

## Hard North

A dystopian novel by C.M. Miller

### Synopsis and Plot Treatment

Secession, violence, surveillance, *Disneyland*—it's 2045 and CalNation has everything.

Everything except cars.

But for project manager Crane Wells, the rusted, illegal Volkswagen sitting in the garage might be his only way out of the nightmare.



When Crane gets an urgent radio message from his daughter, the one who went off grid in the northern forests a decade ago, he packs his car and the chase is on—both for him and for Jessica, the young revolutionary who's been stalking him.

### Synopsis:

*Hard North* is a dystopian novel for adults.

The main character, Crane Welles is a civil project manager with the Triangle, the governing structure that expanded across Southern California when the state left the union. Earlier, and right on the cusp of 'CalExit,' Crane's daughter Aideen left with a survivalist group and disappeared into the forests above Chico. Since that time, and with no one aside from the couple Ruth and Daren who remained Crane's best friends, he's had nobody to live for. For a decade, and while life has deteriorated and become even more surveilled, restrictive, and dangerous Crane breaks the law by shutting his phone completely off, and venturing off grid to pirate broadcasters, who communicate his daughter's description to other broadcasters up north over HAM radio.

When Crane gets a message back from her, everything changes. Not only is Aideen alive and well, her message comes with a set of coordinates, an invitation to join her, and a window—*ten days only*. But while Crane prepares the '83 Volkswagen Rabbit has Dad left him for one last journey, Jessica Mariposa, a young revolutionary with a romantic

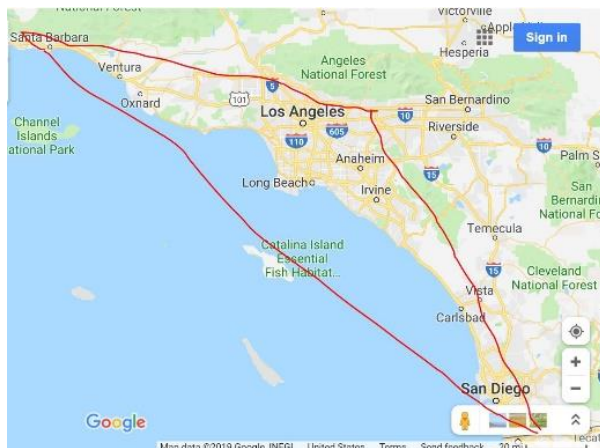
attachment to Salo (a ruthless captain of the ‘Professionals’) and instructions to kidnap him, follows in the shadows.

As Salo suspects, Jessica has a secret of her own. Crane’s friend Ruth—both Jessicas’ former childhood teacher and a high-ranking figure respected by the warring tribes that resisted CalNation—taught Jessica the *kill code*, a single password that might shut down the *Algorithm*, CalNation’s single, AI-powered network, communication, and social credit system.

With Ruth’s blessing, Crane leaves... and Jessica hijacks him. Together, and with Salo waiting for them, they break out of the Triangle on a one-way journey. But when Jessica learns that Salo only wants her for one thing (the kill code) and will take out her whole family to get it, she switches over to Crane’s team. On a detour through Cartel territory and the Capital region, where Salo’s Professionals are staging a hostile takeover of CalNation’s leadership, they drop off information from Crane’s years of work doing the Triangle’s dirty laundry with a hacker-journalist.

From there, and to honor Ruth and Daren’s request, Crane drives Jessica to the redwood coast to rendezvous with her Uncle Reuben, who leaves in a colony in the region that was once Southern Oregon. Along the way, they’re hunted by mercenary drones and helicopters from the Triangle. At times, and through one close shave after another, Crane wonders if his message from Aiden is even real.

In a final act, and with Ruth and Jessica’s blessing in the form of a protective medallion, Crane drives east—out to the coordinates where his daughter said to meet him. Along the way, we learn more of his past: the strained relationship with Aiden’s late mother, an affair that lost him his daughter’s respect, and his attempt to stop Aiden from leaving when California left the country. When he reaches crumbled roads and marauders, Crane comes to a point where he must leave the Rabbit, and whatever’s left of his old life, behind.



