

# THE HIGHWAY PEOPLE

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John Boston

Walter wasn't quite sure what he saw. He wasn't sure if it was lightning or a thunderstorm...or something else entirely. It was the middle of the day and the sky had turned a different color. He had lived in the desert for nearly thirty years and had never seen anything like this. When he heard something that sounded like thunder, he figured the rain wouldn't be too far away. This time of the year, the desert can experience severe monsoonal storms where they get their entire year's worth of rain in just a few hours. He had been caught in a few of them, the last one was just downright scary.

"Looks like a storm's coming," he said to his wife Martha who was in the passenger seat.

"My bones aren't saying rain. I don't know what that was, but I don't think it's going to rain."

The sky suddenly changed color. Walter heard a strange ringing in his ears. He looked up and saw kind of a tunnel forming in the sky. It was the most incredible thing he had ever seen.

"Martha, what the hell is that?"

"I don't know Walter.....I've never seen anything like that in my life," she said in awe of what was in front of her.

"Do you feel that? On your skin I mean?"

"Yeah. Feels like static electricity," she said.

Walter kept driving. They were on a desert road off the I-40. Walter and Martha lived in Palm Desert and were on their way back from a weekend in Las Vegas. The road was normally almost deserted. Once and a while, they spot another car. He knew they had just experienced something otherworldly. Something that defied logical explanation.

*It would give the old hens in church a little something to cluck about. Cause whatever that was.....it was not something he wanted to experience again.*

"Walter.....is that car up there?" asked Martha.

"Yes, I believe it is. What kind of a car is that?"

"It says Camaro," said Martha

"Paul's boy got one after he came back from Vietnam. Chevy makes them."

He said.

"That is the strangest looking car I've ever seen," she said.

Walter slowed down and came to stop in front. A young black man wearing an Army uniform came running over to him.

"Hi there Lieutenant. Car trouble?" Walter asked.

"I'm ashamed to admit it. I got lost and ran out of gas. I was the only one in my squad who passed nighttime land navigation and I can't even read a roadmap. It was almost like I was driving in circles, then those weird lights in the sky, did you see those? That was the craziest thing I've ever seen."

"We sure did. I'm Walter, this is my wife, Martha. We can take you to the nearest gas station if you like. I think there's one right off the 40 just outside of town."

"I sure would appreciate it. My name is Ron Haywood. Man, is it hot out here." said Ron, wiping the sweat off his brow.

"It's barely a hundred. That's cool for this time of year. Say, that's some car you got there Ron."

"Yeah, my dad bought it for me after we got back from Iraq. Spent six months over there training for the big invasion, then we're told we have to stop a hundred miles outside of Baghdad. We just let Saddam get away. Just incredible. We better get going before I melt out here." said Ron and jumped in the bed of Walter's pickup."

"We have soldiers in Iraq? I didn't know that.....and who is Saddam?" asked Walter looking at his wife.

Walter kept driving. Nothing about this trip was making sense. He should have seen signs for I-40 by now. He saw the turnoff for Zzyx road. He even saw a sign for Ludlow. He looked at his fuel gauge. He had only a ¼ tank left. He kicked himself for not filling up in Vegas. Running out of fuel this time of the year in the Mojave desert could be a death sentence. Martha told him to fill up. He should have listened to her. They didn't have much water left either.

*Things were beginning to deteriorate at a lightning fast pace for Mr. and Mrs. Walter here.*

He slowed down when he saw the car parked off the road up ahead. They had a sheet over the side. A man and woman came running over to the truck as soon as they approached.

"Hi, folks. We've been out here for two days. Ran out of gas. Do you have any water?" asked the vagrant.

"Got a water jug in the back. Don't know if it's drinkable or not. I filled it up last year." said Walter.

The man and woman ran over to the back of the truck. They grabbed the water jug and started guzzling. Ron reached over and grabbed the water jug from the woman's hands.

The man gave Ron an ice-cold stare. Ron had seen it from a few of the old school white men when he had been stationed in the deep south. He knew it all too well.

*The only good nigger is a dead nigger look.*

"We should try and conserve the water. It might be a while before we get any more."

"Give me back that jug boy." said the bum.

"I will not and don't call me boy."

"The hell you doing wearing an Army uniform? Since when do they let your kind in the Army?" he sneered.

"I'm a commissioned officer in the United States Army. Anyone can be an officer.....well maybe not everyone," said Ron.

"Well shit, if I ain't seen it all now. Say, old man, you mind if we catch a ride with you. I'd be ever so grateful."

"I can take you as far as Palm Desert. We don't have much gas left. I hope we find the highway soon." said Walter looking out his window.

The man and woman climbed up in the back of the truck. He and Ron had taken an almost instant dislike to one another.

