries to explain to Alvin that the trailer is too heavy for the lawnmower. He explains that he must go see Lyle on his own. She understands, and he tells her to look at the sky. It's full of stars. Then, we see the sun rise.

In the morning, Alvin begins on his journey as the town watches him pass. His friends come out to talk to him and try to tell him that he's going to get hurt. Alvin travels slowly down the road through many fields while making his way to see his brother. During the journey, music plays in the background, but there is almost no talking. The film moves slowly across the countryside of Iowa, and viewers enjoy the beauty as the music provides a background for the action. As people watch Alvin drive by, he simply waves.

When a tractor-trailer passes Alvin, his hat is blown off, and he pulls over to the side of the road to recover it. He gets off very slowly, gets his cane and retrieves his hat. Then, he gets back on the mower and tries to start the lawnmower up again, but it won't work. He flags down a bus driver and asks for a ride to Grotto so that he can get help with his lawnmower. The man agrees since the group is on a tour of the area.

Finally, Alvin gets help and a truck in the next town and brings his lawnmower and trailer back home. The men at the station watch him come back and just shake their heads and say, "Poor Alvin." While Rose and Dorothy have lunch, Alvin walks slowly and sadly back inside his house. Outside, he uses a gun to shoot at the lawnmower and causes it to explode.

The following day, Alvin goes to see the owner of the John Deere store, Tom, and talk to him about the use of his riding lawnmower. The man says he knows better than to talk Alvin out of his idea, but Tom thinks he's crazy. Tom shows Alvin an old 1966 machine, and Tom accepts Alvin's offer of \$323 and tells him that he actually used to own the machine. Alvin takes his new John Deere and drives home. Then, Rose watches as he leaves again.

Alvin's journey goes a little more smoothly the second time around. He stops on the side of the road for the night and uses his Grabber to pick up sticks so that he can make a fire for the evening. After Alvin finishes, he sits down and enjoys a smoke and his fire. The next day, he starts again. He is constantly passed by honking cars, and when he passes a young hitchhiker, he just waves as she looks on, stunned.

That night, Alvin once again makes his fire. The young hitchhiker comes up and says she couldn't get a ride. He asks whether she's hungry and offers her a hot dog. The girl begins to ask him about his life. He tells her that he has one daughter living with him and six other children, but his wife died a decade ago. She says that she's running away and she's five months pregnant. Her name is Crystal.



Alvin explains that he's going to see his brother, Lyle, in Wisconsin. She gets a blanket from the trailer and says that her parents will really hate her when they find out. Her boyfriend doesn't know yet. Alvin doesn't think they'll be mad enough to lose her or her "little problem." He says that a warm room and a roof sounds better than eating with an old geezer riding a lawnmower.

Alvin then begins telling the hitchhiker about Rose. He explains that most people think she's slow, but he disagrees. One night while someone else was watching the kids, there was a fire, and one of her boys was burned. Because of her slowness, the state decided she wasn't competent and took the kids away. He says she pines for them every day.

Alvin says that when his kids were little, he'd give a stick to each of them to break. Then he'd have them tie the sticks in a bundle and try to break them. Together, the sticks were too strong to break. He explains that the bundle represents family; together, a family is much stronger than the members are when they are apart.

Alvin offers to let Crystal sleep in the trailer while he stays in the chair, but she wants to sleep under the stars. She helps him up, and he goes to bed. The next morning when Alvin gets up, Crystal is already gone, but a bundle of sticks with a striped shoelace tied around it is lying beside the fire.

Alvin begins driving again and passes the dairy farms and sheep farms of the Midwest. Once a bad storm begins, Alvin tries to keep driving, but he decides to pull into an empty barn instead. He waits out the lightning storm inside while he smokes a cigar. Once again, Alvin travels on his lawnmower through the fields of the Midwest. At one point, a bicycle race passes him as he stops to watch the racers zoom by. They look at him like he's crazy but greet him kindly, anyway.