## **Characters:**

**Crane Wells** - A wealthy, late middle-aged civil project manager who longs to see his daughter again. Plodding, methodical, and ruthlessly focused on his own survival, Crane successfully navigated the state's secession, the turmoil that followed it, and the L.A. region's collapse and social unrest. By day, he works on highly paid logistics projects for the Triangle, but in his time off, he reaches out to his daughter through illegal radio broadcasts, secretly prepares for a defection attempt with dad's old, barely functioning Volkswagen Rabbit. Crane has a bargaining chip—a flash drive with evidence of the Triangle's secret payments to Cartels, who now produce food on the Central Valley's remaining farms through slave labor. Wary, guilt-ridden, but hopeful, Crane's longs to be reunited with his daughter, the only family he has left.

**Aideen Wells** – Crane's daughter, now in her late thirties. She disappeared when the state seceded and is rumored to be living off the grid in a 'Haven' of the northeastern forests. She appears in a few flashbacks, as a surfing-crazed teenager with flowing red hair. She's bright, adventurous, truthful, deeply caring, and uncompromising in her principles.

**Jessica Mariposa** –A half-Latina, twenty-two-year-old protestor seeking to join the 'Professionals,' the underground faction planning revolt across the Triangle. She's snarky and bold, but starving for someone she can trust and rely on. Unfortunately, and at the start, that person is Salo Díaz, an on-again, off-again romantic partner who convinces her to accept the mission of hijacking Crane's car when he drives north and taking him hostage. Jessica possesses hidden, dangerous knowledge of the 'kill code' a single passcode that could take out the Algorithm network across Triangle and the entire state. She learned this passcode from Ruth, who is her neighbor, a former teacher, and practically family. Above all, she wants to improve the lot for her ailing Abuelita, and her two young cousins Nestor and Lorena.

**Ruth Fujisaki** – Crane's best friend going back to high school. On the surface Ruth is a wise, neighborly Japanese-American senior who runs a bilingual tutoring clinic out of her house in an impoverished neighborhood. But in secret, she's an iconic resistance leader, point-person for one of the 'Havens' up north and those resisting the Triangle. In her past, she was fired from her career as the first Chief Director of the 'Algorithm,' when she voiced ethical objections to the network's existence. Unmarried for most of her life, she's spent the last decade being a wife to Darren, a well-to-do lawyer turned Christian Pastor of their Spanish-speaking church. Ruth knows Crane best; she both advises him on his escape and encourages him to help, rather than simply fight with Jessica after she captures him. Ruth also gives Crane a talisman necklace, along with a commonplace journal of quotes from the Bible and Western classics for him to read on his journey.

**Pastor Daren** – Ruth’s husband and Crane’s friend. Darren is a retired high-caliber Malibu lawyer turned Pastor of a multicultural congregation in Gardena. He enjoys good wine, fellowship, and shocking jokes that earned him the reputation of a wanna-be-comedian. Together with Ruth, Darren is involved in organizing the Havens up north and helping rebuild society in their crumbling corner of the Triangle.

**Salo Díaz** – Salo is a young, cocky, transnational student turned revolutionary. An early protégé of the Professionals, his skills in sabotage, tradecraft, inciting riots, and ruthless, hand to hand combat precede him. Trying to execute a takeover of CalNation’s leadership during a governor’s meeting in Sacramento, Salo hears rumors that Jessica knows the code that will disable the Algorithm. He seduces her, uses her to kidnap Crane, who is another candidate who might know the kill code, and then plans on using the code to disable the Algorithm and assure the success of his Leninist style *push*. At times, Salo’s nature as a sadistic killer with no conscience comes to the surface.

**Sean Locke-Smythe** – Crane’s awkward, intrusive boss at Wind and Water. A true believer in the woke propaganda of the Algorithm, Sean spies on Crane and discovers his illegal dealings. After Ruth and Darren take the heat publicly and die in their own escape attempt, Sean suspects that Crane, who is now far north, is really responsible.

**Mongrel** – A pirate broadcaster who lives in the Triangle’s gang and violence ridden ‘Corridor.’ After broadcasting Crane’s description of his long-lost daughter up north, Mongrel surprises him by running out with a scrawled message from her.

