

City in the Desert

It was a pleasant day. The smooth roadside, decorated by rocks and short desert plants flew by. It was hot, but the radio rocking and AC blasting fought hard against the monotony. It was a road trip. This is what a road trip should feel like.

Don was touching mindless bliss for the fleeting minutes that he didn't have to concentrate on keeping his car on the road. He was on here for another 100 miles, his phone turned off, saving battery for when he would actually need directions.

Don's only concern was that the fuel gauge was low. It was strange, he could have sworn he had fueled up at the last town, he ought to have more than enough to make it to the next, though he supposed he had fueled up the moment he had rolled in, and stayed for a little too long.

But the fuel was almost empty. Down at the E reading on the dial, in a couple of minutes, the gas light would come on.

Don kept one hand on the wheel and turned his phone on with the other. The phone took a little bit to boot up, he glanced around at the flat red surroundings. It was mesmerizing to look at the horizon. The heat rising off of the ground distorted the line, creating a dance of blue and red at the edges of the world.

One of the distortions wouldn't go away. Don was concentrating on it, determining what it was when his phone vibrated. The final stage in its boot sequence. He glanced down, opened the maps app, and typed "gas station" before snapping back to the road. This stupid car drifted right. It was awful. It wasn't even a rental, Don had picked it out of the shop himself and in just a few years it had turned into a junker.

What **was** that up ahead? A butte? Don wasn't in Butte country. It must be some sort of rock formation, not uncommon in the desert, but to be rising over the horizon like that it must have been huge! Don was eager to see what it was this was what this road trip was all about!

Don laughed. He opened up the engine, not caring about the dwindling gas. Maybe he'd break down. Maybe he would have to camp in the back of his car for a week before another soul passed him to hitch him a ride. In the meantime, he would be busy communing with nature and breathing fresh air, miles away from civilization. He had the camping stuff in his trunk. Now this would be an adventure!

The gas light came on. Don didn't want to take his eyes off of the wiggling horizon and hold onto this feeling of euphoria that gripped him so passionately, but it broke, and he couldn't get it back no matter how much he tried to block out reality. Don checked his phone. It wasn't on, even though he had been charging it all day. He mashed the power button again, the phone began its start-up sequence. That butte he had been focusing on earlier was coming into view. The large flat-top behemoth showed bright above the shaky perimeter of the horizon.

And it was silver. Chrome even, shining blindingly against the stark red of the desert, either this was an astounding new formation to report back to geologists, or Guinness for that matter or... This tower was obviously man-made.

Don glanced at his phone. It hadn't even gone through the boot sequence before shutting back down. Maybe it was overheating. Don had left it in the sun he supposed.

The tower approached. And with it, another, and another, followed by the lower-rise buildings of the outskirts of a city. There was no way. Don was nowhere near civilization. Any city would have at least had a lone gas station a couple of miles out on the highway... and especially a city this size, and this new! Don stared at the spectacle. The "butte" that he had seen when approaching was a chrome spire with a large, circular flat top with the diameter of a football field, balanced almost impossibly on a pillar almost needle-thin at the top that tapered outward towards the ground. Around this central building was a cluster of office buildings. Large identical white rectangles with a uniform grid of windows down their face.

Don was taking this in as he passed the first buildings on the outskirts. The central monument could not have been more than two or three miles away from the first house Don

saw, approaching on his right, springing up from the desert with a low white fence to denote its own patch of brown dirt as opposed to any other. The city came on fast, the road Don was on almost immediately turned to cross streets and residences, each house painted the same almost-white blue, one-and-a-half stories, and a thatched red roof. The highway he was on was marked at every crossroad. "I-40" and "50th street". "I-40" and "49th street". The numbers counted down relentlessly, Don noted that he had not seen another car. Not on the streets or in the driveways. It was impossibly clean, and Don hadn't seen a soul. Maybe it was one of those fake towns that the military had set up to test nuclear bombs, only a bomb hadn't been set off here...

At I-40 and 28th, the residential buildings opened up to a corner on the edge of a business district. There was a gas station. The sign was blank, painted in the same white-blue paint as the rest of the city. The fuel light in the car had not started blinking, but Don didn't really have a choice. He pulled up to a pump, turned off the car, and stepped out.

As soon as the door opened, Don hit a wall of silence. Closing your eyes you wouldn't know that this was a city. A breeze blew by and not even a power source could be heard humming in the distance. Don unhooked the pump and socketed it into his tank. He turned to put in his credit card. The screen didn't function. It was painted over with that same paint that the houses were adorned with, which, up close, Don noted, was actually millimeter-thick stripes of blue and white. Don went to grab the pump and depressed the handle a couple of times out of frustration. To his surprise, there was resistance. He held the handle down and felt gas begin to flow. That was good news.

Don wandered into the station, thumbing through his wallet for cash. This town didn't seem real, but he figured he'd leave a twenty on the counter just in case. He bumped the door open with his hip and stepped into a spotless gas station. A bright fluorescent lamp coated the white walls and solid light grey flooring with flat white light that seemed to eliminate all shadows. And, for the first time since driving in, Don saw a human being.