Later that evening, Alvin stops at the cyclists' campsite. They talk about getting old. Alvin says that he now realizes that you have to separate the wheat from the chaff and let the little stuff fall away. He says the worst part about being old is remembering when you were young. Alvin now has to drive on a busy four-lane road while it's raining. Large trucks are passing him. The next day, a car passes Alvin, and then the audience hears the squeak of breaks and a thud as we watch Alvin react in horror to the wreck.

Alvin tries to help the woman whose car has wrecked, but she starts screaming about how although she's tried to do everything right, she's hit thirteen deer in seven weeks driving down this road. She has to drive to work and home forty miles every day. She can't understand where they all come from. The deer is dead, and she begins to cry because she loves deer.

As the woman pulls away, the audience sees the dead deer lying in the center of the road. Alvin goes over to inspect it. Later, we see him cooking a large piece of meat and see antlers attached to the front of the trailer. The next day, a group of men watches a building burn. The firemen try to put out the blaze, but the people watching think it was



an eyesore, anyway. While Alvin is driving along, he comes to a large hill at a spot where the speed zone suddenly changes.

Although Alvin tries to slow down, he can't. The people watching the fire see him as he finally comes to a stop in front of the burning building. They come over to check on him and tell him that he's lucky that the mower didn't roll. The man, Dan, says that the belt probably broke, since there aren't any breaks. He used to sell John Deere tractors and doesn't think Alvin should be carrying that kind of load. They move it off the road so that Dan can take a look at it.

The firemen go back to their job while Dan takes a look at the mower. Not only is the drive belt broken, but there are also transmission problems. When Alvin tells the people his destination, they can't believe it. He still has sixty more miles to go, and he has already been on the road for five weeks.

The couples are shocked that Alvin's made it so far. One of the women thinks he should be frightened to travel alone, and he points out that after fighting in World War II, there's no reason to be afraid of a cornfield. They offer to let him stay with them for the night and use their bathroom.

Alvin smokes his daily cigar that night and watches the stars. He opens his wallet the next day and finds that he still has some money left. He knocks on the door of Dan's house and asks to borrow the phone. He wants to call Rose and let her know what's going on. He asks simply to call outside rather than go inside. On the phone, Rose tells Alvin that she's been worried about him. He asks her to send him his Social Security check. When he gets done with the phone, he leaves three dollars beneath it for the cost of the call.

Inside the house, Danny tells his wife that Alvin probably doesn't have the money to fix his mower. Danny is worried about Alvin possibly getting hurt. He knows that the hills will only get worse as Alvin gets closer to the Mississippi. She kisses him and tells him to go ahead and drive Alvin. He's a good man, and that's why she married him despite what her mother said.

After Danny finds the money, he comes out to see what Alvin's cooking. He lets Alvin know that it will cost \$250 to get the mower fixed. Danny offers to drive Alvin the rest of the way to see his brother, but Alvin wants to finish in his own way. Danny lights a cigarette and warns Alvin about the hills and the fact that the mower might break down. Alvin tells Danny that he's a kind man talking to a stubborn man who wants to finish what he started. Danny tells him to stay as long as he wants.

An older man, Verlyn, comes to see Alvin and invites him out for a drink. Alvin doesn't drink much, but he's ready for a change of scenery, so he goes. They talk about the war, and Alvin says that he began to drink then because he was angry. A preacher helped him stop. Verlyn says that many men came back trying to forget, and Alvin points out that those who haven't are easy to spot.



Verlyn then begins telling his story. When they were waiting for a warm meal one time, they thought the worst was behind them. Suddenly, a plane came over the hills and dropped a bomb on all his buddies. He can still see the swastika. Alvin says it's strange that his buddies' faces still look young, and every year he gets, they lose since they always look young.