"I believe your kind ought to be running behind the truck. This area is for white folk only." said the vagrant smiling.

Ron got up and had his fist cocked back, ready to knock the man's head off when he quickly opened up his jacket and put his hand on his gun. Ron stopped abruptly.

"That's right, settle down boy. You wouldn't be the first nigger I killed."

Ron was fuming. He was an accomplished amateur boxer before enlisting. He had never wanted to beat up anyone so badly in his life, but that gun changed everything. That was a huge variable in the equation.

"Dear.....what's a highway?" asked the woman

"I'll be damned if I know," he replied.

"Say, what year was that Ford coupe, looked like a 34 or 35?" said Walter, trying to defuse the situation in the back.

"It's a 34, just bought her last month," said Roy.

"Man, she's in great shape. Whoever did the restoration, did a great job," said Walter.

Roy said nothing and just gave Walter a puzzled look.

"So, what brings you nice folks out to the desert?" asked Martha.

"We was uh.....we decided to go for a drive. I don't know what the hell happened, but the next thing I know, the sky gets all funny. I hear this strange sound and everything I touch starts shocking me. I saw the sky open up. Weirdest thing I've ever seen in my life.

"I'm Walter Hansen, this is my wife Martha."

"Pleased to meet you. I'm Roy Jenkins, this is my wife, Sally."

"Roy and Sally Jenkins, where do I know that name from?" asked Martha.

Walter just shrugged his shoulders and kept on driving. Ron was hanging out the back of the truck, trying to avoid the other two in the back. Walter was getting very nervous. This truck was not exactly *fuel-friendly* and the gauge was getting lower by the minute. He looked up and saw buzzards flying over his head. He wasn't sure if they were for a dead animal.....*or just getting ready to devour Walter and everyone else in the truck.*

"Ron, we've been driving this road for years. Hell, I helped put it back in 39. We should have hit the highway by now. I don't understand."

"I thought the same thing. The road is only about thirty miles and I was on it for almost two hours."

"Now, what is that?" asked Walter pointing up ahead.

They slowed down and saw two ladies sitting by the side of the road. Walter stopped the truck. The ladies came walking over to him. They were barely wearing any clothes and had strange tattoos on their arms and back. Their car looked like something straight out of the future. He was trying to make out the writing on the back.

*PRIUS.....what the hell is a PRIUS?*

"Hello, ladies. Having some car trouble?" asked Walter.

"We are lost. I know. I lost my signal and my battery died. Could you guys call us a tow truck or something? I'm so hot, I'm afraid I'm going to pass out." said Melania.

"Do you guys have a phone? I just need to make a call, it's super important," said Crystal.

It took Ron a moment to process what the girls were saying. He was in awe of what he saw. They had the craziest pictures drawn on their skin. They were hardly wearing any clothes at all.

*Ron could certainly get used to this.*

"Lady, how in the hell would any of us have a phone?" asked Roy

"A cell phone?" said Crystal holding up hers.

Roy grabbed it and looked it over. He looked over at Crystal and the other girl.

*Things were getting a little too real for Roy. It was like these ladies were from another planet or something.*

"Do you guys have any water? We've been out here for hours."

Ron handed her the water jug. She gulped down several mouthfuls, then handed it over to Melania who did the same.

"I'm Ron. I don't know who these two are. We all broke down on the road like you."

"You all broke down. That's weird. We were driving overnight. I saw the sky light up. It was the most beautiful thing I've ever seen. I took a shortcut, trying to get to Riverside. I should have just stayed on the 15, I'd have been there by now."

"What the hell do you mean the 15?" asked Roy

"Interstate 15."

"What's an Interstate?"

"The big highway that goes right through the desert. So none of you has a phone that works? I can't get a signal."

"Would you girls start talking normal?" said Roy

"I am talking normal," said Crystal.

"What kind of car is that? It's so weird looking."

"It's a Prius. It's my baby. We used the electric for like two hours after we ran out of gas. I just don't get it, we seemed to be driving in circles."

Ron was fascinated by the girls. He loved white girls, especially wild and crazy ones like these.

*There was just no telling where you were going to end up with girls like these.*

"Folks we got a problem here. I'm almost out of gas. With the extra weight in the back, I'm afraid we won't make it much further." said Walter.

"Look, just take us to the nearest gas station, we'll figure out the rest," said Melania.

"Well, you heard the man, guess your ride is about over huh, boy?" said Roy reaching into his jacket.

"Yeah, I guess it is," said Ron hopping out of the back of the truck.

"Look folks, I don't know what's happening here, I think we can all agree that something very unusual is going on. I know everyone's scared, I am too, but I think we stay together as a group. At least until we know what's going on."

"Guys, we ran out of gas and got lost. It's not the end of the world," said Crystal.