**Daniel** – A bodyguard and captain for the Professionals. Hardened and no-nonsense, Daniel advised Jessica against taking the mission to hijack Crane and his car. Later on, knowing that Salo is simply using her and plans to plunge CalNation into chaos with the kill code, Daniel turns into a saboteur and helps Jessica and Crane escape.

**Dido** – A cautious, sneering hacker who works for the Professionals. When Salo and his *push* fail, Dido agrees to sell Crane out to Sean Locke-Smythe in return for immunity and a sinecure job within the Triangle.

**Tench** – A Wind and Water accountant who manages Crane’s illegal side dealings off the books. The closest thing Crane has to a friend at work, or anywhere else.

**Sam** – A hacker-journalist who lives in the Capitol. An old friend of Crane’s.

**Reuben** – Jessica’s uncle, and a land-owning settler in Southern Oregon. When Crane and Jessica are ambushed near the old Stateline, Reuben and his crew come to their aid.

## **Plot Treatment**

### **Part One** (Chapters two through seven)

Longing for his daughter, Crane's world is turned upside-down when he receives a radio message from her, scrawled on a newspaper. The message reads 'Alive and well' and lists geographic coordinates, along with the phrase 'Ten Days Only' Crane realizes he has ten days to get to the coordinates before his daughter goes back into hiding...forever.

Jessica Mariposa, a young revolutionary, accepts a dangerous mission from Professionals captain Salo, who she's romantically involved with. When she finds Salo talking to a high-level programmer in a fashionable neighborhood, she learns he's after the kill code, a single passcode that could bringdown the entire CalNation algorithm. Though she doesn't tell him outright, Salo suspects (correctly) that Jessica knows the kill code.

After saying goodbye to friends Ruth and Daren, downloading CalNation's dirty secrets onto a flash drive, and having all his legal (and illegal) assets transferred to them through a friend, Crane drives his '83 Volkswagen out to the last remaining freeways. Ready for her mission, Jessica is horrified when Salo instructs her to kill Crane rather than capture him. To save his life and protect her family, and knowing Salo is trying to force her to give up the kill code, Jessica lies, insisting that Crane knows it.

Before he leaves the Triangle, Crane is hijacked by a desperate Jessica at gunpoint.

### **Part Two** (Chapters eight through twenty)

Jessica and Crane fight their way out of the Triangle, drawing attention and becoming suspects on the news. Knowing that Crane is suspected of embezzlement, Ruth and Daren arrange for Jessica's family to plead asylum as Las Vegas... and then come forward as the culprits of his shady dealings themselves.

Along what's left of Highway Five, Jessica and Crane broker a fragile truce.

At the rendezvous point, Salo and his lieutenants Dido and Daniel wait for them. When they arrive, Salo interrogates Jessica and threatens her family, forcing Daniel to rebel and break Crane and Jessica free—as a result, Salo executes him.

Distraught and suspicious, Jessica steals the car from Crane. But when it overheats, she wanders onto a Cartel farm, where drug cartels harvest crops with slave labor. While he looks for her, Crane reaches Daren on a lucky phone call, and learns that Ruth and Daren actually want him to help Jessica. When he finds her, he reminds her that he has all the information on the Cartel farms, and he asks if she'll accompany him to the Capitol

where they can drop it off with a journalist-hacker friend. After that, and on Daren's request, Crane will drive Jessica out to her Uncle Reuben, who lives in an independent settlement in what was once Southern Oregon

With Dido and Salo tracking them, they reach the Capitol, where mass protests are devolving into the Professional's organized push to topple CalNation's government. When Salo captures them, Jessica is interrogated and Crane has to fight his way through the protest to free her. Dido helps Jessica turn the tables and prevents the kill code from taking effect—together, they dump Salo off a fourth story balcony and into the protest below.

While they escape, Dido secretly makes contact with Sean, Crane's boss, promising to turn Crane in to him for a ransom.

### **Part Three** (Chapters twenty-one through twenty-six)

Crane, Dido and Jessica drive the Rabbit west, and out to the Mendocino redwoods. On the way, they learn that Ruth and Daren died trying to escape the Triangle—and that they are still believed to be the culprits of the shady, now public embezzlement that Crane was up to. Crane struggles to understand their sacrifice, both taking the blame for him and paying with their lives.