Alvin was a sniper, and they would send him ahead to sit and watch. He would shoot at whatever he saw, even a movement in the woods. They had one scout, Kotz, a small Polish boy from Milwaukee, who saved them many times. One day as they crossed, the men were fired upon, and Alvin saw a slow movement. He shot, and the movement stopped. The next day, the group found Kotz shot in the head. Everyone thought until this day that a German sniper took him, but Alvin has always known the truth. Alvin sits quietly and sadly later that night, thinking and looking at the stars.

The next day, the Olsen twins work on the mower. They argue a lot in the process while Danny and Alvin watch. When they finish, they give Alvin a bill for \$247.80. Alvin thinks it's a little heavy for light work. He notices that the tires aren't as new as they claim, and he convinces them to lower the bill by \$30.

Alvin then asks how much labor he's paying for that was actually the twins fighting. Danny agrees, and then Alvin asks to have 20% taken off the labor. He also asks to get the oil price down a little, and they finally give the oil to him free. When they finally add up the charge, it comes to \$180.

Alvin agrees and gets ready to get back on the road. He tells Dan and the twins that he's going to see the brother he hasn't seen in ten years. He also shares with them that a brother near your age will know more about you than anyone else. He tells the story of hard things that were said. Now, pride is being swallowed as he goes to reconcile with his brother. He hopes that he's not too late. They look at him and realize how important their relationship with each other is.

That night, Danny wishes Alvin good night. Alvin plans to leave really early in the morning and takes this time to thank Danny for his kindness to a stranger. Danny asks Alvin to write to him sometime. Before daylight, Alvin starts up his mower and drives off as Danny watches from the window while drinking his coffee.

Alvin heads out of the town and toward his brother's home. He sees ponds and trees now that he's getting closer to the Mississippi. The audience sees the Mississippi River as Alvin crosses over the bridge. He is thrilled to see the "Welcome to Wisconsin" sign.

Alvin finally stops near a church and graveyard to spend the night. During the night, a priest comes out of the church and brings Alvin some dinner. The priest sits down to talk to Alvin. Alvin apologizes for trespassing, but the man says that he made a good choice. He camped next to one of the oldest cemeteries in the Midwest.

The priest then asks about the lawnmower. Alvin explains his mission and talks about Lyle. The priest asks who Alvin's brother is, and the priest says he met Lyle while he



was visiting at the hospital. The priest doesn't remember Alvin, though, and finds out that they haven't really been brothers for a while. The priest can't tell him anything more.

Alvin then begins telling his story of growing up with his brother. His parents struggled to run a farm while Lyle and Alvin tried to help. They were freezing most of the winter and longed for the summer. They talked about the lives they wanted to live as they grew up, and the dreaming made the trials seem less serious.

The priest asks what happened between the brothers, and Alvin responds that it's the story of Cain, Able, vanity and liquor. They both became so angry about what happened that they haven't talked in years. Alvin says none of that matters now. Alvin just wants to make peace and look up at the stars and talk again like they did when they were boys. The preacher says, "Amen to that."

The next morning, Alvin arrives in a town and stops at the bar as the bartender watches in amazement. He asks for a Miller Lite after all these years and then answers the bartender's questions about his trip. Alvin asks for directions to Lyle's place, and the bartender tells him to let Lyle know that Mickey hopes he'll feel better soon.

As the bartender is finishing giving the directions, the audience sees Alvin heading down a lonely road. He stops at one point for a long time because the engine stops. A man on a tractor stops and talks to him, and Alvin tries the engine again. It works. Then, he follows the man to Lyle's house.

Alvin finally arrives at Lyle's house and calls inside. There's no answer at first, and then Lyle shouts that he's coming. He walks out with the help of a walker. Lyle can't believe that Alvin is there and invites him to sit down. Alvin admits that he rode the lawnmower all this way to see Lyle. They sit together and cry a bit, and then the audience sees the sky full of stars as the film ends.



Characters

Alvin Straight, played by Richard Farnsworth

Description

Alvin Straight is an elderly man living with his daughter, Rose, in Iowa. He has had a long, full life, but one thing still bothers him: he hasn't talked to his brother in years. When he gets a call that his brother has had a major stroke, Alvin decides that he must go make peace with him before they run out of time.