"I'm afraid the gravity of this situation might have eluded you, young lady. Without water, we won't last more than a few hours in this heat before dehydration sets in. If we don't get to civilization soon, well....." he said.

*Things could become mighty unpleasant for all parties involved.*

Roy stood up and pulled out his gun. Sally pulled out hers as well. No one said a word. They didn't have to.

*The guns said more than enough.*

"Walter, I had to be a bother, but the way I see it, Sally and I stand a much better chance of making it by ourselves than with the rest of you. Walter, I'll be needing your keys, if you would please," said Roy holding the gun.

"Who the hell is that?" asked Ron pointing.

They all turned around to see a cowboy on a horse galloping through the desert. He was waving frantically at the group. Ron had never seen a real cowboy before.

"Hiya folks.....name's Slim Maltby. I run cattle for the railroad. He turned and looked over the Prius, then looked at Walter's truck. What is this thing?"

"How did you get here?" asked Crystal.

"I was chasing this heifer and I see the night sky light up. All these weird lights and colors. It was like a rainbow, except it was everywhere. Everything just shifted. It got all blurry. I've been riding all night, trying to find something, hell anything. My horse needs water. I need water.....what exactly is a Prius anyway?"

The group just looked at one another. They were all scared. It was Martha who first realized it. She was the first one who asked.

"Slim.....might I ask you something?"

"Yes ma'am, ask away."

"Slim, if you would be so kind as to tell us what year it is."

"Ma'am?"

"What year is it Slim?"

"Ma'am.....it's May 8th or 9th, 1901," he said.

"Shit, were you dropped on your head or something, cowboy? It's June 1934," said Roy looking over at the rest of the group, smiling.

"What year is it for you and Martha, Walter?" asked Ron.

"December 1968. What about you?"

"February 1992.....ladies?"

"June.....2022," said Crystal.

"Now, wait just a damn minute here. I ain't stupid, there's no way you all are from the future."

"Look at their car idiot. Have you ever seen a car like that? I bet it drives itself.....does it?" said Ron

"Pretty much," said Crystal.

"How is that possible? How can we all be from different times?" asked Melania.

"We're from different times, but we were all traveling in the same area. Whatever happened up in the sky, it must have somehow brought us here," said Walter.

"It's like some kind of trap. Once you're in, you don't seem able to get out. So then, when exactly are we now?" asked Ron.

"Look, folks, this is all very fascinating, but as I said earlier, we do have the guns. Now, Walter, your keys, please. Don't make me ask again." he said pointing his gun at Walter.

Slim took out his pistol and aimed it right at Roy.

"Put the gun down, or you're eating lead," he said.

Sally aimed her gun at him.

"Jesus, you idiots! What's your name?" screamed Crystal walking right up to Roy.

"Roy."

"Roy, do you realize you're talking to someone from the year 2021?"

"So what?"

"So what? I'm talking to someone from 1934. Don't you see how crazy this is?"

"It's a little weird I guess."

"Yeah and we're going to shoot each other? Over what?" asked Crystal.

"Lady, just get out of our way. We're out of here. Give me the keys pops, or your wife gets it " said Sally.

"I told you once, I ain't gonna say it again. Put your gun away or I'll kill you right here and now," said Slim

"Two guns against one. You like those odds?"

Ron reached around and grabbed Sally's gun, ripping it out of her hands. He pointed it at Roy.

"You dumb bitch." he sneered.

"Jesus, what is wrong with you people? Maybe my wife and I should just take our chances on the road."

"Your wife? You mean you two are dykes?" asked Roy holding the gun on the group.

"We are a same sex couple, yes. Melania and I are legally married."

"So in the future, dykes can marry each other? I guess queers can marry each other too, huh?" said Roy.

"Roy, you're a homophobe. A disgusting homophobe."

"What the hell is that?"

"Young lady, are you saying that in the year 2022, homosexuals can marry one another?" asked Martha

"Yes, why is that so hard to believe?"

"Cause it's freggin weird," said Slim. So, is there a negro army in the future?" asked Slim

"People.....look. I might sound like a bitter old woman, but I just do not understand as a Christian, how our society could allow homosexuals to marry one another. What else do we allow? I mean, look at you ladies. What man is going to respect you dressed the way you are? You look like cheap hookers." said Martha.

Walter put his hand over her to try and calm her down.

"If all ladies act and dress in the same manner, you do in 2022, then God help us all," said Martha.

"Fuck you lady," said Melania.



Martha walked over to her and slapped her across the face. Walter grabbed her and pulled her back. Melania was about to swing for her when Ron got in between them.

"The more things change, the more they stay the same, huh?"