There was a man behind the counter, standing straight upright, military-like, behind the cash register smiling at Don with a grin so tight he might crack a tooth. This cashier had on a business suit, he was clean-shaven with close-cropped hair, and he hadn't said a word.

Don walked up to the register. He was going to pay and leave, this was way too much. "Hey I just filled my tank, it's like 20 gallons to fill the whole thing how much is that?"

"No charge sir." The cashier made eye contact, spoke kindly, and returned to his original position.

"Oh come on, what is with this act? Listen, I have a twenty and some change. I'd like to pay with a card but I'll just leave this on the counter if you insist."

"No need sir." The man seemed sincere enough in the moments that he spoke. His face broke into a less intense smile and he made eye contact before finishing his sentence and returning to his position.

"Oh come on! What is this? Do you need help? Do you want a ride out of here?" The man did not move an inch, it was almost supernatural, it was at least well-practiced. Don leaned in closer and whispered. "Am I in danger?"

The cashier's eye's snapped to Don's "Please leave sir."

Don now noticed the absolute stillness as the cashier stopped speaking. The convenience store was fully stocked, but not a single bag of chips or bottle of soda had been taken off the shelves. He inspected the cashier as the man stood, staring straight ahead, or perhaps at the door, Don noticed that the cashier was not actually within reach of the cash register. The man breathed, and he blinked. Perhaps it was all some bizarre performance art. "Well, I'm leaving this here." He declared, throwing the money on the table and walking out.

"No need sir." Though the cashier swiped the cash off of the table regardless and shoved it in his pocket. "Sir?" The voice stopped Don as he was about to exit the doorway, he did not turn. "Don't stop for anyone else."

Don walked briskly to his car, acutely aware of the silence of this "city". He got in and drove out onto the highway he had come in on. The business district he passed was shoddy, Don passed a small grocery store, a couple of walk-in loan businesses, a Chinese restaurant, and a liquor store. All immaculately clean, and finished with the same bright blue aesthetic as the rest of the city. As he left the small business district, he passed by some houses, still the same color and general design, as the ones he passed before, these houses were three stories tall, with pillars on their doorsteps and shrubs instead of fences. Don glanced into the window of the first house he passed. He saw a large flat television screen displaying bright blue static. The room it shone on was barren, the blue light coated the white walls with its harsh bright light, as Don marveled, on the opposite end of the room was a couch upon which sat a solitary woman in a red dress, staring at the television screen, grinning. She spotted Don's car as he rolled by and turned to look, and for a split second, her face faltered before snapping back to the screen.

Don sped up. He should have turned around but at the moment he had pulled out of the gas station, out of either instinct or stupid curiosity he had driven onto the interstate in the direction he had been going, and there was no way he was going to slow down once he was moving or dare turn onto a side street.

The tower at the center of the city was coming up on Don's right. Don glanced down the streets passing by him off the main highway. As the numbers counted down, 15th, 14th... Don hit another business district, the businesses were upscale now. He passed by giant glass-front stores, with clothes, jewelry, and technology on display. Down the streets, towards the center of the city, the stores turned into office buildings, beginning at the same three-story height and growing exponentially up until the base of the tower, which dwarfed everything else.

At about tenth street, Don saw movement. He slowed, just a little bit, to see what was happening there, about ten blocks down. It was more people, dressed in the suits and dresses he had seen in the upscale shop windows, walking briskly towards the center of town. The

sparse movement grew as Don approached First Street until it was a throng of people clogging the street, although, Don noticed, not down any other streets.

Don passed Second Street, and he stopped in awe. At the end of First Street was the tower, the crowd of people had turned into a mob about the base of the tower. The throng coalesced into a sort of vortex of bodies and heads next to the base of the tower. What the crowd was actually gathered around was a wooden throne, kind of a tall ornate chair although Don couldn't make out too many details. The legs of the chair went about 10 feet down to the top of the highest head in the clamor of bodies squirming underneath it. Simultaneously supporting the throne and flirting with knocking it over the crowd struggled, fighting to be the ones with hands on the legs.

At the top of the chair sat a man in a black coat and red blazer. It might have been a trick of forced perspective, but the man lounging in the chair seemed two or three times larger than anyone in the crowd below him. As Don stared, the man in the chair turned to look at him. The man had short black hair and brown eyes, he grinned at Don, and Don swore the man's head grew larger and larger, as if approaching him, the light from outside began to fade...
Thump something hit Don's car on the passenger's side. He swiveled to look, a woman in a red and white polka dot dress was pressed against his window, she stepped back, shocked that a car would be in her way. Don glanced back to the crowd at the far end of the street. The man on the chair was still grinning at him.

Everyone in town had turned to look as well.

Don floored it. He cracked 120mph as he left the last white picket fence that flowed seamlessly into the brown-red sanity of the desert. Don didn't look back and vowed never to tell anyone he knew about the experience. They would swear he had gone crazy driving by himself across the country, and in another 10 years, he had decided the very same.