Neither Alvin nor Rose can drive, but Alvin decides that he will figure out how to get to his brother's house, anyway. He is stubborn and refuses to accept defeat. He chooses to drive his old lawnmower there, but it gives out quickly. He then buys a new John Deere lawnmower and makes it almost all the way there. After one repair, he finally arrives at his brother's house and makes peace.

Alvin meets numerous people along the way and helps each of them with his common sense. Alvin's impact on the lives of those he meets is great, and they are inspired by his life and his determination.

Analysis

Alvin Straight is the definition of determination. He refuses to be beaten by anything. People think he should be concerned about sleeping on the side of the road, but he kindly points out that after fighting in World War II, he really has nothing else to be scared of.

Alvin brings hope to all those he meets. He proves to them that you can do anything you set your mind to do, and that by accepting defeat, you are defeating yourself. Alvin also inspired people across the country when this real-life story appeared on television throughout America.

Rose "Rosie" Straight, played by Sissy Spacek

Description

Rose is Alvin's mentally handicapped daughter. Although she is a "little slow," Rose had her own family but moved in with Alvin after her children were taken away from her because of a fire at their house. She cares very much for her father but still misses her children desperately.

Rose tries to take care of her father as best she can, but she can't stop him when he gets focused on accomplishing a goal. She tries to convince him not to ride a



lawnmower all the way to Wisconsin, but when she can't, she tries to support him and help him visit his brother.

Analysis

Rose is a kind, caring woman who wants to do her best for her father. She loves making birdhouses so that she can make the house even more beautiful. She also does her best by her father, even when she doesn't agree with his ambitions.

Dorothy, played by Jane Galloway Heitz

Description

Dorothy is Alvin and Rose's neighbor, who listens to their stories and stands by Rose while Alvin is gone.

Analysis

Dorothy is a kind woman who is friends with Rose and interested in helping her neighbors.

Crystal, played by Anastasia Webb

Description

Alvin meets Crystal during his journey to Wisconsin. She is five months pregnant and ran away without telling her parents or her boyfriend. As she tells her story, Alvin advises her to return home.

Analysis

Crystal learns from Alvin that family, like a bundle of sticks, is not easily broken. When she takes off, she reveals to Alvin that she has learned the lesson by leaving a small bundle of sticks tied with a shoestring.

Danny, played by James Cada

Description

Danny is the kind man who helps Alvin when his lawnmower breaks about halfway through his trip. He helps Alvin get the mower fixed and even offers to drive him the rest of the way, but Alvin wants to do this on his own. Danny talks to Alvin about life and love.



Analysis

As much as Danny helps Alvin by giving him a place to stay and helping him find someone to fix the lawnmower, he seems to learn even more from Alvin. He learns about integrity, love, kindness and persistence.

Verlyn, played by Wiley Harker

Description

Alvin meets Verlyn in a bar, and they discuss the effects of World War II on the men who made it back. These two, like so many others, have been suffering from the memories for many years.

Analysis

Verlyn tells Alvin his story and listens to Alvin's. They bring each other peace and understanding of a situation that most people don't understand.

Tom, played by Everett McGill

Description

Tom is the John Deere dealer who sells Alvin his new lawnmower. Tom is kind and treats Alvin with the utmost respect.

Analysis

Tom has great respect for Tom and treats his desire seriously.

Lyle, played by Harry Dean Stanton

Description

Lyle is Alvin's older brother. They are only three years apart, and they used to be very close. They had a falling out and haven't talked in years. Now that Lyle has had a stroke, Alvin goes to visit and make peace.

Analysis

Lyle is just as stubborn and ornery as Alvin. After one big argument they stopped speaking for over a decade. Lyle is happy to see Alvin when he arrives though, and they are finally able to make their peace.



Themes

Slowing Down Life

Many times life becomes so hectic that people have little time to enjoy their family and friends. Most people don't pay attention to sunrise or sunset and often miss out on some of the most important things in life because they are too busy working or running after the American Dream.