"What you mean by that boy?" asked Slim

"I mean we've always been terrible to each other. We're probably always going to be. We always think things will get better in the future, but they never seem to, do they?"

"Lady, people like you are the reason the world is so screwed up. Always trying to force your opinions on others. Do you have a daughter?" asked Melania

"No, Walter and I have a son. He died last year in Vietnam," said Martha

The girls seemed to pause and back off. Roy put his gun away and so did Slim. They realized they were in a bad situation with people they did not like.....or just downright loathe.

"Crystal.....is that your name?"

"Yes."

"I'm guessing in the future, cars probably get really good gas mileage?"

"What's your point?"

"Walter's truck here probably gets like ten or twelve miles per gallon. How many miles per gallon does your car get?"

"About sixty."

"That's my point. We should put the gas in the truck into your car. Maybe turn on the air conditioning?" said Ron.

"The hell is air conditioning?" asked Roy.

"He does have a point. We could get a lot farther in my car than this old truck."

"Yes, but we can't all fit in your car."

"I'll send help. Twenty-nine palms can't be farther than ten or fifteen miles from here. We can walk there tonight when it's cooler. We don't have to die out here."

"Ma'am I rode up and down this desert, up the hills, and on top of a mountain. I didn't see a damn thing. Not one light last night. You'd just be digging your own grave if you tried to walk." said Slim

"So, what do we do, just sit here and wait to die? Cause that's not much of a plan," said Melania

The group heard the strange rumbling in the sky. They saw the strange lights. In an instant, Walter looked over at Martha and saw her get very blurry. The sky was shooting out sparks like it was convulsing. The light was very bright. Everyone took cover behind the truck. In one deafening roar, the sky erupted and everyone felt the strange tingling on their skin. Slim's horse took off into the desert.

When it was finally over, they stood up and looked around. The Prius was gone.

"Where's our car?" screamed Crystal.

"What happened to the road?" asked Ron.

They walked over to the road. The pavement was cracked and filled with holes. Sagebrush and weeds were growing between the cracks.

"What the hell just happened?" asked Walter.

"We jumped again. I think we went way far into the future," said Ron.

"How do you know that?"

"Well, I figure if we went back in time, the road wouldn't be here. The road is still here, but no one's using it.....or maintaining it."

"I wonder why not. Maybe they just built a new road?" said Walter.

"Maybe.....I wish I knew where we were.....or when we were."

"Ron, we're out of gas and water. We don't have many good options left. What do you think we should do?" asked Walter.

"Excuse me. It will be a cold day in hell before I take orders from a nigger."

Ron turned and just as he was about to hit him, Walter grabbed his arm.

"Son, he's too stupid to know what he's saying. His kind just doesn't know any better."

"You got something to say to me old man?"

"I served in the army with people like you. Dumb and nasty, that's what you southerners are. You take some kind of sick pleasure in being cruel to people. I can't believe we fought a war trying to keep people like you from forming your own country. I would have sent you packing as quickly as possible." said Walter breathing heavily.

"God, I'm trapped with idiots. If this heat doesn't kill us, we'll end up killing one another," said Crystal.

"We should just leave. Take our chances. I think we'd be better off without these people." said Melania.

"No one's forcing you to stay," said Martha.

"Hop on. I'll keep going until we run out of gas, which isn't going to be long." said Walter and climbed back in his truck.

No one in the group liked anyone else in the group. As much as they despised one another, the thought of having to face this situation alone was even scarier. One by one, they climbed into the truck, which had so much weight, it was barely moving. Walter had it floored and was only doing about 35 mph. Just as the truck was beginning to sputter from a lack of fuel, he saw it. There were some cars parked off to the side of the road up ahead. Walter pulled up beside them. Everyone got off and jumped out of the truck.

They were standing over a small bridge that went over a washout below. The summer rains can quickly turn into dangerous floods. The bridge was very unstable and beginning to crumble. Walter looked around and had to take a step back at what he saw.

Parked down below were dozens of vehicles. It had rained recently in the area and the wash area had water in it. The water was moving. It wasn't much, but it was better than nothing. Maybe a small spring. The cars had ended up here one by one. This was the end of the road.

"Jesus, what is this place?" asked Crystal.

The group made their way down the ravine and into the wash. They passed by the cars. They were from different decades. One was a very futuristic-looking car with Chinese writing on the back. Walter opened the door to a mid-1970's station wagon and a skeleton fell out. Walter took out his wallet and looked at his id.

"Jerome Powell. From Cottonwood, Arizona," said Walter

"Miss Annabel Slater from Santa Monica," said Crystal.

"What the hell? Why didn't they at least try to walk or something? They just sat here and died? That's so weird." said Ron

"Maybe some of them did. Maybe they were waiting for a rescue that never came."