The three travelers take refuge under the protection of Manna, an old woman who operates a northern haven called the 'Lord's Land.' Manna doubts the authenticity of Aideen's message to Crane, suggesting that his quest itself is meaningful, whether or not she's really alive.

Later, and on old route 101, drones and helicopters from the Triangle ambush them. Crane gets on the phone with Sean, who is commanding the squadron and attempting to capture and extradite Crane to the Triangle. A fleeing Jessica reunites with Uncle Reuben and his band of fighters, who fight off the helicopters, rescue a wounded Crane, and nurse him back to health.

They camp out in the redwoods, and Uncle Reuben offers Jessica a path to independence and citizenship in his colony, if she's willing to give up her revolutionary beliefs and follow their rules.

Before Crane and Jessica part ways, Reuben takes a small bronze figure Ruth gave to Jessica, and another bronze figure from a book Ruth gave to Crane, and forges them together—he tells Crane to wear this figure as he navigates warring bands of resistance fighters and uncertain terrain.

## **Part Four** (Chapters twenty-seven through thirty)

Crane drives the Rabbit east. When he's stopped by resistance fighters, they nearly shoot him on sight—but when they see and recognize Ruth's medallion, they let him through.

While he drives, Crane relives the first time he drove out this way to fetch his daughter—right on the cusp of California breaking away from the country and locking down its citizens. He relives the pain of getting close to her, but then being unable to leave his former life and his house by walking out to her group, where he would be exiled but free to start an entirely new life.

He drives up into the northeastern mountains, until the roads get patchy, torn up, and then completely impassable. With help, and tows from strangers, the Rabbit holds on... until the timing belt breaks. Stranded, and feverous from an infected gunshot wound, Crane camps for days... and the ten-day window his daughter gave him elapses.

When marauders arrive and take the Rabbit apart for scrap metal, Crane is mortified. But he accepts their offer of a ride that will bring him close to his daughter's coordinates. On the drive, Crane suspects that they will capture him for ransom, and he flees into the wilderness when drones attack. Exhausted, out of supplies, and washed out by a flash flood, Crane accepts help from an elderly couple riding horseback.

Thinking that there is no way his daughter would stay at the coordinates past the ten-day window, Crane reasons that at the very least, he can find the place where she waited for him and live out his days there.

They couple takes Crane across gorgeous, uninhabited land to a lake, Jane's Reservoir, where he's astonished to find log cabins, families, children, and armed patrols—another secret Haven. There, he meets his grown daughter Aideen when she offers to wash his feet.

### **Heart of the Story**

*Hard North* is a part social-political thriller in the vein of 1984), part Mad Max road trip, and every bit redemption tale, (Children of Men). Christian readers will recognize the clear-cut coming to faith, and walking out faith story even unto death story (Pilgrim's Progress). Crane's journey and his longing to be forgiven by, and reunited with his daughter is the heart of the story. His being taken captive by Jessica turns into a long shot, unexpected blessing, giving him the chance to bear with someone not at all like him, understand their needs, and lay his life down—the exact things he struggled to do when work and success ruled his life, his wife separated from him, and his relationship with Aideen grew strained and distant.

When Crane learns of Jessica's relationship with Ruth and Daren, he takes their injunction to protect and transport her to heart, even following it to his own near death. Along the way, and as others give up their lives for him, Crane stumbles forward on his own redemption path—one that culminates in the living, Christlike hope of meeting the daughter he longed to see again face to face. In the end, everything is stripped away from him and he wanders through the wilderness to find her. When he does find her, he's cleansed.

**Genre, Style, Audience:**

This novel is speculative fiction for adults. The genre is straight, clean dystopian drama, in the vein of novels like P.D. James's *Children of Men* and Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*. It will explore and lean on the psychological intensity of fleeing danger, being captured, facing the unknown, and sacrificing oneself, with echoes of the atmospheric, psychological realism of J.G. Ballard—but the heart of the story is the relationship between Jessica and Crane, and Crane's growth toward redemption. Political conservatives, and Christians, in particular, will see shades of allegory that point toward the deepest reality—one birthed in bloodshed on a cross.

This novel is character driven, narrated from a third person omniscient point of view that switches off between the timelines and thoughts of Crane and Jessica, as the two fight, outsmart, negotiate, and learn to trust one another.