Alvin has spent his life working hard and making a living. His life has finally slowed down, and he is enjoying doing what he wants. When he hears that his brother has had a stroke, though, he realizes that he has to visit his brother one way or another, so he leaves on his lawnmower.

Along the way, viewers see Alvin moving at a very slow pace. Although he is laughed at by some, most people are impressed by his persistence. By slowing down the pace of his life, he is able to meet many different people during his journey. Since his lawnmower is not enclosed like a car, Alvin is able to talk to people even as he drives, and he affects many lives just by taking things slowly.

Persistence

Alvin may be one of the most persistent people alive. After hearing about his brother's illness, he decides that he will do anything to make peace with him. Since he doesn't want to take help from anyone else, Alvin decides to ride his lawnmower from Iowa to Wisconsin.

Everyone tries to convince Alvin that his plan is "crazy." Others try to tell him how dangerous the trip could be, to which he replies that after fighting in World War II, there's nothing to scare him in an Iowa cornfield. Alvin refuses to give up on his goals even when things seem impossible.

Alvin encounters many problems during his trip that almost prevent him from completing his journey. He also has to deal with the people who mock him or look at him like he's insane. Alvin's persistence can inspire viewers to be the best they can be and never to give up no matter what the odds.

Importance of Family

Family is one of the most important things in life to Alvin. Years ago, he and his brother fought and quit speaking. Now that they are older, and his brother's health is failing, he once again realizes the importance of family. Thus, he sets out on a six-week journey to make things right.



When Alvin meets Crystal, he quickly understands her situation. She doesn't realize that her family still loves her no matter what. He tells her a story from his childhood. His father would have the children gather up a bundle of sticks. While they could break the individual sticks, they could not break the bundle tied together. His father explained that family was the same way. Crystal obviously understands the message because she leaves a bundle of sticks tied with a shoestring by the fire the next morning.

Finally, Alvin arrives at Lyle's house and has a chance to make peace with his brother. Although they say little, they sit together in silence and enjoy the warmth of being with family. Alvin's greatest dream comes true, and the brothers sit beneath the stars again so that they can talk.

Style and Cinematography

The Straight Story is based on the true story of Alvin Straight, who traveled from Iowa to Wisconsin to see his brother. Lyle has had a bad stroke, and Alvin wants to make amends since they haven't talked for years. Alvin can't drive, so he rides his lawnmower for six weeks to get there.

Alvin Straight is an inspiration to viewers. His tenacity and stubbornness keep him from giving up even when everyone thinks he's insane. After fighting in World War II and raising a family, Alvin still has enough energy to undertake a major journey. Instead of being frightened by sleeping outside alone at night, he feels that after all he's been through, he has nothing left to fear in this life.

David Lynch does a beautiful job directing this film. He takes a major risk by keeping the action moving slowly throughout the film. Many viewers demand films that unfold at a fast pace, but Lynch wants viewers to experience and appreciate a slower pace and the beauty of nature shown with exceptional panning shots that scan the entire countryside. Lynch succeeds and displays a masterly grasp of the various tools he uses.

Motifs

Journey

Alvin Straight takes the journey of a lifetime in *The Straight Story*. After Alvin finds out that his brother, Lyle, is sick, he sets out on his lawnmower to visit and make amends. Alvin embarks upon a six-week journey from Iowa to Wisconsin so that he can make things right with his brother.

As Alvin journeys, he meets many people along the way and affects their lives. First, he meets Crystal and helps her to realize the importance of family, even though her family may be a little disappointed in her. Then, he helps Danny and the others see the value of persistence and integrity.

Although Alvin's impact on others is great, he also learns many things on his journey. After all these years, he rediscovers the beauty of a sunset and the enjoyment of driving along the highway. He also realizes the importance of family and the love he carries for his brother.