"Hey, look at this," said Martha. She was standing under the bridge. Everyone who was here and carved something into the concrete. There were hundreds of names. Some had even written messages.

"Jesus, this is crazy. They all knew they were going to die out here. What the hell were they waiting for?" asked Ron.

"Ladies. I would be careful about drinking that water. I know it's tempting, but we don't know if it's safe or not." said Martha.

"I guess we'll find out pretty quick," said Melania who scooped up several mouthfuls and swallowed them.

"Walter, what the hell is this place? How does something like this even happen?" asked Ron.

"I wish I knew son. All of these people probably had family and friends who just thought they vanished. This thing is like some kind of trap. Once you're in, you can't get out."

"What were they doing here? There should be a lot more bodies here. Some of these names and dates are over a hundred years old. They got caught up in this web just like we did."

"I wonder if anyone had found a way out of here. Maybe it's written on the wall over there."

"Might be worth taking a look."

"Whatever is happening, it's getting stronger. Instead of going forward in time twenty years or so, we're going forward hundreds or thousands of years. Judging by the looks of some of these vehicles, they've been sitting here for a very long time."

"Will this finally end and we'll be at some fixed point in the future?" asked Ron.

"I'm hoping. I think that's what these people were hoping for too. Maybe they've figured out more of this puzzle than we have."

They walked over to the underpass and saw Melania with Crystal. They didn't seem to like what they had found.

"Okay, this is what is carved in the rock here. They say there is no point in trying to reach civilization because civilization is gone. Some people have reached nearby towns and they say there is no one there, they've been deserted for years. One group even reached Barstow. It was completely destroyed." she said.

"Did anyone happen to find out what year all of this happened?" asked Ron.

"The last date they could find was 2087. But, no one knows what year we are in now."

"So in the future, no one is alive? How does it all end?"

"I don't know. No one is sure. They say if you take that dirt road, you can reach Twenty Nine Palms in two days.....if you don't die first." said Crystal.

"That's it. We're going to die out here. Even if we reach a town or gas station, there won't be anyone there to help us." said Crystal.

"Won't be any gas either," said Walter.

"Walter, have you noticed that Roy and that other redneck seem to have gotten rather friendly all of a sudden?" asked Ron.

"Yeah. They went from pointing guns at one another to sharing a smoke together. Birds of a feather flock together I guess."

"Yes, except these birds have guns and we don't. We might want to begin searching the cars. Maybe one of them has something we can use to defend ourselves."

"Yeah, Martha and I will start looking," said Walter.

Ron didn't completely trust Walter. Mrs. Walter seemed to be a closet lunatic, but at the moment, he had no choice. He was a lone black man in a group of very white people. Old school white.....*the kind that doesn't take too kindly to people like him.*

Slim and Roy walked over to the group. Ron kept an eye on them while pretending to search the vehicles.

"Ladies and gentlemen.....and lesbians. Mr. Maltby and I have taken it upon ourselves to lead this group of ours to safety. I know, you can all thank us later. We may not agree on everything, but we are Christian men after all." said Roy.

"I wouldn't follow you two idiots to the bathroom," said Crystal.

"Just who exactly put you two in charge?" asked Martha.

"Mr. Smith and Mr. Wesson, that's who," said Roy, pulling out his gun and aiming it at the girls.

"You're a big man with that gun aren't you. People like you make me sick," screamed Crystal.

"You know ladies.....I'm not sure how things are done in the future, but in my time, girls dressed like you are going to be used for one thing and one thing only," said Slim inching closer to the ladies.

"Eww.....get away from me," said Melania.

"Dress like a whore and men will treat you like one, dear." interrupted Martha.

"Shut up you old bitch, no one was talking to you anyway."

"Roy, I do believe the lack of a penis is making these ladies go nuts. I read about it.....from that Freud guy," said Slim.

"Could be Slim, could be."

Walter walked over to Ron who was going through the vehicles. So far he had found nothing. Anything of value had already been taken.

"How's it going?" he asked.

"They're going from bad to worse. We have to get one of those guns away from those two idiots. I think we're on borrowed time if we don't. I just wish I were twenty years younger."

"Walter.....our only chance is to get out of here and cross the desert on our own. The rest of them are dead weight.....literally," said Ron.

"That's not the Christian thing to do Ron."

"It's going to be your funeral, Walter. How much longer until Slim and Roy decide to have a little X-rated fun with the girls there?"

"I don't really think it would come to that."

"They're garbage, Walter. I wouldn't put anything past them."

"Martha couldn't make it through the desert. I don't think I could either. We're too damn old."

"It's our only option. I'm leaving tonight, as soon as it gets dark. The only black man in the group doesn't stand a chance. I know Roy is just looking for an excuse to kill me."

"I think God is testing us right now. I was in the first World War Ron. God didn't let me down then and I don't think he's going to now."

"I can't tell you what to do, I'm only suggesting it."

"I can't tell you what to do either, Ron. I just think we're here for a reason. It was not an accident."

"We're here because we were on this road when all this craziness started, just like everyone else. I wondered how many people have been swallowed up over the years by this thing?"

"From the looks of it, quite a few."

"How many do you think made it back safely?"

"Well, if they did make it back, I'm sure we would have heard about it."

"Exactly. We don't hear about it. No one makes it back. This is our life now. Our survival depends on us making the right decisions, not the wrong ones. One mistake and we could wind up dead."

"I'd better go find Martha before she starts any more trouble," said Walter walking back to the group.

The group was now screaming at one another. It was Roy and Slim vs. Crystal and Melania. Martha was on her own side. She didn't much care for the girls, but the two men scared the hell out of her.

"People.....can we stop bickering for two seconds. This isn't going to help anything. We may not like each other, but we're in this together. We need some ideas.....and quickly." said Walter.

"I agree with the old man. That's why Slim and I are in charge. Can't have two dykes making important decisions for us." said Roy.

"Okay Roy, you want to be in charge, tell us how you're going to get us out of this mess," asked Walter.

"Yeah, Please Roy.....tell us how to get out of here," said Crystal.

"Well hell, everyone can't be gone, there has to be somebody still alive out there. We just have to find them....or let them find us."

"For all we know there could be a virus or something that killed everybody. It could kill us too," said Melania.

"I hated to leave my horse. She was more reliable than my ex-wife. I don't know if I need a new horse or a new wife." said Slim holding up his revolver.

"Roy, what the hell are we going to do?" asked Crystal.

"Okay.....well. Let me discuss it with Mr. Maltby and we will get back to you."

"You do that," said Melania.

Walter looked over at the water. He knew he shouldn't drink it, but he was so thirsty, he had to take the chance. He took a mouthful and tasted it. It was so cool. He took several drinks. Water never tasted so good. Pretty soon everyone was drinking the water. They had no choice. It was either that or die of exposure.

"Okay.....first things first here. Since we have a very limited supply, we have decided that we need to prioritize who gets what. Now Walter, no disrespect here sir, but you and the misses are older than dirt and probably won't be around too much longer anyway. I'm afraid we just can't waste anything on you two. Food and water are for Slim and me and the girls." said Roy.

"I see. What about Ron?"

"The negro? Who cares about him?"

"So, you're basically condemning the three of us to die. That's your plan?" asked Walter.

"Walter, I realize this sucks, but it makes the most sense. I'm sorry. I don't like him, but he's right." said Crystal.

"No, he isn't. This is not how Christians behave," said Martha

"Jesus lady, get over yourself. God put us in this nightmare. He sure as hell isn't just going to magically pull us out of it. We're on our own here." said Crystal.

"Ron and Martha and I are leaving once the sun goes down. I can't stand the sight of you people. I'd rather die out there in the desert and let the buzzards pick away at me than be around you people for one second longer. I'm ashamed of you." said Walter and he turned slowly and walked away.

"Wait... Walter.....hold on a second," said Melania. Once they were out of earshot, she began talking.

"I'm sorry, I really am. I know this sounds horrible, but you guys can't leave us with those two. I see the way they look at us.....they've already raped us with their eyes." she said pleading with him.

Walter turned and looked at her.

"Stupidity in a woman is unwomanly. Now, get away from me," he said angrily.

Walter and Martha walked back over to Ron. After searching a dozen vehicles, he had come up empty-handed.

"Ron, Martha, and I will go with you. I don't expect you to carry us. I just ask that you not make this trip a race." he said.

"Sure. I found an old map. I think we're only about ten miles from where the old highway used to be. Only five miles from those old buildings on Zzyx road. Maybe the plumbing and electricity are still on."

"It was a maintenance station for the railroad. I remember passing by it. There were always cars parked outside the buildings." said Martha.

"Problem is Rom, if you're wrong, Martha and I are toast. I'm so thirsty I can barely stand up. Don't know how long we would last hiking through the desert in the dark. I hope your navigation skills are better than mine."

"If we stay here, we're either going to have to disarm the rednecks or they'll kill us. Either way, we're screwed," he said.

Ron and Walter turned around to see the group arguing once more. This time Martha was right in the thick of it. Sometimes he wished she would just let it go. Not everyone can be saved.....or wanted to be saved.

"God, you two are disgusting!" shouted Crystal.

"I'm sorry Melania, but where I come from, when two ladies are dressed like you two, the next question is usually: *How Much?*"

"You're just going to stand there and not say a word?" said Crystal looking over at Sally.