Nature

Most of us drive past nature at breakneck speeds. We never stop to slow down and appreciate the beauty all around us. *The Straight Story* takes viewers through the fields of Iowa and the hills of Wisconsin so that viewers can appreciate fully the beauty of nature.

David Lynch takes a major risk by moving the story so slowly. The story develops over time, and there are many moments of quiet with just the background music playing or the sound of rain falling. Viewers who have not visited the country receive exposure to the beauty of the American heartland as they watch the film.

Lynch forces viewers to enjoy nature just as Alvin does. We watch as he rides past dairy farms, sheep farms and wheat fields. We see him drive through rain and sun to visit his brother, maybe for the last time. We see the nature that surrounds Alvin and understand the situation and the life of the Midwest better as the film proceeds.

Interactions with Strangers

Alvin meets many people as he journeys toward his brother's home. He has spent many years living in his small town, so now that he is out where people don't know his stories, he makes an impact on those he meets. The first stranger Alvin meets is Crystal, a confused young woman who is five months pregnant. She is terrified to tell her family, and Alvin shares with her his own story and understanding of family. The next morning,

we realize that she learned the lesson because we see a small bundle of sticks tied with a shoestring that she left by the fire before returning home.

Alvin also meets Verlyn, who comes to grips with his memories of World War II while talking to Alvin. In this case, Alvin also receives something because he is able to let go of a few ghosts himself. No matter whom Alvin meets, he always seems to make a major impact, and through these meetings, viewers learn about Alvin's life and loves.



Symbols

The Lawnmower

When Alvin decides to visit his brother, Lyle, he chooses to ride his lawnmower all the way there. Everyone thinks that he is insane for attempting such a long trip on a lawnmower, but he is convinced that he can do it.

Alvin's lawnmower symbolizes his determination and perseverance. Alvin refuses to take "No" for an answer, and even though the trip takes six weeks one way, he will not be stopped by anyone or anything before he arrives at Lyle's.

Another possible interpretation is that Alvin's lawnmower symbolizes the slowing down of life. On the mower, Alvin must proceed very slowly, so he is forced to enjoy life and the beauty of nature. As Alvin moves at a slow pace, viewers also enjoy the beauty of the Iowa countryside.

The Stars

After all these years, Alvin wants only one thing. He wants to sit beneath the stars and talk to his brother like they did when they were children. His happiest memories took place with his brother under the stars, and he wants to have at least one final chance to enjoy the experience.

The stars symbolize the joys of childhood. For Alvin, the time under the stars was one of the most important parts of his life. Most people have memories from their childhood that are special and that they would do anything to relive. Alvin finally has this opportunity.

The stars also represent the similarity of life from person to person around the world. Since we all live under the same stars, our lives are also similar in many ways. We all experience the joys of family and love, and we could all use a few minutes to slow down a little bit in our hectic lives.

The Sticks

When Alvin meets Crystal, she is running away because she is five months pregnant. She didn't tell her boyfriend or parents and left quietly so that she wouldn't have to hurt them. Alvin believes that she is making a mistake, so he tells her a memory of his from when his children were young.

Alvin would have each child pick up a stick and break it; they could all do it easily. Then he would have them find another stick and put all their sticks together in a bundle tied by string. When they tried to break this bundle of sticks, none of them, not even the



strongest, could begin to break it. He explained that this was family. Therefore, the sticks are symbolic of family and love. Crystal leaves a bundle of sticks by the fire the next morning as she leaves. When Alvin finds it, he realizes that Crystal has understood his message and returned home to her family.



Essay Questions

Describe Alvin. What aspects of his character are admirable? Does he have any flaws?

Describe Rose.

What news does Alvin get that convinces him that he needs to see his brother? Why is it so important to him to go on this journey?

How does Alvin propose to get to Wisconsin? Why does he choose to travel this way?

What do Alvin's friends think of his plan? What do you think?

What happens the first time Alvin sets out?

How does Alvin help the girl on the road?

Describe Alvin's relationship to those that help him.

Why does Alvin continue on his own?

Describe the reunion between Alvin and Lyle.