"What do you want me to say? He's right.....you two look like whores. No fear of the Lord in you two at all." she replied.

"God, I'm stuck in this nightmare with the worst people ever!" shouted Melania.

"You two just settle down now, let the men do the thinking here. We'll get us out of this mess," said Roy



"You two are so dumb, you could drown in a kiddie pool! Let us do the thinking please," said Crystal.

"I ain't gonna let no Jezebel tell me what to do. You two ought to just shut up and try to get right with the Lord!" shouted Sally.

Crystal and Sally were nearly ready to come to blows with one another when Martha spoke up.

"Roy and Sally Jenkins.....I remember now. I know where I heard that name before. You two were bank robbers. Robbed a bank in Victorville. Yes, that's right, Walter and I were still dating at the time. I was working as a teller at a bank in San Bernardino. Yes, I'm sure of it. Well, you two certainly play the part, now don't you."

Roy and Sally said nothing. They didn't even try to put up a fight.

"So what. It don't change nothing," said Roy.

"Of course it does. I'm stuck in hell with two bank robbers. Yes, the news said the cops lost you two in a thunderstorm out in the desert. You just vanished into thin air is what they said."

"We was only taking our money back from the bank who stole it from us in the first place," said Sally.

"Yes, I'm sure that will convince a jury," said Martha.

"You really robbed a bank. Damn....you got some real balls there my friend. I've been thinking of doing the same thing, just could never get the nerve to pull it off." said Slim.

"Except you killed someone in the bank, didn't you?" said Martha.

"That was an accident. We didn't want to, it just happened," said Roy.

"So, you're a thief and a murderer. Wonderful.....and I was really beginning to like you Roy," said Crystal.

"You was?"

Crystal rolled her eyes and walked away.

Walter and Ron rejoined the group. Ron had found nothing of value. The cars had been stripped of everything, including gas.

"You find anything, boy?" asked Slim

"No.....and don't call me boy," he said angrily.

Walter put his hand on Ron's arm.

"Buck up to me again and I shoot your ass, dead boy, you hear me?" he said taking out his gun and aiming it at Ron's head.

"Fine."

"Say, sorry."

"What?"

"Say you're sorry for disrespecting a white man," said Roy.

"What the hell? Are you serious?"

"Damn right we're serious. I don't know how colored folk acts in the future, but in our time, any negro who disrespects a white man gonna get what's coming to him," said Roy taking out his pistol.

"You want to shoot me, go ahead. Just remember.....you don't know what you're going to find out there. Your guns won't do much. You might need me to help save your sorry asses." he said.

They heard it up in the sky. The crackling of thunder, followed by strange swirling lights. It was like the Aurora Borealis on steroids. The wind began to pick up as well.

"Shit.....it's happening again. Everybody take cover, we don't know how bad this is going to be," shouted Walter.

Everyone hid inside the abandoned cars. The wind had turned into a hurricane-force type of wind. The sky seemed to be almost screaming and convulsing. The light show was almost hypnotic. It went on for several minutes. The wind was rocking the cars back and forth with such force, Walter was afraid they'd be lifted off the ground. It died down several minutes later and vanished just as quickly as it had appeared.

Slim was the first one to step out of the car, followed by Ron, then the girls. They looked around expecting to see a desert.

"Where the hell are we?" asked Crystal.

"Yeah, where are we?" asked Roy.

Walter got out and felt the change in temperature almost instantly. He could see snow on the mountains up ahead. The hot, dry desert air had been replaced by a much more moist atmosphere. He looked around and saw grass on what used to be dirt.

"Walter, are we still in the desert?" asked Crystal.

"Walter, the road.....it's back together again. Looks brand new," said Ron walking back up to the road.

"Really?"

"Yup. Want to go for a drive?"

The group walked over to Walter's truck and hopped inside. He didn't have much gas left. Maybe ten for fifteen miles at the most.

They got back on the road, which had recently been repaved and striped.

"Walter.....look, over there. It's a lake. A huge lake." said Martha pointing. Walter looked and headed over to the shoreline. He stopped the truck and got out. Everyone was in awe. The lake seemed to go on for miles and miles. They couldn't see the other side of the shoreline.

"Where are we?" asked Ron

"We're in the same place. The same road, even the hills, and mountains are the same.....it's just not the same climate anymore."

"What do you mean?" asked Roy

"Thousands and thousands of years ago, during the last ice age, the desert was filled with giant lakes and marshes like this. It was a tropical paradise."

"It's called climate change people.....it's very real," said Melania

"Walter, the lake is deep.....like really deep," said Crystal.

"Come on, we're burning gas, let's get going," he said.

The group piled back into his truck. They were a few miles down the road when they saw the sign. It was stenciled on the turnoff.

## HARMONY 5 MILES

"I don't remember a town called Harmony out here," said Martha.

"We don't know when we are. There could be all kinds of new towns out here. I think we should try it. I'm so thirsty I would sell my soul for just a glass of ice water." said Walter.

"You're driving," said Martha.

He took the turnoff and drove down the gravel road. Along the way, he could see fields and meadows. They finally passed by a farmhouse with some large metal buildings.

"Finally, sweet civilization," said Walter.

"Roy....Sally. I'm sure there's a statute of limitations on bank robbery, but you know, we're going to have to turn you in as soon as we find the police." said Crystal.

Roy was angry.....very angry. He should have shot that old bitch for ratting him out.

"Now why would you want to go and do a thing like that?" he asked

"Because I really don't like you. You're the very definition of toxic masculinity."

"Huh?"

"Misogynist, homophobe. Roy, were you ever in the KKK?"

"No, why?"

"You never hanged anyone?"

"I never said that, I just said I was never in the Klan. Nothing wrong with those boys. They got a right to express themselves just like you do."

"I'm going to enjoy seeing the cops putting handcuffs on you and your chick," said Crystal.

"You might want to think really carefully about that sugar," he said pulling out his gun.

"Are all women like you in the future? Cause if they are, no man is going to want to be with you. Don't matter how good you look." added Slim.

"That's why they're dykes." said Sally.

Roy and Slim just smiled. The hatred between the group was beginning to boil over. At this point, they weren't even trying to pretend. They hated each other's guts.....*and weren't being shy about it.*

Walter slowed down as he passed two people herding sheep on the side of the road. He waved, but they just looked at him with these blank looks on their faces.

"Not very friendly, are they?" said Martha

As the truck pulled into the center of the town, Walter could see metal buildings and fences. The town looked as if it had been hastily constructed. A small group of townspeople had gathered around the truck. They were dressed in strange clothing, with strange symbols written on it. The group hopped out of the back of the truck and walked up to the main building. None of the townspeople said anything, something that Walter found disturbing.

"Who all is in charge here?" asked Roy

The townspeople just returned his question with silence. They just continued to look at the group with an ice-cold glare.

*That look sent a shiver up Walter's spine.*

"The hell is the matter with you people?" asked Slim

"Walter.....I'm not getting a good feeling about this," whispered Ron.

"Um yeah....me neither," he replied.

"I know this is going to sound crazy, but we are actually from another time. We got caught in this weird storm out in the desert that brought us here. What year is it for you folks?." asked Ron.

"It's the year 241." replied a man stepping out of the building on the front steps.

"Year 241?"

"I believe in your time, it would be the year 2650 or something close to that."

"Damn, we went six hundred years in the future Walter," said Ron.

"Look, could you please help us. These two are bank robbers, he's a cowboy, the old woman is a Christian whacko. My wife and I would love to put as much distance between them and us as possible."

"Young lady, I've had just about enough out of you," said Walter losing his cool.

"Jesus, go back in your truck. Thanks for the ride, but we can take it from here," said Crystal.

"You ungrateful little tramp! We could just have left you two harlots on the side of the road," shouted Martha.

"Hell girls, he saved your lives. You ought to show the man a little more respect," said Slim.

"Just shut up, all of you!" said Melania

"Just get me away from these people, please. I can't stand to be around them for one second longer," she said

"Well, I see the stories our ancestors told us were true after all. We thought they were just crazy. You have come a long way. Our planet and our people have come a very long way since your time. You see my dear, we have evolved, matured. We are a much better people because of it. Now, there is only one voice to speak for everyone." said the leader.

"Good, can I get some water, please?" asked Slim, walking past the leader. He grabbed Slim and threw him back on the steps with such force, it shocked everyone.

"You will speak when spoken to human. Is that understood?" said the leader.

Roy took out his pistol and shot the leader twice in the chest. Slim started shooting as well, hitting two of the townspeople.

"Oh shit....Walter, let's get out of here!" said Ron, but there were too many of them. That look in their eye. It wasn't anger or hatred.....it was something else completely.

*Like a starving person looking at a full course buffet.*

*Crystal screamed when she saw the fangs. Melania tried to run. The rest of the group watched in horror as the townspeople began to devour her....ripping her apart right in front of their eyes. Martha was too scared to move.*

"CHRIST JESUS.....WHAT THE HELL ARE THESE PEOPLE?" shouted Walter.

*All they saw were the fangs. Most of them died quickly. The people of Harmony hadn't eaten this well in ages. For a second, they almost felt human again. The last thing Walter heard was his wife screaming. The last thing he saw laying on the ground, being eaten alive was the sign. Even though he was screaming in pain, he had to acknowledge it.*

WELCOME TO HARMONY.

THE FUTURE IS NOW